

## Chinese with character!

In the first of a two-part interview, *Teacher's News* talks to Dr Zhu Zhu, Chinese Language Programme Director of Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh about 10 areas to consider in order to make Chinese character writing more meaningful and memorable for students.

**Teacher's News:** It's a pleasure to meet you. This month we'll look at your first 5 tips for making character writing more effective. First, perhaps you could give us some general thoughts on the subject.

**Zhu:** A pleasure to meet you too. Yes, you often hear people say that Chinese characters are difficult. In fact, characters are only difficult for beginners or, to put it more accurately, just for the earlier stage at the beginner level.

But if characters can be introduced to learners in a thoughtful, meaningful and systematic way, they will not be as daunting as all the stories about them sound. Once learners pass the first stage, they often don't find characters difficult at all and start to make progress naturally.

Of course, the role teachers play in introducing characters is crucial. When this is handled well, the whole process of learning characters can be full of fun and fit nicely into the communicative classes that many learners around the world are used to.

**Teacher's News:** Thanks. So let's look at your first five tips.

### Tip one

**Teacher's News:** What is the best timing for students to start learning Chinese characters?

**Zhu:** It is good for the learning of characters to lag slightly behind early conversational classes. This is to help students feel motivated and develop a sense of achievement as they learn some simple expressions first, such as counting and greetings.

The gap could be a few days to a few weeks, depending on the year group and intensity of class. Generally speaking, the younger the learners the

bigger the gap. Also, less intensive classes need a bigger delay before characters are introduced.

Teachers just need to make sure that the gap before starting teaching characters is not too big. Otherwise, learners will then have too many characters to learn in one go.

## Tip two

Teacher's News: What's the best relationship between learning characters and other aspects of Chinese learning (such as conversational classes) in a Western context?

Zhu: Around the world, many beginner classes are integrated with one teacher responsible for all the four skills. This is different in China where learners attend separate classes that focus on a certain skill.

The result is a more communicative approach and activities that develop character writing need to reflect this.

## Tip three

Teachers News: How do you open the very first class of Chinese characters so that students find the transition smooth and stress free?

Zhu: I frequently open my very first class of Chinese characters by asking students to count from 1 to 10 in Chinese. This is a very easy task for students to complete. Then I draw four boxes on the white board. Each box is like this  and the cross in the middle is drawn in dotted line.

First, I ask students to count 1 to 3 again slowly. I then write the three numbers in Chinese characters separately in the first three boxes while students are counting. Since the character for 1 is one horizontal line, the character for 2 consist of two horizontal lines and the character for 3 consist of three horizontal lines, I can joke with the students about how easy Chinese characters are and that they have already learnt three characters without any sweat at all! This helps to create a positive and relaxed atmosphere in class.

Then, I write the Chinese character for 4 in the fourth box. I don't ask students to copy or learn this character at this stage - this is just to show them how Chinese characters can get more complex than 1, 2, 3.

From this point, I can easily move on to develop learning related to Chinese characters and the basic rules of writing Chinese characters. What I would stress is that it is very important for teachers to use squares to teach even the very first character. It's an effective way to demonstrate that Chinese characters occupy a more or less square area in which the components of every character are written to fit in order to maintain a uniform size and shape. Students automatically follow and find it natural to do. It also saves a lot of time and effort later.

## Tip four

Teachers News: What approaches to Chinese characters should beginners be introduced to first?

Zhu: Here are some areas ...in this order but, of course, not all within one hour!

- basic structure of Chinese characters (one-component characters vs compound characters)
- basic strokes
- stroke order
- all strokes
- the concept of a radical
- a couple of radicals related to students' conversational classes
- commonly seen radicals especially those related to students' conversational classes
- how to use a Chinese dictionary

## Tip five

Teachers News: Finally, what characters should be included in a beginner's class?

Zhu: Those related to conversational classes and anything that will spark students' curiosity, such as characters for animals when you are teaching young learners.

### **Next month, Zhu will talk about:**

Some of the best materials for beginners  
Activities that work in and after class  
How you can manage common problems  
Motivating students to move beyond pinyin  
How far beginners should try to go