

What are some of the best materials for beginners?

Beginners in different age groups have varying learning styles and abilities. Teachers should use various materials accordingly to motivate learners and to achieve expected learning outcomes.

Generally speaking, teachers should aim to help learners in all age groups make connections of the 'sound', 'script' and 'meaning' aspects of a character. In other words, learners should be expected to be able to pronounce a character and recall its meaning when seeing a character that has been learnt. Teachers will, of course, need to use different materials for different age groups in order to achieve that goal.

Learners in all age groups should be encouraged to write characters. However, the younger the learners are, the more the focus should be on recognising characters rather than writing characters. If you are thinking about the best timing for students to start learning Chinese characters, read the first half of this interview in Teachers News Issue 12. All learners should be encouraged to write characters on the special writing sheets from the very beginning. The sheets are called tianzige in Chinese (sheets with rows of 田 shape boxes). You can find the sheets following the link below:

<http://wenku.baidu.com/view/8de3c420dd36a32d73758158.html>

When teaching very young learners (under the age of ten), an efficient way is to use flashcards of characters and relevant pictures. For example, when teaching 鱼(fish), the teacher shows the character and a picture of fish, and at the same time reads the character aloud. The children can then make connections between the 'sound', 'script' and 'meaning' aspects of the character 鱼. Pinyin is normally used to help older learners to make connections between 'sound' and 'script', but it may cause confusion among very young learners and it is best not to use it for this age group. When teaching older learners (children over ten and adults), flashcards are still very efficient tools. It will be very helpful if teachers include pinyin on the cards of characters for older learners. Generally speaking, the older the learners are, the less frequently pictures are used. Teachers can also use cards to teach radicals of characters to older learners.

The following are some of the best materials for beginners:

- ❖ Flashcards

<http://www.semanda.com/> (suitable for all age groups; teachers to choose characters as appropriate)

<http://www.yellowbridge.com/chinese/flashcards.php> (more appealing for adult learners, including words from quite a few widely used textbooks)

- ❖ Animation showing stroke order of writing characters (suitable for all age groups; teachers to choose characters as appropriate)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/games/characters.shtml>

<http://www.tom61.com/FLaSHzhiyuang/FLaSHzhishilei/hanzibihua/>

- ❖ Chinese learning websites (more appealing for adult learners)

<http://usa.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php>

- ❖ Tracing books for Chinese characters writing (suitable for all age groups; teachers to choose characters as appropriate)

<http://wenku.baidu.com/view/594439260722192e4536f650.html>

- ❖ Chinese teaching software and on-line materials

<http://down.it168.com/283/289/47498/> (free download; for very young learners)

<http://www.wenlin.com/> (fees applicable; more appealing for 12+ learners)

What activities can you recommend that work well in class?

Learners in all age groups welcome games and activities of Chinese characters in class. Generally speaking, the younger the learners are, the more eager they are for games. When teaching students over 14 years old or beyond the beginners' level, teachers should limit the number of in-class games on characters according to students' interest and the learning objectives of a specific class.

The following games and activities are popular with beginners:

- ❖ Stating the order: The teacher writes characters that students have not learnt on the white board and ask students to work out the stroke order of writing them. This activity helps reinforce the rules of stroke order that have been introduced to the students.
- ❖ Finding twins/triplets: The teacher writes characters on flashcards and mixes them up – the teachers creates 2-3 with exactly the same character on it. The characters do not necessarily have to be ones students have learnt. Each student takes one card randomly and then tries to find someone who has the

same character in the class. This activity promotes students' sensitivity about the script of characters.

- ❖ Finding missing family: The teacher writes the radical and the other component(s) of compound characters separately on different flashcards and mixes them up. All the characters are ones that the students have learnt. Each student takes one card randomly and then tries to find which classmate has the other component(s) that can form a compound character together with the one s/he has. This activity helps students memorise the structure and components of the compound characters that they have learnt.
- ❖ My story of the character: Students are encouraged to tell the class how they remember the characters that they have learnt. The teacher does not judge whose story is more interesting but must make sure that the stories the students come up with do not violate the rules of stroke order. This activity encourages students to explore a way suitable for him/herself to remember Chinese characters.
- ❖ Adding the missing stroke(s): The teacher writes incomplete characters that the students have learnt on the white board and ask the students to add the missing stroke(s). This activity helps students remember the details of the characters.
- ❖ Character copying competition: Students are divided into two groups for the competition. Two flipcharts are placed in the front of the classroom facing the students. One Chinese character is written on each page of the flipchart pad and the total number of characters equals the number of students in the classes. The characters on the flipchart are not necessarily ones the students have learnt. One group sends one student at a time to the front to try to remember the script of character on the page and then write it on the white board. Each student is given the same amount of time looking at the character. Once the student starts to write on the board, s/he is not allowed to come back to look at the character on the flipchart again. The next student will turn the page of the flipchart pad and carry out the same activity. The group who write more correct characters on the white board wins. This competition promotes students' ability of observing and writing characters.

How you can manage common problems in the classroom?

I have been frequently asked the following questions and I would like to share my answers with you:

- ❖ When taught stroke order, students would ask: "Why should I follow the order? It will be fine as long as my complete character looks the same as yours." I would say: "Actually, it will not be fine. It is just like when you are

writing 'apple', you cannot write any other letter first except the letter 'a'." It is very important to insist on correct stroke order from the very beginning. This will save a lot of trouble for the future.

- ❖ Some students may complain that no matter how much they try, they still cannot remember how to write characters. When this is the case, the teacher should use different strategies according to the learners' age group. Games on characters will be a good way to help young learners. For learners over 12 years old, the teacher needs to explain more knowledge related to the script of the characters, such as radicals, similar component/structure to other characters, etc.

How can I motivate my students to move beyond pinyin?

Young learners are generally very motivated and interested in learning characters. So are learners studying Chinese for their GCSE/A-levels/degrees. As long as the teacher introduces characters at a good time as noted above, and attaches appropriate importance to characters throughout the classes, it is not likely that the students will develop a dependency on pinyin.

It is usually community adult learners who may shy away from characters and tend to rely on pinyin in reading and writing. When this happens, the teacher should first of all find out the reasons why a specific student wants to learn Chinese. If the learner only plans to attend classes for a short period of time because of, for example, a forthcoming trip to China, the teacher may not have much opportunity to motivate the learner to move beyond pinyin. However, if it is a learner who has a long-term plan for Chinese language learning, the teacher should explain to him/her that it is important to gradually move to characters because of the very fact that there are a large number of homonyms in Chinese (different characters with the same pronunciation). The teacher should also, at the same time, organise interesting in-class and after-class activities for the learner to realise that it is not as difficult to learn characters as s/he thinks. More importantly, the teacher should make sure that both pinyin and characters are used in all handouts and writings on the white board in class. This is because in life-long learning settings, learners in the same class vary greatly in terms of their background, motivation and learning abilities. By presenting both pinyin and characters, the teacher will not only help the learners who have difficulties with characters to continue their studies and gradually overcome the difficulty, but also minimise the adverse effect on other learners who may not be at ease with characters.

How far should beginners try to go with character learning?

As I mentioned earlier in this interview, it is very important to help beginners make connections of the 'sound', 'script' and 'meaning' aspects of a character. In other words, learners should aim to know all three aspects when learning a character.

Furthermore, since there is no sense or case in Chinese, it is possible for even beginners to make grammatically correct sentences from a very early stage. Therefore, beginners should be encouraged to make phrases and sentences using the characters that they have learnt. Once the learners pass the beginning stage, they will not find characters as difficult. Again, I would like to emphasise that teachers play a very important role in introducing characters to learners in an enjoyable way.