

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Chinese Language

China is a country with one of the oldest civilizations that includes a language system that has prevailed several thousand years and which is still in use today. The term, Chinese, is a terminology that is being used freely to represent the people of China or the descendants of people from China, regardless of which nationality they belong to. Although there are 56 ethnic groups in mainland China, the Han ethnicity occupies about 92% of the population of China (Wikipedia, China.org.cn, & China Travel Guide, 2008). The rest of the 55 ethnic groups are considered minorities and they have their own languages and customs. The language that the Hans use, “Hanyu” 汉语, is therefore referred to as the Chinese language.

Nevertheless, there are many variants of the Chinese language that are being spoken by the Han Chinese in mainland China as well as in countries where there are Chinese immigrants. These variants of spoken Chinese language are called dialects. People from different parts of China verbalize the Chinese language differently. For instance, people from Hong Kong say their Chinese characters in Cantonese. Those from Guangdong province speak various dialects such as Teowchew and Cantonese. In addition to that, dialects like Shanghainese, FuZhou, etc are being used in other parts of China. Mandarin is one of the dialects used in the northern region, and it is selected as the common language, “Putonghua” 普通话, for all mainland Chinese. “Putonghua” 普通话 adopts the Beijing speech sounds as the standard sounds, and its grammatical model

is based on the modern classic works written in the vernacular style (Liu, Deng, & Liu, 1997).

Similar to the numerous varieties of English used in the world, there exists too a variety of terminology for Mandarin. While the Chinese language is called “Putonghua” 普通话 in China; Taiwan refers to Mandarin as their national language which is “Guoyu” 国语; whereas in South East Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, Mandarin is commonly mentioned as “Huayu” 华语. “Zhongwen” 中文 is another term used to refer to Mandarin. For the purpose of this study, Chinese language is referred to as Mandarin.

## **1.2 Learning the Chinese Language**

Learning a second language, especially the Chinese Language, is not an easy task. Although there are various Chinese dialects, there is basically only one mode of the written form. These Chinese words, which are better known as Chinese characters, are vastly different from English words. Chinese characters were traditionally very complex in scripts but they were simplified to meet the modern needs of China and the world.

To study the Chinese language is to learn about the fundamental characters and their pronunciations, and the way to arrange them into meanings. Chinese characters are orthographic and are made up of strokes. They exist in two forms. The traditional form of the Chinese character is complex, but is used widely in Taiwan and Hong Kong; whereas the simplified characters are more commonly used in mainland China, Singapore and Malaysia. Depending on the forms of the characters, the pronunciation scripts of the characters come in two types. Zhuyinfuhao, which is also known as

Bopomofo, is a traditional phonology script that is used for pronouncing the traditional characters (Huang and Hanley, 1995). The other kind of pronunciation script that comes with the simplified characters is the Romanized Hanyu Pinyin system. In this study, Hanyu Pinyin is used for denoting the way to pronounce the characters.

To clarify the confusion and misconception of the Chinese language and its varieties in pronunciation, the script of the Chinese language, the characters, will be introduced in detail in Chapter 2.

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

Regardless of their language backgrounds, second language learners of Chinese believe that the most difficult part of the language is in memorising and mastering the Chinese characters in the written form. How does one learn and remember the thousands of Chinese characters over several years of learning? Learners need to be equipped with the fundamental knowledge of the characteristics of the Chinese characters so as to enable them to differentiate the tones and the associated meanings of the characters. In addition to that, learners also need to use their prior knowledge of the learnt characters so as to make intelligent guesses of new vocabulary in reading unfamiliar Chinese texts. Since native speakers of Chinese are already fluent in speaking the Chinese language, they may find it less challenging to learn the phonological component of the Chinese characters. Second language learners of the Chinese language, on the other hand, have to learn both the phonological and the morphological features of the Chinese characters concurrently. Therefore, both phonology and morphology awareness of the Chinese characters need to be introduced and emphasized concurrently to the second language learners. This is probably the reason why most people find learning the Chinese language as a second language is more challenging compared to alphabetical languages.

Individual second language learners have different learning styles and strategies. According to Brown (2000), learning styles refer to the typical personality traits that characterize the individuals' way of thinking while learning strategies are ways they choose to solve learning problems. This study only looks at the strategies each participant employs in reading and understanding the Chinese texts through the approach of using the phonology and morphology of the Chinese characters.

#### **1.4 Objective of Study**

In this study, participants are taught to learn new topical vocabulary by relating the new Chinese characters to their phonological and morphological characteristics. In addition to that, the participants are constantly reminded to apply their own strategies in reading and understanding the comprehension exercises. It is hoped that by eliciting in the awareness of the phonological and morphological characteristics of the Chinese characters, and by understanding the strategies used in reading, the participants may find it less stressful in reading Chinese texts which may contain a very wide range of topics.

This study thus seeks to investigate the usefulness of processing phonological and morphological information of Chinese characters for second language learners at an international school. It also aims at identifying the strategies adopted by learners in reading unfamiliar Chinese texts.

## 1.5 Research Questions

Therefore, the three research questions of this study are:

- (1) Do the awareness of learning the phonology and morphology of Chinese characters enable non-native learners to decode the meanings of Chinese characters through reading?
- (2) What kinds of strategies are employed by the second language learners in comprehending Chinese texts?
- (3) Are lexical processing strategies useful for reading and understanding Chinese texts?

## 1.6 Significance of the Study

The number of people interested in learning the Chinese language has increased tremendously in the past decade, in light of the fast economic development in mainland China. Due to the general perception that mastering the Chinese language is difficult, this study aspires to alleviate such concerns by suggesting that having knowledge of the phonology of Chinese language and the morphology of Chinese characters can facilitate the process.

It further suggests that the learning of the Chinese language begins with learning the characters, and that the morphological process associated with those characters should be introduced concurrently. Taking the character 饭 (fàn) ‘rice’, as an example, it can be said that the phonology of the character is revealed through the phonetic component of 反 (fǎn); whereas the semantic component 食 (shí) carries meanings like eat or food. When the character, 饭 is taught as an object, the morphological knowledge of the character 饭 may be further introduced with other vocabulary such as 早饭 (zǎofàn) ‘breakfast’, 午饭(wǔfàn) ‘lunch’, and 晚饭 (wǎnfàn) ‘dinner’. More lexicals like 中国饭 (zhōngguófàn) ‘Chinese food’, 马来饭 (mǎláifàn) ‘Malay food’, and so on may then

be presented. Having learned these vocabularies, learners can then substitute them with the character 饭 by constructing the basic sentence structure of “Subject+verb+object” (SVO).

### **Examples of basic sentence structure (SVO):**

Sample sentence of simple present tense: 我吃饭. I eat rice.

Substitute rice with lunch to become: 我吃午饭. I eat lunch.

Further substitute lunch with Malay food: 我吃马来饭. I eat Malay food.

It is hypothesised that the morphology process could be further used in the introduction of the radical 食 (shí) and the phonetic components of 几 (jǐ), 并 (bīng), 包 (bāo) to form additional characters that contain meanings associated with food such as 饥 (jī) which means hungry, 饼 (bǐng) which means biscuits, and 饱 (bǎo) that carries the meaning of being “full after a meal” respectively.

By means of such morphological process, at the end of each of the reading comprehension exercise, learners can be encouraged to utilize the dictionary to create a list of lexical items from the newly learnt vocabulary and to classify them according to topics. It is anticipated that learners would be able to compile new vocabularies by topic and is hoped that they find the compilation useful in the form of a customized dictionary used for personal reference.

## **1.7 Scope and Limitation**

Due to the small number of participants involved and the constraint of time, it is inevitable that the results obtained from this study cannot be generalized. Moreover, it

has been noticed that most of the participants place emphasis on other courses as compared to the Chinese language course. Hence, their results obtained may not truly reflect their knowledge of the characters. However, the researcher has taken steps to minimize such limitations by conducting individual interviews in order to get a clearer picture of the results.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

To promote the learning of the Chinese language in a proficient and effective manner for second language learners, this study proposes to investigate the usefulness of the phonological and morphological awareness in recognising and reading Chinese characters. Besides that, the study also hopes to uncover strategies used by the second language learners in guessing the new vocabulary contained in the unfamiliar Chinese texts.

It is anticipated that the learners may find it advantageous to use the phonological and morphological information they have on the Chinese characters, for the purpose of retention and retrieval, coupled with their reading strategies when challenged with unfamiliar texts. With such endeavor, the researcher hopes to alleviate the frustration of learning Chinese for learners in remembering the various vocabularies of different topics found in the unfamiliar Chinese texts.