Reading Acquisition and Reflections among South Asian Students at Tertiary Level in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The Hong Kong Education Bureau has implemented various measures to support the integration of South Asian ethnic minorities into local communities. One such measure is providing Chinese language education in primary and secondary schools, as proficiency in Chinese is considered crucial for social mobility. The measure has been implemented for a decade; positive outcomes are to be expected. However, official data about the Chinese proficiency level of South Asian ethnic minorities is limited. With the increase in the number of South Asian students from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri-Lanka successfully entering higher education institutions in Hong Kong, there is a need for language teachers to find out more about the current situation of this learner group and reflect on current curriculum and pedagogy. This study investigates the issues of reading acquisition of South Asian students, aged 18 to 22, and from various academic disciplines, with prior knowledge of traditional Chinese characters and Cantonese, in an English as a medium of instruction Hong Kong university in their Chinese language learning, specifically in intermediate Chinese reading and writing courses. Preliminary results show that the South Asian students acknowledge the advantage of their prior knowledge, that is, understanding of radicals and the full handwriting ability of a traditional characters, while having some difficulties in recognising simplified characters such as characters which are totally different in form. Practitioners can enhance their awareness and understanding of students' learning backgrounds and difficulties to facilitate their learning. Additionally, relevant learning materials, such as comparisons of traditional and simplified radicals and the basic rules for Chinese character conversion could be supplemented to assist students.

Keywords: Chinese reading acquisition, Chinese characters, pedagogy, second language acquisition, South Asian students

INTRODUCTION

The proficiency in Chinese is considered a crucial factor for South Asian ethnic minorities' social mobility (Shum et al., 2011). The Hong Kong government has been facilitating the integration of South Asian ethnic minorities into local communities through supporting their Chinese learning for a decade (Education Bureau, 2024), positive outcomes are to be expected. However, official data about the Chinese proficiency level of South Asian ethnic minorities entering higher education institutions is limited (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2023). Notably, there has been a discernible increase in the number of South Asian students successfully entering Hong Kong's universities (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2023), which underscores the need for focused research on this growing learner group. This study aims to strengthen the research area in the context of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). The study focuses on investigating the issues that arise from South Asian students who have prior knowledge of traditional Chinese and Cantonese proficiency in learning simplified Chinese at the tertiary level. One of the areas to be investigated is when South Asian students are promoted to tertiary education at HKUST, where the university requires them to learn simplified Chinese, and whether they encountered any difficulty in the process. Another area is when students with prior knowledge of traditional Chinese learning to read simplified Chinese, different aspects of their learning of the language may be affected respectively.

RELATED LITERATURE

Inadequate Chinese proficiency has become one of the reasons for various challenges faced by South Asian individuals in terms of social mobility in Hong Kong (Li & Leung, 2018), making the issue of Chinese education for South Asian students a focus of concern. Since the 2014/15 academic year, the Hong Kong Education Bureau has continually increased support for South Asian students learning Chinese (Education Bureau, 2024). However, the inadequacy of Chinese proficiency among ethnic minorities remains a major barrier to their further education, employment, and social integration (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2023).

Current research on Chinese learning among South Asian students primarily focuses on the primary and secondary school levels, while relevant studies at the university level are relatively scarce. When it comes to Chinese reading at the primary level, studies indicate that for South Asian students who have acquired basic language skills, reading poses a greater concern (Chou, 2015). At the secondary school level, studies show that the main challenges faced by South Asian secondary school students in learning Chinese are reading and writing (Shi & Ye, 2017).

Leung (2024) focusing on South Asian children studying in kindergartens and primary schools in Hong Kong, the study analyses the challenges they face in learning Chinese

and proposes innovative teaching methods to enhance their Chinese learning effectiveness and expand their opportunities for higher education and career development. Lai and Tai (2022) discussed the learning motivation of South Asian secondary school students in Hong Kong; Wang (2023) focused on how teachers utilised different translanguaging strategies to teach south Asian secondary school students.

As scholars explore Chinese studies at the university level for South Asian students, they find that Chinese characters are a major difficulty in their Chinese learning (Li & Leung, 2018). When students self-identify learning difficulties in written Chinese, writing Chinese is considered the most challenging (Li & Chuk, 2015). Other than the above, research specifically addressing South Asian students in terms of simplified and traditional character conversion and Chinese reading is relatively limited.

METHODS

This research employs an integrated approach that includes semi-structured individual interviews and assessment paper analysis. In fall 2023, only 9 South Asian students enrolled in an intermediate-level Chinese reading and writing course for non-Chinese background students at HKUST and 6 agreed to complete the interview, two from India, three from Nepal, and one from Pakistan. Learners are typically required to have a proficiency level around the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) level 2 before enrolling in this course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the investigation of the challenges faced by students with prior knowledge of traditional Chinese and Cantonese, that is, understanding of radicals and the full handwriting ability of a traditional characters, when learning simplified Chinese, all participants noted that having a foundation in traditional characters is beneficial for comprehending simplified Chinese characters, while they still acknowledged the difficulties encountered during the learning process.

Participants highlighted the similarities between traditional and simplified characters, for example, the way to decode strokes in a character, which helps them learn words more quickly. In Figure 1, showing 们 (simplified) and 們(traditional) as a set of examples, it shows that Chinese learners need to follow the stroke order from up to down, left to right, hence both simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese characters are transferrable in this way. However, while the semantic radical 人 shared commonly on both characters, the phonological radicals on the right were different. Despite the differences, the stroke order knowledge was still providing a clue. However, being conditioned in learning traditional characters brings certain challenges as learners need to unlearn what they learn. Much effort is needed to switch their mind from traditional to simplified as some characters are totally different structurally.
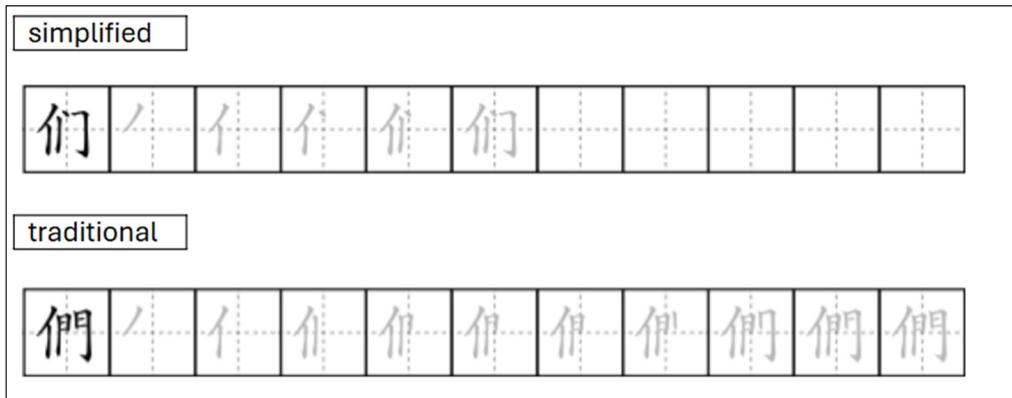
Figure 1. Stroke order of Chinese characters. (An2.net, n.d)

Based on their performance in the course reading assessments and with reference to the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework established by Education Bureau of Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2019), participants showed outstanding reading abilities at the word level, meaning that they could recognise the commonly used words (corresponding to NLR (1.1)1, where NLP denotes the curriculum structure for second language reading ability, with a larger number indicating a higher difficulty level). However, their accuracy rate was lower at the sentence level, and reading comprehension of short passages proved more challenging. An interesting pattern emerged in text comprehension: four out of the six participants performed better in comprehending longer texts (a few paragraphs) than shorter ones (a single paragraph), with both text types corresponding to the same assessed NLR levels [(1.1)3, (2.1)1&2, (3.1)1&2]; one participant's performance remained the same at 100% accuracy. This suggests that learning in context may be crucial, as longer texts likely provide more contextual clues that aid understanding.

In response to the above situation, the curriculum is recommended to include comparisons and conversions between traditional and simplified characters, to teach and learn in context, or a tailored course be developed for this group of learners who have prior knowledge in traditional Chinese and Cantonese. The curriculum should build on their previous primary and secondary Chinese language education by extending the proficiency levels and special learning needs. Achieving this will require concerted efforts from teachers, educational institutions at various levels, and the government.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, participants identified challenges with characters, vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall comprehension of text passages, particularly with individual characters and shorter texts. While traditional Chinese can aid in learning simplified Chinese such as the stroke order is transferable for both versions, it can also cause some confusion as some characters are totally different structurally. Overall, however, the benefits still outweigh the problems for learners, and teachers can make use of the benefits to further enhance their teaching and curriculum planning.

To enhance the learning experience for South Asian students, it is essential to integrate comparisons and conversions between traditional and simplified characters into the curriculum. Tailoring courses to build on their existing knowledge from primary and secondary education will better support their language acquisition. Collaborative efforts among educators, institutions, and the government are crucial to address these challenges and improve Chinese language education for this demographic. The first step is suggested to be taken by course developers and frontline teachers at tertiary institutions to get the wheel moving as resistance may be lesser, and flexibility may be higher compared to primary and secondary schools. Ultimately, supporting South Asian students in mastering Chinese not only benefits their individual growth but also enriches the cultural diversity and inclusivity of Hong Kong society.

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