

Preferential Use of Sublexical Cues in Interpreting Chinese Characters among Alphabetic Readers in Taiwan

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The study investigated preferential use of sublexical cues in decoding Chinese characters among learners of Chinese as a second language (CSL) with alphabetic L1 literacy backgrounds. Twenty-one adult CSL learners chose from three pseudocharacters the one that best represented an invented object with a novel name. Each pseudocharacter was composed of a semantic radical and a phonetic radical. In two pseudocharacters, one radical conveyed relevant information and the other irrelevant. In the third, both radicals were irrelevant. Results showed that 98% of the pseudocharacters chosen by CSL learners contained either a relevant semantic or a relevant phonetic radical. There was an interaction effect between choice of phonetic radicals and item order. Choice of pseudocharacters comprising relevant phonetic radicals was significantly higher in the first three test items than in the last three test items; the effect of item order was not significant in the choice of pseudocharacters comprising relevant semantic radicals. While Chinese character reading ability was inversely related with choice of pseudocharacters comprising irrelevant radicals, it was not related with the participants' preference for phonetic or semantic radicals. These results suggest that though Chinese phonetic and semantic radicals are not always compatible in their cueing functions, CSL learners with basic character reading skills are able to apply sublexical cues to interpret Chinese characters flexibly and adaptively in attuning to the nature of the task.

Keywords: teaching Chinese as a second language, Chinese characters, phonetic radical, semantic radical, Chinese character reading ability

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