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ISBN 978-974-625-956-9

RMUTR & RICE International Conference 2022, pp. 274-280,

22-24 June 2022

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doi: 10.14457/RMUTR.res.2022.21

Received 24.05.22/ Revised 28.05.22/ Accepted 7.06.22

## Etymological Method for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

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### Abstract

Morpheme, context, and network teaching methods are more practical for Chinese vocabulary teaching. These teaching methods interpret and summarize vocabulary at the synchronic level and rarely involve the diachronic perspective. Based on the findings of etymological research, this academic paper argues that the etymological teaching method should be the standard for teaching vocabulary when teaching Chinese as a foreign language. This method overcomes the limitations of traditional methods. It is a progressive method and is based on synchronic research and interprets Chinese vocabulary from the diachronic level. In addition, using etymological knowledge, teachers can also teach the evolutionary track of Chinese vocabulary. Learners of Chinese, thus, will become aware of the systematic characteristics of Chinese vocabulary, and will increase their motivation and interest level. From the perspective of teaching Chinese as a second language, it is important to use a method which will help international students understand and remember Chinese vocabulary more easily. In this academic paper, the authors summarize relevant research which identifies shortcomings of various vocabulary teaching methods and propose methods which may improve the teaching methods.

**Key words:** *Etymological teaching method, diachronic level, Chinese lexicon teaching method*

### 1. Introduction

In word origin, vocabulary often hides legends, and often introduces students to mythology and history to make them understand important people and events (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2020). Words are like a small window through which students can get familiar with a nation's past. Learning vocabulary can also help understand a nation and its history. Vocabulary is the key to being able to express things. Without vocabulary, teachers cannot express anything in language teaching (Diane, 2019),

which underlines the fundamental status of vocabulary from the perspective of linguistics. At the same time, vocabulary, as one of the elements of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, is pivotal and runs through all teaching stages in all other courses (Lan & Fan, 2019). The outcome of vocabulary teaching directly affects the entirety of language teaching.

Moreover, there is a common phenomenon in second language vocabulary teaching: at the beginning, students have a sense of progress. This feeling of progress can be experienced every month, or even every week. However, after learning about 1000 words, students' progress slows down and they lose this sense of progress. After learning 2000-3000 words, the task of vocabulary learning is more and more arduous, at which time many students lose interest. That is, what language specialists call the "plateau area" of vocabulary learning. This is especially true for learners of Chinese – a "plateau reaction". For learners of Chinese in the middle and advanced stages it can be very serious. Therefore, it is important for teachers to use the bet methods so that the so-called period of "stagnation" and low interest level can be reduced or even avoided.

Before the 21st century, vocabulary teaching was even in a lower position than grammar teaching. However, after entering the 21st century, this situation changed. Many experts and scholars began to study methods of vocabulary teaching and made remarkable progress in the theory as well as in various methods of vocabulary teaching.

- Cognitive psychology advanced the theory in which knowledge could logically be divided. This brought about reforms which resulted the new methods for teaching Chinese vocabulary to foreign students in the intermediate stage. It became possible that students be able to acquire a vocabulary of about 20,000 within two years (Sweller, 2020).
- Grammar-centered teaching was abandoned and vocabulary teaching became the dominant mode
- The work of French sinologists proposed the "character standard" which was combined with Chinese vocabulary teaching
- The new focus for vocabulary teaching included of text linguistics

Since the 21st century, linguists have developed different linguistic theories which has resulted in a more rigorous approach to vocabulary teaching. With the guidance of various theories, different vocabulary teaching methods have sprung up, including morpheme teaching method, word-based teaching method, network teaching method, context teaching method, set teaching method, task-based vocabulary teaching method, input-output mode teaching method, root method, etymology method, translation method, collocation method, discourse connection method, comparison method, and topic vocabulary checklist.

However, after some analysis, these dozens of teaching methods almost all study vocabulary and vocabulary teaching methods from the synchronic level, such as parts of speech, word collocations, word meaning, and collections of words. Rarely did anyone study the origin of words from the diachronic level. Due to concerns about space restrictions, the author has selected three of the more respected vocabulary teaching

methods, analyzed their advantages and disadvantages, and finally, puts forward views about a less known method, the etymological teaching method.

## 2. Vocabulary Teaching Methods

### 2.1 Morpheme teaching

The application of "morpheme" in vocabulary teaching has only flourished in recent years. The morpheme teaching method is a vocabulary teaching method of separating morphemes (words) in words and then combining them with other morphemes that have been learned or not (Baumann et al., 2002). To consolidate the learned words (including target words and learned words) and expand the learning scope of new words. It is carried out in combination with the word-formation method. For example, after learning the common Chinese words "*dian ying*" "*dian nao*" and "*dian shi*" in level 1, the teacher consciously uses the morpheme teaching method to explain the combined relationship of "*dian*" and "*ying*" "*nao*" and "*shi*" separately. Then, when students learn the vocabulary of levels 5 and 6, such as "*dian chi*" "*dian zhan*" and "*dian yuan*", they can successfully guess the meaning of the word according to what they have learned before. The proper use of the morpheme teaching method can help learners guess the meaning of words, improve the speed and efficiency of vocabulary learning, increase vocabulary, consolidate the vocabulary they have learned before, and mobilize students' enthusiasm in Chinese learning to a certain extent. It is the most respected teaching method by teachers. However, there are several problems in this teaching method that are not easy to solve.

One is the relationship between word meaning and morpheme meaning. When students use morpheme meaning to guess word meaning, they often think that word meaning is the addition of morpheme meaning (Qiu, Cui, Bian, Gao, & Liu, 2014). For example, when learning the words "backbone" and "leader" of CET-6, we will add the two morpheme meanings but cannot understand the extended word meaning caused by figurative rhetoric. The other is that the morpheme meaning of the same morpheme will also change in different words, which will bring trouble and more critical questions to international students. The third is the morpheme meaning interpretation of function words. The morpheme teaching method cannot explain many function words in Chinese. For example, some conjunctions "*zhiyou... cai...*" "*chule... suoyou...*" cannot let students grasp the meaning of words by simply separating morphemes. To sum up, the morpheme teaching method has insurmountable difficulties in these three problems.

### 2.2 Context teaching

The context teaching method does not directly explain the meaning of new words but puts new words in real situations so that students can feel and guess through physical objects, pictures, sounds, actions, and language communication situations to learn to use new words (Byram & Wagner, 2018). For example, when learning nouns such as "*bingqiling*" "*tianpin*" "*jiazi*" and "*juzi*" can be brought to the classroom and

presented to students intuitively; When learning verbs such as "*dang 挡, diu 丢, diao 掉 and ban 搬*", teachers can express this word by doing actions, which can not only arouse students' interest in learning but also deepen students' impression of these words. Moreover, this teaching method can also make up for the lack of a morpheme method that cannot explain function words. For example, when learning the associated word "*zhiyou(只有)... zhiyou(只有)...*", if we only explain that it represents "*a relationship between premise and result*" it must be difficult for the students to understand. At this time, the teacher can set up such a situation: *David carefully reviewed what the teacher said last week and passed the exam successfully, Then guided the students to use this related word to make sentences. The students will soon say, "only after careful review can they pass the exam," and draw inferences from one instance, say many similar sentences, such as "only by listening carefully can they learn Chinese well," "only by communicating more can they speak Chinese".*

No matter their Chinese learning stage, they can adapt to this teaching method. Although this teaching method is impeccable in many aspects, it still has some objective shortcomings. The first is the setting of context. Context setting requires concise language, typical materials, and close to life, and the amount of information can neither be too large nor too small. These standards and requirements cannot be quantified. They all depend on Teachers' knowledge and life experience. Once the situation setting is not typical enough or fails to trigger students' psychological cognition or the words used are inaccurate, students will not understand the intention of teachers to express, and this situation setting will fail.

When the amount of information is too large, students cannot accept it. If it is too small, it cannot meet students' semantic understanding needs. For example, when explaining the word "*fang song (放松)*" if the teacher only creates a situation, "*Xiao Ming feels very relaxed*" = "*Xiaoming Ganjue Hen Fangsong*" and then asks the students to make sentences, the students can only know that the word means a feeling and cannot understand what this feeling is, and the students will wonder "*does it mean happiness or sadness?*" This context-setting is invalid. Second, applying the context teaching method throughout the classroom will affect the teaching progress. In situational practice, students are not proficient in the new words they have just learned, so they will be very slow in stating and organizing their language. Moreover, teachers also need to slow down when describing the situation. The superposition of the two will slow down the whole teaching progress so that only a few situations can be set in each class, and students can only master a few new words. It is unbelievable for thousands or even tens of thousands of vocabularies in the middle and advanced stage.

### 2.3 Network Teaching

This teaching method aims to use the network characteristics of vocabulary, consciously combine the target word with the word or meaning associated in the

vocabulary network in vocabulary teaching, and help students establish a Chinese vocabulary network (Sui, Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Liu, 2019). For example, when learning the Chinese words "冰灯, 冰雕" "冰雪节" "中央大街" and "太阳岛" guide students to establish an association network with "Harbin" as the central word in their brain. When learning Chinese words "好看, 美丽, 漂亮, 美好, 优美, 美观" guide students to establish a near semantic relationship network related to "美" in their minds. For students, using the networked vocabulary teaching method can quickly expand their vocabulary from point to area and enhance the systematic understanding of Chinese vocabulary among international students. For teachers, the network-based vocabulary teaching method has strong operability, is convenient to guide students to establish a network structure, and can effectively improve teaching efficiency. It is unnecessary to establish a context for explanation word by word like the context teaching method. It is a more practical teaching method. On the other hand, the network teaching method is not satisfactory. First, helping students establish synonymous and synonymous relationship networks will trouble international students, so they cannot distinguish synonyms, confusing the use of synonyms. For example, using the network-based teaching method, foreign students have constructed a synonymous relationship network with "静" as the central word. The words in the network include "宁静、安静、寂静、平静、冷静、镇静". In the view of foreign students, these words mean "quiet" so there is no difference in use, resulting in many mistakes. Make sentences such as *"if I think so, my mood will be quiet," "we are in a calm (quiet) place where we can hear our heartbeat"*. Second, the network-based teaching method is a lagging vocabulary teaching method. Students can connect all nodes in their minds and form a network only after they understand the meaning of each word. In other words, the network-based vocabulary teaching method cannot explain the meaning of words but can only be classified, and the understanding of word meaning is the most important and necessary for international students. To sum up, the more common vocabulary teaching methods have their insurmountable shortcomings and deficiencies, linked or decomposed from the synchronic level. Below, the author will introduce a new vocabulary teaching method, which can make up for the shortcomings of the traditional vocabulary teaching method to a certain extent.

### 3. Etymological Teaching Method

As a new vocabulary teaching method, the etymology teaching method is not perfect in theory and methodology (Ziafar & Namaziandost, 2019). Firstly, the etymology teaching method can stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese. In the process of English teaching, students are willing to understand the history and origin of words, like the training activities related to etymology. They will put more enthusiasm and attention into learning all kinds of information related to etymology and actively memorize and use relevant words in this process. This phenomenon also exists in Chinese teaching. Students are eager to know how a word comes from? Why use this word to refer to this thing? For example, the newly learned "抱 and 饱" and the

previously learned "包" contain "包". What is the relationship between them? "轮船" has no wheels, Why is it called "轮"? Why do "马虎" refer to "马" and "虎"? Why use "吹牛" to talk big? Is there any connection between "捎、梢、哨、削、稍"? The etymological teaching method can help to deal with these issues. If students have questions, they will be interested, and if they are interested, they will be motivated to find out the answers to these questions, and students will pay particular attention in class. Second, the etymology teaching method is helpful to the discrimination of synonyms. For example, "树立" and "竖立" The 树立 originally refers to the generic name of the plant, which is a general and abstract word. Therefore, the word 树立 derived from it is primarily abstract, such as goals and ideals. The 竖立 originally refers to a kind of vertical bean ware, which is a specific thing. Therefore, the word 竖立 derived from it is primarily specific, such as stone tablets and columns. In this way, the difference between the etymological analysis of such a group of words bothering international students is evident. Third, the etymology teaching method is helpful to the acquisition of polysemy by international students. The polysemy of Chinese words often annoys international students, who do not know which meaning to choose under which situation. The application of the etymology teaching method can help students understand the original meaning and evolution of words (Carey & Barner, 2019). Moreover, to understand the development motivation and process of words, form a track line of the development and change of word meaning in their mind, and turn the messy meanings into a regular and searchable word meaning system so that international students can correctly choose meanings, expand memory categories and improve vocabulary learning efficiency.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

At the beginning of the development of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, linguistic researchers have seriously studied teaching Chinese. Because of their efforts, the methods of teaching Chinese as a foreign language has developed into a 'garden full of flowers'. Based on summaries in the previous sections, this paper has put forth a synthesized version of the most effective method for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. It focuses on the review and analysis of the emerging teaching methods in vocabulary teaching, and attempts to introduce an innovation to existing methods. In professional teaching practices, teachers should be aware at the beginning of the students' learning status and the characteristics of Chinese itself. Several teaching methods run through the whole teaching process and make up for the deficiencies in vocabulary teaching. This academic paper has attempted to bring together the research on emerging methods for the benefit of teachers of Chinese as a foreign language.

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