Abstract:

A frequent objection to studying Chinese is, quite simply, that it is too difficult in the sense that the language needs patience and considerable memorizing. Each character looks like a square-shaped box written in various strokes. Learners who are used to the alphabetical writing system find characters difficult to recognize, time consuming to write and nearly impossible to remember. However, there is also encouraging evidence which points to the insights and efficiency of etymology in Chinese character teaching and learning. In addition, one of the great fascinations of learning Chinese lies in the Chinese writing system.

This paper is intended to address the interrelationships between Chinese etymology and Chinese character teaching from three aspects: features of Chinese characters, construction of Chinese characters, and implications for Chinese character teaching. Finally this research describes how a Chinese language teacher can apply character etymology to convey how Chinese characters are constructed from basic components such as form, shape, structure, stroke order, sound, and meaning. The character components and the construction of Chinese characters from these components are game-like interactive learning tasks. Commonly used components stimulate the students to think about form, function, and internal structure and they are real assets for improving their language proficiency.

I. Features of Chinese Characters

The primary feature of Chinese, an ideographic or hieroglyphic language, is different from alphabetical European languages by nature. Introducing the basic components is fundamental to engaging learners in the concept of a character-based script. Ideographs are characters or symbols representing an idea or a thing without expressing the pronunciation of a particular word or words, e.g. traffic signs commonly used for “no parking” or “parking prohibited.” The term “ideogram” is often used to describe symbols of writing systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sumerian cuneiform and Chinese characters. However, these symbols are logograms, representing words or morphemes of a particular language rather than objects or concepts. In a sense, Chinese characters are like emoticons.

Most Chinese characters are composed of semantic and phonetic components. They are phonetic complexes, or “phonograms” (as opposed to the older “pictograms”, which are pictures and symbols) consisting of a Radical, which gives indication to its
meaning and a phonetic, which gives indication to its pronunciation. Chinese radicals serve as the keys to Chinese language learning because they give indication as to its meanings.

Based on these characteristic features of the Chinese language, there are ways to demonstrate how the commonly used components can be recycled and used in different combinations to form new characters. Through remembering the pronunciation or meaning of these components, learners will gain a basic knowledge of the composition of Chinese characters—the radicals, the phonetic components and their configurations. This will establish a relationship between form, pronunciation, and meaning in characters and will enable learners to transfer what they already know when they learn new characters.

The origin of Chinese characters goes far back to the early history of China as established from word-signs on pottery shards dating back to around 5,000 BC and from oracle bones made of tortoise shells dating from the Shang Dynasty (1523-1027 BC). Only 43% of the Radicals appear in 3,693 characters, which is 74% of the 5,000 characters in the dictionary. Knowing these commonly used Radicals will give learners the “keys” to the meanings of about 3,700 characters. There are 3,500 characters in Frequently-used Characters of Modern Chinese, which was announced by National Language Committee in March, 1988.

II. Construction of Chinese Characters

The components of Chinese characters are combined in a logical or meaningful way instead of in a horizontal line. The hierarchical structure for the formation of Chinese characters is from stroke, to component, to character. Structurally Chinese characters can be classified into two kinds: one-component characters and compound characters. The first can be further categorized into pictograms and indicative characters, and the second kind, into associative characters and picto-phonograms. The compound characters are composed of one-component characters or components evolved from them, the two kinds generally constitute the radicals.

Based on their origin, Chinese characters have four major construction types: pictographic characters, indicative characters, associative characters, and picto-phonetic characters. Characters of the first type (Type A, e.g. 日、月、水、门) are like pictures representing a word, phrase, or idea, especially ones used in early writing systems. The second type (Type B, e.g. 上、下、本、末) are abstract symbols added to Type A characters to indicate meanings. The third type (Type C, e.g. 好、安、休、明、家) are two or more type A characters put together to describe actions or abstract meanings. Though Chinese is not a phonetic language, many two-component characters have one component to indicate the sound, called the phonetic, while the other to convey the meaning, called the radical. For examples, “女” in the character "妈" carries the meaning and "马" indicates the sound. Characters like this are called picto-phonetic characters and the two components are generally denoted as
radicals and phonetics. The fourth type (Type D, e.g. 妈、种、机) are “radical+ phonetic”, which are two component compound picto-phonetic characters. There are 11 commonly used radicals indicating: e.g. food, animal, house, hand/action, illness, heart/feeling, flesh/body, mouth/speech, metal, clothes, water. The parts which form the combined characters are called components. The components are either one-component characters themselves or symbols derived from them. Some components show meaning; others indicate sound. In Chinese dictionaries, the characters are arranged according to the different category of components. All the characters in 口 (mouth) 部 (category) contain the component 口, and all the characters in 人 (person) 部 contain the component 人. These components are radicals.

Therefore, radicals can be taken as the most basic components of Chinese characters. In addition, radicals also appear as meaningful components in the associative characters and picto-phonograms. Thus, teaching and learning Chinese characters through the Radicals makes it easier to analyze the structure and meaning of the picto-phonograms and the associative characters. As almost all Chinese dictionaries use radical indexing systems for characters, it is essential to prepare the students for the use of dictionaries. Statistically, 59% of radicals are on the left-hand side of the characters, with 13% on the top, 12% at the bottom, 8% on the right-hand side, and with 8% inside-outside or the radical alone being the character. The structures of the combined characters are divided into three principal types: left-right structure (林、明、好), top-bottom structure (男、尘、尖), and inside-outside structure (回、国、园).

III. Implications for Chinese Character Teaching

First, the approach of teaching and learning Chinese should be different from its counterpart for teaching and learning European languages, such as French or English, that employ a phonetic system or alphabet as an aid to learning pronunciation. The Chinese language is not alphabetical, but picto-graphical or ideographical, which means that there is no direct relationship between the form and structure of Chinese characters and their pronunciation.

Second, the linguistic understanding will in some way reveal the Chinese mind, considering the cognitive ability of language learners. During their development history Chinese characters experienced different writing stages. There are five major scripts, i.e., oracle bone script, bronze script, seal script, clerical script, and regular script. It is useful to know what the traditional character form looks like as it is often used to illustrate how the characters came to evolve to their present form.

Third, knowing the commonly used Radicals will give learners the “keys” to the meanings of the high frequency characters. When a new compound character containing the same radical of an old character learned before, emphasis should be placed on the logical relationship between its components, its meaning and the structural type of its components.
Fourth, Chinese character recognition and writing will be an efficient supplementary approach to facilitate Chinese language teaching and learning. When this approach is applied in Chinese character teaching, teachers should start from stroke to stroke order, from components to radicals, from one-component characters to combined characters, from commonly used ones to less commonly used ones. Different teaching methods can be used according to different origins or constructions of Chinese characters elaborating on the radicals and components.

Fifth, there are digital tools to facilitate character teaching and learning in the classroom setting. Students can work individually or in pairs on a range of learning tasks. The acquisition of new components and understanding must remain fundamental when etymology is involved in teaching and learning. For example, students can analyze Chinese compound characters by breaking compound characters into basic components using lists of characters which share common components, or analyze the relationships between form, sound, and meaning in Chinese characters.

**Keywords:** Chinese characters; Etymology; Radicals; Chinese Language Teaching