

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH AMONG LEARNERS OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

### Research Among Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language

Michael E. Everson & Helen H. Shen (Eds.)

2010

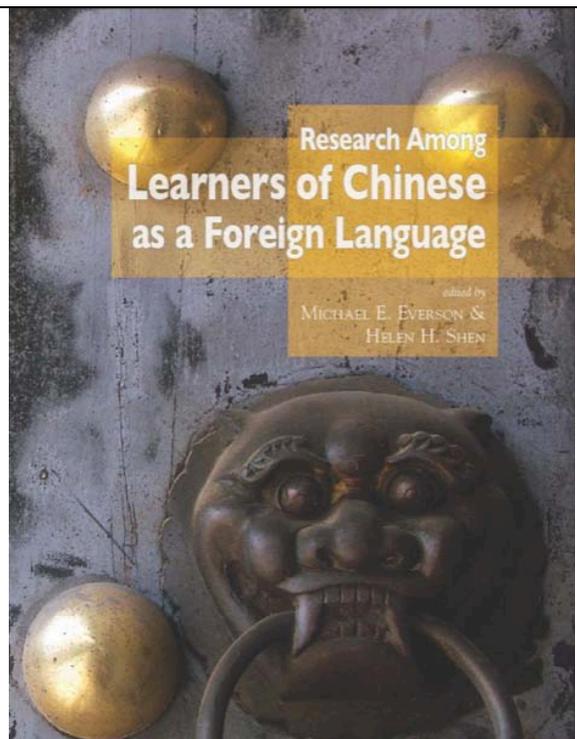
ISBN: 978–0–9800459–4–9

US: \$23.00

200 pp.

National Foreign Language Resource Center:  
University of Hawai'i Press

Honolulu, HI



Review by **Jing Wang**, [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis](#)

### OVERVIEW

*Research among Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language* addresses important issues related to the acquisition of the Chinese language in the context of post-secondary institutions. The book brings together eight empirical studies on learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), primarily those who are native speakers of Roman alphabetic languages. Although only one chapter directly addresses the use of technology, this volume is nonetheless an important resource in understanding technology use in the CFL field by providing a broad picture of Chinese acquisition research. As such, it offers an overview of current research in the field to language and technology researchers, Chinese language instructors, and readers generally interested in CFL.

This edited volume represents a range of research conducted in the field of CFL and thereby helps to address gaps that Ke (2012) has recently pointed out in this field in the United States: While reading research in Chinese has been extensively pursued and research specific to grammatical features has been studied, many of the skill areas and the applications of technology have not been fully explored. In evaluating the contributions made by this volume in light of the current context of Chinese acquisition research laid out by Ke, this collection not only advances knowledge in the more frequently examined areas such as reading and grammar, but also systematically examines several less studied areas: language attrition, mental lexicon, discourse processing through listening, writing, and online learning. Taken together, the chapters in this book employ varied and complex theoretical models and rely on diverse research methods.

## SUMMARY OF INDIVIDUAL CHAPTERS

In the first chapter, Du focuses on the acquisition of the *ba* construction. Grammatical words such as *le*, *ba*, and *de* play an important role in conveying grammatical meaning in Chinese, and they are frequently targeted in language instruction. Focusing on two constraints for *ba* verbal phrases: RVC (resultative verbal complement) and *le*, Du compared and contrasted CFL learners' performances not only at different levels but also with native speakers. Sixty-five CFL learners across three levels and 20 native Chinese speakers participated in the study. They produced Chinese sentences and completed grammaticality judgment tests using video clips. Non-native participants across three levels produced significantly fewer *ba* constructions than the native group, yet they showed no significant differences from the native group on most parts of the grammaticality judgment tests. In addition, the three non-native groups did not differ much in the production of *ba* constructions and on most parts of the grammaticality judgment tests. For the CFL learners, Du did not identify clear developmental trends. Comparing and contrasting the CFL learners in her study and young native speakers described in literature, Du confirmed some similarities. Yet she found the following differences: The CFL learners occasionally wrongly used *ba* with bare verbs while young native speakers did not; the CFL learners judged *ba + le* and *ba + RVC* equally well, while young native speakers demonstrated a particular acquisition order (i.e., *ba + le* preceding *ba + RVC*).

In the second chapter, Tseng reports actual language loss and the perception of attrition with regards to grammar, listening, and reading among learners during their summer hiatus from formal instruction. Because many CFL learners often experience a break in continuity with their language learning, this chapter provides useful guidance to language teachers for effectively dealing with this phenomenon. Seventeen first-year participants completed a pre-test before the summer break, and they also completed a post-test and a survey after the break at the beginning of their second year of language study. Statistical analyses indicated that there was no statistically significant decrease in listening and reading, whereas there was a significant decrease in grammar. As to their perception of attrition, the participants felt they experienced substantial losses in listening and grammar and some loss in reading. In this study, with the exception of their perceived grammar skills, participants' perceptions exaggerated their actual language attrition.

The next chapter focuses on the acquisition of radicals (i.e., character components) among beginning CFL learners. Shen invited 65 CFL learners from a midwestern university in the United States to take four radical tests, covering 100 radicals, during their first year of language learning. In each radical test, they wrote the pinyin (Roman alphabetical letters to indicate pronunciation), meaning, and graphic shape of the tested radicals. At the end of their first year, participants also completed a survey, in which they ranked their learning difficulties and gave their perceptions on learning radicals. Statistical analyses of the radical tests indicated that participants experienced less difficulty with radical meaning than with radical sound and shape. Test results coincided with participants' self-ranking of the difficulties in these three aspects. Qualitative analyses of survey answers illustrated special difficulties associated with learning radical meaning, sound, and shape. In addition, among the five categories of perceived effective learning methods, which were revealed through qualitative analyses, participants felt that repeated integration of radical meaning, sound, and shape was most conducive to learning radicals. Furthermore, a large majority of participants perceived radical knowledge as helpful in learning characters. Drawing on these findings, Shen offers several pedagogical implications to language instructors: emphasize pinyin and strokes, practice radicals across time, explain radicals' historical development, integrate radicals into character learning, employ a variety of engaging activities, and incorporate assessment. This chapter advances our knowledge on beginning CFL learners' experiences and perceptions of learning radicals.

In the fourth chapter, Lü focuses on vocabulary acquisition by exploring CFL learners' mental lexicons through word associations. In a total of 90 two-character words with three levels of familiarity and three parts of speech, twenty-two beginning and intermediate participants heard the words and then spoke out word associations, which were put into four categories: paradigmatic relations, syntagmatic relations,

phonological relations, and random responses. Compared to beginners, intermediate-level participants produced significantly more paradigmatic associations and significantly fewer random associations. In terms of depth of word knowledge, participants produced more paradigmatic and syntagmatic associations and fewer random associations with the increase of word familiarity, and they produced the fewest phonological associations for familiar words. As to parts of speech, participants produced the most paradigmatic associations for nouns. Lü concludes that proficiency, familiarity, and parts of speech all influence CFL learners' mental lexicons, and lexicons become more organized with improvement in language proficiency. She also concludes that CFL learners develop their mental lexicons differently from learners of English.

Chapter 5 turns to an exploration of reading strategies used by CFL learners at three different proficiency levels, which allows for a comparison of the strategies used by learners across levels. Specifically, covering the same topic and with the same discourse organization, Chang chose and modified three texts for three proficiency levels; she also revised an existing survey to gauge the cognitive and metacognitive strategies used by CFL learners in the reading process. Of a pool of participants who read a text at their proficiency level, wrote a recall in English, and completed the survey, data from 66 participants were analyzed. Statistical analyses did not indicate a clear developmental pattern, though they revealed one trend: With the improvement of language proficiency, participants increased their use of global processing strategies and decreased their use of local processing strategies. Specifically, participants at the three proficiencies showed different features of strategy use. In addition, within each proficiency level, more proficient readers used more global strategies than less proficient ones. Chang advocates explicit instruction of global strategies, suggests focusing on different strategies for different proficiencies, and emphasizes vocabulary development.

In Chapter 6, Liu extends the understanding of CFL discourse processing and memory through listening activities by CFL learners whose first language was Japanese. Thirty-two second-year participants listened to a short passage three times and then wrote recalls in their first language of Japanese. In addition, 10 participants wrote recalls in Chinese. Statistical analyses of the 32 recalls indicated that the beginning and the end of the passage were recalled significantly better than the middle. Qualitative analyses of the 32 recalls in Japanese showed that participants added new information, omitted details, changed sequences, and changed content; analyses of the 10 recalls in Chinese indicated that participants changed wording, changed sequences, and omitted words. Liu found that the middle of a reading passage was the most difficult to recall and that CFL learners employed different strategies in producing recalls, which may have been influenced by several factors. She concludes that CFL learners focus on content rather than the original form.

Chapter 7 turns to the area of writing, which in the CFL field has received less empirical attention. Xiao focuses on discourse features in the written development of CFL learners. Eight written diaries from two heritage and two non-heritage learners were gathered in two sequential semesters. In addition, one native speaker of the Chinese language re-wrote all the diaries. Contrasting the native speaker's writings with those of the participants, Xiao discovered differences in the use of discourse features that were unique to the Chinese language; however, she found no differences between the writings of heritage and non-heritage learners and no major changes in the use of discourse features over the duration of one semester. Xiao advocates the inclusion of more formal prose in textbooks and overt instruction of discourse features.

In the final chapter, Tasker uses grounded-theory methodology to study CFL learners' perceptions of distance learning of Chinese. Forty-one intermediate participants who had experienced learning Chinese through distance learning completed an open-ended survey. On the basis of survey responses, Tasker offered a detailed description of the participants and their path of learning Chinese, then she described four emerging themes of advice regarding the use of the distance-learning mode. She also provided an analysis of why participants chose distance learning. In addition, she summarized identified challenges

presented by distance learning and offered possible solutions to these issues. This final chapter complements a growing body of literature on the use of technology for the teaching and learning of Chinese (e.g., Bai, 2003; Xie & Yao, 2009; Xu, 2009; Zhang, 1998) and the effectiveness of CALL tools (e.g., Hong, 1997; Tsai, Kuo, Horng, & Chen, 2012; Wang, 2012; Wang & Upton, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This volume is the fourth monograph on research published by the Chinese Language Teachers Association in the United States. Together with the previous three volumes, this book charts the progress of research in the CFL field. It extends our knowledge by collecting empirical work from a variety of research methodologies to explore questions of current concern to CFL professionals.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Jing Wang is an assistant professor of Chinese at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Her research areas are second language acquisition, Chinese language pedagogy, computer assisted language learning, and cultural studies.

**Email:** [jw41@iupui.edu](mailto:jw41@iupui.edu)

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