

Character Decoding: A Creative Method for Teaching Chinese Characters

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Abstract

Students in Chinese language programs often experience a motivational decline when introduced to Chinese characters. Character learning is widely perceived as tedious, time-consuming, and cognitively demanding (Olmanson & Liu, 2017). Traditional teaching approaches emphasize rote memorization, which can frustrate learners. This article draws upon Oxford’s language learning strategies (1990), incorporates principles from “Wild Association,” and proposes a creative, interactive character instruction method designed to enhance student participation and facilitate character learning. Through classroom examples, this article illustrates how young learners make meaningful connections to character structure through imagination and personal associations. This method supports visual and social learning preferences, making character acquisition more approachable and enjoyable. Identifying effective Chinese character learning strategies is essential to maximizing learner performance and mitigating frustration that may lead to attrition.

Keywords: *Chinese character instruction, language learning strategies, Wild Association, visual learning*

Introduction

Chinese ranks as the sixth most studied language in American higher education institutions (Lusin et al., 2023). As a dominant less commonly taught language, Chinese instruction is offered in up to 72% of U.S. high schools either through classroom or online formats (American Councils for International Education, 2017).

Despite relatively steady enrollment, researchers note that students often lose interest in Chinese after one or two semesters due to linguistic challenges (Sung, 2014). The complexity of the Chinese writing system—its lack of phonetic trans-

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parency, intricate stroke patterns, and abundance of homophonic and heterographic characters—poses significant difficulties for learners whose first language uses alphabetic scripts (Shen, 2010; Yan et al., 2015).

Lu et al. (2013) reported a decline in learner motivation upon the introduction of characters. Xu et al. (2013) emphasized that Chinese script lacks consistent grapheme-phoneme correspondence, making orthography especially difficult. Wang (1998) asserted that Chinese’s tonal pronunciation and non-alphabetic script contribute to its reputation for difficulty. For English-speaking learners, the structure of Chinese characters presents a major hurdle (Wang & Leland, 2011).

Established Approaches to Chinese Character Instruction

Character-Centered Approach

The character-centered approach, rooted in classical education, utilizes texts such as *The Three Character Classic*, *Hundred Family Surnames*, and *The Thousand Character Classic* (《三字经·百家姓·千字文》). These character-dense rhymes promote recognition over production, allowing learners to read but not necessarily write characters (Lam, 2011). The strategy categorizes radicals semantically or phonetically to expedite recognition (Zhan & Cheng, 2014). However, this approach has been criticized for being too removed from practical language use and for not adequately addressing the needs of learners from alphabetic backgrounds, who require different scaffolding strategies.

Meaning-Centered Approach

Contrasting with the previous approach, the meaning-centered approach presents characters within contextual usage. It emphasizes understanding polysemous or function-specific characters. However, it may neglect the explicit teaching of orthographic and phonological awareness, which is essential for effective written communication (Olmanson & Liu, 2017). One challenge of the meaning-centered approach is that focusing on characters in context and communicative texts can leave less explicit guidance on character form and structure, which may lead some teachers to rely on rote memorization rather than systematic instruction (Lam, 2011).

Component-Based Approach

The component-based approach encourages analysis of character components, helping learners reduce memorization load by understanding the structural logic of characters. While effective for simplifying complex characters, it can still result in rote memorization if not paired with conceptual understanding (Cui et al., 2018; Lam, 2011). This approach is more effective for compound characters, whose semantic and phonetic components aid recognition, but less applicable to simple pictographs, which lack analyzable parts (Zhou et al., 1999).

Computer Assisted Chinese Character Learning (CACCL)

CACCL uses digital tools to teach Chinese characters through multimedia, interactive exercises, and adaptive feedback (Li, 2023). It can improve recognition, recall, and learner engagement, especially for second language learners. However, its effectiveness depends on learner motivation and access to technology, and it may not fully replace traditional handwriting or in-depth character analysis. CACCL works best when combined with established instructional methods. By integrating digital tools into character learning, CACCL expands opportunities for both classroom and self-directed study, bridging traditional pedagogy with modern educational technology.

Theoretical Framework: Language Learning Strategies and Wild Association

Oxford (1990) categorized language learning strategies into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. The examples presented in this article emphasize memory-related and social strategies. Alongside Oxford's framework, the examples also draw on the concept of "Wild Association" (奇特联想), a creative technique introduced by Weimin Li that uses imaginative associations to help learners build personal meanings from character forms (Sun, 2014).

Memory-Related Strategies

Memory-related strategies involve associating verbal material with visual imagery, movement, or spatial positioning (Oxford, 1990). Visual imagery in particular enhances verbal recall, especially for learners with strong visual-spatial intelligence (Shen, 2010). The mind's storage capacity for visual information significantly exceeds its capacity for verbal material, making visual-verbal associations particularly powerful for character learning.

Social Strategies

Social strategies encourage collaboration and cultural immersion. Group work fosters motivation, improves self-esteem, and encourages knowledge sharing (Oxford, 1990). Cooperative learning also reduces anxiety and builds mutual support systems. In character learning contexts, social strategies allow students to share mnemonic devices and creative associations, enhancing the collective learning experience.

Pictographic Characters and the Wild Association Approach

Traditional instruction often involves repetitive character copying, which students find tedious (Tse et al., 2007). Chinese characters originated from six classifications, with pictographs being the earliest, depicting humans, animals, and natural elements in stylized forms (Low et al., 2014). Focusing on the pictographic properties of characters can serve as the most fundamental function of jumpstarting and raising the interest of learners in learning Chinese characters (Lam et al., 2018).

There are several Chinese character teaching approaches utilizing the pictographic properties of Chinese characters. Weimin Li (李卫民) suggested a more liberated approach to learning the compositions of the characters. His approach is called Wild Association (奇特联想). Wild Association encourages learners to come up with their own explanation, as imaginative as possible, of why the characters are composed the way they are. Lam et al. (2018) found that such imaginative strategies enhance retention and deepen engagement by turning abstract characters into vivid, memorable images rooted in learners' personal and cultural experiences. Wild Association in character deconstruction and memorization is suggested to be the most effective when applied and controlled moderately in character memorization (Sun, 2014). Lam et al. (2018) suggested that when learners use their own imagination to learn Chinese characters and relate their own experience in doing so, they can learn faster and more effectively. The learners are encouraged to come up with their own stories or provide a rationale. Such an approach makes learning characters more interesting, interactive, and meaningful. It also triggers and stimulates learners' desire to learn. Kuo and Hooper (2004) explained that Chinese characters are highly imageable logographic words. Chinese characters were often created through careful observation and logical reasoning, each

character reflecting a story or suggesting a logical or philosophical idea. Logographic words provide graphic and semantic contexts that can lead to successful character recognition. The visual appearance of a character helps learners differentiate and identify the characters. While “Liushu,” a traditional framework for classifying Chinese characters, has been recognized and accepted as the basis for the teaching of Chinese characters, the Wild Association approach is accepted as a valid and useful supplement.

Implementing a Creative Teaching Model

To reduce learning anxiety, I employed an interactive strategy combining Wild Association with memory-related and social learning principles. This method is a viable alternative for teaching characters, particularly in the initial stages when the characters are still unfamiliar to learners. It can boost learners’ interest and minimize their fear of learning characters. It also supports learners’ engagement and visual processing, allowing them to interact with characters through creative, hands-on tasks (Lam et al., 2018).

During a sports unit for sixth-grade students, I began with a warm-up asking which sports they enjoyed and which were popular in China and the United States. We then created a Quizlet flashcard set together to introduce the new vocabulary. When I shared that I am good at ping-pong, I displayed the characters “乒乓” (ping-pong) and asked for their impressions. Students noticed the similarity between the characters, mimicked the motion of playing ping-pong, suggested that the characters resembled paddles, or commented that the pronunciation sounded just like “ping-pong.” Using this group activity as a model, I asked students to create their own visual interpretations of the vocabulary. The class of 16 was divided into three teams, each exploring how the sports related to their corresponding characters.

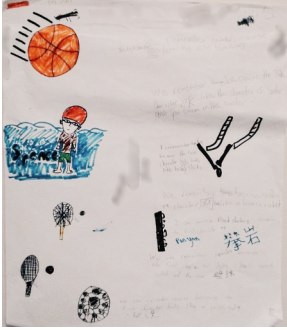
The activity spanned two class sessions of 40–45 minutes each. In the first session, I modeled Wild Association while introducing the vocabulary, demonstrating how visual interpretations can support character learning. In the second session, students worked in teams to select three to four sports and generate visual interpretations linking the Chinese characters to a meaning, image, or movement that made sense to them. They were encouraged to draw pictures, connect characters to shapes, or relate them to personal experiences. Teamwork lasted 25–30 minutes, followed by brief presentations in which students explained their associations. While circulating among the teams, I observed without intervening, allowing students to generate their own imaginative connections. This non-intervention was intended to highlight the value of peer collaboration in building meaningful connections. Grounded in social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the decision to withhold direct guidance enabled students to reinterpret inputs freely and rely on peer-to-peer scaffolding to co-construct understanding.

Figure 1 shows examples of students decoding the characters and interpreting the characters in their own words.

Figure 1

Posters of Students Decoding the Sports Characters and Interpreting the Characters in their own Words

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Note. Students wrote the following sentences describing each sport, from left to right:

We remember 篮球 [basketball] because “篮” [basket] looks like the color blue “蓝” [blue]

We remember 游泳 [swimming] because the 2nd character 泳 [swim] like the character water and you swim in the water; I remember 游泳 [swimming] because the three dots on the left means water

We remember 网球 [tennis] because the first character 网 [net] looks like tennis racket; I remember 网球 [tennis] because the first character looks like a net

I can remember 冰球 [ice hockey] because the first character 冰 [ice] looks like hockey sticks

We can remember 足球 [soccer] because the first character looks like a person kicking a ball; I remember 足球 [soccer] because the ball is black and white like a zebra

I remember 乒乓球 [ping-pong] by the two characters in the middle look like the paddle of the game ping-pong

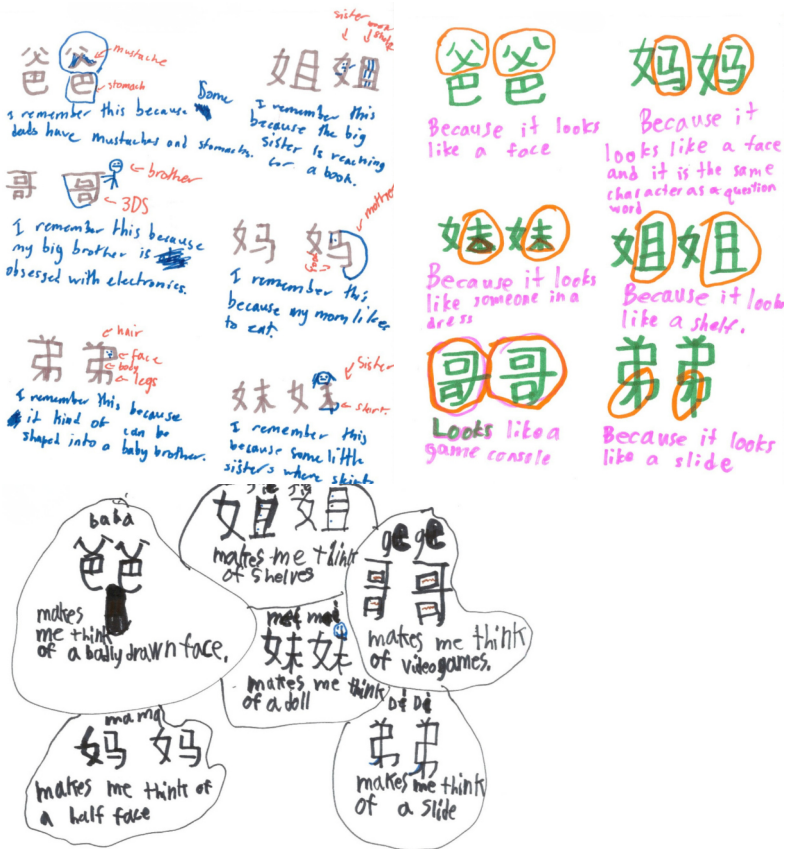
I remember 骑车 [riding a bike] because the 2nd character looks like a bike frame

Another activity involved fifth-grade students interpreting characters for family members (Figure 2).

This method emphasizes the learning process by integrating memory-related and social learning principles. In the first example, students formed creative links between character forms and sports, making the characters more approachable and less intimidating. Through dual coding and elaboration, they paired shapes with images, movements, and personal associations that supported long-term retention. Many reinforced meanings through embodied cognition by acting out the sport, linking motor memory to character recognition. Collaborative work further strengthened social learning as students observed, discussed, refined, and shared their interpretations during presentations. These creative exercises also allowed students to personalize their learning experience while strengthening character recognition and recall. Informal observation indicated that students demonstrated greater enthusiasm for character learning and showed improved retention when they created personal associations compared to traditional rote memorization methods. The collaborative nature of the activities also fostered peer support and reduced individual anxiety about character complexity.

Figure 2

Students Use Association and Connection to Decode Characters of Family Members



Note. Three groups of students wrote the following sentences, reflecting their interpretations of family-member characters:

爸爸 [father] makes me think of a badly drawn face; I remember this because some dads have mustaches and stomachs

妈妈 [mother] because it (马) looks like a face and it is the same character as a question word; 妈妈 [mother] makes me think of a half face

哥哥 [older brother] makes me think of video games; 哥哥 [older brother] looks like a game console

姐姐 [older sister] makes me think of bookshelves; I remember this because the big sister is reading a book

弟弟 [younger brother] makes me think of a slide

妹妹 [younger sister] makes me think of a doll; Because it looks like someone in a dress; I remember this because some little sisters wear skirts

While the activity does not involve immediate target-language communication, it is designed to build foundational character recognition and prepare learners for

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subsequent communicative use. By creating personal and motor-based associations, students actively engage with the material, strengthening long-term retention, motivation, and confidence, which are essential before engaging in sentence-level or conversational tasks (Lam et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). The time invested in these creative, interactive exercises is supported by evidence showing that they reduce learning anxiety, foster peer-supported learning, and enable students to internalize characters more effectively than rote memorization alone. My informal observation indicated that students demonstrated greater enthusiasm for character learning and showed improved retention when they created personal associations compared to traditional rote memorization methods.

Discussion and Limitations

Research suggests that language learning is most effective when learners actively regulate their strategies (Winke & Abbuhl, 2007). In Chinese character learning, integrating visual and social strategies reduces cognitive load, fosters creativity, and builds learner confidence. Collaborative sharing of mnemonic devices enhances engagement and promotes deeper processing (Wang & Leland, 2011). Rather than relying on repetition, students benefit from analyzing, comparing, and visualizing characters, which improves retention and makes learning more meaningful (Wang, 1998).

The present examples employed the Wild Association approach as the technique for teaching Chinese characters. This strategy encourages students to generate personal visual or imaginative associations, positioning them as active creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of information. In the classroom setting examined here, students frequently volunteered to share their own character-association strategies after learning this method. Those who continued studying Chinese in higher grades reported that they remembered the activity and continued applying the strategies, suggesting that Wild Association can become internalized as part of long-term character learning practices.

Several limitations should be noted. Wild Association is most effective with pictographic and ideographic characters, which naturally support visual associations. More abstract or complex phonetic-semantic characters may require modifications or additional support. Although creative associations aid initial learning and retention, advanced proficiency still requires systematic understanding of character structure, radicals, and composition principles. The Wild Association activities described here focus primarily on character recognition rather than immediate target-language communication, which may limit opportunities for practicing sentence-level or conversational skills. Additionally, these creative, interactive character-learning activities did not incorporate digital learning strategies, which have been shown to enhance engagement and retention in recent research (Li, 2023). Therefore, Wild Association should complement, rather than replace, structured instruction. Moreover, research on Wild Association remains limited. Aside from foundational studies (Lam, 2011; Lam et al., 2018) and a brief mention by Ye and Ésik (2025), recent scholarship rarely addresses the approach directly, and most applications focus on early literacy instruction for young learners (Du et al., 2024). It is worthwhile to examine studies on graphic creativity (Wu, 2022) and visual mnemonics (Chang et al., 2022), as these studies suggest principles similar to Wild Association, even if the term itself is not explicitly used. Additionally, features of the classroom setting may limit generalizability. At my school, the language program is interest-based. Students are only required to recognize characters, and a variety of activities are used to maintain engagement. The young age of learners also makes collecting formal feedback challenging.

Future research should examine the long-term effectiveness of Wild Association across different character types, age groups, and proficiency levels. Investigating how it can be integrated with traditional structural approaches may support comprehensive character instruction and provide evidence-based guidelines to improve learning outcomes while sustaining student engagement and motivation.

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