

Holistic vs. Decompositional Processing in Chinese Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

Over 80% of Chinese characters are compound characters with semantic and phonetic constituent parts (Hoosain, 1991). These sub-character components provide crucial information for deciphering the character as a whole. Exploring how they contribute to character processing may help improve our better understanding of Chinese character processing, especially in Chinese-as-a-foreign-language (CFL) learners. How does the combination of character familiarity and character frequency affect visual character processing? How do CFL learners and Chinese native speakers differ?

A character decision task is used, with masked priming of a semantic radical that is congruent or incongruent with the radical in the target character. A significant difference in RTs between matched and unmatched conditions suggests character decomposition, while no difference implies holistic processing.

Results show that character frequency determines whether or not CFL learners process compound characters holistically or in a decomposed manner, even though classroom vocabulary instruction does not follow any type of frequency distribution.