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Teaching English Reading in the Chinese-Speaking World

Building Strategies Across Scripts

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*To my lovely wife, Bonnie, and my kids.
Coming home to you is what makes all the
hard work worthwhile.*

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Introduction

Many, many years ago (enough so that I don't really want to admit the actual number in print), during my undergraduate days, I decided to rent a small house for the summer with a group of friends from university. We were of various backgrounds and origins, and we had different motivations and goals for being there, but we were united in that most universal of college student traits—abject poverty. While we managed to scratch together most of what we needed to live, it wasn't very long before we discovered that we lacked broad categories of kitchen supplies! While we were planning to cook for ourselves through the summer, during the year, we had all been on university meal plans, and as such, we had very few kitchen supplies. I'm sure everyone had assumed that once everyone's kitchen things were assembled together that we would have a fully stocked kitchen, but as you may well have guessed, most of the things we had were redundant. We had a few pots of various shapes and sizes, but no frying pan. We had bowls in abundance, but few plates. We had an awe-inducing number of cups and glasses, which was nice, but we had an extremely limited number of forks, knives, and spoons. In short, what unfolded was a hilarious summer-long adventure in creative dish and utensil use as buying new ones was a thought that never even seemed to cross our minds.

One day while attempting to make spaghetti for that evening, two of us discovered that the person charged with putting away the groceries had neglected to separate the ground turkey meat into smaller portions before tossing it in the freezer, thereby producing a rock-hard lump of meat about the size and shape of a half-inflated volleyball. We knew that we lacked a proper kitchen knife, and we were reluctant to cook the whole glob of meat. We didn't have enough time to simply defrost the lump. In the midst of discussing our options, I had a sudden thought. Hanging on my wall in my bedroom was a scimitar I had picked up during a trip to Mexico; *what if we...???*

A few minutes later, the kitchen floor was covered with trash bags and the house was resounding with “*Twaack! Thwaaak!*” noises as my roommate flailed the sword against the ball of frozen flesh and bits of bloody turkey meat flew across the kitchen, slowly thawing on the floor. At this point, I looked up and saw another roommate who had been taking a nap in his room standing wide-eyed in the kitchen

doorway. After a few moments, he mumbled something about not being willing to help us “hide the body” and stumbled back to bed.

The above anecdote was recounted simply to illustrate the point of the importance of having the right tools for the job. Lacking the correct tool, we can often still complete a job, whether that job be construction, cooking, or anything else. A rock can make for a serviceable hammer when in a pinch. Still, while one can often still *technically* complete a job without the right tools, there are a lot of drawbacks. Using the wrong tool for any job is going to be clumsier and less efficient. Using the rock to drive a nail is probably going to leave marks on your board, and you might bend a few nails (or break a few fingers) before you succeed. There’s a simple reason why tools tend to have a specific function—they are designed to maximize efficiency and effectiveness while minimizing risk.

While most people may not make the immediate intuitive leap, education functions in the same way. Learning strategies are developed to maximize different skill sets, but these learning strategies are often designed for very specific tasks, and transferring them to other jobs would be inefficient or even counterproductive. Certain mnemonic devices may work great for memorizing a list of capital cities, but may be of no use whatsoever in memorizing times-tables. This book, boiled down to its essence, is making the argument that the skills we learn at the beginning of literacy tend to be language-specific, and may not transfer well to other languages. Specifically we’ll be looking at how native speakers of Chinese approach word identification and processing in their own language, and how that may affect them when they try to learn English as a second language, but the basic argument would be transferable across any two languages that vary in script (or possibly even if they vary significantly in terms of orthographic depth).¹ Just like using a scimitar to chop off a bit of frozen meat, misapplication of first language literacy strategies to another language doesn’t necessarily mean that the attempt at reading will fail, but rather that it is merely not the most efficient, nor the easiest, way of going about learning to read the foreign language. Simply put, if we have the right tool for any job, that job is going to be done more easily and with less effort, and the end result is going to look better. If students are provided the right tools for foreign language literacy development, there will be a lot less “blood on the floor,” so to speak...

¹If you don’t know what this means, don’t worry—you will soon enough.