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WHILE USING PHONETICS TO LIQUIDATE ILLITERACY
STRENGTHEN THE STUDY OF HAN CHARACTERS
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WHILE USING PHONETICS TO LIQUIDATE ILLITERACY,
STRENGTHEN THE STUDY OF HAN CHARACTERS

[The following is a translation of a report by the Honan An-yang Egg Factory Hung-chuan (Red Expert) School. The report appears in Kung-jen Jih-pao, Peiping, 30 June 1960, page 3.]

When our school proceeded this time with liquidation of illiteracy through the use of the phonetic alphabet, we took into consideration the lesson our previous experience had given us. This time we paid serious attention to the study of the characters and made our students master them well. All forty students in our class (with the exception of some three or four transferred or on too long a sick leave) after 123 class-hours of study were able to recognize easily 2,000 characters, read popular publications, and write short tests of some 300-400 characters.

Liquidation of illiteracy through the use of the phonetic alphabet does not mean "liquidation of illiteracy in phonetical transcription of Chinese speech", but "liquidation of illiteracy in Chinese characters". Therefore, in liquidation of illiteracy through study of the phonetic alphabet, study of the characters must be taken very seriously so that after a certain period of study the student might be able, all by himself, to read or write comparatively long essays without the help of the phonetic alphabet. When in 1958 we initiated our classes for liquidation of illiteracy through the use of the phonetic alphabet, we did not pay sufficient attention to the study of characters. And our students could read but few characters when they were not accompanied by the alphabet. This time we treated the matter in a different way.

In the period of studying the phonetic alphabet we put special stress on study of the Chinese syllables. At this time students did not yet begin study of the characters, but due to peculiarity of spelling, mastering

of the syllables serves as an introduction to the mastering of reading of the characters. So, when a student mastered some 400 Chinese syllables it means that he has mastered phonetic expression of all Chinese characters.

With this in mind, our students first mastered consonants, then vowels and spelling. This led the students to the mastering of some 400 syllables. So after a vowel "a" is explained and mastered the student is required to familiarize himself with reading and writing of all vowel syllables with "a". In this way when a class is through with all vowels, all 400 syllables are correspondingly mastered.

In the end when the class makes a general repetition of the syllables, students must have the syllables bound with the characters. Here it is important to have the student clearly perceive that a Chinese character is but a syllable, and a syllable represents phonetic reading of the character. Only when students mastered all syllables can they proceed speedily to the spelling of the characters.

When we were through with the period of spelling characters, students were required, operating with the alphabet, to master quickly the spelling and meaning of 2,000 characters and to be able to write 350 basic characters and some composite characters. When we started the study of spelling of the characters, we had printed a table with the spelling (in alphabet) of the 2,000 characters in common use. This table was distributed to the students for practice in spelling and reading.

Adult students, who are comparatively more conscientious, diligently mastered syllables and learned readings and meanings of the characters. So when the teacher started study of characters with emphasis on their form, the students could proceed at a greater speed without any waste of time. When we began to spell characters, using for this the phonetic alphabet, we turned to the study of basic characters and simultaneously with the study of spelling of the characters we taught students thirteen types of brush strokes and six writing rules, and also taught them to copy 350 basic characters.

After that we turned to the study of the composite characters, made dictation on basic characters, and had students copy the composite characters. At the end, we undertook the study of the radicals. Here we made dictations on all basic characters and some composite

characters, and also repeatedly practiced the radicals. When this period of study was over, all students were able to spell the 2,000 characters in phonetic alphabet.

In the period of reading of texts accompanied by the alphabet, study of characters was still very important. On the one side, the students were instructed in the reading of many texts with the aid of alphabet, and in this process of repetitious readings, they memorized many characters. On the other hand, through calculated copying of the groups of words, phrases, and pieces, they were led, on the basis of peculiarity of readings of Chinese characters, to make out their meanings and write out their form, and finally to memorize them.

During the readings, students no longer looked at the accompanying alphabet above the characters already mastered. As to characters which students recognized with the help of the alphabet above the characters, they also were not new to him, as he already had studied them, but they were still not firm in his mind. The students made marks under such characters and copied groups of words or sentences containing such characters.

In class studies we helped them analyze written forms of such characters. After the classes we requested them to copy characters repeatedly and arrange them by radicals. After repeated recognition of characters and repeated copying, students mastered almost 2,000 characters with which they were familiar before.

At the same time, students increased their ability to master Chinese characters utilizing peculiarities in character construction. For example, the four characters "尧 [yao], 浇 [chiao], 烧 [shao], 绕 [jiao]" have all different meaning, but the students were all able to discern correctly, by their radicals, their reading and meaning. They used to say "尧" alone is "yao". With "氵" (water) added it is "浇" (chiao), and means to water the fields. With "火" (fire) added it is "烧" (shao) and means to burn coal. With "纟" (silk) added it is "绕" (jiao).

In the writing period of texts, not only did we teach the students to pass over the obstacles they met (i.e., characters they did not know how to write) by resorting to the use of the phonetic alphabet, but also continued the intensive study of characters, with the constant aim that students master firmly the 2,000 characters. Insufficiently firm knowledge of characters was reflected in the writing of texts where students

resorted to the use of the phonetic alphabet for characters they did not know.

With respect to such characters we adopted measures of a general and individual nature. A teacher arranged characters into many groups by radicals. From these groups the characters already studied, but not firmly mastered, were separated into one group. The characters not studied before made the second group. The first efforts of the teacher in the class was directed at the first group. Students had to recognize characters repeatedly and copy them. In their home work they had to copy them again three to five times. The characters formerly unknown were analyzed and read in class only by the teacher. Students were required to practice them at home. After the completion of the text writing period, students not only mastered 2,000 characters in common use, but also became familiar with additional characters.

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