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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this dissertation was to investigate the development of metalinguistic orthographic awareness in learners of Chinese as a foreign language, particularly those from outside of the Sinographosphere. Three critical aspects of metalinguistic orthographic awareness of the Chinese writing system were identified: graphemic awareness (concerning structural relationships between strokes, components, and elements), grapho-morphemic awareness (how a Chinese character and its parts connect with meaning), and grapho-phonetic awareness (how a Chinese character and its parts connect with pronunciation).

Qualitative research methods, in particular phenomenographic methods and prepared research tools (i.e. semi-structured interview and metalinguistic orthographic awareness test), led to a better understanding of how learners perceive Chinese characters, how their perception changes with increasing language proficiency, and how metalinguistic orthographic awareness develops over time. The study revealed a discrepancy between declarative and procedural knowledge, which gradually diminished with rising language proficiency. The following qualitative shifts in the perception of Chinese characters were identified: a change in the perception of character structure, a decrease in the perception of characters as pictographic, and an increase in integrated perception of various aspects of Chinese characters. Furthermore, the study confirmed that different aspects of orthographic awareness develop at different rates.

To conclude the study, an original model for processing Chinese characters was proposed. The aim of this model is to accommodate the needs of Chinese language teaching and learning in institutional environments. The proposed model is also adaptable to different stages of metalinguistic orthographic awareness development. Implications of the findings for teaching practice were also discussed, including suggested teaching content at various learning stages and types of tasks supporting the development of metalinguistic orthographic awareness. The necessity of supporting the development of orthographic awareness in students was also emphasized, given its crucial role in facilitating the learning process of the Chinese writing system and the further development of language proficiency.