Article

The Value, Challenges, and Strategies of Character Recognition Instruction in Elementary School Chinese Language Arts Under a Core Competencies Framework

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Abstract: Character-based literacy instruction is a teaching method guided by the theory of Chinese character studies that traces the origins of Chinese characters, analyzes their formation patterns, and explores their cultural significance. Character-based literacy instruction guided by core competencies offers multiple educational benefits, including fostering students' cultural confidence, enhancing higher-order thinking skills, strengthening language proficiency, and cultivating aesthetic and creative literacy. However, it also faces practical challenges: first, an overemphasis on instrumental rationality leads to a lack of cultural transmission; second, the removal of contextual elements limits the development of critical thinking; third, insufficient teacher training results in inadequate language proficiency among educators; and fourth, a neglect of perceptual understanding leads to a lack of aesthetic cultivation. To explore solutions to these challenges, the action strategies lie in striking a balance between instrumental and humanistic approaches to create a character-based literacy classroom centered on cultural education; designing contextual learning environments for character-based literacy instruction to nurture students' higher-order thinking skills in language arts; strengthening teacher training in character etymology to enhance their literacy instruction capabilities; and conducting character-based literacy classes infused with aesthetic education to highlight the quality of language arts education in cultivating students through beauty.

Keywords: Core Competencies; Character-Based Literacy Instruction; Character Education

1. Introduction

Character-based literacy instruction refers to a method of teaching Chinese characters that draws on their cultural significance, traces their origins, and is guided by the theories of sinology; it may also be referred to as etymological culture instruction [1]. Character etymology is not only an important cultural marker that embodies core competencies but also reflects the nation's commitment to preserving its cultural roots. In 2021, the State Council proposed promoting the inheritance of traditional cultures such as oracle bone script, demonstrating the nation's emphasis on Chinese character etymology [2]. In 2024, the Ministry of Education further called for exploring the educational value of Chinese characters and applying research findings on ancient scripts, highlighting the important educational function of character etymology [3].

Current research primarily focuses on character logic-based literacy instruction from the perspective of daily teaching [4,5]. It also examines character analysis, students' harmonious development, and culture [6-8]. However, there is a scarcity of discussions regarding the value potential, practical challenges, and implementation strategies of character logic-based literacy instruction guided by core competencies. Therefore, this study attempts to clarify the logical framework for character-based literacy instruction in elementary school Chinese language education under a core competencies framework,

Received: 22 September 2026
Revised: 04 November 2026
Accepted: 16 November 2026
Published: 19 November 2026

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explore the practical challenges faced, and identify strategies to overcome them, with the aim of providing new insights for practical implementation.

2. The Value and Significance of Character Recognition Instruction in Elementary School Chinese Language Education under a Core Competencies Framework

2.1. Passing Down the Wisdom of Chinese Characters and Cultivating Students' Cultural Confidence

As a cultural crystallization that has been passed down to the present day, Chinese characters are not only a concentrated embodiment of the Chinese nation's wisdom but also an important vehicle for rich cultural connotations and philosophical concepts. Character-based literacy instruction, by tracing the origins of characters, explores the history of Chinese character culture, helps students appreciate the emotions embodied in them, and fosters their cultural confidence. First, by analyzing the pronunciation, form, and meaning of Chinese characters, students explore cultural history. "Almost every ancient Chinese character can reveal a part of cultural history through its form, sound, meaning, and function" [9]. Second, it integrates Chinese character culture to help students appreciate the emotions embedded in the characters. "Look up to observe the heavens, look down to examine the earth; draw near to observe the human body, and look far to observe all things"-by integrating Chinese character culture into character-based literacy instruction, students are guided to appreciate the evolution of Chinese characters and the emotional nuances behind them, progressing from sensory perception to emotional understanding. Third, we should tap into cultural resources to foster cultural confidence. Chinese characters are vessels of thought imbued with moral and emotional significance, embodying the nation's ideology and cultural confidence. Etymological culture serves as a valuable educational resource for Chinese literacy instruction and is a key tool for cultivating cultural confidence. Therefore, teachers should fully explore the rich cultural resources embedded in etymological culture to establish educational goals centered on cultural inheritance and understanding.

2.2. Understanding the Logic of Chinese Characters to Enhance Higher-Order Thinking Skills

The "2022 Edition of the New Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education Chinese Language" advocates fostering students' unique personalities and developing and enhancing their thinking [10]. This holds significant pedagogical importance. First, the rational imagination inherent in the logic of Chinese characters provides a foundation for the development of higher-order thinking. The wisdom of character creation-based on "drawing analogies from objects"-transforms visual thinking into conceptual thinking through the abstraction of objects, the distillation of characteristics, and the classification of analogies. This process not only cultivates the sensitivity and depth of thought but also enables Chinese characters to transcend their purely symbolic function, transforming them into cognitive vehicles that embody both cultural significance and intellectual value, thereby laying a theoretical foundation for developing students' higher-order thinking skills in literacy instruction [11]. Second, the rationale and structural composition of Chinese character etymology provide a basis for the development of higher-order thinking. Vygotsky pointed out that thinking is not merely expressed through language but is realized through it. As an important linguistic practice, character-based literacy instruction offers two key advantages for the development and enhancement of students' thinking. On the one hand, the etymological principles of Chinese characters form the foundation for developing students' thinking. Elementary literacy instruction that relies on the structural rationale of the characters themselves and traces their origins serves as a crucial guarantee for both the quality and quantity of students' literacy acquisition. On the other hand, the structural types of Chinese characters serve as material for cultivating students' thinking. Pictographic characters, which derive meaning from their shapes, develop students' intuitive thinking; ideographic characters, which serve as markers or indicators, develop students' visual thinking; ideo-semantic characters, which carry

narrative elements, develop students' divergent thinking; and phonetic-semantic characters, which integrate form, sound, and meaning, develop students' logical thinking.

2.3. Tracing the Semantic Origins of Chinese Characters to Enhance Language Proficiency

Heidegger stated that "language is the home of Being," and Chinese language education serves as the "home of Being" in the philosophical dimension of the nation's standard language and script, as well as the "spiritual cradle" in the cultural dimension of that language and script. Tracing the origins of Chinese character meanings serves as a bridge to explore the existence of language and a bond for understanding the essence of Chinese culture. First, enhancing language proficiency in authentic contexts. Teachers should integrate etymological culture into their lessons based on key instructional objectives, enabling students to master linguistic and cultural knowledge within authentic language contexts. Second, clarifying cultural identity by tracing the origins of Chinese character meanings. "The cause of language and writing is characterized by its foundational, overarching, social, and nationwide nature" [12]. Given the significant national responsibility borne by language and writing, teachers must guide students to deeply understand the Chinese linguistic civilization and cultural world in which they live, helping them define their cultural identity as members of the Chinese nation.

2.4. Appreciating the Beauty of Chinese Characters and Cultivating Aesthetic and Creative Literacy

Character-based literacy instruction should closely revolve around the fundamental task of fostering virtue and nurturing talent. Through the teaching philosophy of "nurturing the heart with beauty and cultivating the heart with culture," it should create an aesthetic atmosphere, conduct diverse aesthetic experience activities, and cultivate students' aesthetic and creative thinking. Character-based literacy instruction can enhance the aesthetic experience in the classroom through four aspects: sound, form, meaning, and connotation. First, the beauty of sound lies in its pleasantness. Chinese characters are divided into four tones-level, rising, departing, and entering-which give them a distinct sense of rhythm and lyrical beauty when read aloud. Second, the beauty of form delights the eye. The aesthetic quality of Chinese character forms imbues them with imaginative qualities. The method of character creation-"depicting objects with fluid, natural strokes"-endowed early Chinese characters with a strong pictorial and intuitive quality, enabling them to directly reflect the characteristics of all things in nature. Character-based literacy instruction can leverage these pictorial features to foster aesthetic education. Third, the beauty of meaning enriches the heart. The beauty of Chinese character meaning embodies the essence of Confucian "cultivation of the gentleman" in aesthetic education and serves as the spiritual core for comprehending "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and integrity." Experiencing the beauty of Chinese character meaning involves using the cultural connotations of these characters to guide students in forming an understanding of beauty, generating aesthetic experiences, and thereby fostering a love for beauty, a pursuit of beauty, and the creation of beauty-ultimately cultivating a Chinese aesthetic character that combines artistic appreciation with moral refinement. Third, the beauty of meaning purifies the soul. The beauty of meaning in Chinese characters possesses a dual aesthetic dimension: their essence carries emotional resonance, while their contextual use creates the beauty of poetic imagery-such as "using sound to accentuate stillness" and "the interplay of the concrete and the abstract"-thereby forming an aesthetic quality in which form and meaning mutually reinforce one another.

3. Practical Challenges in Character-Based Literacy Instruction in Elementary School Chinese Language Education under the Guidance of Core Competencies

3.1. An Overemphasis on Instrumental Rationality Leads to a Lack of Cultural Transmission

Currently, character-based literacy instruction either downplays the cultural significance of character recognition or, even when cultural elements are incorporated, remains constrained by an exam-oriented mindset, thereby weakening the cultural and

educational function of such instruction. The root cause lies in the fact that teaching practices dominated by instrumental rationality have strayed from the essential pursuit of "cultivating people through culture," making it difficult to achieve a deep immersion in traditional culture. First, the current teaching landscape, dominated by instrumental rationality, obscures the intrinsic value of students' lives. Most literacy instruction today revolves around reading speed and test scores; students view Chinese characters as tools for completing tasks rather than as vehicles for culture, emotion, and self-expression. Consequently, characters become mere symbols rather than the language of life. Second, insufficient recognition of the humanistic nature of character-based literacy instruction hinders the development of students' cultural character. In 2014, the state proposed that humanities disciplines such as Chinese language and history should leverage their unique educational advantages [13]. However, in actual teaching practice, there remains a lack of rational understanding regarding the value of Chinese characters. From the perspective of cultural education, the integration of culture remains superficial and superficially packaged, failing to delve deeply into the relationship between cultural contexts and the laws of student cognition. In terms of cultural content, teachers neglect the internalization of the contemporary spirit and the construction of cultural character.

3.2. The Limitations of Decontextualization on the Cultivation of Higher-Order Thinking

Core literacy competence refers to students' ability to effectively solve real-life problems in complex contexts by drawing on mental schemas and action strategies [14]. However, the integration of contextual elements into character-based literacy instruction currently suffers from a disconnect between theory and practice, resulting in teaching that is detached from real-life contexts. First, character-based literacy instruction is divorced from real-life contexts, which diminishes students' interest in learning characters. Most character recognition classes are limited to the decomposition, combination, and substitution of character components, causing students to remain at a superficial level of memorization regarding Chinese characters. They have yet to understand the cultural connotations of Chinese characters or their applications in daily life, making it difficult to stimulate students' interest in learning. Second, the decontextualization of character recognition instruction based on character structure weakens students' cognitive development. Some teachers fail to design instructional processes based on the actual needs of the curriculum standards, student interests, and social life; furthermore, when designing learning scenarios, they place too much emphasis on superficial entertainment value. Consequently, they struggle to stimulate students' higher-order thinking, causing contextualized instruction to become merely a formality.

3.3. Neglect of Teacher Training Leads to Insufficient Language Proficiency among Teachers

Chinese language teachers are the practitioners responsible for integrating Chinese character etymology into literacy instruction, and they determine the practical effectiveness of this approach. Therefore, building a highly qualified team of Chinese language teachers can provide a solid foundation for the orderly advancement of integrating Chinese character etymology into literacy instruction. However, at present, the integration of Chinese character etymology into literacy instruction by Chinese language teachers is not widespread. The fundamental reasons are as follows: First, teachers have low motivation to teach this way. Influenced by traditional literacy teaching philosophies, and compounded by non-instructional factors such as entrance exams and classroom management, teachers generally adopt a "respectful but distant" attitude toward using character etymology in literacy instruction. Second, teaching skills need improvement. Teachers struggle to innovate their teaching methods based on actual instructional needs, which severely hinders the effective implementation of integrating character etymology into literacy instruction. Third, the application of character etymology in teaching requires greater flexibility. Teachers often engage in "teaching for the sake of teaching," blindly pursuing the integration of character etymology while neglecting students' cognitive patterns and psychological characteristics.

3.4. Neglecting Perception and Comprehension Leads to a Lack of Aesthetic Cultivation

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued the "Notice on the Comprehensive Implementation of the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative," which states: "We should comprehensively implement the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative, create artistic and dynamic classrooms, and contribute the power of aesthetic education to building a strong educational nation" [15]. However, in actual teaching practice, teachers struggle to guide students in perceiving and understanding beauty. First, teachers' "lecture-style" character instruction overlooks the fact that students' aesthetic thinking is in the transitional phase from concrete to abstract thinking. Second, teachers' one-dimensional aesthetic exploration of character etymology fails to inspire students to develop diverse aesthetic perspectives and personalized expressions regarding Chinese characters. Third, teachers' oversimplification of the teaching of Chinese characters' pronunciation, form, and meaning-as well as their misinterpretation of characters and fabrication of etymological explanations-has led to a situation in literacy instruction where "the sounds of Chinese characters fail to delight the ear, their forms fail to captivate the eye, their meanings fail to nourish the heart, and their essence fails to purify the soul." Therefore, integrating the etymology of Chinese characters into elementary school Chinese literacy instruction must take into account students' cognitive development, aesthetic sensibilities, and the scientific rigor of etymology. If these three aspects are neglected, instruction will not only hinder students' cultural understanding but may also distort the cultural significance of Chinese characters.

4. Implementation Strategies for Character Recognition Instruction in Elementary School Chinese Language Arts Based on Core Competencies

4.1. Upholding the Unity of Instrumentality and Humanistic Values to Build a Literacy Classroom That Fosters Cultural Education

The instrumentality of the Chinese language discipline emphasizes the understanding and application of language and characters, while its humanistic nature refers to the infusion of ideas, emotions, humanistic literacy, and cultural values. However, a utilitarian approach limits the goals of Chinese language instruction to instrumentality and test preparation, neglecting the role of literacy instruction in cultural transmission and cultivation. Therefore, teachers must pay attention to balancing these two aspects.

First, leverage the instrumental value of Chinese characters and understand the principles governing their structure. "Language use" is the foundation of the four core Chinese language competencies [16]. Literacy instruction must first effectively harness its instrumental value in order to better highlight its humanistic significance. When incorporating character-etymology-based literacy instruction into Chinese language classes, it is essential to grasp the principles of Chinese character structure and utilize them to enhance the efficiency of literacy instruction. The inclusion of "The Story of Bei" in the Unified Chinese Language Textbook begins by explaining the pictographic characteristics of the oracle bone script character "Bei." It then explains the character "Bei" and characters with the "Bei" radical-such as "Cai," "Huo," and "Mao"-by noting that in ancient times, "Bei" was commonly used as currency and as a medium of exchange for goods. Through the analysis of a category of characters, students can identify the common features of the "Bei" radical and understand the characteristic of phonetic-semantic compounds, where "the radical conveys meaning."

Second, emphasis should be placed on the humanistic aspects of character recognition instruction to cultivate students' cultural literacy regarding Chinese characters. On the one hand, the origin, evolution, structure, and application of Chinese characters are all intertwined with culture [17]. Therefore, teachers must thoroughly prepare instructional objectives for character recognition based on etymology. When designing instructional objectives, teachers should conduct a profound interpretation and understanding of the culture involved in etymological character instruction. Grounded in the text and students' learning situations, and in light of contemporary developments, they should distill the spirit of outstanding traditional culture and reconstruct the taught

content accordingly. On the other hand, attention should be paid to the cognitive patterns underlying students' character education. Mr. Wang Ning points out: "Scientific Chinese character instruction is a comprehensive reflection of two sets of principles: one concerns the structural composition and usage patterns of Chinese characters, and the other concerns the psychological and cognitive patterns of learners receiving Chinese character education" [18]. Therefore, when preparing for instruction, Chinese language teachers should integrate students' cultural contexts and psychological cognitive patterns.

4.2. Creating Contexts for Character-Based Literacy to Cultivate Students' Higher-Order Thinking in Chinese

The classroom is the "main arena" for education and teaching, as well as for the development of thinking [19]. When conducting character-based literacy instruction, teachers should focus on cultivating students' higher-order thinking.

First, understand the authentic meaning and design thinking objectives. Authentic Chinese character learning "stems from the genuine needs of language use in daily life and serves real-world problems" [20]. Teachers should design thinking objectives based on the authentic needs across five areas: curriculum standards, student interests, social life, regional culture, and textbook content.

Second, create authentic contexts to cultivate higher-order thinking. Thinking abilities primarily include "intuitive thinking, visual thinking, logical thinking, dialectical thinking, and creative thinking" [21]. First, the authenticity of the context creation. Real-life contexts activate students' cognitive abilities-such as intuitive and visual thinking-awaken their cognitive and emotional responses, connect with their life experiences, and enhance their perception of Chinese characters. Second, the problem-oriented nature of context creation. Its primary task is to internalize character etymology knowledge into students' cultural literacy, place students within relevant real-world contexts, stimulate their problem-awareness, and thereby cultivate logical and creative thinking through the process of identifying, posing, and solving problems.

4.3. Strengthening Teachers' Knowledge of Character Etymology and Enhancing Their Character Recognition Teaching Abilities

Teachers serve as guides in the classroom. To ensure the effective integration of etymological culture into teaching, it is necessary to strengthen teachers' knowledge of character etymology and enhance their character recognition teaching abilities.

First, stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for using character etymology in character recognition instruction. First, when teaching character recognition, teachers can integrate etymological approaches with other methods such as comparative analysis, context-based learning, and focused instruction. Second, organize professional development activities for teachers focused on etymological character instruction. While national policies should guide these initiatives, teachers must also proactively organize learning exchanges and collaborative reflection to gradually improve their teaching skills in this area.

Second, enrich teachers' understanding and methods for teaching character recognition through etymology. First, adhere to the principle of "accuracy" in character recognition instruction. Ensure that the decomposition of Chinese characters not only follows the rules of character formation and proceeds according to correct hierarchical relationships but also accurately analyzes the meaning of each component. Second, adhere to the principle of "moderation" in character recognition instruction. Explanations of Chinese character culture must follow the laws of students' cognitive development, avoiding the introduction of obscure knowledge of sinology; at the same time, it is important to note that not all Chinese characters require cultural interpretation, as some have lost their cultural connotations during the simplification process. Finally, adhere to the principle of "timeliness" in character recognition instruction. When using character etymology to teach character recognition, teachers should choose the right moment and proceed gradually, based on students' knowledge foundation and cognitive level.

4.4. Integrating Aesthetic Education to Enrich Character-Etymology Classrooms, Highlighting the Distinctive Quality of Chinese Language Education in Nurturing Students through Beauty

When integrating character-etymology-based literacy instruction into Chinese language literacy teaching practices, one must avoid mere formalistic accumulation. Instead, it should be grounded in the scientific and systematic basis of character etymology and cultural connotations, elevating Chinese language literacy instruction to a realm of aesthetic and artistic expression.

First, stimulate students' aesthetic pleasure and expand their aesthetic experience of Chinese characters. Language and writing captivate the ear, the eye, the heart, and the soul through the beauty of music, form, semantics, and artistic conception, fostering aesthetic pleasure in the individual as they savor beauty. "Experience" is a way of understanding the world, characterized by its immediacy, emotional depth, and meaningfulness [22]. The experiential aspect of character etymology-based literacy instruction encompasses two dimensions: On the one hand, it involves simulating the context in which Chinese characters were created. Since students cannot personally experience the historical context of a character's origin, they employ visual thinking to put themselves in the shoes of the creators, tracing the origins of character meanings to understand their etymology and empathize with the cultural sentiments present at the time of their creation. Only through such experiences can individuals truly enter the world of Chinese characters and experience the aesthetic pleasure they offer. On the other hand, it involves experiencing the authentic cultural context of Chinese characters. The experiential aspect of learning Chinese characters is not merely about understanding their etymological principles but also about appreciating the spiritual essence and aesthetic sensibilities of the Chinese nation's language and culture.

Second, respect the scientific essence of character structure to foster literacy classrooms imbued with aesthetic education. Character-structure-based literacy instruction embodies rich aesthetic value, and the principles behind Chinese character creation enrich students' aesthetic appreciation. First, teachers guide students to observe character structure and, based on the principles of character creation, strengthen their aesthetic appreciation of Chinese characters. Pictographic characters help students appreciate the beauty of character forms; ideographic-indicative characters help them appreciate the beauty of the relationship between character forms and specific symbolic meanings; ideographic characters, which combine multiple imagery elements, help students appreciate the narrative beauty of Chinese characters; and phonetic-semantic characters help students appreciate the beauty of the connection between form, sound, and meaning. Subsequently, teachers should focus on integrating aesthetic education resources into character-based literacy instruction, appropriately incorporating local cultural resources and optimizing teaching materials to cultivate students' aesthetic and creative literacy-including their ability to independently perceive, understand, express, and create.

5. Conclusion

Language arts education is fundamentally concerned with how individuals enter the cultural world carried by language and writing and, through that entry, form a Chinese cultural identity. Based on this purpose, literacy instruction is dedicated to exploring the effective integration of cultural transmission and cultural heritage, while core competencies provide a solid foundation for students to build cultural depth. Therefore, elementary school literacy instruction guided by core competencies undoubtedly holds significant value.

Funding: This paper was supported by the Gansu Province Higher Education Graduate Student "Interdisciplinary Learning Design and Practice Research for the Development of Complex Problem-Solving Competence" (Grant No. 2026CXZX-474).

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