Developing Initial Literacy in Chinese

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One of the biggest challenges of learning Chinese at any level of the K-16 spectrum is literacy development, learning to read and write in the Chinese language. This is especially true when students are first introduced to Chinese orthography, its character-based writing system. This Brief outlines the issues that students face when they begin to develop literacy in Chinese. It

- explains what it means that Chinese is a character-based language (does not use an alphabet) and the key components of the character-based language structure
- describes differences between simplified and traditional characters
- discusses when and why to teach and use *pinyin*, a system that uses the Roman alphabet to help learners sound out characters in Mandarin.

The authors then explain seven principles for developing students' initial literacy in reading and writing through research-based pedagogical practices:

1. Ensure that realistic literacy goals are aligned with the program setting and communicated clearly to the school community.
2. Ensure that the curriculum is standards-based and that expectations are communicated in meaningful terms about what students should know and be able to do as they develop literacy in Chinese.
3. Situate literacy instruction squarely within the curriculum.
4. Integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in classroom activities and tasks in order to foster students' creative, communicative, and cognitive development.
5. Understand that literacy development occurs in an environment where learners receive rich amounts of oral language input.
6. Incorporate the handwriting of characters in the curriculum in addition to using computer technology in composing written text in Chinese.
7. Provide adequate classroom space for Chinese instruction.

Literacy development needs to occur in a classroom environment that provides rich text surroundings for students, with a standards-based curriculum that outlines clearly what students can do with the spoken language and Chinese characters that they learn. The literacy goals of the curriculum should be realistic and aligned with the learning setting and with assessments that are valid in measuring and documenting the developing literacy skills of the students.