One-syllable Articles as a Technique for Teaching Chinese Radicals

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Abstract

Chinese character comprehension is one of the biggest troubles CSL (Chinese second language learners) face when trying to learn a Chinese language. *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den*, a One-Syllable Article (同音文章 *Tóngyīn Wénzhāng*) from 1916, continues to see use in classrooms, but there has been a lack of attempts to refine the medium for alternative learning outcomes. The author writes two poems using /ao/ and /ou/ to show the possibility, forcing reliance on orthographic distinctions between phono-semantic compounds. The author therefore proposes their use in a technique for introducing the system of radicals within the Han script. Taking the form of a pedagogical proposal and materials development study, this paper fills a gap in radical-focused learning materials, promoting inductive, student-centred learning, with a reproducible methodology for further development.

Keywords

One-syllable articles, Chinese radicals, phono-semantic compound, teaching technique, Chinese characters

以同音文章作为一种汉字部首教学的方法

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摘要

汉字认读是汉语作为第二语言的学习者面临的主要难点之一。1916 年发表的同音文章《施氏食狮史》至今仍被用于课堂教学，但很少有人尝试改进这一形式，以实现不同的教学目标。本文作者以/ao/和/ou/拼音音节创作了两首诗歌，展示利用字形区分形声

字的可能性，迫使学习者依赖汉字形旁与声旁的差异进行辨识。据此，作者提出将此类文本作为一种引入汉字部首系统的教学手段。本研究采用教学提案与教材开发的形式，填补了部首专项学习材料的空白，倡导归纳式、以学生为中心的学习法，并提供了一套可复制的方法供后续开发使用。

关键词

汉字教学，部首教学，同音文章，形声字，施氏食狮史，教材开发

Introduction

Literacy in Chinese characters (漢字 *Hànzì*) is a common and significant challenge for a Chinese Second Language (CSL) learner, regardless of their first language (L1). Their relative complexity relative to other writing systems is often an extreme shock and thus an educator often needs to dedicate significant time to the script (Shei et al., 2020). Radical awareness has shown ample signs of being the key to establishing basic recognition and memorisation (Y. Li et al., 2020; Tong et al., 2017; Tong & Yip, 2015), but acting upon this in respect to materials development appears underdeveloped. The technique this paper proposes is primarily designed for beginner-to-intermediate CSL learners in a Mandarin-medium classroom, aiming to build foundational radical awareness and character decoding skills.

One-Syllable Articles (同音文章 *Tóngyīn Wénzhāng*) are homophonic texts read in the reader's Chinese topolect and usually written within the medium of Literary Chinese. However, the text may not necessarily be homophonic across all topolects. For example, what is homophonic in Mandarin may not be in Wu Chinese or Cantonese. *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* 施氏食獅史 by Hu Mingfu 胡明复 (Zhao, 2024) Yuen Ren Chao (趙元任 *Zhào Yuánrèn*) has been used in the CSL classroom, but the medium has not advanced beyond the use of Chao's other works in particular (Chao, 1980, pp. 147–151), largely being seen as a humorous linguistic curiosity. While the benefits of literature in language teaching need no introduction (Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Chan et al., 2022; Long, 2000; Mitsigkas, 2016; Starr & Hu, 2019), there are many ways to improve upon the use of One-Syllable Articles, and issues with *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* should be expressed. The original *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* was an *argumentum ad absurdum* against the phoneticization of Literary Chinese during a period of flux in the Chinese writing system as a whole (Chao, 1980). While a good way to introduce the fact Literary Chinese exists, it immediately politicises the tongue and thus questions its existence. The cultural history associated with it is important and valid; it is an authentic material of that era. Furthermore, it serves as a strong tonal exercise that also trains readers on the /shi/ syllable's retroflex [ʂ] onset. These are all excellent qualities, and it shows potential in the genre for further development. Thus, this paper intends to explore alternatives that may be more pedagogically useful for learners of Mandarin or Literary Chinese, using poems written by the author that provide intensive practice within a given syllable, thereby building metalinguistic and radical awareness in the learner. This will be explained through a literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, discussion, and conclusion.

As One-Syllable Articles are typically written in Literary Chinese, the pedagogical technique being employed here will place emphasis on Chinese characters and their radicals, rather than Chinese grammar and syntax. However, application in the Literary Chinese classroom is perfectly feasible as an authentic material, and this is treated as a valuable, secondary use-case. It will therefore be mentioned in passing, with one poem foregrounding its unique syntax and semantics for demonstrative purposes.

Literature Review

Chinese radicals (部首 *bùshǒu*) are the components that make up a Chinese character; that is, a part that may be placed with another to make a compound that represents meaning and possibly a spoken word. For example, *nǐ* 你 is made up of *rén* 亻 and *ěr* 尔. The concept of radicals dates back to Xu Shen's work in the Han dynasty (S. Xu, 2015), where he numbered 540 components; these were the precursors to the modern idea of "radicals." In modern-day, there are generally considered to be around 214 radicals, as concluded in *Kangxi Dictionary* 康熙字典 *Kāngxī Zìdiǎn* (Wan et al., 2019; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015), though it generally depends on the dictionary used.

Semantic radicals are abstract glyphs which give a small hint towards a Chinese character's meaning (Lü et al., 2015; Wan et al., 2019). For example, *guī* 龜, a pictograph and one of the 214 *Kangxi* radicals, represents a tortoise. Therefore, one would assume *biē* 鱉 refers to a kind of tortoise, and they would be right: It represents a softshell tortoise (*Amyda sinensis*), though it has variant forms in 鼈 (same pronunciation) among others (Kroll et al., 2017). Given this, semantic radicals can imply a Chinese character's word class, and this has been proven in practice with studies such as Jijie *et al* (2006); indeed, teaching techniques associated with increasing semantic radical knowledge and recognition is associated with improved fluency (Lai et al., 2020) and test scores (Nguyen et al., 2017). Semantic radical knowledge has correlated with increased character comprehension (Ho et al., 2003) and study has shown it is often the key predictor of recognition with novel characters (Hew-yan, 2011). Properties and knowledge have been shown to be processed jointly by CSL readers (Lü et al., 2015).

Phonetic radicals – radicals within phono-semantic compound characters that imply pronunciation (Wan et al., 2019) – are often viewed first by a CSL reader (Wood et al., 2025). Around 80% of the 300,000+ Chinese characters in existence come under this category (Wan et al., 2019). Moving back to the *biē* 鱉 example, its phonetic component is *bì* 敝 which, while not accurate, is strikingly similar to the compound character's pronunciation. The teaching of phonetic radicals has abundantly shown that increased awareness of phonetic radicals correlates significantly with reading fluency (Ho et al., 2003; L. Li et al., 2018; Y. Li et al., 2020, 2022).

What we see here, then, is the clear utility of radicals, semantic and phonetic, in understanding Chinese characters. With a text that actively fights against a CSL reader's attention to phonetic cues, one can force them to shift attention to semantic radicals and structure. Alternatively, one could flood the reader with unfamiliar phono-semantic compounds to bring attention to the consistencies in structure. This led to the investigation seen in this paper.

Psycholinguistic study has shown that radicals assist with the processing of word class (Jijia et al., 2006), and the use of chunking alongside meaningful interpretation increased learner performance in character retention overall, especially in independent study (X. Xu & Padilla, 2013). The use of this knowledge is key in processing characters, as shown in study of adult learners (Lü et al., 2015) and an eye-tracking study showed they were not only important, but also that learners were more concerned with phonetic than semantic components (Wood et al., 2025). Said study also noted that radical knowledge specifically had an influence in the way learners would look at characters; online recognition increased with semantic knowledge, and offline recognition increased with phonetic knowledge.

Perfetti *et al.* (2005) propose a lexical constituency model of reading, specifically focused on the Chinese script. In this model, the form (orthography), phonology (sound), and semantic meaning of a word are necessary for it to be recognised; these three factors are known as "constituents." Phonology is particularly important: It is activated automatically and rapidly, and in Chinese, this still happens; it is therefore not a script-to-meaning system. Phonology is a constituent of word identity. In a study by Zhang *et al.* (2016), we see this model manifest: By implicitly teaching radicals through pseudocharacters, it was shown that learners gravitated more towards characters with regular and transparent radicals – those that follow the common patterns in pronunciation and semantic meaning. Building on this understanding of constituent-based recognition, the materials this paper proposes, we force the identification system to rely heavily on different constituents, of which become extremely apparent in Chinese.

Kats and Frost (1992) introduce the orthographic depth hypothesis: Shallow orthographies, such as Italian, can easily support phonetic word recognition. Deep orthographies, however, present difficulties to readers, encouraging semantic recognition via visual-orthographic structure. Marjou (2021) applied this hypothesis through neural networks; out of the 17 languages studied, French, English, and, important for this study, Chinese, were ranked as the opaquest in writing and reading. In the case of Chinese, there was a 20% writing score and a 78% reading score. While promising out of context, the reading score was almost 20% lower than the next best orthography, Turkish (98.7%). It is notable that Simplified Chinese was used in this study, while this paper uses Traditional Chinese; whether this has an impact was not tested. Regardless, the opacity revealed in this study empirically shows the challenge posed to CSL learners, and thus their need for instructional materials that train their radical awareness. It is important, then, that materials focused on radical recognition are quite obvious to an attentive reader; feeding into the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) and the accomplishment one ought to feel is important for repeated success in this area.

Gamification of radicals has been employed in study and teaching. Higher-grade CSL learners perform better at composing characters out of a random assortment of radicals than lower-grade learners (Hong et al., 2016). E-learning through flashcards has been used, particularly with displays of stroke order (H.-C. Chen et al., 2013; H. Wang et al., 2025), which resulted in dramatically improved recognition; indeed, writing exercises involving stroke-order show marked improvements as well, though comprehension is not built if used alone (Hsiung et al., 2017).

However, radicals are far from perfect. Should a Chinese character's radicals not be transparent, they will not affect meaning retention (T. Chen & Feng, 2020). Chinese characters are ancient; their current incarnations crystalised in the Three Kingdoms period (~230 C.E.), around 1,800 years ago. Therefore, radicals are not necessarily a "cure-all" for problems; while the Han script contains phonetic elements (C. Zhang, 2011), those elements were disused long ago and the script should therefore be treated as a logographic one.

Technique Outline
Based on the Approach-Method-Technique-Procedure framework proposed by Richards and Rodgers (2014), we shall outline the technique to be employed within a given educator's conception of language teaching. This will assume one takes a constructivist or communicative approach to language teaching in general, and that the learners (be it Mandarin or Literary Chinese) are beginner-to-intermediate in level. It could take place within a one-off lesson for intermediate learners or a broader unit on character composition for beginners. Therefore, learners could be familiar with characters or have a minimal understanding.

Share's (2004; 1995, 1999) self-teaching hypothesis supposes that translating written words into verbal pronunciations allows one to self-teach and develop their own orthographic knowledge. Therefore, whenever one reads, they will reinforce their phonetic knowledge, and contextual information around that word will assist with a semantic understanding as well. Use of this method in Chinese has proven effective, correlating with improved lexical knowledge (Y. Li et al., 2022). One could draw upon SLA (Second Language Acquisition) to infer that the flood of input from a single syllable could increase vocabulary exponentially (Ambridge et al., 2013; Ortega, 2014; Wei et al., 2024). Given the psycholinguistic factors (Jijia et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2025), one should implement the findings through activities that encourage interaction with characters. The Literature Review informs that flashcards and stroke order are effective, but a design around deductive analysis and character creation are also plausible for this purpose. The teacher should, then, be a facilitator and model (Harmer, 2013; Ur, 2012), rather than simply aiming for teacher-centred activity. Infusing hope in learners who may dismiss characters as unlearnable is key; this could be achieved through strategy instruction (Zong, 2021; Zong & Forbes, 2022).

We shall therefore propose a classroom procedure, which assumes a set of pre-intermediate Mandarin Chinese learners, aiming to bring awareness of phono-semantic compounds to the front through leveraging their semantic components for understanding.

Step 1: Inductive Discovery		
Action: Write a line from a poem: e.g. 聱鰲鶩謷鼇.	**Instruction:** "Look at these characters. What do they have in common?"	**Aim:** Identify shared component *áo* 敖
Step 2: Sound-Meaning Connection		
Action: Write component *áo* 敖 in isolation and drill pronunciation.	**Instruction:** "Since these have the same component, their sounds must be similar! Let's read and guess!"	**Aim:** Induce the phonetic component principle.
Step 3: Negotiating meaning		
Action: Focus on form	**Instruction:** "Look at what is different between these characters. We have seen these before, haven't we? What do you think these might mean?"	**Aim:** Meaningfully negotiate meaning to understand the sentence without a dictionary.
Step 4: The Reveal		
Action: Show the full poem with *Baihua* 白话 or English translations (depending on L1)	**Instruction:** "Here's what this means! Were you right?"	**Aim:** Allow for meaningful interpretation of the chaos.
Step 5: Production Task		
Action: Creative extension	**Instruction:** "Using the 敖 component, try to make your own /ao/ character! Maybe you can find it in a dictionary!"	**Aim:** Promote understanding of character composition.

There are ways this could go wrong: It assumes the students at least know the ear 耳, horse 馬, speech 言, and turtle 龜 radicals, and also have some awareness of phono-semantic compounds. Should the assumed knowledge be present, this technique is valid? With the technique outlined, we can move into procedure, which I will manifest through two poems.

Methodology of Poem Composition
Constructing a One-Syllable Article is quite difficult depending on the syllable in-use. As I chose to engage in poetry, I chose to keep these two within the Ancient-Style Verse 古體詩 *gǔtǐshī* format, which does not impose Tang dynasty 平仄 *Píng-Zè* upon the poems (L. Wang, 2009). It is possible to adhere to the constraint with tonally and semantically rich syllables such as /yi/ and /zhi/, but for these syllables it was not.

I chose to use Mandarin Chinese for the homophony criteria as it is the language I am most familiar with. Therefore, a Cantonese, Wu, or Min-Nan Chinese teacher may not be able to apply what I have made here. Naturally, while Literary Chinese is a continuation of Classical Chinese (Yang, 2016), these poems will not be homophonous in reconstructed Middle or Old Chinese either.

The workflow can be explained as follows:
1. Search dictionary aggregators such as Pleco (Love, 2025) or zi.tools (2019) for every attested Chinese character within a given syllable; in this case, /ao/ and /ou/.
2. Verify the definitions in historical dictionaries such as *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Erya*, and the *Jiyun*. This is essential for authenticity.
   a. Should a definition not be possible to find, lack quotation, or otherwise be ambiguous, search corpora such as the Chinese Text Project (Sturgeon, 2020, 2021) or *Kangxi Dictionary* (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015) and make a value judgement.
3. Develop a shortlist, wherein I append definitions, assign word class(es), and Mandarin tone.
4. Functional minimum test – Analyse the shortlist for potential Topic-Comment candidates, nouns, verbs, grammatical particles, etcetera.
   a. If there are extremely minimal lemmas (1 - ~3) that are semantically and/or syntactically incompatible, deem the poem impossible and return to step 1.
5. Semantic viability test – Attempt to form an SVO, SOV, or Topic-Comment sentence using the characters.
6. Refine the shortlist based on potential poetic themes.
   a. When prosody and meaning conflict, priority is given to syntactic coherence and semantic viability. Poems that fail *Píng-Zè* but sustain narrative are historically valid poems (Cai, 2007; L. Wang, 2009).
7. Produce the poem based on the aforementioned shortlist.

With this workflow, a writer can produce a One-Syllable Article within a given syllable of literary merit. The process itself could also be a project for a student of Literary Chinese. I provide annotations for each character with these poems for the educator and student's use.

Case Study A: /ao/

「驁謷鼇」

謷碳驁，敖拗。
驁摯鼇，拗拗！
聱驁鼇謷鼇。
麈麈！媼翱翱！
驁懊，媼摯驁，
嚻凹，驁敖敖。

简体译文	《驁謷鼇》
	嶙峋的石山之巅，那匹傲慢的驁，正倨傲地踱步，肆意违逆着一切。 它扬起蹄爪，猛击鼇；力道之猛，足以摧筋断骨。 它又发出刺耳的嘶鸣，喋喋不休地诽谤、嘲弄着这鼇。 唉！鏖战骤起！媼神自九霄之外翱翔而至，俯冲而下！ 傲马痛楚地哀嚎——因为它已被媼神挥掌击中，彻底挫败。 山坳深处，一切重归死寂。但那败走的傲驁，心中唯有倨傲，永不臣服。
English Translation	"The Good Horse slanders Ao" At the imposing rocky peak, the Arrogant Horse strolls defiant. The Arrogant Horse strikes Ao the Turtle, breaking its leg! The Arrogant Horse, deaf to critique, gallops around, slandering and mocking the turtle. Drama! Houtu soars high and zeroes in! The Arrogant Horse cries out in anguish as it is struck by Houtu. Yet, in the deep valley, the horse remained proud.

7 of the 18 (38.8%) of the unique characters use the 敖 / áo/ component, while 18 out of 35 total Chinese characters (51.42%) use it within this poem. One line is only comprised of 敖-using characters, which could be used in isolation for teaching phono-semantic compounds in isolation:

謷驁驁謷鼇。

Ào ào ào áo

ADJ N V V N

Heedless horse horses slander turtle

The [Arrogant] Horse, deaf to critique, gallops around, slandering and mocking the turtle.

Given the use of *huóyòng* 活用 "to change a character's word class" (S. Wang, 2012) to switch 驁 from a noun to a verb, I recommend a Mandarin class omit that character; the meaning is generally preserved. However, for a Literary Chinese class, its presence allows for the teaching of that phenomenon as well. Teaching of *huóyòng* should ideally be done as soon as possible given its prevalence in classical texts and should not be discounted.

Not one Chinese character in this poem is on the HSK (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021), which presents a problem for one hoping to improve a student's vocabulary for that framework. However, one could consider it a form of "novel character" teaching not unlike that of Zhang *et al* (2016). This ensures no student in the class is expected to know the vocabulary within, and thus a teacher could use the poem to teach radical comprehension to a beginner or train it in intermediate learners. Furthermore, it means the poem could be used as a character decoding exercise for those of higher levels and thus higher radical sensitivity.

Narrative-wise, the poem invokes the names of Ao 鼇, a giant turtle whose legs were cut off by Nüwa 女娲 to support the sky in the Chinese creation myth (Liu, 2022), and Houtu 后土, an earth goddess named Aoshen 媼神 during the Han dynasty (Zhu, 2025). These are potential discussion points for students, encouraging independent learning of Chinese history, culture, and myth. There is also a moral question: Was it necessary for Houtu to strike the horse? If the physical punishment did not work, was there another way? The use of the /ao/ sound could prove useful as a mnemonic method: It sounds a bit like "Ow!", which is mimicked in the cartoon violence throughout the poem.

Annotations

1. 驁 *ào* – *"Thoroughbred horse of the highest quality."* (Kroll et al., 2017). Syn. listed as 駿馬 *jùnmǎ* "fine horse" in *Shuowen Jiezi*, an archaic equivalent to 良馬 *liángmǎ* (X. Li, 2022; S. Xu, 2015). If reduplicated, the thoroughbred horse then acts as a horse, thus galloping freely in gallant manner (Kroll et al., 2017; Van Norden, 2019).
   《說文解字注》五到切驁駿馬。
2. 謷 *áo* – To slander or vilify. If reduplicated, it can be taken as a synonym for 嗷嗷 *áo'áo*, the sound of crying (Kroll et al., 2017).
   《說文解字注》五牢切謷不省人言也。(S. Xu, 2015)
   《廣韻》不肖語也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)
3. 磝 *áo* – *"Stony, rock-strewn hill"*; when reduplicated, it can describe more of a slope (Kroll et al., 2017). *Kangxi Dictionary* cites 韻會 *Yùnhuì* which lists it as a synonym of 嶅 (same

pron. and similar semantic radical) and the 釋名 *Shìmíng* gives a proper definition (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015).

《韻會》牛交切，𠀤音聱。與熬同。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

《釋名》山多小石曰磝。磝，堯也。每石堯堯獨處而出見也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

4. 敖 áo – To stray, to ramble at will, to squabble, bicker, or wrangle (Kroll et al., 2017). This is the phonological component a significant number of characters in this poem share as well: 7 out of 18, 38.8*%.

《說文解字注》五牢切敖游也。(S. Xu, 2015)

5. 拗 ǎo/ào – In the third tone, to break (off), snap, or even fracture (Kroll et al., 2017), particularly by bending (Kleemann & Yu, 2010). In the fourth tone, it means to defy or disobey (Kleemann & Yu, 2010).

《說文解字》於絞切拗手拉也。从手幼聲。(S. Xu, 2015)

6. 搞 áo – To hit, strike, and/or smite (Kroll et al., 2017)

《集韻》《韻會》《正韻》牛刀切，𠀤音敖。擊也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

7. 鰲 áo – Legendary sea turtle (Liu, 2022).

8. 聱 áo – To *"turn a death ear to others' opinions, be deaf to; heedless."* (Kroll et al., 2017)

《說文解字》五交切不聽也。从耳敖聲。(S. Xu, 2015)

《廣雅》不入人語也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

9. 鏖 áo – Usually a kettle or cooking-pot, but figuratively can be used to describe a heated battle, which we use here (Kroll et al., 2017).

《集韻》盡死殺人曰鏖。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

《字彙補》器也。亦銅盆也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

10. 媼 Ǎo – Han dynasty name for 后土 Hòutǔ (Zhu, 2025).

11. 翱 áo – To fly, soaring in the sky (X. Li, 2022).

【說文】翱，翔也。(S. Xu, 2015; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

12. 懊 ào – Either singular or in bound forms only. To be regretful, worried, or vexed (Kroll et al., 2017); the *Jiyun* states that it is a synonym for 恨, which can also describe feeling hostile towards something (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015). Here, we use it to describe being worried yet hostile.

《廣韻》懊惱也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

《集韻》恨也。或作怏。晉綠珠有懊儂歌。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

13. 墺 ào – Level land in a mountain (Kleemann & Yu, 2010); often used in placenames (X. Li, 2022). Rare enough in classical literature to lack a dictionary quote, not even in *Kangxi Dictionary*!

14. 凹 āo – A pit or depression in an area; a concave (Kroll et al., 2017)

《集韻》於交切，音䆐。窊也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

Case Study B: /ou/

「歐偶鷗」

鷗 漚 漚 歐 歐
毆 藕 藕 齲 偶
歐 區 鏂 鷗 鷗
嘔 熰 甌 樞 謳
。 ！ 。 。 。

简体译文	《欧偶鸥》
	欧和一只海鸥结伴一起讴歌。
	欧生着龋齿，海鸥叼着榆枝。
	欧沤了两鏂藕，盛在了瓯里。
	他又沤了四区藕，结果火太熰，烧起来了！
	海鸥气得殴打阿欧，欧被打得呕吐。
English Translation	"The Quarrel of Ou and the Seagull" Ou pairs with the Seagull, together they sing.
	Ou, with crooked teeth, and the Seagull, with elm (in beak).
	Ou boils two *dou* of lotus root and puts it in a bowl.
	Ou boils four *dou* of lotus root. Oh, too much heat - fire!
	Seagull retches at the debacle and beats Ou with a stick.

Out of the 16 unique characters, 12 share the same component, 75%, and out of the 24 total characters, 15 share the same component, 62.5%. However, it does not share the same audiovisual utility of the /ao/ poem where each character carries a simple meaning with a mnemonic sound; I therefore believe it is not as useful as a pedagogical tool.

This poem is a Punch & Judy-style sketch in four-character quatrain form. The meaning, though, hinges on 偶 being interpreted as 合 "pairing with," which is asserted in the Erya, then cited by Kangxi Dictionary and echoed by Kroll (Kroll et al., 2017; J. Wang, 2021; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015). This is not a *common* meaning for the word, but with it, the entire prose of this text becomes possible. I therefore encourage this be used in higher-level Mandarin classes centred around cultural awareness, where Literary Chinese is likely to be introduced.

The poem uses two obscure classifiers that are derived from *dòu* 斗, a dry grain measure equivalent to a litre (X. Li, 2022). *Ōu* 甌 is two *dòu* 斗, while *ōu* 區 is four *dòu* 斗. An observant educator will notice that *ōu* 區 is usually read as *qū* to mean "place" – that is right, and this is a convenient way to teach this rare reading in isolation. However, I use these classifiers in the Literary Chinese context of them being post-noun (Barnes et al., 2009; Pulleyblank, 2000), and therefore an educator of Mandarin Chinese ought to place them in the pre-noun position so to not confuse a student.

Annotations

1. 偶 ǒu – In this case, to pair with. (Yi, 2019; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015). Synonym: 合 (J. Wang, 2021, p. 25)

    《爾雅‧釋詁》合也。《註》謂對合也。又胖合也。 (J. Wang, 2021, p. 25; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

    Connotations change come 賈誼:

    《賈誼‧五餌》言偶人無時。《韓詩》言不失時，以偶爲胖合也。 (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

2. 歐 ōu – Surname, usu. seen in the disyllabic family name 歐陽 *ōuyáng* seen in the *Hundred Family Surnames* (Cheng & Wang, 2023; Hu et al., 2017) but is valid on its own (X. Li, 2022).

3. 鷗 ōu – A type of bird in the *Laridae* genus (Kroll et al., 2017).

    《說文解字注》烏侯切鷗水鴞也。 [《山海經》注曰：鷗，水鴞也。按《列子》作漚。] 从鳥。區聲。 [烏矦切。四部。] (S. Xu, 2015)

4. 謳 ōu – To sing without musical accompaniment; can be used figuratively (Kroll et al., 2017).

    《說文解字注》烏侯切謳齊歌也。 (S. Xu, 2015)

5. 齵 óu – Crooked, uneven teeth; can be singular or in the bound form 齺齵 *zōu'óu*. (S. Xu, 2015)

    《說文解字注》五婁切齵齺齵也。从齒。禺聲。 [五婁切。四部。按二字各本譌亂。今依《廣韻》正之。] (S. Xu, 2015)

6. 樞 ōu – Thorn-elm; *Hemiptela davidii* (Kroll et al., 2017).

    《說文解字注》昌朱切樞戶樞也。 [戶所以轉動開閉之樞機也。《釋宮》曰：樞謂之根。] 從木。區聲。 [昌朱切。四部。]

7. 漚 ōu/òu – In the first tone, bubbles on water. In the fourth tone, it implies letting something ferment, brew, or simmer until ready (Kroll et al., 2017). Here, we use it in the fourth tone.

    《說文解字注》烏候切久漬也。 [言久漬者，略別於漬也。上統言。此析言。互相足也。《陳風》。可以漚麻。傳曰：漚，柔也。《考工記》。漚其絲。注曰：楚人曰漚。齊人曰涹。或假渥字爲之。如《左傳》鄅人漚菅者，《周禮》注引作繪人渥菅是也。] 从水。區聲。 [烏候切。四部。] (S. Xu, 2015)

8. 甌 ōu – Traditional measurement equivalent to 2 斗 *dòu* (Kroll et al., 2017), thereby equal to 20 litres (X. Li, 2022), though it fluctuated over the years.

《集韻》門鋪謂之鏂鉧。《博雅》錏鍜謂之鏂鉧。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

9. 區 ōu – Traditional measurement equivalent to 4 斗 *dòu* or 2 鏂 *ōu* (Kroll et al., 2017), equal overall to 40 litres (X. Li, 2022). More well-known for its qū reading, meaning "area" (Kroll et al., 2017; X. Li, 2022; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015).

《爾雅 釋器》玉十謂之區。(J. Wang, 2021, p. 278)

《集韻》《韻會》《正韻》дㄨ烏侯切，音甌。量名。四豆爲區。《左傳 昭三年》豆區釜鍾。又匿也。《左傳 昭七年》楚文王作僕區之法。《註》僕，隱也。區，匿也。又姓。《韻會》古歐冶子之後。《王莽傳》中郎區博。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

10. 甌 ōu – A shallow, wide bowl (Kroll et al., 2017).

《說文解字注》烏侯切甌小盆也。(S. Xu, 2015)

《爾雅 釋器》甌瓿謂之瓵。(J. Wang, 2021, p. 261; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

11. 熰 ōu/ǒu – In the first tone, it describes a drought; in the third tone, it describes "*giving off a lot of smoke as a result of poor burning*" (Kroll et al., 2017).

《玉篇》炮熰也。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

《集韻》於候切，漚去聲。煨也。或作嘔薀。(Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

12. 毆 ōu – To beat someone with a stick (Kroll et al., 2017)

《說文解字注》烏后切毆捶毄物也。(S. Xu, 2015; Y. Zhang & Chen, 2015)

13. 嘔 ǒu/ōu/òu – In the third tone, it describes gagging or retching as a synonym of 歐 (Kroll et al., 2017); in the first tone, it describes singing as a synonym of 謳 (Kroll et al., 2017); in the fourth tone, it describes being irritated or annoyed, usually seen in 嘔氣 *òuqì* and 嘔人 *òurén* (X. Li, 2022).

《說文解字注》烏后切嘔吐也。(S. Xu, 2015)

Discussion & Implications

By systematically designing One-Syllable Articles with a high density of shared phonetic components, a unique pedagogical tool arises that forces CSL learners to rely on their radical sensitivity to derive meaning. We therefore change what began as a linguistic curio into a targeted literacy exercise. These two poems demonstrate a replicable classroom technique that presents strong potential for further development. These are, to my knowledge, the first One-Syllable Articles written using the /ao/ and /ou/ syllables, thereby proving that these are syllables that can create meaning on their own; it is not impossible for a student to find other possible syllables should they study the liturgical language.

One superficial criticism of these poems is the density in rare characters. However, this is precisely what makes them potent: *Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den* uses common characters that be recognised by just about anyone. These poems are, by comparison, opaque, forcing the reader to decode them. As with Zhang *et al.*'s (2016) use of "pseudocharacters," the poems provided act as an environment of inductive, procedural discovery for the learner, something demonstrated by Ibn Tufayl (2003). This directly combats the reader's tendency to read the phonetic components first, as Wood *et al.* (2025) have shown, turning that strategy against them. This then operationalises Katz and Frost's (1992) orthographic depth hypothesis by isolating the semantic and phonetic constituents of every Chinese character, as Perfetti *et al.* (2005) succinctly describe. They must negotiate meaning to succeed, which fits Schmidt's (1990; Ünlü, 2015) noticing hypothesis in that language acquisition requires a level of awareness.

Such an opaque text will naturally bring forth the potential for one's affective filter to raise (Du, 2009; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). However, this technique is designed to quickly turn into engagement and enjoyment. One should not dismiss the power of enjoyment in a language classroom (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). An educator ought to quicken the "Is this a joke" into "Oh, this is actually really interesting" process for a lesson to succeed. We must reduce the student's anxiety from being overwhelmed (Fraschini & Tao, 2023) and turn that into a learning opportunity with hope (Zong, 2021; Zong & Forbes, 2022). It is funny, but it is also meaningful. Naming the author and genre is a valid strategy for reducing anxiety by humanising the text. This is something Egan (1997) extensively discusses as a way to expand the learning environment beyond the classroom and show an ongoing culture or tradition. By naming the genre, an individual who enjoys the work can find more of it, giving them an "in" into the culture of the language they are learning. Linking this with Chinese education specifically, we could invoke the 正名 *Zhengming* doctrine promoted by Confucius (Kong, 2000) and Gongsun Long (Gongsun, 2014): Without naming things, students cannot find things. I find this no more essential than with these poems.

In a Mandarin Chinese classroom, the primary value of these poems is in their promotion of metalinguistic awareness and decoding skill. They are an environment in which the reader can discover the nature of phono-semantic compounds for themselves. As suggested with the /ao/ poem, Literary Chinese complexities can be dropped in favour of a focus on character structure, something often done with *Lion-Eating Poem in the Stone Den*, given its use of the classical meaning of *shì* 是 "this" rather than a copula. Therefore, the advanced knowledge of Literary Chinese is not necessary for the poem to be effective; its use of Mandarin phonology is what matters here.

In a Literary Chinese classroom, One-Syllable Articles could be seen as a crash course in the vocabulary within a single syllable and show the flexibility of its grammar. One poem will likely teach a student many, many rare characters, all within context; given the rarity of them, this makes them suitable for advanced learners with a strong foundation. Some grammatical particles, such as *yī* 繄, *wǎ* 唯, or *yù* 聿, which all act as introductory copula meaning "Let it be the case that X is Y" in ancient texts (Kroll et al., 2017), are very likely to be used when writing those syllables. Another benefit to the teaching of Literary Chinese using this medium is the often-simplified grammar of these poems. Without the Swiss Army knife of 之 or the variable 亦 at play, one can present simplified, isolated grammar points of the language without mining for out-of-context quotes within the classical canon. This does, however, have a crucial counterpoint: As mentioned before, many characters this would teach would be quite rare, and therefore not be useful. Regardless, the potential for these poems to be used as a less intimidating entry point into dense classical prose is strong.

Limitations

As these poems are written in Literary Chinese, much like Yuen Ren Chao's famous work, a learner would need some awareness of parataxis and *huòyòng* to fully decode their meaning. Additionally, they will demand some initial radical knowledge from a learner should they be used in active decoding activities. These limitations can be solved through further exploration of the One-Syllable Article genre, particularly regarding character transparency and use of the learner's potential vocabulary inventory. Furthermore, further study on the decoding speed of characters based on radical knowledge and longitudinal study on reading fluency could further illuminate the impact of these activities. These poems are unlikely to work in other Chinese

topolects, being specifically designed for Mandarin Chinese phonology, and therefore teachers of Cantonese, Hokkien, Shanghainese, and others would not find much use here.

Conclusion

These poems demonstrate that One-Syllable Articles can be systematically designed for radical-rich character instruction, giving learners an environment to freely discover the phono-semantic elements of characters for themselves. By employing this contextual approach, CSL learners can develop awareness of this feature of the Han script and increase their reading fluency. This paper has expanded pedagogical materials for Mandarin and Literary Chinese by providing these decodable texts with controlled grammar and script constraints.

This paper opens several avenues for research. More common Mandarin syllables, including Chao's /shi/, /ji/, and /xi/, could absolutely be replicated with more targeted vocabulary; this could include using the HSK as a further constraint. Texts within Mandarin grammar could also be explored, which would be more directly applicable to a Mandarin-medium classroom; the poems I wrote use Literary Chinese grammar to its fullest. Further exploration within other Chinese topolects, particularly Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Hokkien, could absolutely lead to desirable results.

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