Research findings for teachers of Chinese

Summarised from Dr Gianfranco Conti, “11 Cutting-Edge Research Findings Every Teacher of Mandarin Should Know”, gianfrancoconti.com, Aug 2026

Tones · findings 1–5

1

Wang (2013): about six hours of focused tone listening significantly improved perception. Perception-only training worked; production practice was not required.

In class: Use decision listening: same or different? Which tone? Which word? Which character matches the sound?

Receptive processing before production

2

Hao (2012): learners could often imitate a tone they could not identify. A clean choral repeat proves very little.

In class: After modelling, wait. Ask students to identify what they hear; later, retrieve it without the model. Revisit tomorrow and next week.

Modelling, then processing, then production

3

Wiener, Chan & Ito (2020): brief explicit explanation of tone contours improved production of rising and falling tones.

In class: Explain the contour simply, model it, contrast it, then give plenty of practice.

Explain to focus attention, then process to remember

4

Wiener, Chan & Ito (2020): hearing many different speakers from day one produced no automatic advantage for beginners.

In class: Start with a few clear, careful voices. Add voices, speeds and contexts once sound and meaning are stable.

Narrow listening: keep input narrow, then widen it

5

Cao, Pavlik & Bidelman (2024): exaggerating pitch range made the Tone 2 / Tone 3 distinction easier to perceive.

In class: Exaggerate the contrast at first, slow it down, isolate it; then fade back to natural speech.

Scaffold, then fade

Characters & vocabulary · findings 6–10

6

Zhang, Li & Liu (2021): characters shown while learning a new spoken word could impair recall of the spoken form.

In class: Decide what students should encode right now. Secure sound and meaning before stacking on character, pinyin and picture.

Controlled input; staged processing

7

Layout research: keeping character, pinyin and meaning physically adjacent produced better learning than scattered layouts.

In class: Keep related information close together; cut visual searching and decorative clutter from worksheets and slides.

Sentence-builder design frees working memory

8

Hou & Jiang (2022): highlighted radicals and stroke-order animations reduced character-recognition accuracy (40 learners).

In class: Still teach radicals and stroke order; just not everything at once on the same slide.

Manage cognitive load; less can be more

9

Zhang (2016): awareness of word parts and compound structure predicted vocabulary knowledge (171 learners).

In class: Build word networks: 学生, 学校, 学习. Ask where students have seen 学 or 电 before.

Intelligent recycling, including parts of words

10

Shi, Hu & Zhu (2026): typing strengthened character recognition and dictation; handwriting strengthened meaning recognition.

In class: Choose the activity for the link you want to strengthen, not for the technology.

Practice matches the operation you want to build

Memory · finding 11

11

Harrington & Jiang (2013): words given retrieval practice were learnt better than words simply shown again.

In class: Short retrieval starters every lesson, spaced: five minutes, tomorrow, next week, next term. Eventually students must recall it with no prompt in sight.

Retrieval is central to EPI

Source: "11 Cutting-Edge Research Findings Every Teacher of Mandarin Should Know" (gianfrancoconti.com, Aug 2026), written as Conti prepared his CLTANSW keynote (September 2026). The individual studies are cited there; the EPI mapping is Conti's.

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