

Essential Chinese Vocabulary: rules and scenarios, written by Wen-Hua Teng, published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. 330 pp. ISBN: 9780415745406

A Book Review

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Essential Chinese Vocabulary: rules and scenarios, written by Wenhua Teng, aims at serving as a multipurpose Chinese lexical/grammar reference book. Teng selected 200 essential words (arranged alphabetically) and explained their meanings, usages as well as grammar rules in real-life scenarios.

This book can be used both as a grammar handbook as well as a vocabulary dictionary. It not only focuses on Chinese grammar such as commonly used function words but also focuses on some content words as well. The first example is “Ban (班)” which means “class”. In different combinations, the character in Chinese has meanings such as “class”, “students in the class”, “in the class”, “in the entire class”, “going to work”, and “getting off work”. There are also some rules that are affiliated to the usage of the vocabulary, for example, the Chinese word “whole class” and “in the class”, Ban (班) became a stand-alone word. In the expressions “going to work” (“Shang ban”) and “getting off work” (“Xia ban”), the author also explicitly clarifies the restriction that the action of the first one should be lasting. That means you can add the duration of time in between two characters, while the other is “instantaneous verb”, “the action cannot last”. These explanations bridge the lexical meaning and grammar usage of the word.

In this book, Wen-hua Teng explains function words in a comprehensive way. For example, a typical function word “Daodi” (literally means “to the end”) often misleads students by vague meaning in vocabulary combinations and confusing sentences structures. Instead of simply translating this as ‘after all’, Teng explores five usages of ‘Daodi’ in six scenarios on four pages.

Daodi is used in a question to emphasize the inquiry in order to give the question a stronger tone. It usually shows the speaker’s impatience or strong puzzlement.

The common mistake made by learners who are English speakers is to use Jiushi (就是) where Daodi (到底) is the correct word.....

It should be noted that Daodi(到底) cannot be used in a question with Ma (吗).

In the explanation for all words, Teng deliberately avoids linguistic terms and integrated the form, meaning and usage into context. This method is in line with discourse grammar instruction developed from functional grammar, which not only taught *what* but also further states issues of *when* and *why* (Liu & Jiang 2009) Advocated by many scholars and applied in different languages, such as English, French, Japanese and German (Hughes, R., & McCarthy, M. 1998, Celce-Murcia, M & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, Mori, J. 2005, McCarthy & Carter, 1994), the discourse grammar teaching method shifts their focuses on language components to sentenced-based contexts. Chinese language, as a high-context language (Edward T. Hall, 1975), in which the meanings of phrases are usually embedded in the context and the grammar rules are simple but with many exceptions. This book finds a good explanation in Chinese.

Another merit of this book is that examples are closely related to students' life, which helps learners visualize vocabulary usage. For example, on page 140 the structure is “Lian.....Dou” (连.....都), which is an emphatic expression according to the author. Instead of simply translating into “even”, the author provides nine scenarios about tests, college life, dialogue among Chinese learners, narration from a father, and describing an “extreme situation”.

In addition, Teng shows her keen observation on the explanation of words whose meanings are seemingly obvious. The author is trying to explain Chinese vocabulary “Yi Ge Ren” in discourse or scenarios showing learners the meaning of ‘along’ or ‘by itself’ and implications of combination of the phrase such as ‘Yi Ge Ren (Jiu)’ implies a large quantity and ‘Yi Ge Ren de’ indicates belonging to someone or alone.

As a reference book, it is helpful for both teachers and students, especially inexperienced teachers in two ways. Firstly, this book predicts potential errors by Chinese language learners. For example, Duo (多), which means ‘more’ or ‘more often’. The author clearly states, “Speakers often make mistakes when using this pattern, because the word ‘more’ appears after

the verb in English.” (page 54); Another example is ‘otherwise’: since the word ‘otherwise’ is not used with ‘unless’ in English, learners who are English speakers must consciously remind themselves that the word Fouze (否则) is not optional if this pattern is used. (page 27). Secondly, this book also provides detailed information on the punctuation marks, pronunciation tones, connotation, denotation, and compares synonyms in short sentences. This book mentions “series comma” (“enumerating comma”) regarding its unique function in the Chinese language system as one of the most common punctuation marks in Chinese text connecting two nouns, pronouns, or two adjectives.

On page 250, Teng compares the difference between Yixiang (一向) and Yizhi (一直).

Yizhi can mean ‘all the time’ or ‘all along’ and is similar to Yixiang or Xianglai. However, Yixiang or Xianglai is not used when a specific time frame is mentioned. Yizhi does not have this restriction.

Theoretically speaking, this book is consistent with Lexicogrammar Teaching Theory /Pedagogy considering that grammatical structures and lexical items are intertwined rather than two separate components. “Lexical items often have grammatical implications, and conversely grammatical structure has lexical restriction” (Francis, 1993). Regarding Chinese, there is no obvious distinction between the rules of Chinese vocabulary and the rules of grammar. In other words, phrase combinations follow the same rule as sentences construction.

However, it would seem a more systematic examination on the relationship between vocabulary and grammar or involving more representative function words in different proficiency levels, would have facilitated Teng’s goal to “bridge the gap between grammar and vocabulary”.

It would have been even more illuminating with some minor changes. First of all, this book would be more organized if the proficiency level of readers had been clarified in the title of the book. Most of the words are required by intermediate level speakers. Second, the layout of the book might be more user-friendly if the author differentiates phrases and characters. Minor

errors in some measure words on page 139 and typos can be improved. The measure word Feng (封) for emails would be more accurate. On page 94, the word Jinguan (尽管) is the typo of jǐnguǎn (尽管). On page 16, the word Huifu (回覆) should be Huifu (回复).

Overall, the strength of this book far outweighs its weakness. It not only contributes to the field of pedagogical grammar in teaching Chinese as a foreign language to English speakers, but also further the understanding of intermediate functional vocabulary and grammar usage. Readers can find benefits in enlarging their vocabulary but also deepen their understandings of certain grammar implications behind some common vocabulary. Despite this book only examining 200 Chinese words, the initiative the author has taken is very important. This book is recommended as a vocabulary usage and grammar reference book to those who are interested in learning basic grammar rules in supplement to intermediate Chinese language textbooks.

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Manuscript: Book review on Essential Chinese Vocabulary: rules and scenarios, by Wen-Hua Teng, published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.