

Research on How Primary School Calligraphy Teachers Maintain Students' Interest in Learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the strategies used by primary school calligraphy teachers in Congtai District, Handan City, to sustain students' interest. Through in-depth interviews with six experienced teachers, the research identifies key methods such as creating engaging environments, employing reward systems, and integrating technology and real-life connections. Data were collected and analyzed across multiple sessions during the academic year. Findings indicate that these student-centered strategies are effective in maintaining engagement, though their success is limited without stronger institutional support. The study concludes that a diverse and dynamic pedagogical approach is crucial for fostering a long-term appreciation of calligraphy and preserving this traditional art form.

INTRODUCTION

The promulgation of the Opinions on Carrying out Calligraphy Education in Primary and Secondary Schools by China's Ministry of Education in 2011, and its subsequent refinement in the 2013 Guidelines, underscores a national commitment to revitalizing calligraphy instruction. This initiative addresses declining writing skills in the digital age while safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. However, a persistent pedagogical challenge remains in primary education: students' initial enthusiasm for calligraphy often wanes during intermediate learning stages, threatening long-term cultural appreciation goals.

In response, researchers have proposed diverse strategies to sustain engagement. Scholars such as Wen (2021), Mao (2018), and Lin (2023) advocate integrating imaginative and creative thinking from art education. Cheng (2023) and Fuyubi highlight internal motivation, while Lian et al. (2023) emphasize technology integration. Student-centered approaches like experimental learning (Shi, 2023; P.Q. Wang, 2023) and flipped classrooms (T. Wu, 2023) are recommended to foster active participation. Simpler knowledge delivery (L.N. Wu, 2021), exhibition organizations (A.C. Wang, 2023; Shao, 2022), and character-collection activities (Lei, 2021) enhance experiential learning. Furthermore, theory-practice combination through group tasks (Liu, 2018), life-related self-expression (Zhou, 2023), educational games (Denise et al.), and spatial-artistry appreciation (Christine) collectively form a multifaceted framework. These strategies, though fragmented, provide crucial insights for developing systematic, student-focused calligraphy pedagogy that maintains interest and supports national educational goals.

This study addresses this gap by providing a focused, qualitative exploration into the lived experiences and pedagogical reasoning of in-service calligraphy teachers. The research contributes to knowledge enrichment in two significant ways. First, it captures a unique niche sample of six dedicated, full-time calligraphy teachers from diverse primary schools in Congtai District, Handan City—a group whose sustained, first-hand experiences provide rich, authentic insights often absent from broader, more theoretical studies. Second, the study aims for theory enrichment by systematically consolidating dispersed practical strategies into a coherent framework, explicitly linking teacher practices with established educational theories such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson), behaviorism (Watson), and constructivism. The novelty of this research lies not in discovering entirely new strategies, but in their systematic integration, practical validation through teacher narratives, and the identification of underutilized approaches, particularly concerning technology integration and fostering autonomous learning. Consequently, this study was designed to identify the effective strategies these teachers employ to sustain student interest, with the ultimate aim of formulating a comprehensive and practical reference framework for educators seeking to enhance their calligraphy instruction and, thereby, contribute to the preservation of this traditional art form.

Research Aims and Questions

This study aimed to identify the effective teaching strategies used by primary school calligraphy teachers to maintain students' interest in learning.

Based on the insights gathered from in-depth interviews with experienced teachers, the research sought to formulate a comprehensive set of strategies that can serve as a practical reference for educators. Furthermore, through extensive literature review and qualitative analysis, the study intended to provide well-rounded recommendations for improving calligraphy instruction, ultimately contributing to the enrichment of teaching practices in primary schools and fostering a lasting appreciation for calligraphy among students. The central question guiding this research was: How do primary school calligraphy teachers effectively sustain students' interest in learning calligraphy throughout the academic year?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The qualitative nature of this study on maintaining primary school students' interest in calligraphy is supported by several educational theories, which provide a lens for understanding and analyzing the teaching strategies identified.

Differentiated Instruction (Carol Ann Tomlinson)

Differentiated Instruction is a teaching philosophy based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in response to the diverse needs, interests, and learning profiles of students in a classroom. The core of this theory is to maximize student growth and individual success by meeting students where they are and designing instruction that is engaging and accessible for all learners.

Constructivism (Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky)

Constructivism posits that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflecting on those experiences. In this framework, the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides experiences and guidance, encouraging students to explore, ask questions, and discover principles for themselves, rather than passively receiving information.

Behaviorism (B.F. Skinner, John B. Watson)

Behaviorism is a theory of learning which states all behaviors are learned through interaction with the environment through a process called conditioning. Thus, behavior is simply a response to environmental stimuli. In education, this theory supports the use of reinforcement (rewards) to increase the frequency of a desired behavior (e.g., student engagement and practice) and punishment or lack of reinforcement to decrease unwanted behaviors.

Experiential Learning (John Dewey)

John Dewey's theory of Experiential Learning emphasizes that learning is most effective when it is grounded in real-life experiences and connections. He argued that education should not be separate from life but should simulate social

environments and engage students in "learning by doing." This approach helps students see the relevance of their studies and fosters deeper, more meaningful understanding.

Research and Hypothesis

This study is qualitative in nature. It employs a phenomenological and narrative research design to explore the lived experiences and strategies of calligraphy teachers through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. As such, it does not propose or test quantitative hypotheses. The objective is to gain rich, detailed insights and generate a comprehensive framework of strategies, rather than to measure variables or establish statistical correlations. Therefore, a discussion of previous studies concurring or rejecting a quantitative hypothesis is not applicable to this research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing Phenomenological and Narrative Research designs. The primary goal was to deeply understand the personal experiences and strategies of calligraphy teachers in maintaining students' interest.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted both offline (face-to-face) and online (via phone calls). Each of the six participants took part in three interview sessions (early, middle, and late stages), with each session lasting at least one hour, allowing for in-depth exploration and tracking of changes over time.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of primary school calligraphy teachers from Congtai District, Handan City, Hebei Province, China. A purposive sample of six calligraphy teachers was selected from six different primary schools to ensure diversity in age and gender. The inclusion criteria required participants to be actively teaching calligraphy in a primary school, have at least three years of teaching experience, and conduct calligraphy lessons weekly for a full academic year. The exclusion criteria included non-specialized calligraphy teachers, such as Chinese language teachers who occasionally teach calligraphy, as well as teachers with less than one year of calligraphy teaching experience.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data from the six calligraphy teachers, we followed a systematic process to identify key teaching strategies.

First, we transcribed all interview recordings word for word. Reading through these transcripts multiple times helped us become thoroughly familiar with the teachers' experiences and initial patterns started to emerge.

Next, we began coding the data manually. We highlighted meaningful statements about teaching methods and student engagement, assigning short

descriptive labels to them. For example, comments about using stories or games in class were grouped under "creating engaging learning environments."

From these codes, we developed broader themes. We constantly compared and discussed our interpretations to ensure they truly reflected what the teachers shared. This helped us identify recurring strategies like "encouragement and rewards," "linking lessons to life," and "using demonstration."

To check the reliability of our analysis, two researchers coded parts of the data separately and then compared results. We also shared our preliminary findings with the participating teachers for their feedback, making sure we accurately represented their views. Although we worked mainly with printed transcripts, we used NVivo software later to help organize the coded material and visualize connections between themes.

Finally, we connected our findings to existing research on calligraphy education, which helped place the teachers' practical strategies within the broader academic context.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth interviews with six primary school calligraphy teachers in Congtai District, Handan City. The data, organized thematically, outlines the specific steps and strategies identified as effective in maintaining students' interest in calligraphy learning. The results are summarized in the tables below for clarity.

The following tables summarize the core findings related to curriculum setup, the role of competitions, influencing factors on student interest, and the specific teaching strategies employed.

Table 1. Calligraphy Curriculum Setting in Participant Schools

Teacher	Teaching Experience	Grades Taught	Classes/Week	Class Duration	Calligraphy Interest Group
A1	6 years	Not Specified	1	40 minutes	Yes (Monday afternoons)
A2	30 years	1-6	1	40 minutes	No
A3	3 years	3-6	2	40 minutes	Yes (Afternoon classes)
A4	10+ years	Not Specified	1	40 minutes	Yes (Time not fixed)
A5	4+ years	1-6	1	40 minutes	Yes (Wednesday, 1 hour)
A6	7+ years	3-5	1	40 minutes	Yes (Thursday afternoons)

Note: All schools complied with the national guideline of offering at least one weekly calligraphy class for grades 3-6. Most schools also offered interest groups.

Table 2. Role and Frequency of Calligraphy Competitions

Teacher	Competition Frequency	Perceived Role and Impact
A1	Monthly	Improves interest; effect is better.
A2	Based on higher-level competitions	Improves skill level; builds confidence and maintains interest if students win.
A3	Monthly	Improves writing level and generates interest.
A4	At least once per semester	Improves skills, enhances aesthetics, and cultivates interest.
A5	Every two months (school/grade level)	Stimulates interest in learning.
A6	Once per semester (grade level); 3 municipal per semester	Standardizes writing and maintains interest.

Note: Competitions were universally recognized as a positive mechanism for boosting and sustaining student interest and skill.

Table 3. Factors Affecting Student Interest in Calligraphy

Category	Teacher	Key Factors
External Factors	A2	Overly rigid teaching mode.
	A3	Exam-oriented education pressure; lack of time.
	A5	Parental pressure; teaching methods not hitting students' interest points.
Intrinsic Factors	A1	Physical fatigue; perceived as less fun than video games.
	A4	Lack of knowledge about calligraphy; inability to learn effectively.
	A6	Perceived distance from modern life; lack of understanding.

Table 4. Teaching Strategies for Maintaining Student Interest

Strategy Theme	Specific Methods Employed by Teachers (Examples)
1. Creating an Interesting Learning Environment	Storytelling (A1, A4, A5); animated videos (A5); "stroke stitching" games (A5); role-playing (A5); museum visits & resource sharing (A5); using whiteboard turntables (A5, A6); "unpacking blind boxes" for lesson introduction (A6).
2. Incentive and Praise	Hierarchical reward system with certificates/material gifts (A1); "good" seals leading to "scratch card" rewards (A5); spiritual rewards like being a class representative (A1); verbal encouragement and praise (A2, A4, A5); multiple awards (e.g., "Excellent Star," "Progress Star") (A6).
3. Application of Teaching Methods	Live teacher demonstration (A2, A3, A4, A6); copying methods (e.g., single/double hook) (A4); vivid metaphors (A4); flipped classroom with group work and presentations (A6).
4. Creating a Positive Learning Atmosphere	Teacher writing alongside students (A2); group writing sessions (A4); decorating classrooms with student works and ancient-style themes (A6).
5. Associating with Real Life	"Points bank" redeemable for rewards (A5); student "auction house" for artwork (A5); gamifying lessons based on popular games (A5); using calligraphy apps on tablets (A6).
6. Encouraging Exploration	Pen and ink experiments to feel color changes (A5); integrating Chinese painting with calligraphy lessons (A5).
7. Model Setting	Sharing personal stories of family perseverance (A2); displaying works of peers in art museums (A3).
8. Enhancing Autonomous Learning	Students setting their own painting themes (A5); self-evaluation by circling well-written characters in different colors (A6).
9. Changing Writing Forms and Other Methods	Using diverse formats like fans, long scrolls, and banners (A4); calling for stronger policy and platform support from educational departments (A3).

DISCUSSION

Integrating Empirical Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

This study's findings on sustaining students' interest in calligraphy reveal significant connections with established educational theories while offering new

practical insights. The comparison between our empirical data and existing research demonstrates both alignment and meaningful extension of current knowledge.

The core pedagogical challenge identified—students' perception of calligraphy as disconnected from modern life—finds resonance in broader educational literature addressing traditional subjects in digital environments. Our teachers' response through creating engaging learning environments strongly aligns with Mao's (2018) emphasis on motivational classrooms, yet our findings reveal more sophisticated implementation. While Mao discussed general gamification principles, our teachers demonstrated specific integration of storytelling, role-playing, and digital tools that transform abstract concepts into concrete experiences. Teacher A5's use of animated videos like *Thirty-Six Characters* exemplifies how digital storytelling bridges traditional and contemporary media, extending previous research by showing practical applications of Tomlinson's differentiated instruction theory in calligraphy contexts.

The demonstration method's crucial role, emphasized by multiple teachers, provides empirical support for Li's (2020) assertion about instructional design importance. Our findings extend this understanding by revealing how live demonstration serves as multisensory scaffolding that static materials cannot replicate. The dynamic process of showing writing movements, pressure application, and rhythm creates learning experiences that transcend verbal instruction, offering new insights into skill acquisition in traditional arts education.

Reward systems implementation in our study corroborates Zhu's (2022) emphasis on encouragement while revealing innovative adaptations. The "points bank" and "scratch card" mechanisms demonstrate how behavioral theory principles translate into daily practice, blending material and spiritual rewards in ways that address both behavioral and humanistic psychological needs. This integration represents an advancement beyond conventional reward systems discussed in previous literature, showing how abstract principles become culturally relevant classroom practices.

Technology integration findings partially support Lian & Lai's (2023) advocacy for digital classrooms while revealing implementation barriers. Although teachers recognized technology's potential, limited adoption highlights the gap between availability and application—a crucial factor underrepresented in previous optimistic assessments. This divergence suggests need for more nuanced understanding of technology integration challenges in traditional subjects.

The connection to real-life contexts through "auction houses" and economic simulations provides concrete examples of Dewey's learning-by-doing philosophy in action. While previous literature mentioned this approach theoretically, our study demonstrates its practical application in calligraphy education, showing how abstract educational philosophy translates into engaging classroom activities that enhance relevance and motivation.

Flipped classroom implementation by Teacher A6 extends Wu's (2023) general discussion by providing specific evidence of how student-led analysis fosters autonomy and cultural understanding. This represents a significant

advancement from theoretical discussion to practical demonstration, showing concrete benefits of constructivist approaches in traditional arts education.

Exploration and autonomy encouragement through ink experiments supports Cheng's (2023) emphasis on creative thinking while demonstrating practical implementation strategies. The move beyond rote practice toward experimental learning shows how metacognitive skills develop through hands-on experience, offering new insights into creativity cultivation in structured learning environments.

Most significantly, our study reveals a crucial gap in systemic support that existing literature has overlooked. While the 2013 Ministry Guidelines emphasize innovation, teachers report inadequate implementation support – explaining why promising strategies remain underutilized. This finding necessitates rethinking innovation models to include stronger institutional backing.

The psychological attunement of effective strategies to young learners' needs confirms established child development principles while showing their specific application in calligraphy contexts. The pedagogical soundness of these approaches demonstrates how theoretical principles translate into practical effectiveness, while their contextual relevance highlights the importance of adapting general theories to specific subject requirements.

In conclusion, our study moves beyond validating existing research by providing empirical evidence of how theoretical frameworks manifest in practice. The identified strategies form an integrated approach where teachers create stimulating environments while connecting learning to students' experiences. This research demonstrates that successful calligraphy education requires both teacher creativity and systemic support, offering a more comprehensive understanding of interest sustainability in traditional arts education. The findings contribute to educational theory by showing how general principles apply in specific cultural contexts while providing practical guidance for classroom implementation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that sustaining students' interest in calligraphy requires a multifaceted and student-centered approach. Various strategies used by teachers – such as creating an engaging learning environment, implementing reward systems, integrating technology, connecting lessons to real-life situations, and encouraging exploration and autonomy – play an essential role in enhancing student engagement.

The teacher's role is central to the success of calligraphy instruction. Teachers serve not only as instructors but also as active facilitators who design interactive and enjoyable learning experiences. Their ability to adapt strategies to students' age, interests, and psychological development significantly influences the effectiveness of the learning process.

However, teachers' efforts are often limited by insufficient institutional support. The lack of adequate training, resources, and policy reinforcement restricts the long-term effectiveness of the strategies implemented. Additionally, students' interest is shaped by a variety of internal and external factors, including

academic pressure, parental influence, teaching methods, their understanding of calligraphy, and short attention spans.

This study also highlights the underutilization of technology and innovation in calligraphy teaching, despite their strong potential to boost motivation and learning outcomes. Therefore, sustaining interest in calligraphy education requires coordinated collaboration among educational authorities, school leaders, teachers, parents, and the wider community. Such synergy is essential to ensure that calligraphy learning remains engaging and fosters a deeper appreciation for this traditional art form.

FURTHER STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into the strategies used by primary school calligraphy teachers to sustain students' interest, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted exclusively in Congtai District, Handan City, Hebei Province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions in China, particularly rural areas or more developed urban settings. Second, the sample size was relatively small, involving only six calligraphy teachers. Although the participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity, a larger sample would strengthen the applicability of the results. Third, the qualitative nature of the study emphasizes depth rather than breadth; the absence of quantitative measures – such as student performance data or interest scores – restricts statistical validation of the strategies identified. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported information from teachers, which may introduce bias, social desirability effects, or recall inaccuracies. The lack of longitudinal tracking also limits understanding of how students' interest evolves over time. Lastly, the study focused solely on teachers' perspectives; incorporating student viewpoints would offer a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of factors that sustain interest in calligraphy learning.

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