

A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Beginners' Perception of Learning Japanese and Effective Strategies for Teaching Chinese-Japanese Homograph

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Abstract. Japanese-Chinese homographs are an essential topic in Japanese education research. This study focuses on Japanese-Chinese homographs in both the Chinese and Japanese languages. It analyzes the perception of Japanese beginners, learning difficulties, and teaching strategies using data collected from questionnaires. The study finds that as Japanese learning progresses, students gradually improve their understanding of Japanese-Chinese homographs, but misuse still occurs. Students generally perceive learning Japanese-Chinese homographs as challenging and deserving of attention. Regarding teaching strategies, students prefer self-summaries and Japanese-Japanese translations for learning Japanese-Chinese homographs. Based on these findings, the study proposes Japanese teaching and learning suggestions.

Keywords: Japanese learning; Japanese teaching; Japanese-Chinese homographs; Chinese-Japanese difference.

1. Introduction

During the Tang Dynasty, many Chinese characters found their way to Japan, eventually becoming the official script of the nation. Consequently, numerous Chinese terms were incorporated into Japanese, and reciprocally, Japanese words were adopted into Chinese. This linguistic exchange resulted in a host of identical or strikingly similar terms between Chinese and Japanese, particularly in the context of "Chinese words". This apparent similarity often leads to the misconception that Chinese speakers might learn Japanese relatively more straightforwardly. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that similarity does not imply identity, and there are substantial distinctions in certain words, creating potential for misunderstanding.

For instance, the term "benkyou" holds different connotations in Chinese (reluctant) and Japanese (to study/to reduce the price). Likewise, the word "kega" carries different meanings in Chinese (blame me) and Japanese (injury). These terms are homographs, exemplifying differences between Japanese and Chinese characters and words.

As per the studies conducted by Keiko Maruyama [1] and Yoshiyuki Sato [2], Japanese-Chinese homographs constitute a significant area of research for scholars specializing in Japanese-Chinese linguistics. These researchers have demonstrated exceptional proficiency in classifying and employing Japanese-Chinese homographs. While Chinese researchers have also exhibited interest in Japanese-Chinese homographs, there are limited studies integrating this with teaching strategies for homonyms. As Xiu Gang [3] suggests, teaching Japanese majors in Chinese colleges and universities has achieved notable milestones and yielded fruitful outcomes in teaching content, faculty development, and scientific research. Yet, there is ample scope for enhancement in teaching methodologies, textbook research, and pedagogical reform. The study implies that understanding Japanese-Chinese homographs by Japanese beginners is an underexplored area warranting further investigation.

Mainland China's trend of opting for Japanese college entrance examinations over English ones is gaining traction among candidates with weaker English proficiency, mainly due to the reform of the foreign language college entrance examination. Many students perceive learning Japanese as a strategy to bolster their overall college entrance examination scores, initiating their language studies in high school. However, they frequently stumble upon challenges with homonyms in Japanese.

Native Chinese speakers often interpret Japanese words based on their Chinese meanings instead of deriving the meaning from the context, a strategy commonly employed when reading English literature. Suppose they strictly adhere to Chinese definitions when interpreting Japanese words and it does not significantly impede their understanding. In that case, they might erroneously associate and reinforce these Chinese meanings with the Japanese words. Such misconceptions can negatively influence their Japanese language acquisition. Thus, this research concentrates on devising effective pedagogical strategies to tackle these issues.

2. Literature References

Although languages, including meaning-phonetic ones like Chinese and phonetic scripts such as English, share certain similarities, they also offer distinct differences. The popular assumption is that their similarities facilitate learning and memorization. However, academic discussions during 2009-2010 proposed that language involves several dimensions, including phonetics, phonology, grammar, and semantics. Numerous theories suggest that languages inherently lack uniformity, and diversity is their true essence [4].

Wang Yong [4] further postulated that subtle differences between languages are integral to every language learner. Accurate comprehension, precise reading, and flexible translation in language learning can only be achieved by recognizing and understanding these differences.

The academic field of "Chinese character culture" has seen scholars investigating the reasons behind the disparities between Chinese and other Eastern languages. Zheng Yangshu [5], for instance, identified four primary factors responsible for Korean-Chinese homographs' formation: linguistic elements, historical factors, societal influences, and psychological aspects.

Similarly, Jin Shaofen [6] argued that the extended history of cultural exchanges between China and Japan significantly impacted Japanese language development, with Chinese culture and characters playing a pivotal role. This has led to a frequent occurrence of homographs between Japanese and Chinese. Chinese-Japanese homographs can be divided into different types, including those with completely different meanings and those with overlapping meanings. The formation of these homographs is influenced by Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges and is intricately linked to Japan's natural environment, societal evolution, lifestyle, and linguistic tendencies.

Based on the statements of these two scholars, it can be concluded that homographs with the same form but different meanings are a "natural phenomenon" within the Chinese character cultural circle. They are the focal point of research on differences in language vocabulary and represent a barrier that individuals within the Chinese character artistic circle must overcome when learning the language of another Chinese character cultural circle.

Chinese learners, while having an advantage in learning kanji, still face several obstacles in the initial stages of learning Japanese. According to Liu Lin et al. [7], there are three main challenges for beginners learning Japanese: the variability of verb forms at the end of sentences, the ambiguity of rejection language in conversation, and the common occurrence of omissions such as subject omission. Despite the similarities between Chinese and Japanese, Chinese learners can benefit from their native language knowledge to facilitate their Japanese learning process. This is undoubtedly convenient for learners. However, it is also a double-edged sword as the limitations of their native language often lead to misunderstandings of Japanese language meaning, causing significant difficulties [8]. The Japanese-Chinese homographs discussed in this study are the fourth significant barrier in learning Japanese, known as the homograph barrier.

When learning Japanese, Chinese students often face the challenge of overcoming the influence of their native thinking style in a short period. Li Xiping [8] points out that learning a foreign language involves constant interference and power from one's mother tongue. Failure to eliminate the influence of Chinese makes it difficult for Chinese learners to master authentic and native Japanese, leading to positive and negative language transfer. This research will focus on the fourth obstacle for Chinese students learning Japanese: the misuse of Japanese-Chinese homographs resulting in negative

language transfer. The study findings will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to improve the learning quality for beginners of the Japanese language.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research questions

Both Chinese and Japanese are languages that use a lot of Chinese characters, and there are many words with the same form. As a result, Chinese students generally believe that Japanese is a relatively easy language to start learning. Some learners even jokingly refer to Japanese as a dialect of China. However, as learning progresses, the influence of "negative transfer" from the mother tongue becomes more prominent. When encountering a Japanese word that has not been learned or memorized, students tend to substitute the Chinese meaning of a word with a similar shape in Japanese, leading to misunderstandings and misuse of words and sentences. Based on this, this paper aims to investigate the following questions:

- 1) Understanding of Japanese-Chinese homographs by Japanese beginners;
- 2) Proficiency in Japanese-Chinese homographs;
- 3) Teaching strategies for Japanese-Chinese homographs.

3.2. Research participants

The study group mainly consisted of college students exposed to Japanese. They ranged in age from 18 to 22, with no distinction between gender and grade. There are three main types of students, namely:

- 1) Japanese majors (Japanese students taking the college entrance examination) or English majors (English students taking the college entrance examination).
- 2) Students studying Japanese in college (Japanese students taking the college entrance examination).
- 3) English majors who choose Japanese as their second foreign language.

3.3. Study tool

In this study, a questionnaire titled "Japanese Beginners' Mastery of Japanese and Chinese Homographs" was created. The survey is divided into three parts: 1) basic information, 2) Japanese-Chinese homograph test questions, and 3) self-evaluation of learning difficulty and teaching strategies. The relevant content is based on Wang Xiao's (2004) [9] research on Chinese-Japanese homographs in Japanese language teaching. The design of the Japanese-Chinese homograph test questions is inspired by Nakayama Aoko's (2020) [10] survey and analysis of the comprehensibility of homographs for Japanese-Chinese learners. The questionnaire has undergone a reliability and validity test, with a Cronbach coefficient of 0.605.

- 1) Word judgment questions (5 questions): Determine whether the Chinese meaning of Japanese-Chinese homographs is consistent with the purpose in Japanese. For example, "shinbun" (newspaper) in Japanese and "xinwen" (news) in Chinese.
- 2) Multiple choice questions (6 questions): Choose the correct Chinese meaning for Japanese and Chinese homographs.
- 3) Sentence judgment questions (8 questions): Determine whether using homographs in the sentence is correct.

4. Data analysis

The survey questions were integrated and distributed in the form of questionnaire stars. A total of 249 data were successfully recovered, but 19 were invalid (from participants who had not studied Japanese), resulting in 230 valid data after elimination.

According to the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) difficulty level, N5 represents the beginner level of Japanese, where individuals can make self-introductions. N4 represents the stage where individuals can communicate in simple daily life. N3 is the level required for Japanese college entrance examinations or the College Japanese Test Band 4 in China. The difficulty level of N2 is similar to that of the College Japanese Test Band 6 and the Test for Japanese Majors Band 4 in China. N1, the highest level of the International Japanese Proficiency Test, is comparable to the College Japanese Test Band 8 in China.

For this study, students in the unexamined/N5-N4 range were considered beginners and were the main focus. Among the collected data, only five copies were from N4-level participants, which is relatively tiny and shows low differentiation. Therefore, the data from N5 and N4 levels were combined for statistical analysis. The unexamined/N5-N4 range accounted for 82.17% of the total data, meaning that approximately 80% of the respondents were beginners.

The researcher makes the following analyses of relevant data:

4.1. The cognition of China' Japanese beginner on the Chinese-Japanese homonyms

According to a survey conducted under the university's Japanese language teaching model and system, most students who have studied Japanese for less than two years opted for the N5 level (91.24%). A small percentage of students reached the N4 (1.55%) and N3 (6.7%) levels, and only one got the N1 level. Students at the N2 and N1 levels are mainly those who have studied Japanese for more than two years. The slow progress of language learning at universities leads many students to view Japanese as another course, resulting in a lower demand for examinations. Only Japanese language majors are required to take the N1 level exam, which has a particular impact on the survey results. Based on the survey results, it can be determined that beginners in Japanese language study typically have a duration of two years or less. Moreover, it can be theorized that the higher the Japanese language proficiency level, the better the understanding and sensitivity towards Japanese-Chinese homographs.

4.2. The difficulty of learning

The first question contains five Japanese-Chinese homographs that are more commonly used in daily life. Among them, "benkyou" (study), "shitsumon" (question), and "shingbun" (newspaper) are key words that learners will encounter when developing an interest in Japanese, and they are relatively easy to understand. The correct rate for these words was 58.2% for the beginner group, 82% for the intermediate group, and 95% for the advanced group. The main difference lies in two less common Japanese-Chinese homographs, "gakucyou" (university president) and "kaoiro" (facial expression). It can be inferred that as learners' Japanese vocabulary expands, so does their accumulation of Japanese-Chinese homographs, and it becomes essential to distinguish between these words consciously. Increasing and expanding vocabulary is an effective way for beginners to overcome the challenge of Japanese-Chinese homographs in learning.

The second question consists of eight Japanese sentences, which is the most challenging part of the test. The correct rates of the three groups were 49.28%, 44.17%, and 68%, respectively, showing no significant difference. Surprisingly, the average accuracy rate of the intermediate group was even lower than that of the beginner group. This indicates that although accumulating many words can help identify Japanese-Chinese homographs and understand their meanings, it is still prone to misuse and cannot produce correct sentence expressions. Beginners should find the right approach to dealing with Japanese-Chinese homographs from the beginning, as otherwise, they will only be able to comprehend the meaning of Chinese without accurately and authentically expressing themselves in Japanese.

The third multiple-choice question focuses on six uncommon Japanese-Chinese homographs that are not commonly encountered in everyday conversations, Japanese classes, or Japanese exams but may appear in exam questions. It is crucial to master these "unpopular" words, as the Japanese and Chinese meaning of Japanese-Chinese homographs differ significantly. Inferring the correct answer

through context or option comparison can be challenging. Beginners typically have an accurate rate of only about 38%, while there is a considerable gap between the intermediate group (62.22%) and the advanced group (86.37%). This indicates that Japanese-Chinese homographs are relatively unique and challenging to learn Japanese. To attain proficiency in authentic and accurate Japanese, beginners must grasp the concepts and connotations of Japanese-Chinese homographs from the outset and engage in independent learning to establish a strong foundation in Japanese language acquisition.

In general, the greater the proficiency in the Japanese language and the longer the number of years of study, the better the mastery of Japanese-Chinese homographs.

4.3. Education strategies

According to the survey results, 97.39% of the respondents believe that learning Japanese-Chinese homographs is more complex than average, making it a challenging aspect of learning Japanese that requires attention.

Regarding the exploration of learning methods for Japanese-Chinese homographs, the four options in order of selection ratio from highest to lowest are as follows:

1) Independently summarize and create a table to write the meanings of unmastered homographs in Japanese and Chinese, then compare and memorize them (86.09%).

2) Watch more daily translations and combine words and example sentences to aid in memorization (69.13%).

3) Most Japanese-Chinese homographs are "ancient Chinese", where one word corresponds to one meaning. For example, "Sexualized male" is translated as "man with posture" (can be used when reading) (58.7%).

4) Memorize Japanese words using the English translation method (36.22%).

Based on the selection ratio, "independently summarizing" was the most preferred method among students, indicating a preference for contrastive mnemonics when learning Japanese-Chinese homographs. Contrast memory methods are commonly used for learning, where similar or related words are grouped for learning and memorization. This approach allows for a clearer understanding of the differences, enhancing memory retention and learning efficiency. The "Japanese-Japanese translation method" ranked second, a foreign language learning method highly respected by teachers in colleges and universities today. It is a way to improve foreign language abilities quickly, and the selection ratio suggests that students are gradually accepting and using this method, which is a positive trend. The least chosen method is the "English translation method," which requires learners to move away from their native language and avoid negative language transfer, making it more difficult and less applicable.

Regarding the research on how to teach Japanese-Chinese homographs, the six options in order of selection ratio from highest to lowest are as follows:

1) In-class or examination paper explanations that point out the differences in meaning, usage, and language sense in Chinese and Japanese (80.98%).

2) Explaining the differences in usage, language sense, style, and expression between Japanese and Chinese words (since homographs are primarily Chinese) through specific language environments (79.89%).

3) Helping students understand the origins of commonly used Japanese-Chinese homographs, explaining relevant background knowledge, and strengthening students' understanding (72.83%).

4) Providing Japanese example sentences with Japanese-Chinese homographs to cultivate students' sense of Japanese (64.41%).

5) Actively engaging in various forms of contrast practice (53.8%).

6) Guiding students to use Japanese dictionaries, adopting the Japanese-Japanese translation method, and correctly understanding homographs (45.65%).

Based on the selection ratio, most students hope that teachers can take the initiative to guide them in learning Japanese-Chinese homographs in the classroom and deepen their understanding of the usage and sense of these words with the teacher's help. Introducing the relevant language environment

and language background of Japanese and Chinese homographs flexibly is also an aspiration for students.

5. Summary and suggestions

5.1. Conclusion

Based on the results of the data analyses, the researchers came to the following conclusions:

1) Beginners have a particular understanding of Japanese-Chinese homographs in the early stage of learning, but this understanding will gradually improve as the knowledge deepens. The degree of mastery of beginner Japanese-Chinese homographs is related to the number of years and levels of study. The longer the learning period and the higher the story, the higher the mastery of Japanese-Chinese homographs.

2) Japanese beginners have particular difficulties in learning Japanese-Chinese homographs, especially in using sentences. Beginners need to solve this problem through vocabulary accumulation and extended learning.

3) Beginners generally believe learning Japanese-Chinese homographs is complex and needs attention. They are more inclined to use contrastive mnemonics to learn Japanese-Chinese homographs, that is, to put them together for learning and memorization. In addition, they also hope to receive guidance and help from teachers in the classroom to deepen their understanding of Japanese-Chinese homographs.

5.2. Suggestions

Many researchers and literature have focused on Japanese-Chinese homographs and studied teaching strategies related to them. This research targets explicitly Japanese-Chinese homographs with different meanings, as beginners tend to make mistakes. Here are suggestions for improving teaching methods:

1) At the beginning stage, consider offering special classes to help students understand the origin of Japanese-Chinese homographs and related background knowledge. This will draw students' attention to the difficulty of learning Japanese.

2) Provide induction templates and appropriate practice questions for Japanese-Chinese homographs to guide students in independent summarization.

3) During course preparation, pay close attention to Japanese-Chinese homographs that may appear in lecture notes or test questions. Actively explain these homographs to students, using simplified dictionary explanations and Japanese example sentences. This will enhance the efficiency of students' learning of Japanese-Chinese homographs and cultivate their sense of the Japanese language.

In response to the common learning difficulties faced by Chinese students learning Japanese, this paper provides the following suggestions:

1) Understand the concept of Japanese-Chinese homographs as early as possible to minimize the negative influence of the mother tongue.

2) Use personal learning strengths to independently summarize unmastered Japanese-Chinese homographs, taking advantage of fragmented study time.

3) When encountering unfamiliar Japanese-Chinese homographs, consult the Japanese-Japanese translation in the dictionary to understand the meaning, linguistic nuances, usage contexts, and even the frequency of the word.

4) In exams where guessing the meaning of Japanese-Chinese homographs is necessary, consider using the following methods:

a) Supplementary translation concerning classical Chinese words, substituting one word for another

b) Associative thinking, especially for words containing or juxtaposing relationships. For example, the Japanese word “shinbun” means "newspaper," and in Chinese, there is a term "news newspaper." By making this association, one can guess the meaning of the word.

c) Some Japanese-Chinese homographs have the same meaning in Chinese as in Japanese, but the usage is different. To understand these, rely on Japanese interpretations. For example, the Japanese word “doukyou” can mean the cohabitation of people or the coexistence of objects, which is more widely used than the Chinese term "cohabitation."

d) Some Japanese-Chinese homographs have entirely different meanings and can only be understood through repeated memorization. For example, “nekoaba” in Japanese refers to doing bad things without being detected, but in Chinese, it means "cat's poop."

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