

# Avoiding Negative Transfer from Grammar and Culture When Teaching Chinese to Japanese Students

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to explain the negative language transfer from Japanese grammar and culture. It can help teachers who are Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL teachers) to give more targeted coping strategies in teaching. In the process of learning a second language, learners usually tend to rely on their mother tongue to understand the second language, which is recognized to create a certain negative transfer of the mother tongue. In the process of teaching Chinese to the Japanese students, the Japanese students often cannot overcome broke the rule of the original mother tongue. It affects the processes of Chinese language acquisition and the way of expression. China and Japan are the only two countries in the world that use characters. There are many common Chinese words in Chinese and Japanese, so it is relatively easy for Japanese to learn Chinese, but there are also some bottlenecks. The research object of this paper is Japanese adults who are learning Chinese, from basic to intermediate and advanced levels. By comparing Chinese and Japanese grammatical structures, expressions, and cultural factors to find out the difficulties of the Japanese students to learn Chinese, then, analyze the reasons and make suggestions. This paper systematically summarizes the problems that Japanese students encounter in terms of grammar, expression habits, and culture when they are learning Chinese, but does not conduct an in-depth analysis of each point, which is hoped to pave the way for future research. Of course, the factors that affect Japanese learning Chinese are pronunciation problems and other problems, which are not covered in this article.

**Keywords:** Language Transfer; TCSL; Japanese; Chinese; grammatical; culture.

## 1. Introduction

When people study a second language, they often want to find some experience from their mother tone, which could help them to use their knowledge to understand the context of the target language quickly. But at the same time, the influence of the native language also leads to errors in the process of the second language acquisition or the use of the target language, we say that is the negative transfer from the mother tongue [1]. In other words, in the process of second language acquisition, learners often rely on their mother tongue to try to understand the second language that they learned, which can easily lead to a certain negative transfer from the mother tongue.

If learners can use the limited vocabulary that they have learned and the grammatical system of the target language rather than the structure of their mother tongue to improve their expression when speaking the second language, then the negative transfer of the native language can be largely avoided. Language transfer is a complex process, including differences in individual, cognition, and many other factors [2].

When Japanese students study Chinese, a lot of them try to use the logic of Japanese, especially the way of expression, in Chinese which affects the process of learning Chinese a lot. From the point of view of a grammatical for example, In Japanese, the restrictions on word order are not that strong, and some syntactic elements can be omitted [3]. Japanese verbs govern the part before it as the object, but in Chinese, it is the part after it; In the aspect of expressive habits, the Chinese pay attention to concise and comprehensive, while the Japanese always want to express every detail clearly or they may think that is not respected enough to the spoke object. Personal pronouns are often omitted in Japanese, especially you, and they are usually replaced by people's names. But in Chinese, "you" can be replaced by a more respectful form or directly use the second person pronoun; In Japanese, politeness includes showing respect (involved of a strong nuance of vertical respect) and

consideration of the status and character qualities of others, as well as being modest to oneself [4]. The causative verb in Japanese is often used when people of higher social classes dominate or command people in lower, such as teachers and students, managers, and employees [5]. But the causative form could be used by any part of social class in Chinese. Many advanced Chinese learners also cannot even accept this kind of difference psychologically, as teachers who are Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL teachers) would better pay attention to these sorts of characteristics.

A study about Chinese and Japanese on their second language acquisition by Talmy (2000) and Slobin (2004) showed that Chinese and Japanese students used different information from their native language in the process of learning English [6]. This demonstrates the importance of studying native language transfer in the process of second language learning.

How to use the positive transfer of mother tongue accurately in the process of teaching a second language and avoid the negative transfer is also an important topic of research in second language teaching nowadays. Lack of understanding of the rules is also the main reason why learners make mistakes when they learn a second language. Because learners do not have enough knowledge of the rules of this language, they often use the rules of expression of their mother tongue in the target language. For example, students in Pakistan and Iran learners are lack accuracy and grammatically correct to produce sentences in English. The uncertainty in English writing is because they are highly influenced by the rules of their First Language [7]. But between the 1940s and 1950s, linguistic acquisition was largely influenced by Behaviorism, which saw the process of language learning as a simple habit-forming process [8]. Therefore, the effect of language transfer on second language learning is only seen as a habit. Then the cognitivist/developmental perspective believes that there is no need to distinguish areas of the human brain that exists especially for language learning, human can spontaneously use everything they know about a language at a given time. And Connectionism addressed that the environment plays an important role in second language acquisition. In the competition model, linguists thought that “language acquisition occurs without the necessity of a learner's focused attention.” After that, Chomsky (1965) argued that children are born with a special ability and innate capacity to learn a language, but this theory was not believed to be broadly applicable to the second language learning process [9]. After that, some scholars believe that the process of learning a second language requires creativity and hypotheses, then re-induction of the structure and grammar of the target language, which is in line with the theory of learning a second language using the thinking method of the target language itself. Therefore, in the teaching process, how to avoid the influence on the learners’ way of thinking from their mother tongue is the important thing to be considered. In terms of Chinese teaching, it is more important to let students avoid the way of thinking in their mother tongue by comparing the differences in grammatical structure, expression, and culture between Chinese and other languages as well. The significance of this article is that the way of thinking about the second language is the bottleneck when students learn a second language. Overcoming the negative transfer of the mother tongue by the way of changing the thinking model and understanding the culture of the second language well can overcome the bottleneck and allowed students to develop Chinese thinking that can help them well understand, communicate and applicate the target language more flexibly.

## **2. Teaching Chinese to Japanese Students**

### **2.1 Japanese honorifics**

Japanese honorifics are words used to express respect in Japanese and are used to express words and relationships between speakers, listeners, and social class figures, Such as elders and children, intimacy and unacquainted, and so on. Japanese people already followed a habit of using the different types of language structures to express the proper relationship and politeness, especially in certain social situations [10]. For example, in the conversation between the teachers and students in Japan, students use honorifics when they are saying “Good morning!” to teachers in the morning, and teachers generally use the simple form when they are feedback to the students on greeting.

Japanese reflects social rank through Japanese honorifics or specific syntax, while Chinese generally reflects social rank through appellations and the content. Japanese culture grammatically presents various forms of politeness to suit the occasion. Keigo, a polite form of speech, varies with the level of formality. There are three types of honorifics: honorific, modest and polite. When speaking Japanese, it is necessary to pay attention to the politeness level to suit each social situation.

From a cultural point of view, respect for the elderly is something that is less emphasized in the West, but it is also a common social and cultural element in almost every Asian country, even in today's society they still maintain a strong respect for the older generation, even in the culture of both Chinese and Japanese. Filial piety is also a very important part of Chinese Confucianism. And in Japan, people even celebrate Respect for the Aged Day called "keirou no hi" in Japanese, as a way to visit their elders, who are sometimes far away from their children and grandchildren. However, in Japan, respect for the elderly is also reflected in the structure of the language, and the honorifics are also a very important part of the culture symbolizing the perspective of respect. But Chinese is different, Chinese people usually talk to elders, such as grandma, casually at home, but when talking to elders in Japan, people must choose honorifics with specific verbal forms carefully. The "Kohai-Senpai" system in the Japanese working environment can also be linked to this respect for elders and love for linear hierarchies.

Therefore, during the Chinese teaching process, TCSL teachers TCSL teachers would better let the students feel that although there are many similarities between Chinese and Japanese even in the culture, China is a unique country with its own culture, which should be treated differently from the culture in Japanese.

## 2.2 Syntax and grammar

Syntax and grammar relative a little more content, mainly from the following five aspects: (1) grammatical structure; (2) sentence structures; (3) Passive Voice and Causative phrases in Japanese and Chinese; (4) quantifiers; (5) logic of language

(1) Among the differences between Chinese and Japanese, the first difference is their grammatical structure. People find Chinese grammar easier to grasp because it only contains Chinese characters. But Japanese was a mix of Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Verbs in Chinese have only one form, and the conjugation of verbs is not involved. Japanese verbs are more complex because the Hiragana writing system creates conditions for conjugation. There are thirteen inflected forms of Japanese verbs. There is no change in Chinese verbs like that, adverbials are needed to describe the specific conditions or the changes of verbs, so the components of adverbials in Chinese are more complicated than in Japanese. So, teaching adverbs in Chinese is something important relatively.

(2) Chinese and Japanese tend to have different sentence structures. From a purely grammatical point of view, although the Chinese language has a similar vocabulary to Japanese, but the sentence structure is often different. For example, the usage of the Chinese word "arrived": Chinese "arrived" is both a verb or a preposition, and whether it is a verb or a preposition, it dominates the object it takes followed. At the same time, the corresponding "arrived" in Japanese, whether it is a verb or an auxiliary word, modified the sentence constituent in front of it. This is the difference between Chinese and Japanese language typology. This difference also affects word order. Word order is crucial in second language learning because it can change the meaning of phrases. In other words, the order in which words are arranged affects the accuracy of expression. When words are arranged incorrectly, it can be fallen awkward. Such phrases might always be confusing or ambiguous. The word order in Chinese is subject-predicate-object. In Japanese is a subject-object then followed by a verb. In Chinese, the object that is modified by a verb is usually in the back of the verb, that is to say, the verb dominates the object behind it. But, in Japanese, the corresponding verb that in the same meaning as Chinese can be a verb or an auxiliary word, but whether it is a verb or an auxiliary word, the modified part always comes before them, and they dominate the preceding part from the back [11]. In general, in Chinese, the sentence structure is similar to English and uses subject, verb, and object structure. In Japanese it is subject, object, then verb, the expression adopted in Japanese is almost an anastrophe.

(3) The passive sentence, meaning passive, that is, subject to suffer some actions or influence by another or things. The use of passive voice in Japanese has a deep origin and relationship with its culture. One of the distinctive features of the Japanese language is the ambiguous expression in communication, which is also the Japanese culture. This passive voice expression is one of the unique characteristics of the Japanese as well, which has an inseparable relationship with its culture.

Usually, causative sentences in Japanese have the meaning concerns that the object is reluctant to do something or be forced to do something by someone, which also means trouble. While Chinese causative sentences do not have so many emotions basically. For example, if say:” This is the book you asked me to buy for you.” In Chinese, it just means I do you a favor to buy a book and I buy it for you now. While in Japanese, that means though I buy a book for you, I don’t like to do it for you.

(4) Most nouns in both the Chinese and Japanese languages do not have plural forms, in order to know the number of nouns, there is usually according to a number or the context. And in both Chinese and Japanese, it is necessary to use quantifiers to combine the nouns and numbers to express the number of things. The abundance of quantifiers is one of the common features of Chinese and Japanese. However, the characters used in the quantifiers in the two languages are different, which makes Japanese students prone to negative transfer because of their native language when learning quantifiers. A large part of the quantifiers in Japanese was passed down from China, but with the passage of time and the development of society, a large number of foreign words flooded into Japanese, and the usage of Japanese quantifiers has changed. Japanese quantifiers are also expressed in Chinese characters. The usage of Chinese and Japanese noun quantifiers is similar, but actually, they are different, which brings difficulties for Japanese students to learn quantifiers. TCSL teachers need to pay attention to this problem when presenting.

(5) The grammar in Japanese is generally regarded as more complex than it in Chinese. For example, in Japanese, verbs, and adjectives are always associated. And Japanese has conjugation, but Chinese is not..... All these above make Japanese language logic more complex than Chinese. So, when teaching Japanese, TCSL teachers could let students simplify their logical relationship of expression, that is, to simplify sentences.

### 2.3 The Cultural influence on Japanese

A language and expression largely reflect their culture. Only by understanding the cultural background of this language can you better understand the way of speaking in the target language and use it to express your thoughts. If you dissect the extremely detailed and historic languages of the two countries, you will feel a distinct difference in expression. These are discussed from the following three aspects: (1) From appellations; (2) From expression; (3) Other subtle differences.

(1) From appellations: On formal social occasions, both Chinese and Japanese cultures emphasize observation titles. Both societies respect hierarchies to avoid disrespect. therefore, it is rare to call each other by their first names directly. Titles of positions such as a doctor, teacher, manager, etc. will be preceded by the person’s family name. But the difference is that after the person is mentioned, Chinese people use to using personal pronouns to replace the same person, such as: "Doctor Zhang, you can do it." But in Japanese, people often don't use “you” to replace the person after saying the person's name. It is common to say, "Now it's time for Dr. Zhang to do it, okay?" Moreover, there are often expressions like that in Chinese, "I like drawing, how about you?" But in Japanese, it is often said: "I like drawing, how about Mr. Tanaka?" People say the name of the person who people speak to and avoid using the personal pronoun” you”.

Because of the difference in speaking habits and cultural comprehension, when Japanese students hear "you" in Chinese, they will feel uncomfortable, more or less. As TCSL teachers, they would better explain the speaking habits and different cultures as the time when they are presenting these pronouns. Parts are explained to students Let students eliminate the psychological barriers when they get in touch with these personal pronoun learning.

(2) In terms of expression, especially when answering questions, the Japanese tend to express the meaning completely and clarify the relationship between a series of elements in a sentence clearly,

but the Chinese usually pay attention to expressing succinctly and concisely, and the previous content can be omitted to avoid being repeated, that is, avoiding repeat too much that are mentioned before. Furthermore, when answering questions, the Japanese also tend to explain all the cause and reasons and effect relationships completely, but the Chinese only need a specific answer [12]. Here is an example of a Chinese living in Japan, one day he saw a road being built in front of a square near his house, and he felt that he couldn't get through, but he still wanted to confirm it, so he asked the administrator nearby. The answer he wanted was just "yes" or "no" at the time, and that could help him to decide which way should he go, but the result was probably that the administrator first told him why the place was under construction, and when it started and then, when might it be over, if not finished at that time, thus, how many days could be lasting. It might take a minute to answer the question. This expression may not be acceptable to the Chinese, but it is quite common in Japan. Therefore, in the teaching process, it is suggested that TCSL teachers could emphasize Chinese is a language that pays attention to simplicity and conciseness. So that, students can develop the habit of accepting this expression psychologically and overcoming their cultural barriers at the same time.

(3) There are also many subtle differences in expressions between Chinese and Japanese. For example, "taking medicine", people often use the verb "drink" in Japanese, but "drinking medicine" in Chinese has the other special meaning, which means suicide, and in the normal usage, people always use the verb "eat". What else, in Japanese, the sentence "It doesn't matter" can both express the meaning of "that's all right" and "I have no question anymore", so TCSL teachers could better not only translate the meanings into Japanese but also give them the certain environment to explain. In addition, in Japanese, there are a number of homographs with Chinese. So as a target language, Chinese is also easy to be prone to negative transfer. While explaining vocabulary, TCSL teachers could tell the difference of these usages to students, so that students can avoid the effect of their mother tongue and use the Chinese words more accurately and natively.

### 3. Conclusion

Language teaching is not a simple process. How to enable students to use this language flexibly and appropriately in the shortest time based on listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is worthy to be studied and researched by TCSL teachers.

This paper summarizes some experiences in the process of teaching Chinese from the negative transfer of grammar, expression, and culture synoptically. In fact, most Japanese learners of Chinese, think that the most challenging part is probably learning the correct pronunciation. The four tones in Chinese are considered to be a tricky part of learning Chinese, but in the process of teaching Chinese to Japanese students, it will be found that Japanese students are actually affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue in grammatical logic and even culture a lot, and it is also ignored by the students themselves usually. That is to say that, if these mistakes are not corrected by TCSL teachers, it is probable that Japanese students themselves will not be aware of these kinds of mistakes. In teaching a new language, it is better for TCSL teachers to take time to let the students get used to subtleties, especially when it comes to expressions and culture because these parts of learning are not easy to find in the textbook.

This paper does not conduct in-depth research on a certain point of grammatical or cultural negative transfer, and I hope that there will be opportunities to conduct further research on the certain point in the future. In addition, this article also does not cover the part of positive transfer. When the native language helps the target language to be acquired and used immediately and rapidly, we say it is a positive language transfer. Making good use of the positive transfer of mother tongue in teaching can make teaching more effective. For example, many words in Japanese have similar meanings to Chinese, which creates a lot of conveniences for Japanese students to learn Chinese. So, studying how to utilize the positive transfer of mother tongue effectively in teaching can also improve the quality of teaching progress.

In short, there are many other subtle changes in language knowledge besides what is taught in books, maybe which are often only felt by native speakers of this language. Therefore, TCSL teachers would better fully understand the similarities and differences between the target language and students' native languages, especially from the perspective of grammar, expression habits and culture, to point out the direction and pave the way to study the second language for students.

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