

## Hitches in Mandarin Stroke Writing

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### ABSTRACT

Many learners especially beginners face difficulties in learning Chinese language. One of the toughest components in learning the language is the learning of character writing as the metacognitive of learning this language is far too different from their native language. This study aims to get a better insight on non-native beginner learners' mistakes in stroke writing. A dictation was carried out to examine the 50 non-native undergraduates' common mistakes in stroke writing. Test items were all common words that they have learnt in their Mandarin level 2 text book. Data revealed that the common stroke mistakes were Stroke, Misalignment, Stroke's Shape and Non-existing Strokes. The findings suggest the techniques of stroke teaching is crucial to rectify the existing mistakes and to make improvement on teaching and learning. Further studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of teaching methods to cater non-native learners' learning patterns to achieve accuracy in stroke writing.

**Key Words:** *Chinese character stroke writing, Stroke writing mistakes, Chinese character stroke order, Third language teaching and learning strategies.*

### INTRODUCTION

In most research of second language learning in English, lexical knowledge is responsible for language acquisition and development (Schmitt, 2000; Cameron, 2001). Similarly, it goes with the learning of Chinese language. However, most non-native learners would find learning Chinese language is rather difficult as learners should first understand the strokes and structure of the characters before they could know the lexical and further their understanding to acquire and master the language. This tells that, learning Chinese language requires a totally different set of metalinguistic awareness (Koda, 2004) as in learning English and Malay, which is mainly the learners' first language. This study aims to get a better insight on non-native learners' stroke writing mistakes.

### BACKGROUND

Learning Chinese language requires a completely different metacognitive awareness (Koda, 2004) as in learning English or Malay languages. Such awareness mainly refers to the ability of the learners to be able to aware of the association of meaning with specific units of the language such as its sounds, phonemes, words, part of speech and etc in order to make meaning across,

understand and use the language meaningfully. Thus, Chinese language might be perceived as the toughest language to be learned especially non-native learners or non-cultured related language.

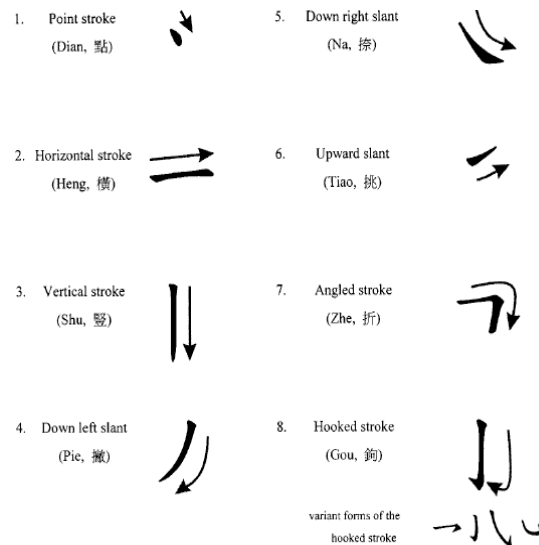
### **The structure of the 'notorious' language**

According to Freed (1995) and Coleman (1997), Chinese language is seems to be the notorious language for English speakers in may studies and it is believed that the non-native learners would faced the similar difficulties. In their research, English speakers required extra time to learnn Chinese language than learning Spanish as they need to cope with the difficulties to pick up elements that are not exist in their mother tongue such as tones in oral communication and strokes in written communication. They need to take up approximately 2,200 class time with half of the time spent in the country where the language is widely spoken, compared to 600 to 750 class time learning Spanish in the same context.

Chinese language has contributed much confusion and frustration to many non-native learners. It is a pictorial or logographs that built up from a combination of strokes and radicals , in which they cannot be deconstructed to individual phonemes as in alphabetically writing system in English (Koda, 2004). For example, the word "sufficient" can be broken down to syllabus as "suf-ficient" but this does not exist in Chinese language, the words cannot be broken down past syllabus level, the radical. Radical is already an indipendent morpheme with its own phoneme. For example, the word 惜(xī) means to cherish, to begrudge and to pity. It consists of the left radical of "忄" (xin) which means love and right radical of "昔" (xi) means formerly, ancient, in the beginning, it also provides the sound for the word 惜(xī).

Apart from that, prefix and suffix in either English or Malay usually contributes to a change of meaning by changing the root word's part of speech, it is still within the word family but they usually have a shared meaning. For example, the word "sufficient" which is an adjective to describe enough, when the part of speech changed to a noun, "sufficiency" it states the condition of being adequate. When a prefix "in-" is added to the root word, it denotes the meaning of not enough. However, such understanding cannot be transferred to the learning of Chinese language. In Chinese language, when the radical changed the meaning changed entirely similarly to its pronunciation. Using the example before, if the left radical "忄" of the word "惜" were to be substituted with the radical "钅" (jin) it forms the word "错" (cuò) which means wrong. As such learners need to memorise each word, unlike in English, learners can extend their lexical knowledge to spell a new word based on their awareness of the combination of phonemes.

MomORIZATION is the ancient methods of learning in Chinese language and its memorization is far beyond the 26 alphabets in English or in Malay languages. According to Nancy et al. (1998), Chinese calligraphy in Kaishu can be discerned in to the basic 8 strokes as in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Basic Strokes in Chinese Characters (Nancy et al., 1998)**

There are myriads combination of strokes to form radicals and characters where the radicals can be semantic or phonetic which contributes to the meaning or pronunciation for the character (Ho et al.,2003; Su, 2010). Semantic radical usually found on the left or top of a character (Ho et al.,2003; Liu et al.,2010). For instance, radical “亻” pronounce as (ren) can be a radical as well as a stand-alone Chinese character “人”. It can be semantic radical that gives the meaning to “傲” (ào) carries the meaning of proud/pride which mainly describes human’s feeling. It can also be a phonetic radical for “仁”( rén ) which means humane, that borrows the pronunciation of the radical “亻” (ren).

### Common and Preferred Learning Strategies

Rote learning to memorise stroke-by-stroke writing has been used in the pass centuries. Findings from McGinnis (1995) suggested that this strategy is perceived as the most impactful learning strategy by the non-native Chinese novice learners during a five-week summer immerse programme. Studies conducted by Wang (1998) and Yin (2003) also eachoed that such strategy is the most preferred strategy used for effective learning of character writing.

Some researcher such as Ke (1998) and Sung (2012) reported that orthographic knowledge-based strategies woudl allow learners to perform better in character writing. In their studies, it can be seen that learners tend to depend on repetitive copying to enhance their familiarization and memorization of words. The strategy is said to allow them to comprehend and improve their knowledge of the construct and structure of the Chinese character.

Pass studies might show foreign learners would most likely prefer the rote learning style but it might not be the most impactful learning strategy (Wei, 2007; Guo, 2008; Dong, 2010; Zhou, 2014; Li, 2016). Learners still made mistakes in recognising or writing the characters. These mistakes making cannot be taken lightly as it might lead to various misunderstanding and miscommunication. Thus, the need to investigate the common mistakes made by non-Chinese learners is crucial. It would serve as a measurement to rectify the mistake making as well as the teaching and learning process as to improve the accuracy of stroke writing among the non-Chinese learners in future especially in different teaching contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

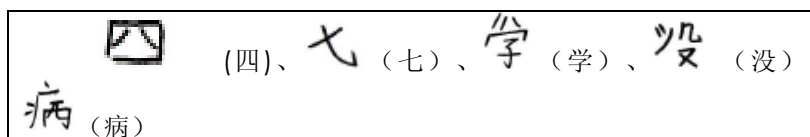
A dictation of 68 common words taken from their Foundation Mandarin Level 2 course book was conducted on all 50 non-native in UiTM Sarawak, Mukah branch. These Level 2 Mandarin course undergraduates was taken as it is pre-supposed that they have gone through the lessons of basic stroke character writing and its writing rules in their Level 1 and it is assumed that their mistake making in character writing is not solely due to trial and error as in in their initial stage of learning in Level 1. Since they have acquired a basic level of understanding on the skills, mechanics and fluency in character writing the findings of the study could be more accurate in terms of measuring their mistake making in character writing.

The data were then analyse based on the framework derived from various studies done by Wei (2007), Guo (2008), Dong (2010), Zhou (2014) and Li (2016). The revised framework and explanation of constructing the framework of the study is described clearly in Ch'ng, Ting and Chuah (2018).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Generally, 73% of the total words dictated were written with mistakes. It is a good indicator to highlight the constraint of the current teaching and learning method used among the beginner non-Chinese learners. The current bottom-up sequence teaching method demanded a strict sequence of teaching. It begun with the teaching to focus on stroke types, stroke orders then the positioning of components or strokes in the characters (Shek, Ference, Wing & Elizabeth, 2007). The whole process might be laborious but it may not yield a promising result. Such dry drilling and memorization also slows down the progress of word recognition written accuracy.

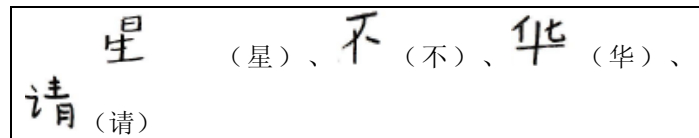
The results reveals that Stroke Misalignment (C1) is the most common mistakes, that is 28.63% from the overall mistakes made. Figure 2 is the samples of C1. Examples show the radicals were written in the correct position but they are not well aligned as in the standard characters.





**Figure 2 Samples of Stroke Misalignment (C1).**

Feng (2015) mentioned that a common challenge among these non-native beginners is making positioning and aligning mistakes, to distinct radicals in a character especially in the recognizing and writing compound characters compared to simple characters. This is because visual-orthographic structure of the compound characters is more complexed than the simple character (Liu, 2011). Beginner learners are prone to make mistakes in stroke alignment (Lee, 2014) because the skill of spatial adjustment of the combination of more than one radical in a word is not necessary in the participants' writing system.

27.46% from the overall mistakes made is Stroke's Shape (D1), it is the second common mistakes made. Shape changing may be noticed from various directions – top to bottom, left to right. Although grid writing is used to help learners to get their writing in shape in their routine writing practices but it does not seem to be habitual when they were tested on in this study. Figure 3 shows the samples of D1.



**Figure 3 Samples of Stroke's Shape (D1)**

The change of shape in character is a unique invention of the learners in writing but it is crucial to promote their word recognition (Feng, 2015). According to Feng (2015), first grade learners were prone to make such mistakes but they will eventually disappear at the end of second grade. Moreover, pen-shaped mistake is common among foreign learners (Norlida, 2015) as it changes the shape of the character. According to Tan, Hoosain & Siok (1996) the nature of Chinese characters is structured into a square shape with no clear initial position. Thus, beginner learners usually would compute such configural properties and strokes in a fast and non-serial way and resulting them to make mistakes in character writing. For instance, the spatial and structure of the character “华” should be written as  but the non-native beginner learners might wrote it as .

Interestingly, 12.26% committed Non-existing Strokes (G), the third highest mistakes among other mistakes. Learners have accidentally coined strokes that is not existing in stroke writing in Chinese. Figure 4 shows the samples of G.



**Figure 4 Samples of Non-existing Strokes (G)**

The sample of mistakes showed the trace of influenced of punctuation mark in alphabetic writing system in writing Chinese character. For example, the stroke “J” is written as “/”, “フ” is written as “>”. Apart from that, some mistakes are likely affected by the alphabetical writing system and has mistakenly transferred to their Chinese characters writing similar with Norlida (2015) pen-shaped mistakes. For instance “七” is written into “f”, “v” into “v”, the radical “β” at the right part into “β”.

According to Gass and Selinker (2001), coining a totally new word by the learners is regarded as one of the communicative strategies to compendate the learners' deficiency in the language. It is part of the interlanguage development. As such, in this case, it can be perceived that learners are trying to relate their learning with their prior knowledge in English or Malay to compensate their deficiency in recognition and memorization of the stroke writing. Mistakes made can be regular especially the learners' first language and second language are interrelated. However, this would speed up the learning process (Gass and Selinker, 2001).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMANDATION

Stroke Misalignment, Stroke's Shape and Non-existing Strokes are the common mistakes found among non-native beginner learners in this study. Generally, stroke writing mistakes is mainly due to the negative transfer of writing knowledge from the participants' first language (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Norlida, 2015), unfamiliarization of the structure (Tan, Hoosain & Siok, 1996; Feng, 2015) and spatial of written Chinese character (Liu, 2011; Lee, 2014) compared to their first language. They need to be rectified before it fosillised. The result may not be conclusive but it has shed lights to the planning of teaching and learning in future as to assist learners to improve in stroke writing. The findings suggest future teaching and learning need to focus on stroke order learning to improve stroke writing accuracy as it is proven that stroke order learning could improve learners to recognize and remember the Chinese characters easier besides enhance their speed and

accuracy in their writing (Li, 2009). However, the investigate the teaching methods that can effectively aid learners in stroke order learning to reduce their stroke mistakes is highly recommended for future studies.

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