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Common Mistakes in Chinese Stroke Writing Among Non-Chinese Learners

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Abstract

The learning of stroke writing is a complicated process yet it is viewed as a fundamental element in Chinese language learning. This has brought great challenges to many learners especially non-native learners. This study aims to identify the types of stroke writing mistakes and the frequency of making the mistakes among the non-native learners. A dictation of 68 words was given to all 50 Foundation Mandarin level 2 Diploma students from Faculty of Business Administration. The words were extracted from their stroke writing exercises in the course's text book. Data suggested that Stroke Misalignment, Stroke's Shape and Non-existing Strokes are prominent mistakes done by the learners. The findings of the study recommend that stroke order might be one of the most impactful component to minimize stroke mistakes among the non-native learners. However, further studies need to be done to investigate the teaching methods that can deliver such component effectively.

Keywords: Chinese character stroke writing, Mistakes in Chinese stroke writing, Non-native Chinese learners, Chinese character stroke order, Learning strategies for stroke writing.

1. Introduction

The interest of learning Chinese language is dramatically increasing due to the needs of the global economy particularly with the continuous attention to penetrate the Chinese market. However, the learning of Chinese language would turn off most aspiring learners especially the non-native Chinese language learners. Many studies revealed that learning Chinese language is tough (Liu, 2014) and learners may need more time to learn the language (Freed 1995; Coleman, 1997). This is mainly due to its writing system which may seem to be complicated to most of the non-native learners. This study investigated the types of Chinese character stroke writing mistakes and the frequency of making the mistakes by the non-native learners in a Chinese course offered by Universiti Teknologi MARA in Sarawak, Malaysia.

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2. Chinese Language, The Notorious Language

Liu (2014) study on English speakers, who begin to study Chinese abroad in China, revealed that Chinese is tough for these English speakers as they might need a longer time to embark their learning journey and the language input might be beyond their comprehension level, let alone producing appropriate responses. In the earlier studies done by Freed (1995, 1998) and Coleman (1997), they found that Chinese would be one of the notorious languages for English speakers and the learning time would take up to 2,200 class hours with half of the time spent in the country where the language is widely spoken. In comparison, Spanish can be learnt in 600 to 750 class hours in the similar learning context. Thus, their studies revealed that those speakers might take up extra time for Chinese language learning especially in the learning of tones in oral communication and characters in literacy acquisition. Thus, Chinese language might seem to be one of the toughest languages to be learnt. The main reason might be due to the distinct language system of English and Chinese which requires a different metalinguistic awareness (Koda, 2004) as compared to the learners' first language. In general, metalinguistic awareness refers to the awareness of the learners to be able to associate meaning to specific units of the language (e.g. sounds, words, part of speech, phonemes and etc.) (Koda, 2004).

Chinese characters are known as pictograph or logograph, in which the words cannot be deconstructed to individual phonemes (Koda, 2004) as in the alphabetical writing system in English. For instance, in English, the word "sufficient" can be broken down to syllabus as "suf-fi-cient" and each letter could be broken down again to individual phonemes pronounce as /səˈfɪʃ(ə)nt/. However, in Chinese, the words cannot be broken down past syllabus level as each 'syllabus' or better known as radical is already a morpheme on its own and has its own phoneme. To explain, the word "insufficient", "sufficient" denotes an adjective to describe the feeling of enough while its prefix "in-" denotes the meaning of not. Thus, the word "insufficient" means not enough. Whereas in Chinese, each radical represents a morpheme, a combination of morphemes creates a word carries a different meaning. 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.

In English, a change of prefix or suffix for the word would lead to the change of the word's part of speech within the word family that are related to each other and have a shared meaning. For instance, the word "sufficient", an adjective to describe enough can become "sufficiency", a noun to state the condition of being adequate when the suffix of the word changed. However, in Chinese, when the radical of the word changed it would change the word's original meaning and pronunciation entirely. Using the previous example, 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 and with the radical "亻" (ren) it forms "借 " (jiè) which mean to borrow.

For hundreds of years, the Chinese people regard the knowledge of basic strokes as crucial for correct stroke writing. An improper writing of the strokes in the Chinese

character writing is referred to as mistakes and can often lead to misunderstanding. Wrong stroke writing is referred as an error and it is more severe as it might impede the understanding of the readers.

As such, most learners would regard Chinese writing as one of the toughest components to be learnt. This is especially prominent for non-native or foreign language learners (FL) (Hoe, 2014) when the learners do not have any prior knowledge and environment to support their learning. Thus, it is crucial in this study to examine the stroke writing mistakes made by the non-native learners. This serves as a measurement to rectify their mistakes and any instructional misconduct in the Chinese language teaching classrooms.

Basic Strokes in Chinese Character Writing

According to Nancy et al. (1998), Chinese calligraphy in Kaishu can be discerned to the basic 8 strokes as illustrated in Figure 1. The first 6 stroke forms are considered as simple strokes that can exist independently, while the last 2 stroke forms cannot stand alone.

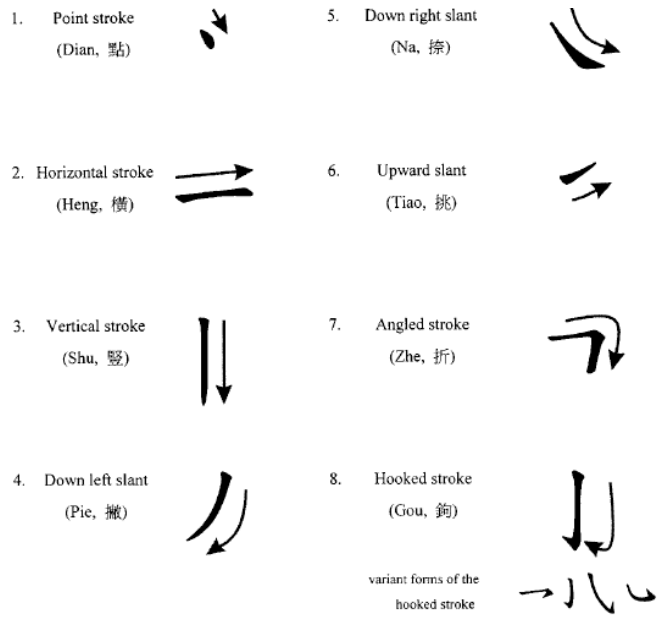

Fig. 1 Basic strokes type in Chinese characters (Nancy et al., 1998).

A Chinese character may consist of more than 1 similar basic stroke. Thus, a combination of basic strokes might form a myriad of Chinese characters. Each stroke can be viewed as the alphabet letter in English writing system. Unlike the English alphabet letters, broadly, there is a discrepancy in the number of basic stroke forms; Wen (1964) listed 22 stroke forms from a range of calligraphy handbooks, dictionaries and other publications and Wang and Xu (1993) listed 41 stroke forms (as cited in Nancy et al.,1998). This is simply because different studies used different categorization schemes. Other study done by Fei et al. (1992) for instance did not use any categorization scheme but list out the basic stroke forms from 6196 most commonly

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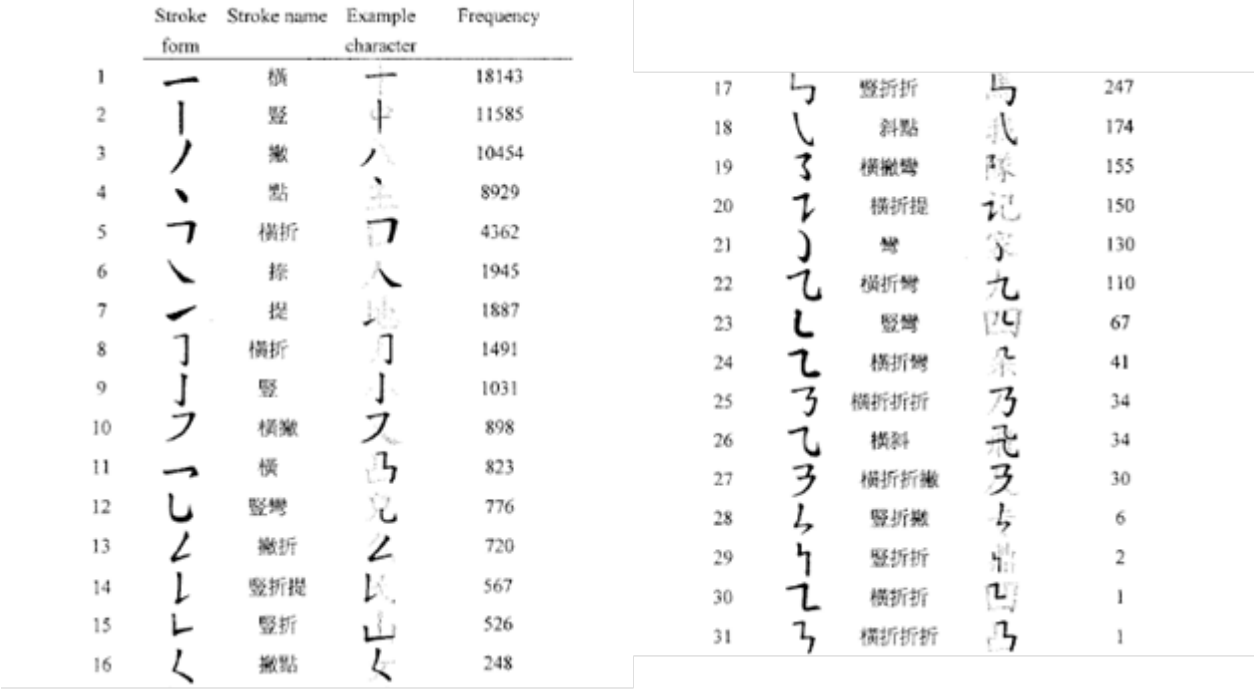
used Chinese characters in the print of Ministry of Culture and the Committee for Revolutionizing Chinese Characters (1965) as in Figure 2.



	Stroke form	Stroke name	Example character	Frequency
1		橫		18143
2		豎		11585
3		撇		10454
4		點		8929
5		橫折		4362
6		捺		1945
7		提		1887
8		橫折		1491
9		豎		1031
10		橫撇		898
11		橫		823
12		豎彎		776
13		撇折		720
14		豎折提		567
15		豎折		526
16		撇點		248
17		豎折折		247
18		斜點		174
19		橫撇彎		155
20		橫折提		150
21		彎		130
22		橫折彎		110
23		豎彎		67
24		橫折彎		41
25		橫折折折		34
26		橫斜		34
27		橫折折撇		30
28		豎折撇		6
29		豎折折		2
30		橫折折		1
31		橫折折折		1

Fig. 2 Simple stroke types (1, 2, 3, 4, 6&7), composite of stroke forms and their frequency of appearance in Chinese characters in Ministry of Culture and the Committee for Revolutionizing Chinese Characters 1965) (Fei et al., 1992).

The Radicals in Chinese Character Writing

The combination of basic stroke forms makes up the radicals, for example the combination of 2 basic strokes of "丿" (down left slant) and "㇏ " (down right slant) become "人" (ren) carries the meaning of human/person. It is also a radical "亻" pronounce as (ren). "人" can be a radical as well as a stand-alone Chinese character. In some situations, it acts as a semantic radical which contributes the meaning of the character like in "傲" (ào) carries the meaning of proud/pride which mainly describes human's feeling. While in certain cases, it acts as a phonetic radical to provide the pronunciation for the word like in "仁"(rén) which means humane, borrowing the pronunciation of the radical "亻" (ren).

Thus, the radical of the word could be a radical of semantic that contributes the meaning of the character and mainly found on the left or top of a character (Ho et al.,2003; Liu et al.,2010). Meanwhile, a phonetic radical contributes phonetic clue to the pronunciation for the character (Ho et al.,2003; Su, 2010). Generally, phonetic radicals can be independent as a complete character unlike the semantic radicals (Su, 2010). However, research found that only 10% of the characters are strictly semantic (Ho et al., 2003), therefore, the term morphosyllabic is said to be more appropriate to describe

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Chinese writing system as each character represents morphemes and syllabus (Guan et al., 2011; Su, 2010; Liu et al., 2010; Koda, 2004).

Such writing system could be confusing especially for a non-native learner. Since the knowledge of these basic stroke forms is fundamental in the Chinese character writing to facilitate proper construction of stroke writing (Nancy et. al, 1998), thus, most successful learners would apply appropriate strategies to improve their proficiency level in character writing.

Learning Strategies in Character Writing

Similar to the learning of other languages, in English, vocabulary learning is being valued as it is the beginning stage for the learners to notice and recognize the word (Elis, 1995; Schmidt, 2008). Enough exposure and repetition of the usage of the word would help to build up their vocabulary knowledge thus assist them to make meaning across (Cain, 2007; Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984) when they read or write. In Chinese, leaning to write the characters is vital. Due to its complex writing system, the learning process would be tough but direct. To add, such process may be perceived to be a huge stumbling block for non-native Chinese learners.

Traditionally, repetition of stroke-by-stroke writing and the drilling of writing practices are one of the most effective methods for Chinese character writing. This rote learning is perceived as the most powerful learning strategies that enable the learners to recognize and memorize the characters well. Findings from McGinnis (1995) study indicated repetitive copying of characters is the main strategy applied by the non-native Chinese novice learners during the five-week summer immerse program. Wang (1998) and Yin (2003) studies that investigated learners' preferences of strategies used for effective learning of character writing echoed McGinnis' (1995) findings in which rote learning was the most preferred strategies used among the learners. Rote learning is perceived to be the most effective way to promote better mastery of character writing.

The study carried out by Ke (1998) and Sung (2012) revealed that learners heavily depended on orthographic knowledge-based strategies to perform well in character writing. Thus, studies show that leaners tend to rely on repetitive copying to enhance their word recognition and memorization via orthographic processing. This increases their understanding of the construct and structure of the Chinese character which lead them to handle the character writing better.

Though repetitive copying and memorization are viewed as the most effective strategies for the learning of character writing but mistakes in the stroke writing still persist in various ways as revealed in past studies (Wei, 2007; Guo, 2008; Dong, 2010; Zhou, 2014; Li, 2016) (Refer *4.4 Framework*). Therefore, there is a need to investigate the mistakes in stroke writing and the frequency of repeating the mistakes by non-native learners in the Chinese course as a measurement for future classroom instructions. This is crucial to ensure the accuracy of stroke writing among the non-native Chinese learners.

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3. Methodology

Participants

All 50 non-Chinese Diploma students from Faculty of Business Administration who took the course of Foundation Mandarin Level 2 in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Mukah branch were chosen for the study. These students had gone through and passed Foundation Mandarin Level 1 course in their previous semester. They had learnt the basic stroke character writing and its writing rules in their Level 1 course. Thus, it is assumed that their mistake making in character writing is not solely due to trial and error as in their initial stage of learning in Level 1. They should have acquired a basic level of understanding on the skills, mechanics and fluency in character writing. As the result, the findings of the study could be more accurate in measuring their mistake making in character writing.

Course Description

TMC101 Foundation Mandarin (Level 1)
This course is offered to UiTM diploma undergraduates who have no Mandarin background. They are taught appropriate elementary Mandarin vocabulary and grammar and learn Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese alphabet system) which enables them to read and write simple sentences, text and dialogues in Mandarin language. They learn Chinese characters and their basic strokes and the rules of Chinese characters before they start to write basic Chinese characters.

TMC 151 Foundation Mandarin (Level 2)
This course is designed specifically for UiTM diploma undergrads who have at least a credit in TMC 101 Foundation Mandarin (level 1). This course emphasizes on developing their oral communication skills. The course also requires them to write simple sentences, texts and dialogues in Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese alphabet system) besides learning the basic Chinese characters writing.

Both courses stress on step-by-step teaching method, in which the students are introduced the basic strokes of character writing, the rules of stroke writing, and then the structure of characters. The character writing exercises only starts when they have understood those basic elements of Chinese characters.

Instrument

A dictation was given to the students to identify their stroke mistakes. The test items consisted of all characters in their Foundation Mandarin Level 2 course textbook's writing exercises. There was a total of 68 characters being extracted from the exercises and they were the common characters needed to be learnt in this course.

Framework

Various studies of different contexts investigating on Chinese character stroke writing mistakes have identified the types of mistakes done by their participants (Wei, 2007; Guo, 2008; Dong, 2010; Zhou, 2014; Li, 2016). Table 1 illustrates the summary of the identified mistakes on Chinese character stroke writing.

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Table1 The Mistakes of Chinese Character Stroke Writing.

Study	Types of Stroke Mistakes
Wei (2007)	• Non existing strokes in Chinese Language • Mistakes in stroke's shape and combination
Guo (2008)	• Mistakes in stroke's shape • Incorrect direction of strokes • Improper distance between 2 strokes
Dong (2010)	• Mistakes in stroke's shape • Omission and addition of strokes • Mistakes in stroke's combination • Attachment and detachment of strokes • Non-existing strokes
Zhou (2014)	• Mistakes in stroke's shape • Reciprocal strokes • Stroke's length imbalanced • Stroke's improper crossed or stopped • Improper placement of strokes • Addition and omission of strokes • Broken strokes • Improper attachment and detachment od strokes • Improper distance between strokes • Incorrect strokes that influenced by nearby strokes • Incorrect direction of strokes • Self-coined strokes
Li (2016)	• Mistakes in stroke's shape • Addition and omission of strokes • Continual stroke is crossed and vice versa • One stroke is written as 2 strokes and vice versa • Improper length of stroke • Intended stroke is substituted by a different stroke • Incorrect stroke count

With the review of the studies in Table 1, it is clear that certain types of stroke writing mistakes are repeated and they are the prominent mistakes that learners might encounter. Thus, this study adapted the repeated mistakes identified for data analysis. However, the analysis framework has been extended to 11 types of mistakes due to the existing stroke mistakes performed by the participants in this study. The analysis framework for this study is shown in Table 2. The types of mistakes are coded as to ease the task of analysis and they are useful for the descriptions of findings later.

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Table2 Analysis Framework for the Types of Chinese Character Stroke Writing Mistakes.

Coding	Types of Stroke Mistakes	Stroke Mistakes Descriptions
A	Stroke Addition	Extra stroke in a character.
B	Stroke Omission	Missing stroke in a character.
C1	Stroke Misalignment	The stoke is not relatively arranged to its position.
C2	Incomplete Stroke	Unfinished/ Abandoned stroke writing.
D1	Stroke's Position	The position of where the stroke(s) meet(s) are unclear or reversed.
D2	Stroke's Length	The length of the stroke is written either too long or too short.
E	Stroke's Direction	The direction of the stroke(s) is/are written incorrectly.
F1	Broken Stroke	One stroke is written as 2 strokes in a character.
F2	Stroke Attachment	2 strokes are written as 1 stroke in a character.
G	Non-existing Stroke	Strokes that do not exist in Chinese characters.
H	Multiple Mistakes	Multiple stroke mistakes identified in a character.

Among the types of mistakes listed in Table 2, Stroke's Misalignment (C1) and Incomplete Stroke (C2) are the subcomponents of Stroke's Shape, which generally means the written strokes have been run out of shape compared to the standard character writing. On the other hand, Stroke's Position (D1) and Stroke's Length (D2) fall into the family of Wrong Combination, which means the strokes written were wrongly jointed. Meanwhile, Broken Stroke (F1) and Stroke Attachment (F1) are part of Stroke Distance, which defines the distance of stroke written that may be confused as 2 different strokes or vice versa.

4. Results and Discussion

To investigate the types of mistakes encountered by the non-native Chinese learners, all collected writing exercises were analyzed based on the framework in Table 2. They were all together 50 participants, each of them writing a total of 68 Chinese characters in their writing exercises of the course. The total number of words that were analyzed in this study was 3400 words (N). The types of mistakes and the frequency of mistake making by the same cohort of students were tabulated in Table 3.

Table 3 The Types of Mistakes Made and the Frequency of Mistake Making in Character Stroke Writing by Non-native Chinese Learners.

Coding	Types of Stroke Mistakes	Frequency of mistakes making (n)	Percentage of mistake making (%)
A	Stroke Addition	18	0.72
B	Stroke Omission	110	4.42
C1	Stroke Misalignment	683	27.46
C2	Incomplete Stroke	90	3.62
D1	Stroke's Position	712	28.63
D2	Stroke's Length	176	7.08
E	Stroke's Direction	40	1.61
F1	Broken Stroke	60	2.41
F2	Stroke Attachment	69	2.78

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G	Non-existing Stroke	305	12.26
H	Multiple Mistakes	224	9.01
	TOTAL	**2487**	**100**

In general, out of 3400 words, 2487 words were written with mistakes by the non-native students, that is 73% mistakes made in this study. Although it may seem to be a common phenomenon among the beginner learners it reflects the limitation of the teaching method used. This bottom-up sequence of teaching method requires teachers to follow a strict sequence of teaching that focuses on stroke types, stroke orders and the positioning of components or strokes in characters (Shek, Ference, Wing & Elizabeth, 2007). Such teaching method relies mainly on drilling and memorization of the students. This could be laborious and boring to both teachers and students and the results of such approach might not be promising. Plus, with the influenced of their first and second phonetic language- Malay and English language, students cannot try to write a newly encountered Chinese character based on the formation of sound but solely depends on the memorization of its orthography. Thus, the progress of recognizing the more Chinese characters is slow and might be even slower in writing accurate strokes in the character.

Table 3 illustrates that the most prominent mistakes of stroke writing is Stroke Misalignment (C1) which is 28.63% from the overall mistakes made. Figure 4 demonstrates the samples of C1. Examples show that the positioning of the radicals are at the right position but they are not aligned as in the standard characters.

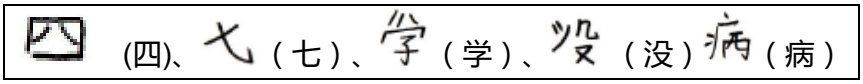

Fig. 3 Samples of Stroke Misalignment (C1).

Making mistakes in positioning and aligning the distinct radicals in a character is a common challenge among these non-native beginners (Feng, 2015). This is mainly because Chinese characters can be categorized into simple and compound characters. The visual-orthographic structure of the compound characters is proportionately higher than simple character. Thus, recognizing and writing compound characters are more challenging especially beginner learners (Liu, 2011). To add, the skill of spatial adjustment of the combination of more than one radical in a word is not needed either English or Malay writing system, thus, beginner learners are prone to make mistakes in stroke alignment (Lee, 2014).

Next, Stroke's Shape (D1) is shown to be the second most common mistake made by the participants. It is 27.46% from the overall mistakes made. Such Shape changing can be from various directions – top to bottom, left to right. Figure 5 shows the samples of D1.

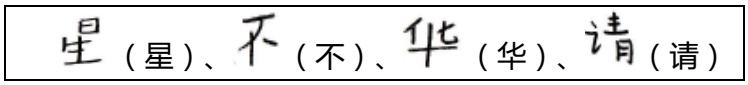

Fig. 4 Samples of Stroke's Shape (D1).

According to Feng (2015), the findings indicated that changing of shape is seemed to be a unique invention of learners in writing and it is fundamental in word recognition. In the study, such incident was apparent in first grade learners and it

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gradually disappeared at the end of second grade. On the other hand, Norlida (2015) highlighted foreign learners have the tendency of making pen-shaped mistakes that would change the shape of the characters. Apart from that, Tan, Hoosain & Siok (1996) reported that, the nature of Chinese characters is composed of strokes that packed into a square shape with no clear initial position. Beginner learners usually would compute such configural properties and strokes in a fast and non-serial way thus it is easy for 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  .

The third highest mistake made was Non-existing Strokes (G), which is 12.26% from the overall mistakes made. Learners have accidentally coined stokes that is not existing in stroke writing in Chinese. Figure 5 shows the samples of G.

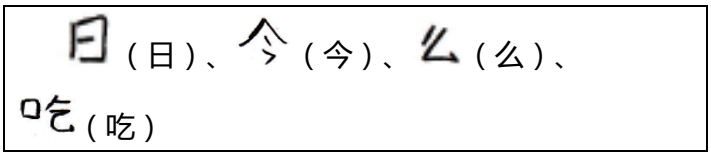

Fig. 5 Samples of Non-existing Strokes (G).

It is noticed that learners might also be influenced by the writing of punctuation mark in alphabetic writing system in writing Chinese character. For example, the stroke "丿" 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. For instance "七" is written into "t", "丷" into "v", the radical " 阝 "at the right part into"β" . The samples of this mistake seem to be similar with Norlida (2015) pen-shaped mistakes. According to Gass and Selinker (2001), learners may develop many types of interlanguage which includes creating a totally new word as one of their communication strategies to compensate their deficiency in their target language. Thus, in this case, it can be perceived that learners are trying to relate their learning with their prior knowledge to compensate their deficiency in recognition and memorization of the stroke writing. Mistakes made would be more often especially the learners' first language and second language is interrelated. However, this would accelerate the acquisition (Gass and Selinker, 2001).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings mainly show that non-native Chinese learners usually face difficulties in Stroke Misalignment and Stroke Shape. Minority of them would coin strokes that are not belonged to Chinese characters. These are common especially in the beginning stage of learning and such mistakes need to be noticed and rectified before it fossilizes in their later level of learning. Mutually is it agreed that the formation of 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. Thus, to assist learners to accelerate in stroke writing, it puts weight in the teaching and learning of stroke order learning. According to Li (2009) proved that the stress on stroke order learning could improve

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learners to recognize and remember the Chinese characters easier besides enhance their speed and accuracy in their writing. However, further studies need to be done to investigate the teaching methods that can effectively aid learners in stroke order learning to reduce their stroke mistakes.

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