Acquisition of Sino-Japanese Characters by Non-Native Language Students: A Primary Language Approach

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Background

Inspiration
In a rapidly changing world, people are developing strategies to adapt to globalization, but in many ways, meaningful promotion of foreign language proficiency, particularly in the United States, is not occurring, and it is to our detriment.

Why This Is Important
Languages containing Sino-Japanese Characters, such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean are greatly disparate from Western languages, but they are also a part of nations of people rapidly growing in political, economic, and cultural influence. Mastery of these languages will likely be critical in the future to maintain positive international relationships, and may nonetheless provide rigorous cognitive exercises for future students.

Purpose and Hypothesis

Purpose
The explicit purpose of this research is to identify novel strategies to optimize Sino-Japanese character proficiency specifically so that they may be used with existing pedagogical methods for non-native speakers, especially those with a western language of origin.

Hypothesis
Many approaches to this subject are not optimal in that they rely heavily on methods that are antiquated and inappropriate for the given material, often reflecting strategies for learning other Roman character based languages. These methods, while perhaps applicable to some other world languages, are wholly inadequate by themselves for those involving Sino-Japanese characters, given that the characters are substantial in number and highly abstract in pronunciation and meaning. To mitigate these circumstances, I hypothesize that instruction that has been modified to mimic the way in which a native speaker learns these characters will yield greater overall language mastery. In order to identify ways to enhance outcomes for Sino-Japanese proficiency, I propose an analysis of the current methods employed by instructors of both a native and non-native audience, and to identify which, if any, elements of native instruction may be modified and manipulated to enhance non-native proficiency.
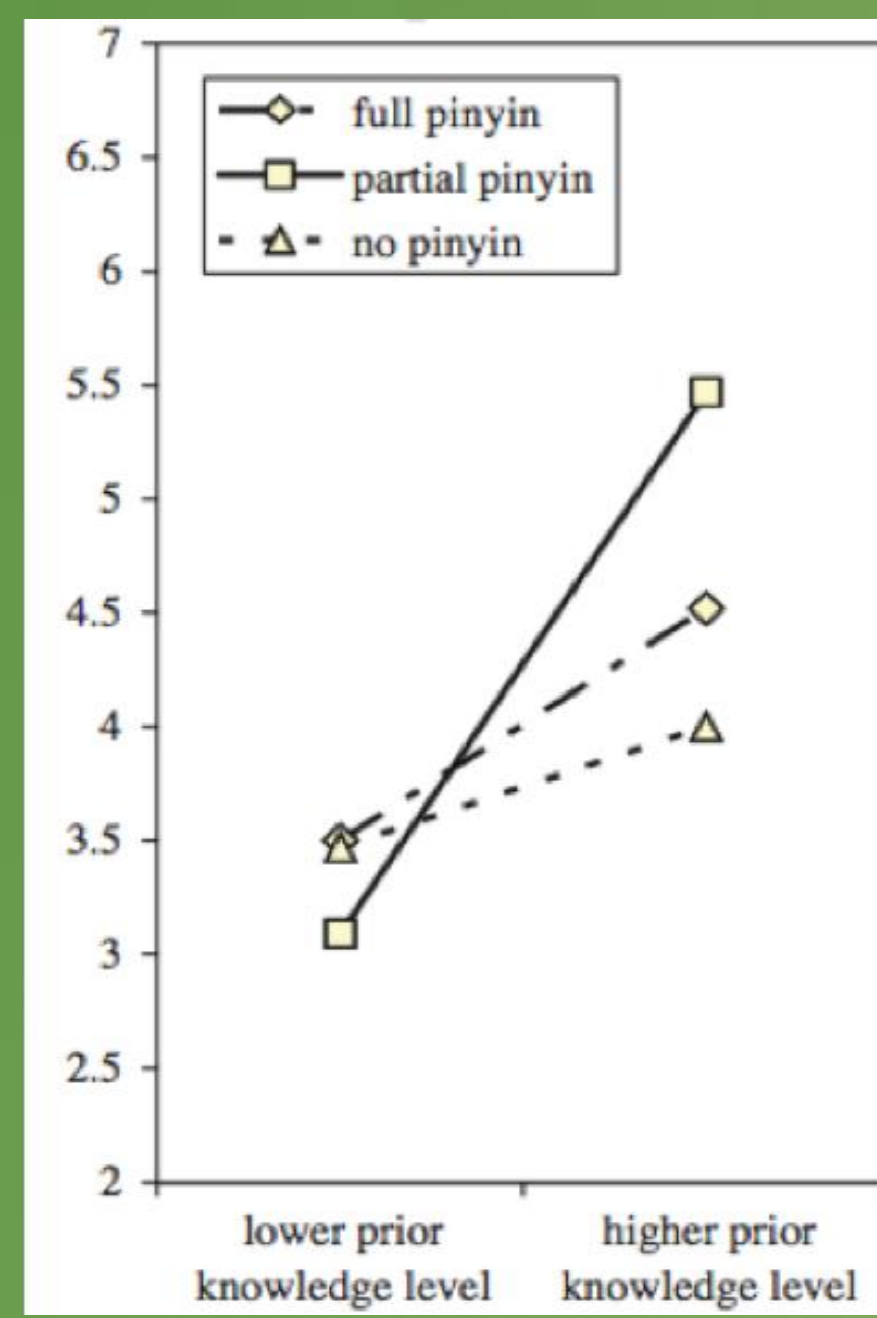
AH, THE FRAGRANCE . . .

何の木の
花とはしらず
匂ひ哉

芭蕉

From what flowering tree
I know not—
But ah, the fragrance.

Nan no ki no
hana towa shirazu
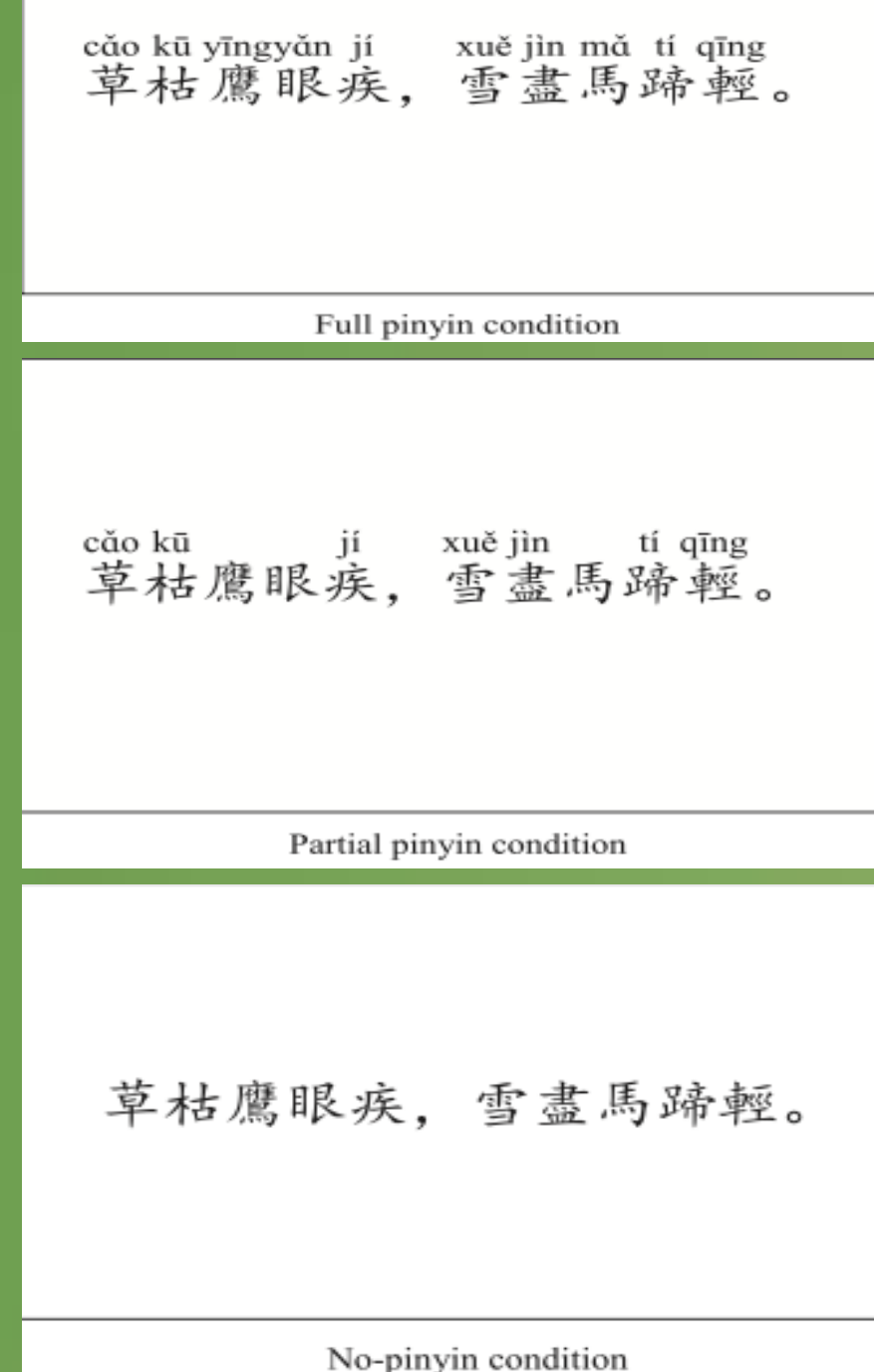nioi kana

Basho

ALONG THIS ROAD . . .

此の道や
行く人なしに
秋の暮

芭蕉

Along this road
Goes no one
This autumn eve

Kono michi ya
iku hito nashi ni
aki no kure

Basho

草枯鷹眼疾、雪盡馬蹄輕
Full pinyin condition

草枯 ji xuě jìn tí qīng
草枯鷹眼疾、雪盡馬蹄輕
Partial pinyin condition

草枯鷹眼疾、雪盡馬蹄輕。
No-pinyin condition

Literature Review and Methodology

The authors examined the premise that "it is conventionally taken for granted that pinyin is always useful in providing pronunciation information for Chinese characters and should accompany characters in learning materials for beginner learners" (Lee & Kalyuga, 2010) but they later found that this was not so, that the use of pinyin was only helpful after a higher level of prior knowledge had been established. This discovery was important in that it established two related precedents crucial in the Kanji learning process. First, the research revealed that even aids to comprehension must be used judiciously for them to be effective. In this instance it refers to the Romanized reading system of Pinyin that actually hindered the learning process for nascent students of mandarin, due to a phenomenon referred to as "cognitive overload" (Lee & Kalyuga, 2010). In their words "the conventional [belief] that pinyin should necessarily benefit the Chinese language may not always be correct. The reported study indicates that the effectiveness of pinyin as a means of instructional support may depend on the [learner's] prior language proficiency and experience with pinyin" (Lee & Kalyuga, 2010). This is also relevant to Iwashita and Sekiguchi's (2009) study which conveyed that native Japanese and, in most cases, native Chinese speakers would be superior users of Kanji. In such a way, Lee and Kalyuga's (2010) research does imply limitation on the background of the student, notably that background does not absolve the individual of using enhanced learning methods. This research does not, on the other hand, mention the use of furigana, a native Japanese construct used to teach native speakers the varied pronunciations of their own writing system. It will require further research to discover if any of the premises for pinyin remain true for furigana, as it would offer a greatly enhanced perspective of the process. Given the different natures of the two sorts of "training wheel" approaches (i.e., pinyin and furigana), I suspect there would be vastly different outcomes in their effectiveness, and they may reveal clues on how to enhance the usage of the other. This research may also reveal important ramifications of JSL (Japanese as a Second Language) students residing in Japan using furigana as well. I speculate that part of the difficulty with using pinyin is that the students are not greatly exposed to Roman characters, and conversely, JSL students may find significant difficulty in their attempts to learn Kanji using furigana.

Less controversial is the conclusion drawn by Iwashita and Sekiguchi (2009) who discovered, as mentioned earlier, that native speakers of Chinese and Japanese would, in most scenarios, almost always use Japanese characters with greater facility than their Western counterparts with the only exception being Chinese students who had not commenced Japanese education until University. As stated by the researchers, "The findings present important pedagogical implications. First, despite the different study backgrounds, the levels of learner performance were not as different as expected. The most notable difference was kanji use, which was predicted, but this applied to one group of character-based language background learners only"(Iwashita & Sekiguchi 2009). This finding gives greater depth in several areas of the Kanji learning process. Again, it trumps the notion that being a native speaker is a free pass. But this fact could be ascribed to factors as diverse as the teaching methods employed at the university level versus the individual's school system, as well as possible demographic factors such as age and or gender that are inherently different in the university community. This study, while on the surface definitive, really gives interesting insights as to how the process may work. Specifically, it details that Chinese and Japanese characters may not have enough in common to be taught with identical, or indeed, even similar methods. This is a very intriguing thought, given their profoundly obvious linguistic and ideological relations. It is worth mentioning that Japanese and Chinese, while possessing highly similar writing structures, are fundamentally different in terms of grammar, speech, and orthography, so it seems a likely conclusion that this research may lead to a constellation of approaches that need to be applied, given the background and objective of the individual student.

Methodology

The article by researchers Lee and Kalyuga (2010) which studied the effects of pinyin usage started by selecting participants randomly from "six classes of 240 year 8 students (113 females and 127 males; average age of 14.04 year, SD=0.68) from two Hong Kong subsidized secondary schools." (Lee and Kalyuga 2010) "The experiment included a pretest phase, a learning phase, and a post-test phase." (Lee and Kalyuga 2010) The pretest phase screened candidates for background and prior competency in pinyin. The subjects were categorized into "low prior knowledge level" and "high prior knowledge level." (Lee and Kalyuga 2010) The learning phase consisted of a lesson, with varied usages of pinyin, the three groups were "Full Pinyin Condition", "Partial Pinyin Condition" and "No Pinyin Condition" (Lee and Kalyuga 2010). The Post-test phase was a multiple choice paper based test and a statistical analysis of the results were produced.

The second sources, from Iwashita and Sekiguchi (2009) featured research using a similar method, but were scrutinized for different results. Again the subjects were screened, divided up into various groups A, B and C. "Group A: post-beginner and character based background, N=15; Group B: post-secondary and character based background, N=5; Group C: post-secondary and non-character based background N=14" (Iwashita and Sekiguchi 2009). All other groups from the original number were excluded and from there, the remaining were required to write a composition of approximately 300-400 characters, or about one page. The papers were then judged and rated on structure, vocabulary, kanji words and characters, and categorization of Japanese complex and simple sentences. From these sources they derived a qualitative assessment of the data.

Additional Prospective Resources

Otsuji T. (2005, March 22) *Kanji Daisuki* [Television Broadcast] Tokyo, Japan: Nippon Housou Kyoukai

Habein, Y. (2000) *Decoding Kanji: a Practical Approach to Learning Look-Alike Characters.* Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha

Shoji, K. (2010) *Common Japanese Collocations: A Learner's Guide to Frequent Word Pairings.* Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha
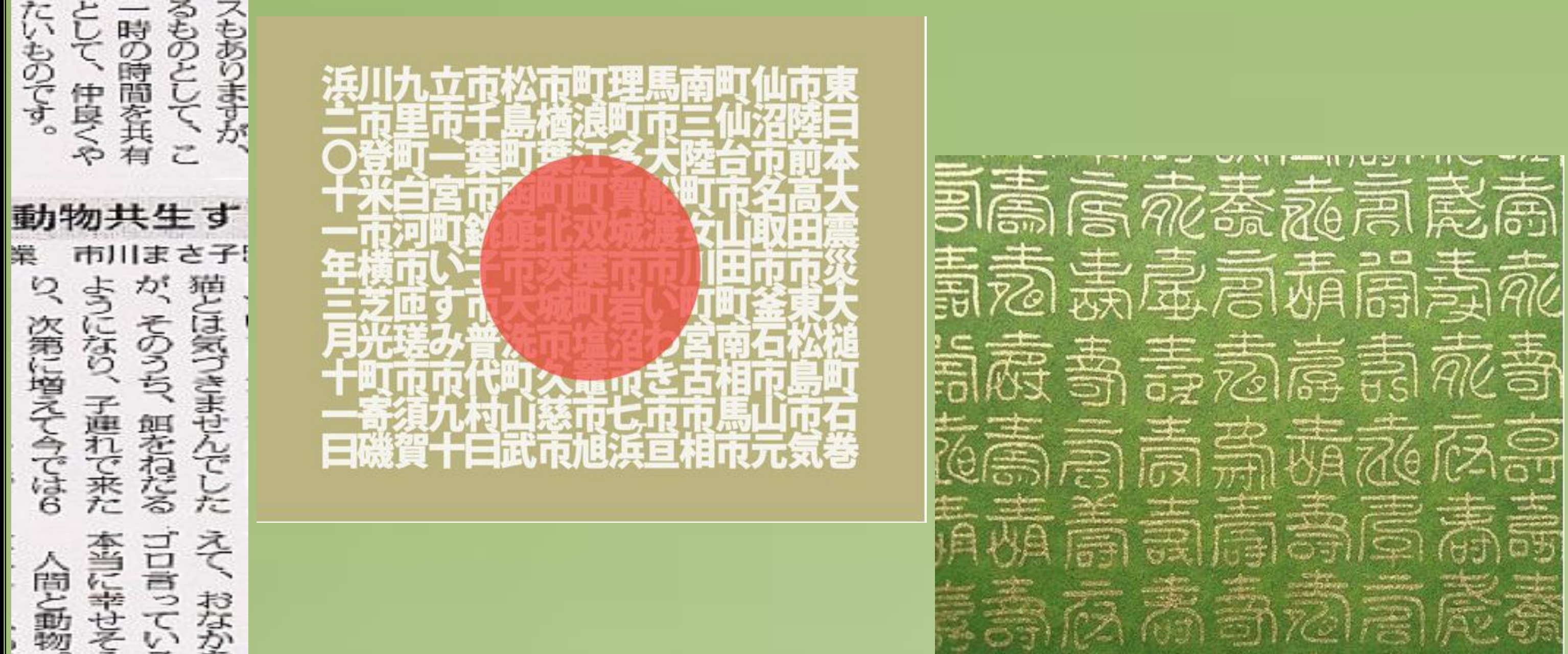
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Iwashita N. & Sekiguchi S. (2009) Effects of learner background on the development of Writing Skills in Japanese as a Second Language. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 32.1*

Lee C. H. & Kalyuga S. (2010) Effectiveness of On-Screen Pinyin in Learning Chinese: An Expertise Reversal for Multimedia Redundancy Effect. *Elsevier, 11-15*

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