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## A Study on the Relationship between Japanese Learners' Listening Ability and Chinese-Japanese Kanji Similarity

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### Abstract

In Japanese language teaching, improving Chinese students' listening ability has long been a persistent challenge. Listening comprehension remains the most challenging and weakest aspect of students' Japanese learning experience. Many students report uncertainty about effective listening study methods, difficulty keeping pace with listening exercises, slow response times, and particularly struggle with understanding vocabulary in listening materials, which impacts their overall comprehension. This research aims to explore methods for improving Chinese learners' Japanese listening ability by examining Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity. Through literature analysis and questionnaire surveys, this study investigates the impact of Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity on Japanese learners' listening study and ability improvement, seeking to identify effective classroom teaching methods and training approaches for listening comprehension.

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### 1. Introduction

China and Japan both belong to the kanji cultural sphere, resulting in many similarities between their written languages in both form and meaning. This linguistic characteristic significantly influences how Chinese students learn Japanese. Specifically, the similarities between the two languages can help native Chinese speakers memorize and understand Japanese to some extent, but they can also lead to incorrect analogies. Due to the high morphological and phonetic similarities between kanji vocabulary in Japanese and Chinese characters, learners from kanji-cultural backgrounds, including Chinese speakers, typically find these words relatively easy to master. However, this similarity often leads Chinese learners to make "incorrect inferences" when learning Japanese kanji and vocabulary. These "incorrect inferences" extend beyond word meanings to include usage, pronunciation, and even writing methods. For example, the Japanese word "新聞" means "newspaper", while in Chinese it means "news"; the Japanese "関心" only has the verb form "関心する" and cannot be used as a noun like in Chinese; "宮殿" is pronounced as "きゅうでん" in Japanese, but Chinese learners often incorrectly pronounce it as "こうでん" due to Chinese influence; furthermore, the Chinese word "效果" is written as "効果" in Japanese, and Chinese learners often fail to notice these subtle differences in radicals, leading to writing errors in Japanese. These examples demonstrate that the similarity between Chinese and Japanese writing systems presents both advantages and potential learning obstacles for Chinese learners.

This research focuses on university students majoring in Japanese in China, examining the relationship between listening ability and Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity, aiming to provide suggestions and insights for Japanese listening instruction and guidance.

## 2. Chinese-Japanese Kanji Similarity

While China and Japan share common cultural origins in their use of kanji, their respective language systems have undergone significant evolution in the morphology, pronunciation, and semantics of characters throughout historical development and practical application. This evolution has provided Chinese learners with unique linguistic advantages, allowing them to quickly establish initial cognitive frameworks when learning Japanese kanji. However, the similarities and differences between the two languages in kanji usage also present potential comprehension barriers for learners. To explore this complex relationship more deeply, this paper will analyze the similarities between Chinese and Japanese kanji in terms of phonology and semantics.

### 2.1. Phonological Similarity between Chinese and Japanese Kanji

Regarding the pronunciation of kanji in Chinese and Japanese, both languages have developed different forms, pronunciations, and meanings through historical transitions. The "on-yomi" (Chinese reading) of Japanese kanji originates from Chinese pronunciation and is categorized into different types such as Go-on, Kan-on, and To-on based on their historical period of introduction to Japan. This indicates that Chinese has significantly influenced Japanese pronunciation through the historical borrowing process of kanji.

In terms of syllable structure, Japanese syllables consist of consonants and vowels, while Chinese syllables comprise consonants, vowels, and tones. According to Wu Qingji (2012) [6], Japanese contains the following phonemes: 5 vowels (/a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/) and 16 consonants (/j/, /w/, /k/, /s/, /c/, /t/, /n/, /h/, /m/, /r/, /g/, /ŋ/, /z/, /d/, /b/, /p/). In comparison, Chinese has a more complex phonological system, specifically including: 6 single vowels (/a/, /o/, /e/, /i/, /u/, /ü/), 21 consonants (/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /l/, /g/, /k/, /h/, /j/, /q/, /x/, /zh/, /ch/, /sh/, /r/, /z/, /c/, /s/), 9 diphthongs, 4 triphthongs, 8 /n/ nasal sounds, 8 /ng/ nasal sounds, and 5 tones including the neutral tone. These phonological system differences indicate significant structural differences between the two languages. In other words, compared to Japanese, Chinese syllable composition is richer and more diverse. Unlike Japanese, the Chinese consonant system has a distinctive feature: consonants are not distinguished by voicing but rather by aspiration versus non-aspiration. This characteristic occupies an important position in the Chinese phonological system, reflecting profound differences in the phonological structures of the two languages.

As one of the few pioneering studies in Japanese education focusing on the phonological similarity between Chinese and Japanese kanji, Kayamoto Yuriko (1995) [3] provides important academic reference. Kayamoto's (1995) [3] research aimed to support Japanese education and second language acquisition theory by exploring how Chinese learners perceive similarities between the "on-yomi" of kanji in Chinese and Japanese. The study selected 1,107 pairs of Chinese and Japanese kanji and used questionnaire surveys to investigate which Japanese kanji pronunciations were perceived as similar or dissimilar by Chinese learners, defining the assessment results as "on-yomi similarity." The survey results showed that the average similarity rating for these 1,107 pairs was 2.38 (standard deviation: 1.32). Overall, most Japanese vocabulary pronunciations were considered dissimilar. However, although the proportion was small, some pronunciation pairs were still perceived as very

similar by learners. For example, characters like "因-イン", "医-イ", "他-タ" maintained pronunciations that learners could perceive as similar between the two languages.

### 2.2. Semantic Similarity between Chinese and Japanese Kanji

Many kanji vocabulary words are shared between Chinese and Japanese, typically having identical or similar written forms, known as "Chinese-Japanese cognates." Examples include "山", "文化", "克服". Chen Yumin (2002) [1] points out that among modern Chinese vocabulary corresponding to Japanese, there are 4,353 words, with cognates accounting for over 70%.

In comparative studies of Japanese and Chinese, *Chinese Words Corresponding to Japanese* (Cultural Agency) is a representative study. This research, from the perspective of Japanese language education, selected 1,882 Chinese vocabulary words that beginning and intermediate learners need to master, compared their semantic differences in Chinese and Japanese, and classified these words into four categories based on their differences in meaning and grammatical function:

1. **Chinese vocabulary with completely identical meanings (S-words):** These words have exactly the same meanings and usage in Japanese and Chinese, making them less likely to cause confusion for learners.
2. **Chinese vocabulary with partially identical meanings (O-words):** These words share similar core meanings in Japanese and Chinese but may have different specific uses due to cultural or contextual differences.
3. **Chinese vocabulary with different meanings (D-words):** These words have different meanings in Japanese and Chinese, requiring learners to pay special attention to their usage contexts and grammatical structures in both languages.
4. **Kanji words without corresponding Chinese vocabulary (N-words):** These words exist in Japanese but have no direct corresponding words in Chinese, or their usage differs significantly between the two languages.

Among these, S-words account for approximately two-thirds of Japanese "on-yomi" vocabulary, representing the largest category. As mentioned later in this paper, this predominant S-word category significantly impacts Chinese learners' Japanese listening study.

### 3. Listening Awareness among Chinese Japanese Learners

The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), organized annually by the Japan Foundation, is one of the largest language proficiency tests in global Japanese education. According to the Japan Foundation's reports, Chinese native speakers achieve higher scores in "Writing and Vocabulary" across all levels, while their "Listening Comprehension" scores are consistently the lowest. In contrast, Western examinees score significantly higher in "Listening Comprehension" across all levels, while their "Writing and Vocabulary" scores are lower.

In actual Japanese teaching practice, Chinese Japanese learners frequently express difficulties with listening comprehension. While they can quickly understand the meaning of kanji vocabulary and therefore have fewer problems with reading comprehension, they struggle with listening comprehension.

To investigate this phenomenon, the author conducted a brief questionnaire survey among 200 Japanese major university students in China. Before the survey, participants were classified into advanced, intermediate, and beginner groups based on their Japanese Language Proficiency Test results. The survey included self-assessments of "Reading", "Writing", "Listening", and "Conversation" skills. Respondents rated these skills on a four-point scale from "1. Very Difficult" to "4. Not So Difficult."

Survey results revealed that compared to other skills, 32% of respondents rated "Listening" as "1. Very Difficult", while 29% chose "2. Somewhat Difficult." Additionally, 22% of respondents found "Conversation" very difficult, with 41% rating it as "2. Somewhat Difficult." Compared to "Reading" and "Writing", respondents expressed significantly higher difficulty awareness for "Listening" and "Conversation." To examine whether these perceptions varied across different Japanese proficiency levels, a Chi-square test was conducted to analyze differences in difficulty perception across "Reading", "Writing", "Listening", and "Conversation" skills. Results showed that only "Listening" demonstrated significant differences across proficiency levels ( $\chi^2 = 33.951$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The survey results indicate a significant relationship between respondents' Japanese proficiency level and their perception of listening difficulty. Specifically, the perception of listening difficulty shows clear stratification across different proficiency level groups. In the beginner group, the vast majority (84.6%) found listening very difficult ("1. Very Difficult"), with no one selecting the easier options. In the intermediate group, the most common response was "2. Somewhat Difficult" (57.1%), followed by "3. Moderate" (21.4%). This indicates a slight reduction in perceived listening difficulty for the intermediate group. For the advanced group, the situation changed notably: no one rated listening as very difficult, with most respondents (42.9%) choosing "3. Moderate", followed by "4. Not Difficult" (35.7%). This trend suggests that as Japanese proficiency improves, learners' perception of listening comprehension difficulty gradually decreases, indicating progressive improvement in their listening comprehension ability.

#### 4. The Relationship between Japanese Learners' Listening Study and Chinese-Japanese Kanji Similarity

Listening comprehension represents an integration of language skills, requiring the combination of phonetic discrimination ability, short-term memory capacity, and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Regarding vocabulary knowledge's impact on listening comprehension, Komori *et al.* (2005) <sup>[4]</sup> indicate that known vocabulary must account for 93% of listening material content for accurate comprehension. This suggests that comprehending listening materials becomes challenging without a substantial vocabulary base. Furthermore, Yamamoto Fumiko demonstrates that in listening scenarios involving lectures or speeches with substantial kanji vocabulary usage, mastery of kanji vocabulary knowledge significantly influences comprehension. Therefore, Japanese listening comprehension ability is constructed through the integration of fundamental knowledge and skills, including grammatical knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, professional background knowledge, and phonological knowledge.

Conversely, Shimizu Yuri (1993) <sup>[5]</sup> argues that mastering "sound" presents the greatest challenge for learners from kanji-cultural backgrounds. While the connection between "form" and "meaning" is relatively easy to understand due to

mother tongue similarities, the association of "sound" with either "form" or "meaning" poses a significant challenge for Japanese beginners learning kanji. Yin Song (2002) <sup>[9]</sup> points out that Chinese Japanese learners often struggle to immediately connect sounds with meanings, even for previously learned vocabulary. He notes that Chinese learners' primary challenge lies in "understanding the meaning when seeing the text but failing to comprehend when hearing the sound."

As mentioned in Section 2.2, approximately two-thirds of Japanese "on-yomi" vocabulary consists of Japanese-Chinese words with identical meanings (S-words). Examples include "散歩", "記念", "経済". While these words serve as powerful tools for Chinese learners in reading and writing, they seriously interfere with their listening training and improvement in listening ability. Specifically, due to the abundance of Chinese-Japanese cognates, particularly S-words, Chinese learners habitually utilize their mother tongue knowledge to understand these words visually. Consequently, their high dependence on written characters often leads them to neglect the study and practice of Japanese pronunciation (readings). This makes it difficult to understand kanji vocabulary meanings from sounds during listening comprehension. Moreover, due to excessive reliance on characters and visual learning, almost all learners memorize words through viewing or writing methods while overlooking the importance of pronunciation. This learning habit closely relates to their inability to comprehend kanji vocabulary pronunciations.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through examining the influence of Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity on Chinese Japanese learners' listening ability, this paper has yielded several findings with both theoretical value and practical significance. Based on literature analysis and questionnaire survey results, the research demonstrates that the similarity between Chinese and Japanese kanji vocabulary produces bidirectional effects on Chinese Japanese learners. This influence manifests not only in the initial stages of language learning but throughout the entire language acquisition process, profoundly impacting learners' listening comprehension ability development. These findings have important implications for Japanese teaching practice while providing new directions for subsequent research.

From a positive perspective, kanji vocabulary similarity provides beginners with a solid language learning foundation and cognitive framework. This similarity first manifests in visual recognition, enabling learners to quickly establish initial cognition of Japanese vocabulary. Second, in semantic comprehension, similar meaning systems facilitate learners' deep understanding of Japanese vocabulary. Finally, in written expression, this similarity also provides reliable language output support. This positive language transfer effect is particularly prominent in reading comprehension and writing. Research data shows that vocabulary with similar kanji morphology demonstrates significantly higher correct identification rates than other vocabulary types in vocabulary comprehension tests, thoroughly confirming the positive role of kanji similarity in early learning stages.

However, the research also reveals significant negative impacts of this similarity, particularly in listening comprehension ability development. First, due to mother tongue interference effects, many learners overly rely on visual recognition and character memorization, neglecting the study and training of the phonological system. Second,

this learning strategy bias leads to serious difficulties when learners attempt to establish "sound-meaning" connections and "sound-form" correspondences. Research data indicates that even advanced-level learners demonstrate significantly lower listening discrimination accuracy for mastered kanji vocabulary compared to non-kanji vocabulary when no written prompts are provided. This phenomenon suggests that mother tongue interference effects not only exist at the beginner level but may become entrenched with continued learning, becoming a long-term constraint on listening ability improvement.

Based on these research findings, this paper presents systematic improvement suggestions for Japanese teaching practice. First, at the teaching philosophy level, instructors should fully recognize the double-edged effect of Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity, remaining vigilant about potential negative impacts while utilizing its positive effects. Second, regarding teaching methodology, we recommend adopting a "sound-priority" teaching model, where auditory input takes precedence in vocabulary instruction, followed by character form presentation only after learners establish correct sound-form-meaning connections. Third, in classroom activity design, teachers should increase targeted listening comprehension exercises, including but not limited to: pure auditory vocabulary recognition training, sound memory training, and dictation practice. These training activities should permeate the entire learning process rather than being limited to listening courses. Finally, in the evaluation system, we suggest incorporating auditory recognition ability as a key indicator of vocabulary mastery to encourage learners to strengthen their phonological system study.

Looking ahead, this study's findings open new exploratory directions for Japanese language teaching research. First, in theoretical research, further investigation is needed into the specific influence mechanisms of Chinese-Japanese kanji similarity on learners at different learning stages and proficiency levels. Second, in teaching practice, more targeted teaching methods and strategies need to be developed, particularly regarding how to effectively utilize kanji similarity advantages while avoiding potential negative impacts. Furthermore, in textbook compilation, these research findings should be incorporated into textbook design, such as increasing the proportion of listening training and improving exercise type settings. These in-depth studies will help us better understand and address the difficulties Chinese Japanese learners encounter in their listening learning process, thereby promoting comprehensive development of their Japanese language abilities. Through these continued explorations and practices, we hope to provide more valuable references and guidance for Japanese education in China.

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