

Cognitive barriers to learning Chinese noun classifiers by
native Swedish speakers

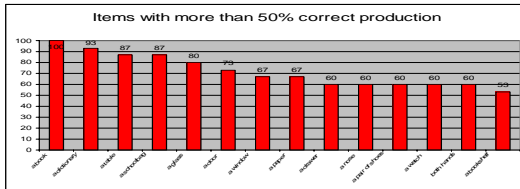
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What do snakes, rivers, and roads have in common? In Chinese, they are all preceded by the classifier *tiao*. Noun classifiers are one of the distinctive features of Chinese. As an obligatory category, a classifier occurs before a noun with a numeral (e.g., *yi* ‘one’, *er* ‘two’, *san* ‘three’) and/or a determiner (e.g., *zhe* ‘this’, *nei* ‘that’), or certain quantifiers (e.g., *ji* ‘how many’, *mei* ‘every’). Classifiers have no explicit lexical meanings of their own but inherently indicate certain features of associated noun referents. Nouns are perceived by native speakers of Chinese with a conscious link to the features and properties of the noun referents. So noun referents are categorically divided by classifiers. For instance, the classifier *tiao* highlights the long, thin, curving characteristics of its noun referents and therefore nouns such as snakes, rivers, roads, ropes, rainbows, trousers, etc. all fall into the same category. However, such classification is implicit and acquired by native speakers at an earlier age as part of their cognitive development, rather than language development per se.

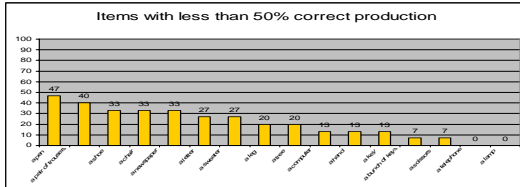
Native speakers of Chinese have an intuitive sense as to which classifier is applicable to which types of nouns. However, no studies have shown that L2 speakers can easily gain the equal ability of making such an intuitive choice. This makes us assume that early, first language exposure to classifiers may influence the ontological categories that people detect, or construct, in a Whorfian fashion. Foreign language learners, who have never learnt a language with a classifier system, find it difficult to acquire classifiers because they don’t have the same ontological categories as L1 speakers do.

To address this assumption, we did a two-month follow-up study of 30 native Swedish speakers learning Chinese, focusing on their ability to learn Chinese noun classifier phrases. The results show that the learners’ classifier learning all lagged far behind their Chinese proficiency. Simple memorization, with and without a top-down method, was observed as a common learning strategy. From a cognitive point of view, this paper argues that the challenge that the Swedish learners of Chinese meet is not the difficulty of language learning per se. The problem is the reconstruction of the conceptual base on which the target language is perceived, specifically the cognitive approach to the semantic association between nouns and classifiers.

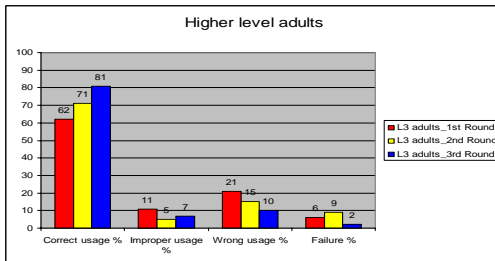
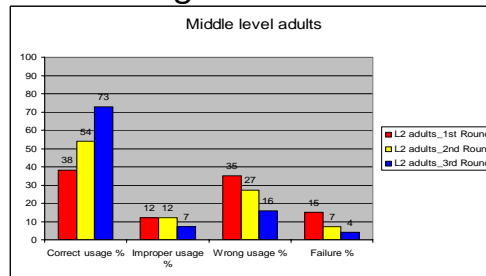
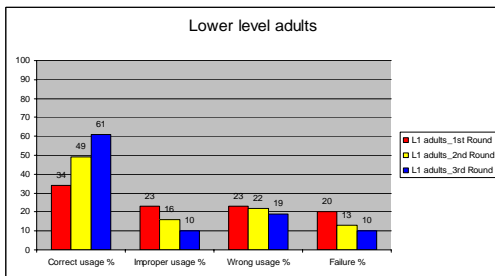
Swedish learners' classifier production on 1st round of recordings



- Highest production:
 - Frequently encountered objects
 - Objects with simple and common classifiers, such as ben, ge, etc
- shuang & zhi
 - High production of "a pair of shoes" & "both hands" \rightleftharpoons shuang
 - Low production of "a shoe" & "a hand" \rightleftharpoons zhi
- Low production of "a computer"
 - Contrast with that in 1st study
 - Significant improvement over 3 rounds of tests in 2nd study though



Swedish learners' classifier production improvement over three rounds of recordings



- Different level speakers exhibited different level of classifier production accordingly
- Similar degrees of improvement were observed among 3 levels' speakers
- For lower level adults, improper usage decreased significantly, while total wrong usage didn't
- For intermediate and higher level adults, wrong usage declined significantly