

# A study on classifier acquisition in Chinese learning

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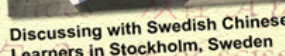
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Chinese learners are always unable to distinguish Chinese noun classifiers from measure words, because they only treat classifiers as grammatical components in the language. This inappropriate correlation makes it particularly difficult for foreign Chinese learners to master noun classifiers, as the acquisition of classifiers involves semantic understanding and categorization concept from which the classifiers are approached. The aim of this study is to investigate Swedish learners' acquisition of noun classifiers as well as that of Chinese-Swedish bilingual children, by carrying out tests on these two groups' noun classifier productions. From the experiments, the bilingual children are found to have a higher percentage of classifier production than Swedish speakers. Different patterns of acquiring classifiers have also been noticed from these two groups. The results of this study provide a good reference for Chinese learners whose native language does not include the lexical category of classifier, as well as for future studies on coognitive linguistics.



Adults Group:

一本字典 A door 一个门 A door - 中国或瑞典 Chinese in China or Sweden

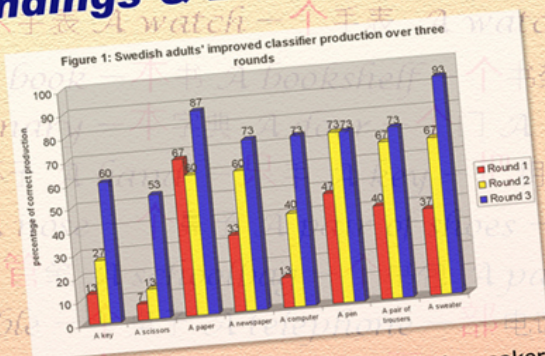
- Adults Group:**
- 15 Swedish adults who have learnt Chinese in China or Sweden
  - all had acquired or were pursuing professional degrees in various fields
  - 13 of them had studied or traveled in China for various lengths of periods
  - half were still taking Chinese courses during the process of the experiments
  - they were divided into lower level, intermediate level and higher level
  - according to their Chinese proficiency, with 5 speakers in each level

Children Group:

- Children Group:**
- 15 Chinese-Swedish bilingual children staying in Stockholm, Sweden, aged between 6 and 14
  - all have Chinese parents working in Stockholm except 2 whose fathers are Swedish
  - all were born in Sweden except 3 who were born in China but moved to Sweden at very young ages
  - all were brought up in bilingual environment: they speak Chinese at home and speak Swedish at school
  - they took some extra Chinese courses in local Chinese schools in Stockholm on weekends

A STUDY ON CLASSIFIER ACQUISITION IN CHINESE LEARNING

## Findings & Discussions



Over the three rounds of recordings, the Swedish speakers are found to have progress on the classifier production over some items that basically fall into two categories (Figure 1). One is objects that have been encountered extensively in everyday life. The degree of acquaintance plays an important role in classifier acquisition from the cognitive viewpoint. The other category consists of objects whose associated classifier has already been acquired by the speaker from another noun that shares the same classifier. Speakers simply apply the same classifier zhang (张) to "a paper" and "a newspaper" once they realize that classifier zhang is used for objects with flat thin surface. Similarly, significant improvements over "a key" and "a scissors" are also detected after the classifier ba (把) is introduced as a classifier for something to grab with. The Swedish speakers apply a top-down manner in classifier acquisition as in normal word learning. They try to match individual noun into conceptual categories where the same classifier is associated with a cluster of nouns. This pattern always proves to be difficult and misleading since the boundary between categories of classifiers is usually vague.

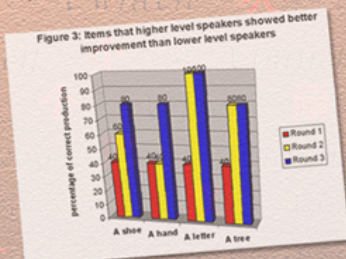
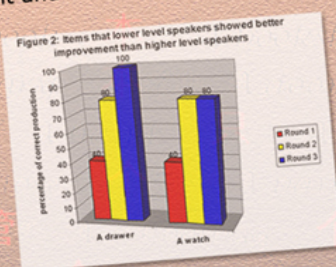


Figure 2 shows that the lower level Swedish speakers have made more progress over the productions of "a drawer" and "a watch" than the higher level speaker, while in Figure 3 the higher level speakers are shown to have more improvements over the productions of "a shoe" and "a hand". This is an interesting contrast, since both "a drawer" and "a watch" allow interchangeable usage of classifier zhi(只) and ge(个), but "a shoe" and "a hand" have strictly distinguished usage of classifier zhi from ge. The speakers' top-down learning pattern does not help in differentiating these two similar classifiers, because the way to distinguish one from another lies mostly in cognitive principles with native speakers. Besides, the higher level speakers are also found to have improved significantly over the productions of "a letter" and "a tree", which are specific classifiers need to learn one by one cognitively.

## Methods & Procedures:

- prepare 30 cards with images of daily objects
- present the cards to each participant one by one in a fixed order
- expect the participants to name each object with correct noun classifier in Chinese
- give enough time for participants to think and rethink
- encourage optional answers
- followed with a discussion over the errors made
  - to let participants understand what correct expressions are
  - to provide the author with a more insightful understanding on participants' classifier production
  - to thank the participants
- for adult group, 3 rounds of similar tests were conducted
  - each adult participants were informed at the end of the previous session about the next test which would be carried out in 4 weeks' time
  - 10 more items were added to the focused 30 items in the 2nd and 3rd rounds of tests, in order to prevent the participants from simple memorization

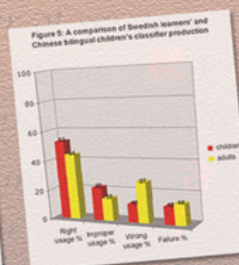
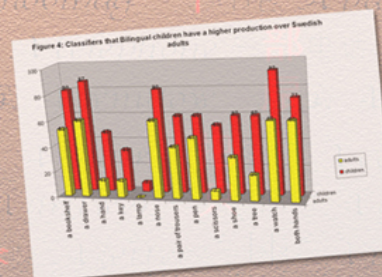


Figure 4 shows that the percentage correct usage of classifiers by bilingual children is higher than by the adult Swedish speakers. "Improper usage" refers to the use of the classifier *ge*(个) in a context that is marginally acceptable. Some items with which bilingual children have a significantly higher production than the Swedish speakers are showcased in Figure 5. Children are found to utilize the animal classifier *zhi*(只) most frequently, as they have much higher production over "yi zhi shou" (a hand) and "yi zhi xie" (a shoe). Most of the items listed in Figure 2 are very common daily objects that the bilingual children may acquire and use frequently in Chinese dialogues with their parents at home. This leads us to the observation that the more effective acquisition pattern of classifiers used by children is an unusual bottom-up manner, in which children acquire specific classifiers first and then generalize the use of classifiers. The Swedish speakers' lag of production over those daily items also indicates the cognitive basis from which the classifiers are approached.