

# Chinese Language Acquisition in India: Error Analysis and Possible Solutions

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*With the advent of China on the world stage and its emergence as a global player, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) has gained significant momentum among foreign language learners of various countries, making it the one of the fastest growing languages of the world. Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented high in the number of people showing interest in learning CFL in India. However, their interests are not fully transformed into actually mastering Chinese language, because of various complexities involved with it. Paucity of Indo-centric textbooks and lack of uniform framework for teaching and learning CFL further complicates the process of Chinese language acquisition in India. This paper analyses various errors made by the Indian learners in the domains of pinyin, tones and characters in the process of Chinese language acquisition and offers possible solutions and strategies to make Chinese language acquisition easier, faster and more interesting. In a multilingual country like India, interference of first language (L1)/second language (L2) plays a significant role in learning a foreign language. The author through this paper also discusses about the interference of L1/L2 in learning CFL and the role of language immersion technique in Chinese language acquisition in India.*

*Key words: Chinese language acquisition, Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), mother tongue*

## **1. Introduction**

There is no denying the fact that 21<sup>st</sup> century belongs to Asia, with China playing the key role in reshaping the world as never before. Keeping in mind the current trends and the growing influence of China in the world, we are recognizing the urgent need to learn Chinese language in order to understand China and its people in a better way, and this recognition has led to significant growth in learning Chinese a Foreign Language (CFL) outside China over the past few years.

China is one of the most important neighbours of India with bilateral ties dating back to ancient times. With the ever-increasing presence of China being felt in India and China being the world's second largest economy and also one of the biggest trade partners of India, People-to-People contacts have witnessed an unprecedented high, which has led to a huge demand for Chinese language experts in India. Realizing the importance of learning Chinese language in India, Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) decided to introduce Chinese as an optional subject in many of its affiliated schools from 2011. The idea of introducing Chinese language in CBSE schools was mooted in 2010 by India's former Human Resources Development minister ShriKapil Sibal during his visit to China. He said:

*“China is our powerful neighbour and emerging as a biggest consumer of global resources. We cannot wish it away. The best way to introduce China in India is to introduce its language at primary level so that our kids develop interest and knowledge about China.”<sup>1</sup>*

This reflects the importance attached to China and learning CFL in India. Chinese language has created a large number of job opportunities both in public and private sectors of India, despite that, the number of students who enroll for Chinese language programmes is far less than the number for other foreign languages, especially European languages. Despite the huge demand for Chinese language experts in India, there are very few universities in India offering Chinese language programmes, which has created a huge gap between demand and supply of Chinese language experts.

## **2. Problems faced by Indian Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language**

General perception about Chinese language is that it's one of the most difficult languages of the world, which to some extent is true, if compared to alphabetic languages like English and other Indo-European languages. The Foreign Service Institute at the United States Department of State while rating 67 languages based on the level of difficulties for native speakers of English language puts Chinese in the category of “super-hard languages”. Though mother tongue of a learner is the most

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<sup>1</sup> DNA India, September 15, 2010

important variable in deciding the level of difficulties of a new language, and English is not the first language of majority of Indian population, but considering the fact that Indian languages and Chinese belong to two different language family groups and English is predominantly used at various levels in India, learning Chinese has proved to be as difficult for Indian learners as for the native speakers of English. CBSE had to shelve the idea of introducing Chinese language in its schools in 2012, citing the reason of inability of Indian teachers to grasp the language, which eventually led to discontinuation of Chinese language training programme for its teachers. Later it had to collaborate with Hanban, a public institution run by the Government of China for promoting CFL worldwide, to get native Chinese teachers from China.<sup>2</sup> There are various factors involved which act as hindrance for Indian learners of Chinese language. This paper focuses on four aspects of problems faced in Chinese language acquisition: Characters, pinyin, tones and interference of L1/L2.

### **2.1. Characters:**

Unlike English, Chinese language does not have alphabets; rather learners have to start from characters, where each character represents certain meaning. The first compiled Chinese dictionary *shuōwénjiězì* of year 110 lists 9,353 characters (Zhou, 2003). Since then the number of characters kept on increasing, with *Yitǐ zìdiǎn* of year 2004 listing over 100,000 characters (Du, 2015). Number of characters existing in Chinese itself creates psychological fear in the minds of the students, even before they start to learn the language. Writing characters is the most difficult part of learning Chinese, it not only takes longer time than writing any other alphabetic languages, but also slows down the entire process of learning Chinese language. Emphasizing on the difficulties in understanding Chinese characters by common people in China, the renowned Chinese writer, Lu xun (1881-1936) in the last year of his life said, “汉字不灭, 中国必亡”, which means “If characters are not destroyed, China is bound to perish”. Further explaining the reason, he said, “Difficulties in understanding Characters have kept majority of the Chinese population away from the advanced culture forever” (杨, 2010).

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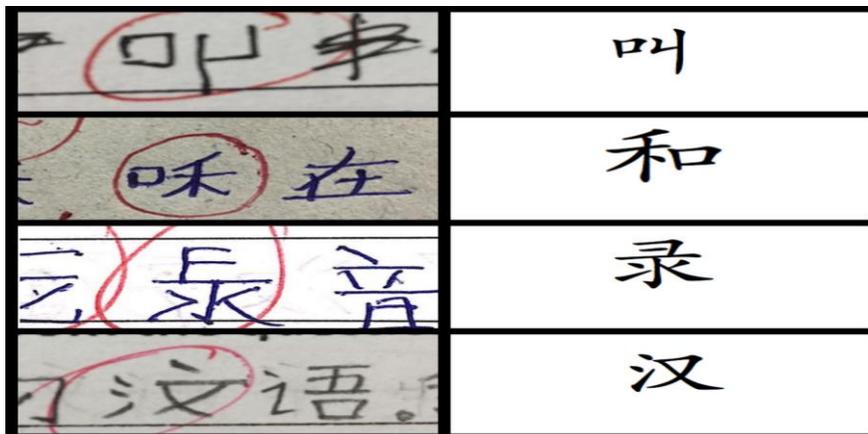
<sup>2</sup>The Indian Express, March 3, 2014

Forgetting characters is one of the most demotivating factors for Chinese language learners in India. Most of the students create a visual image of the characters in their mind, and while writing they try to reproduce the characters in the form of images, rather than following proper stroke order (Pic 1). This method of practicing characters can be successfully implemented only when there are few characters to be learnt. As the number of characters increases, they start getting confused with visually similar characters. For example: 夫 ( fū) and 天 (tiān), 土 (tǔ) and 士 (shì), 未 (wèi) and 末 (mò), etc.

Pic 1

Pic 2

*Characters written by the learners Right characters*



Though the Chinese government has replaced traditional characters with simplified characters to enable more people to write Chinese and eventually to increase literacy rate in China, but character is still a big stumbling block in learning Chinese language.

### **2.1.1. How to overcome the problems of learning Chinese characters?**

#### **A. Reduce the psychological fear of learners about Characters**

Learners should be encouraged to get rid of psychological fear about the vast number of Chinese characters existing in Chinese language. They should be informed about the actual number of Chinese characters existing and the number of characters required for regular communication. Xiàndài Hànyǔ Chángyòng Zìbiǎo (1988) has 2500 frequently used and 1000 less frequently used characters. Xiàndài Hànyǔ Tōngyòng Zìbiǎo (1988) has 7000 commonly used characters, which also includes 3500 characters of Xiàndài Hànyǔ Chángyòng Zìbiǎo. Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK) covers around 5000 words at level six (the highest level of HSK). Classical Chinese experts who often come across many obsolete characters are estimated to know

approximately 5000 characters (Norman, 1988). A native Chinese on average uses around 3000 to 4000 characters for regular communication (Du, 2015). Taking all these data into account, it can be estimated that a student learning CFL on average needs to learn around 3000 characters to have considerable grasp over the language. Out of these, there are only 280 single-component characters.<sup>3</sup> Most of these characters are used either as phonetic or semantic parts of thousands of other characters, sometimes also used as radicals. A learner, once masters these single component characters, can easily write any character irrespective of number of strokes of that character.

### B. Analyze characters

Though initiating character-learning through pictographic characters arouses the interest of the learners to great extent, but not all characters in Chinese can be learnt through pictures. Only 5 percent characters in Chinese are pictographic. 80 percent characters in Chinese are composed of phonetic and semantic components. Learners should analyze the phonetic and semantic components of the characters, it helps them to guess the pronunciation and meaning of unknown characters.

Table I Table II

Characters with common semantic

Characters with common phonetic

component 丿

components 包

河	Hé	River
洋	Yáng	Ocean
湖	Hú	Lake
油	Yóu	Oil
汗	Hàn	Sweat

<sup>3</sup>Single –component characters refer to those characters, which are composed of single independent and complete components, they are the oldest and among the most frequently used characters in Chinese.

抱	Bào	Embrace,hug
饱	Bǎo	Full
鲍	Bào	Dried fish
胞	Bāo	Womb
雹	Báo	Hailstorm

Characters in table I represent objects in liquid state, whereas the second part of each character represents its pronunciation. Characters in table II

have common phonetic component “包” which is pronounced as bāo. Learners, who already know the pronunciation of the character 包 can easily guess the readings of all the above characters, even if they come across these characters for the first time.

Practising characters through split and composition method further arouses interest of the learners in the process of learning new characters. For example:

1. 明 (míng= brightness) : 日(rì=sun) + 月(yuè=moon)

Sun and moon together represent brightness.

2. 坐(zuò=sit) : 人(rén=person)+人(rén=person)+土(tǔ=ground)

Two people sitting on the ground.

3. 男 (nán= man):田 ( tián= farmland) + 力 ( strength)

A man is associated with farmland and considered to be physically strong.

### C. Use characters in different sentences

Most of the students, while practicing characters, follow the conventional method of continuous writing of characters, which is mere practice by hand in isolation with cognition. One of the best ways to practice characters is to use them in different sentences. There is general perception about practicing Chinese characters that if one uses a character in forty different sentences, he is less likely to forget that character ever. Making different sentences not only helps students to practice different characters simultaneously, but also helps them to improve their Chinese grammar by applying their syntactic skill.

## 2.2. Pinyin

Realizing the challenges posed by Chinese characters, many Chinese writers and intellectuals like Lu Xun, Lin Yutang, Su Shi, etc., promoted Romanization of Chinese language through Chinese Romanization movement launched in early decades of the last century (Benjamin, 1997). After liberation of China, Chinese

government initiated a project to develop Chinese pinyin in order to standardize pronunciation and promote literacy in China in 1950s. It was developed by a team of experts led by Zhou Youguang, popularly known as ‘the father of pinyin’<sup>4</sup>, and was officially adopted by the Chinese government in 1958<sup>5</sup>. The objective of introducing pinyin was not to replace characters, but to complement them. Later it was also adopted by the international organization for standardization (ISO) for international standard and the United Nations in 1982 and 1986 respectively.

### **2.2.1. Positive outcomes of Pinyin**

1. It improved literacy rate in China. Various sources indicate that literacy rate in China, in the 1<sup>st</sup> 50 years of 20<sup>th</sup> century, was below 20%. After introduction of Pinyin along with simplified characters in late 1950s, it went up to 47% in 1964, 65% in 1982, which further improved to 91% in 2000 (Zhang, 2005). Of course there are many other factors such as 9-year compulsory education introduced in 1986 which played major role in the rise of literacy rate in China, but contribution of pinyin to literacy rate can not be ignored.
2. It facilitated the rapid input of characters on computers and other digital devices through roman alphabets.
3. It eased the process of learning Chinese as foreign language.
4. It paved the path for development of Chinese braille, eventually helping visually impaired people to read Chinese.

### **2.2.2. Shortcomings of Pinyin:**

Pinyin has undoubtedly been a big step in the direction of simplification and popularization of Chinese language, but it has its own limitations. Some of its major limitations are as follows:

1. Few initials and finals in Chinese, which are represented by same alphabets of English, have different sounds from English. Indian learners, before learning to read Chinese through roman alphabets, have already acquired sounds of these alphabets in English. While articulating such similar letters with different sounds in Chinese, brains of the learners mentally articulate the sounds in a way they have already

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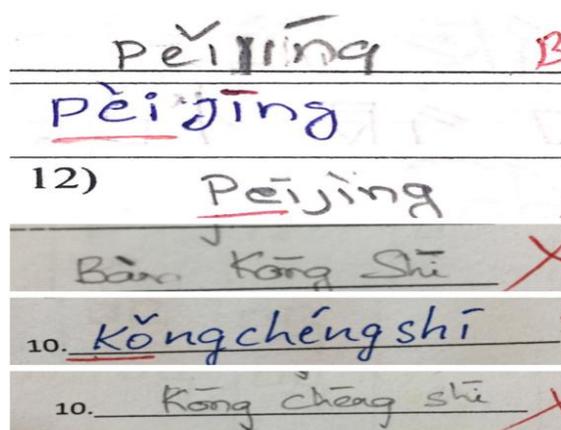
<sup>4</sup> Margalit Fox, The New York Times, January 14, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Xinhua News Agency, February 11, 2008

acquired while learning English. For example, initials b, d, g are unaspirated sounds in Chinese, whereas these three alphabets are voiced consonants in English. Students who already know English prior to learning Chinese, subconsciously write pinyin of 爸爸(Bàba) as Pàpa, 大 (Dà) as Tà, and 工/公 (Gōng) as Kōng, Beijing as Peijing or Peiching (Pic 3). In September 2014, a Doordarshan newsreader had to lose his job after he confused Chinese president Xi Jinping’s surmane with roman numeral 11, and read Xi Jinping as 11 Jinping.<sup>6</sup> Such mistakes happen because of same letters representing different sounds in Chinese.

Pic 3

*Pinyin errors made by learners of elementary level Chinese*



2. There are many homophonic characters in Chinese. Unlike English, or other phonic languages, where a letter refers to certain sound, in Chinese same pinyin may be represented by many characters with different meanings. For example, the pronounced syllable /bōk/ can be written only as *book*, whereas in Chinese, the syllable *Shu* may be represented by many characters such as 书 (book)、输 (lose)、叔 (uncle)、树 (tree), etc., with each character having different meanings. Such homophones in Chinese language further complicate the process of learning Chinese. Therefore, for characters input into digital devices, one must recognize the right combination of characters from the list of multiple characters with same pinyin.

3. Constant use of computers and mobile phones for writing Chinese texts through pinyin based input system has led to “character amnesia (提笔忘字)” not only among foreigners learning Chinese, but also among many native Chinese, especially

<sup>6</sup>BBC News, September 19, 2014

youngsters. According to a survey conducted by China Youth Daily in 2010, 83 percent of the 2,072 respondents admitted having problems writing characters. According to another survey conducted by Ministry of education among 3000 teachers in China, sixty percent of them complained about declining writing ability.<sup>7</sup>

### **2.2.3. Solutions for Pinyin**

There are very few pinyin in Chinese which are pronounced in a different way from English. In the first class of teaching pinyin to students, students should be given a dictation test of writing syllables having similar or almost similar sounds as in English, this will help teachers in understanding how students write these syllables. After identifying the differences between their ways of writing a certain syllable and the actual pinyin of that syllable, emphasis should be on understanding the differences between sounds represented by similar alphabets used in Chinese pinyin and English. Intense drill practice is required at the beginning itself to form a correct habit of articulating such sounds.

Learning Chinese through pinyin may be helpful at the beginner's level where there are not many homophones in use, and some homophones can be understood through context. But at higher stage of learning Chinese, learners should limit the use of pinyin to only learning pronunciation of different characters; they should prefer character-drawing based input system to pinyin based input system for characters input into digital devices. This also helps learners to be in constant practice of writing characters, thus reducing the possibility of forgetting characters. Chinese government has also taken steps in the direction of promoting traditional Chinese calligraphy classes, the government has instructed schools to conduct character-writing classes for at least once in a week.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3. Tones**

Unlike English or any other Indian languages, Chinese is a tonal language having five different tones including neutral tone. Differentiating between different tones is

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times, July 12, 2010

<sup>8</sup> BBC News Asia-Pacific, August 27, 2011

another challenging aspect of learning Chinese, which makes Chinese language learning a complex and difficult process. A word, if not spoken with correct tone, can drastically change the meaning of the sentence, sometimes putting the speaker into an embarrassing situation.

### **2.3.1. Tone-specific problems**

I. Learners while learning new words often overlook tones of the syllables and eventually forget the right tones of the words, this results in listeners unable to comprehend what the speaker says, and thus defeat the immediate purpose of learning the language.

II. The second major tone-specific problem is that students often confuse tones with intonation. Tones are used to distinguish between different words through pitch level, whereas intonation is more often used to express emotions and moods rather than having an obvious effect on the meaning of a word. It's observed that learners often impose intonation patterns of their mother tongue over tones in Chinese, which leads to learning tones in a wrong way and developing poor communication skills. Such interference of intonation patterns of mother tongue is more common among beginners. When asked to tell their 10-digit mobile numbers in Chinese, most students tell the first nine digits in 2nd tone and the last one in 4<sup>th</sup> tone. Similarly, while asking question, they pronounce the last word in second tone no matter what its actual tone mark is. This happens because in their mother tongue questions are often signified by rising pitch. For example: *这是谁的书* is read as *zhè shì shéi de shū(shū)*. They end a statement with fourth tone irrespective of the actual tone of the last word of the sentence. E.g., *这是我的书* is read as *zhè shì wǒ de shū (shū)*.

### **2.3.2. Solutions**

Mastering tones is a gradual process, which requires patience and constant practice. First of all, learners should stop ignoring tones. While learning new words, they must memorize tones of the words simultaneously. They should focus on enunciating tones correctly from the beginning itself, as it becomes difficult to unlearn incorrect tones later. The best way to practice tones is to listen more and speak more. Teachers should carry out intensive tone drill practice in the classroom setup through different innovative means, such as tone games, listening and speaking practice. While

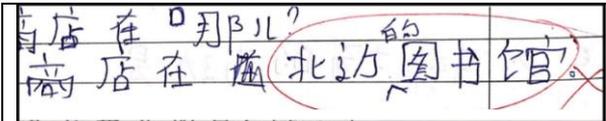
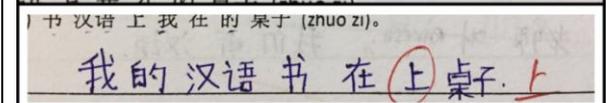
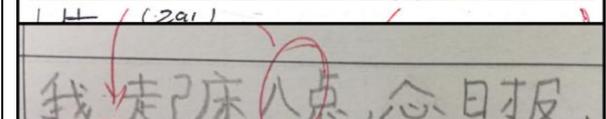
speaking Chinese, focus should be on both correct tones and intonation. Focusing on only one of these two in isolation will lead to wrong learning of the language. Students should first concentrate on tones at word level, and eventually switch over to intonation at sentence level to master the natural accent. Regular interaction with native Chinese, listening and watching Chinese audio visual help a lot in picking up the natural accent.

## 2.4. Interference of L1 and L2

In a multilingual country like India where most of the learners already know at least two languages before they start learning CFL, interference of their second language is more obvious than their first language in the process of Chinese language acquisition. Since most of the universities and institutes for higher education in India follow English as the medium of instructions, English becomes their predominant language (L2). While making sentences in Chinese language, learners subconsciously end up following the sentence structures of English, rather than Indian languages (Pic 3). For example, both in Indian languages and in Chinese, time, place and manner are generally put before the verb, but students with English as their predominant language/L2, end up following the syntax of English, which is most often not similar to Chinese sentence pattern. They would translate *I study Chinese at EFLU* as *Wǒ xuéxí hànyǔ zài yīngyǔ hé wàiguóyǔ dàxué*, whereas according to Chinese grammar, place of action ‘*yīngyǔ hé wàiguóyǔ dàxué (EFLU)*’ should be put before the verb ‘*xuéxí(study)*’. Such kind of negative language interference often leads to wrong learning of a foreign language.

Pic 3

*Syntactic errors in Chinese sentences written by students of elementary level Chinese*

	Shop is on the north side of the library.
	My book is on the table.
	I wake up at 8 O'clock.

	He is also not Chinese.
	I study Chinese in the university.

### 2.4.1. Solutions

In order to tackle the problem of interference of mother tongue or any other predominant language in the process of learning Chinese, learners need to have thorough understanding of both their predominant language and the target language. A strong emphasis should be put in identifying both similarities and dissimilarities in terms of their sentence structures and grammar.

### 2.4.2. Language Immersion technique:

Language immersion is a method used for teaching a second or foreign language, wherein, the target language itself is the medium of instruction in the classroom. Various studies on foreign language learning reveal that it's easier and faster to learn a foreign language in the native country of the target language than learning it in one's own country where the medium of instruction is one's mother tongue or English. Therefore, the best and fastest way to acquire foreign language skill is to immerse oneself into the target language from the initial stage of the learning process. Teachers may use easily comprehensible expressions and teach them through various hand gesticulations, showing pictures and videos to students with minimal use of student's first language. This technique to some extent can solve the problem of interference of L1 or L2, as students are encouraged to think and comprehend directly in the target language itself.

### 3. Conclusion

Despite Chinese being widely regarded as one of the most difficult languages of the world, learning CFL can be made easier and more fun by applying right approach and innovative strategies. Based on challenges faced by Indian students in learning Chinese and their specific requirements, teachers need to design exclusive textbooks for Indian learners. In order to promote Chinese language and culture outside China, the Chinese government has opened more than 300 Confucius Institutes around the world, providing native Chinese teachers and necessary pedagogies to the educational institutes offering Chinese language. It is also necessary to identify the Chinese

language experts and teachers available in India and create a database about their area of interest to cater to the needs of Chinese language learners in India. Teacher's responsibilities lie in incorporating innovative ideas tailor-made for their students, as per the objectives of the course. ICT has emerged as the game changer in the field of education, however lots need to be done for promoting Chinese language teaching through technology. Teachers need to actively participate in contributing to Chinese language teaching through ICT, students should also fully utilize digital platforms provided, such as e-PG Pathshala, Swayam, social media, etc.

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