

Research Article

## The Difficulties in Chinese Language Learning by Sinhala Speaking Students, Sri Lanka

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Received: Sep 17, 2020

Accepted: Oct 1, 2020

Published: Oct 10, 2020

**Abstract:** Nowadays learning Chinese language has become important among several countries due to the issues linked to economic development. Recent times, Sri Lanka has also been stepped towards teaching Chinese language as a second language in order to overcome communication difficulties. In order to understand the difficulties in Chinese language acquisition, it is important to analyze the structure of both languages through a comparative study. When Sinhala students learn Chinese language, the major problem that might be occurred is the difference in between language structures of Chinese and Sinhala as Sinhala follows SOV (subject, object, verb) structure and Chinese follows SVO (subject, verb, object) language structure. Secondly, when learning Chinese, students may face number of acquisition errors due to the absence of several language phrases in their own mother tongue. For instance, in Chinese, there are several set phrases such as "méi guān xi" (It's ok), "bù yòng xiè" (no thanks), "bù kè qǐ" (Welcome) which are not appearing in Sinhala language. Thus, the learners are in trouble due to the absence of those phrases in Sinhala. Therefore, Sinhala speaking students should also keep in touch with the English language in order to solve the communication problems somehow as no such particular word phrases in their own language. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the difficulties faced by Sinhala speaking students and provide a clear understand about the difference in between Sinhala and Chinese languages.

**Keywords:** Chinese, Difficulties, Foreign language, learning, Native Sinhala students.

### 1. Introduction

The foreign language acquisition refers to the process by which a learner acquires a foreign language other than his/her mother tongue. In the process of foreign language acquisition, due to the difference of language backgrounds, different personalities or different learning strategies students may find number of difficulties. When the learners first acquire a foreign language, their reaction to the encounter is various, mainly, because it is more or less unlike the learners' first language. Foreign languages have very often different structures, rules, systems etc. Therefore, in order to easily cope with a foreign language, the learner need time to develop the skills related to speaking, reading, writing and listening.

In this paper, we try to explain some of the most common difficulties encountered by Sinhala native speakers in Sri Lanka during the process of Chinese language acquisition. The differences related to pronunciation, Chinese characters, tones, sentence structure etc. The Sinhala native speakers get used to the language patterns and sounds of Sinhala, which will influence their foreign language learning to some extent. Based on the findings some practical suggestions would be offered to the TCFL teachers in order to overcome these

difficulties. Hence, this research focuses on following matters in order to enabling the native Sinhala Chinese language learner to overcome their difficulties and learn Chinese language successfully.

- 1) What are the common difficulties among native Sinhala Chinese language learners in acquiring Chinese language?
- 2) How the first language of the learner interferes with Chinese language learning in Sri Lanka?
- 3) What are the measures taken to prevent the difficulties while acquiring Chinese language?

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

In recent years, with the comprehensive development of the teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), the Chinese culture teaching for foreign language learners has also obtained more and more attention. The learning of Chinese in the contemporary world has become a global trend. The teaching of Chinese culture in TCFL was initiated in the 1950, almost at the same time the TCFL started. Teaching culture at that time was more for political propaganda than for increasing language competency. Chinese cultural subjects were not widely established in the university education system until 1980. Through Confucius institutes China has taken measures to promote and enhance TCFL language and culture learning in other countries around the world.

Sri Lanka known as the pearl of Indian Ocean has a deep rooted relationship with China that dates back to many centuries. "One belt one road initiative" concept caused to strengthening China-Sri Lanka bilateral relations considerably during last years and as a result of it a vast number of Sri Lankan students are motivated to learn Chinese language based on its significant impact on Contemporary Sri Lankan society. In 1972, teaching Chinese as a foreign language was commenced as a certificate course study in University of Kelaniya. Hence, University of Kelaniya was recognized as the pioneer institution for Chinese language education in Sri Lanka. In 2007, a Confucius institute was established attached to the University of Kelaniya, this was in order to promote, expand and deliver Chinese language teaching and learning to Sri Lankans who wanted to learn Chinese language.

In the year 2013, University Kelaniya was the leading higher education institute to produce Chinese local teachers trained in China with masters' degrees to teach in Chinese. At present, 5 universities, 40 schools and 4 Confucius institutes engage in Chinese language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. The Chinese language education of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka can be mainly divided as TCFL education of the University and TCFL education of Confucius institute.

In the University education system, Chinese language is taught as 3 years general degree program, special 4 years degree program, Certificate course program, optional course program, external degree program and currently it has uplifted to M.Phil. degree program as well. The Chinese language curricular of the universities mainly consists of Chinese grammar, culture & civilization, literature and Chinese speaking.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Difficulties of Foreign Language Learning**

According to Agresto (1985), in a global economy, the acquisition of a foreign language has emerged as one of the major goals for children of the next century. Abdulla (2015) stated that, unable to understand various expressions and sentences of a language due to cultural

differences. Rhalmi (2014) states that, learners should be familiar with second or foreign language structures when they start learning that language. If learners use a wrong structure it will cause the occurrence of negative transfer and ambiguity in the language. He also stated that, sometimes foreign language learners are challenged by specific vocabularies belong to specific communities. Therefore, cultural difference is an important issue that learners face in language learning. Derwing and Munro (2015) stated that, accent varieties may cause problems for learners because they probably confuse the learners' understanding. Mohammed (2018) indicates that, the complexity of grammar makes it difficult for the learners to use and produce correct grammatical tense and sentences. He also stated that, correct word pronunciation of the target language is also a challengeable issue to foreign language learners. Pronunciation is strongly related to the first language because may be some sounds or phonetics does not exist in the first languages, making difficulty for the learners. (Mohammed, 2018).

## **2.2 First Language Interference**

Bhela (1999) stated that, Interference is the errors that can be traced back to the first language, while the learners use the second language. Beardsmore (1982) stated that, if the learners have difficulty in phonology, vocabulary and grammar of L2, there are due to the interference of habits from L1. Ali and Elham (2015) mentioned that, Learners of second language tend to transfer the forms, meaning and culture of their L1 to the foreign language and culture when attempting to speak the language. Beebe and Seliger (2006) stated that, by learning L2 habits L1 habits are also transferred and then the errors occur. Karim and Nassaji (2013) stated that, the learner's knowledge of the target language is not enough, the learner relies on her or his L1 to express his or her idea. According to Cummins (1997), the students' competence in second language depends on their level of first language ability. Cummins (1979) stated that, general academic skills, writing and reading skills in L1 can also be transferred to L2 and that learning two languages improves the learning process for both, regardless of their spelling. Cummins (2005) stated that, when there is appropriate instruction in L1, then there will be a transfer of language proficiency to L2, provided that the student is adequately exposed to it and given adequate motivation. Sparks and Ganschow (1995), assumed that, Skills in L1 can form the basis for learning a foreign language and acquiring basic skills in L1 has an impact on learning L2.

Humbach (2009), reports that, when students fail to reach a high level of competency in L2, there will be limited skills in L1 too. Karim and Nassaji (2013) found that, when second language learners write in L2, their L1 has an effect on their writing. Language learners may use the L1 strategies in their L2 writing because of similarities in L1 and L2. If the learners knowledge of the target language is not enough, the learner relies on his or her L1 to express his or her idea.

Sobhani and Abolhassan (2012), investigated the difference in constant cultures orally in the first and second language, and pointed out if the structures of first and second language were different, learners have difficulty in L2 pronunciation because they faced to unfamiliar phonological rules. Decherts and Dllis (1999) stated that, when learners of second language want to write or speak in the target language, they tend to relay on their first language structures. If the structures are different, then a lot of errors occur in L2 thus this indicates an interference of first language on second language.

Beardsmore (1982), stated that, the learner has difficulties in second language such as phonology, vocabulary and grammar due to the interference of habits from L1 and L2. Dualy,

Burt and Krashen (1982), stated that, interference is the result of old habits of the first language, and it must be unlearned before the learning of the new hobbits of second language.

Bhela (1999) stated that, when the learners feel gaps in their L2 syntactical structures for writing in L2, they use syntactical structures of their first language. Selinker (1983) points out that, there are two types of transfer in learning a second language: positive and negative transfer. In positive transfer L1 facilitated the acquisition of second language, but in negative transfer the first language has negative impacts on L2.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The student sample was recruited from 66 students who engage in Chinese language learning as undergraduates in University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. To select the participants of the present study a simple random sampling method was used. The participants selected for this study, are between 20 and 22 years old. All of them were native speakers of Sinhalese who learning Chinese as first and second year students of the University. Almost all the students who participated for this had six months to eighteen months' experience in learning Chinese as a foreign language.

**Table 1. Demographic information of the student participants**

		Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	23	34.85%
	Female	43	65.15%
<b>Year</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> year	46	69.70%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	20	30.30%

#### 3.2 Data Collection

The research instruments used in this research study consists of questionnaires of 66 undergraduates and the interviews. During the participants' regular lectures, the questionnaires were distributed and they were asked to read carefully and respond sincerely. The questionnaire with four parts were developed for this study. The first part of the questionnaire was related to the demographic information of the participants (Table 1).

The second, third and fourth part of the questionnaire comprised on a Likert scale each of them had five options, i.e. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). With the aim of deriving the results of the survey and exploring the students' perceptions about the difficulties of Chinese language learning in TCFL class, a semi structured interview was conducted by the researcher.

The number of participants engaged in semi-structured interview was ten. The purpose of interview was to fill the gaps in information collected through the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted in Sinhalese, in the participants' mother tongue, in order to carry out better verbal communication.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The data from questionnaires and interview were gathered and analyzed to make sense of the themes, ideas, relationships and categories that emerge from data. Finally, the conclusions were made by listing the ideas and concepts related to the field.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results of the survey

The data obtained through the questionnaire was analyzed using the percentage for every item. Based on the learners' responses, the difficulties of Chinese language learning among Sinhala speaking students, Sri Lanka were analyzed as follows:

**Table 2. Linguistics Difficulties related to Chinese language among Native Sinhala Speakers**

S.No	Item	SA%	A%	N%	D%	SD%
1	The most difficult part of learning Chinese is learning Chinese characters.	24.24 (16)	33.33 (22)	22.73 (15)	12.12 (8)	7.58 (5)
2	I forget the Chinese characters very easily.	21.21 (14)	40.91 (27)	13.64 (9)	13.64 (9)	10.61 (7)
3	It's difficult to speak Chinese according to the correct tone.	31.82 (21)	45.45 (30)	12.12 (8)	6.06 (4)	4.55 (3)
4	I always have difficulties in using words in the right context in oral Chinese.	18.18 (12)	28.79 (19)	24.24 (16)	6.06 (4)	22.73 (15)
5	Chinese grammar is the most difficult part of learning Chinese.	9.09 (6)	39.39 (26)	12.12 (8)	27.27 (18)	12.12 (8)
6	Sound similarities in oral Chinese is the most challenging in learning Chinese.	10.61 (7)	31.82 (21)	16.67 (11)	18.18 (12)	22.73 (15)
7	Differentiating the tone is difficult in learning oral Chinese.	25.76 (17)	27.27 (18)	22.73 (15)	18.18 (12)	6.06 (4)

Above analysis shows the frequency and percentage of the participants and their level of agreement in terms of each item under the theme of linguistic difficulties related to Chinese language learning.

As shown in table 1, the data reveals that the items in which the Chinese language undergraduates of University of Kelaniya showed highest level of agreement are item 3, 77.27% (51), followed by item 2, 62.12% (41), item 1, 57.57% (38), item 7, 53.03% (35), item 5, 48.48% (32), item 4, 46.97% (31) and item 6, 42.43% (28).

The results suggest that the Chinese language undergraduates of University of Kelaniya believe that the major difficulty of learning Chinese is "speaking Chinese to the correct tone". Following this, the item of "forget the Chinese characters very easily" is reported as the second most challenging part of learning Chinese as the native Sinhala speakers. For the rest of items, 1, 7, 5, 4 and 6 respectively, the native Sinhala speakers of the university also represent a higher level of agreement than disagreement. Among the seven items, item 6, sound similarity is believed to be the least difficult. Thus, this data gathered through the questionnaire could be assumed that the Sinhala native speakers in the university agree with the total items as Chinese language learning difficulties.

**Table 3. The First Language Interference in Learning Chinese among Native Sinhala Speakers.**

S.No	Item	SA%	A%	N%	D%	SD%
1	I think Chinese is more difficult than my native language.	18.18 (12)	31.82 (21)	27.27 (18)	13.64 (9)	9.09 (6)
2	When I write and speak in Chinese, I always think in my own language first and translate them into Chinese.	16.67 (11)	34.85 (23)	28.79 (19)	6.06 (4)	13.64 (9)
3	I feel difficult to learn Chinese because of the structural difference in between Sinhala and Chinese.	10.61 (7)	51.52 (34)	18.18 (12)	12.12 (8)	7.58 (5)
4	My native language always interferes with my oral Chinese learning.	19.70 (13)	18.18 (12)	33.33 (22)	15.15 (10)	13.64 (9)
5	I used to use the Sinhala language structure when speaking and writing in Chinese.	27.27 (18)	30.30 (20)	13.64 (9)	16.67 (11)	12.12 (8)
6	When I speak Chinese, it's very difficult to pronounce second and third tones.	18.18 (12)	28.79 (19)	34.85 (23)	7.58 (5)	10.61 (7)

The above data analysis shows the frequency and the percentage of the participants and their level of agreement in terms of every item related to their native language interference. The data in the table 3 shows that the item in which the participants represent the highest level of agreement is item 3, 62.13% (41). This shows that most of the native Sinhala undergraduates think that learning Chinese is difficult because of the structural difference in between Sinhala and Chinese. However, the item in which the undergraduates show the lowest level of agreement is item 4, 37.88% (25), which means only few learners think that their native language always interferes with their oral Chinese learning comparing with other items. The overall results suggest that, the Chinese language learners in University of Kelaniya believe that their native language significantly interferes in learning Chinese as a foreign language, especially through language structure.

## 4.2 Results of the Interview

**Table 4. Common Difficulties related to Chinese Language Learning for Native Sinhala Speakers**

Item	Problem	Number of students	Percentage
1	Chinese tones are the most difficult part of learning Chinese.	8	80%
2	Its' difficult to differentiate "ch", "sh", "zh" and "q", "x", "j" sounds in Chinese.	7	70%
3	It's difficult to find suitable Sinhala words for some Chinese words.	6	60%
4	Sometimes I may need to rely on second language (English) to understand Chinese.	3	30%
5	I feel that, Chinese sentences are grammatically more complex than in Sinhala.	5	50%
6	Chinese sounds are very much different from the Sinhalese sounds.	5	50%



The data analysis reveals that the item in which the participants represent the highest level of agreement is item 1, 80% (8), this shows that, the majority of Sinhala native speakers in Sri Lankans universities consider Chinese tones as the most difficult part of learning Chinese. Among the 6 items, the least number of interviewees (30%) stated that, they have to rely on their second language (English) in order to understand some word meanings of Chinese as they cannot find a suitable meaning in their L1.

## 5. Discussion

This study focused on at investigating the Chinese language learning difficulties among native Sinhala learners including linguistic difficulties as well as their first language interference in learning Chinese. The results revealed that, the native Sinhala learners at universities experience lot of linguistic difficulties. Furthermore, the learners' first language interferes with the Chinese language learning as a foreign language.

Learning Chinese tones and use them in oral Chinese is reported as the most difficult part of learning Chinese. Since the learners' first language, Sinhala is not a tonal language, majority of Chinese language learners in Sinhala speaking background find confuse in mastering tones. Majority of the native Sinhala learners think that the tone 3 is the major obstacle, also it's hard to differentiate the tone 2 and 3. As a result, errors occurred in tone production as well as in identification.

**Table 5. Description of Chinese Four Tones**

Tone name	Tone value	Tone pattern	Tone mark
First tone	55	High level tone (flat tone)	—
Second tone	35	Rising tone	/
Third tone	214	Low-falling-rising tone	∨
Forth tone	51	Falling tone	\

After difficulties related to tones, the learning Chinese characters are reported as the most difficult part to learn. Learners feel difficult to manage with Chinese characters as it has large number of strokes. According to native Sinhala speakers, memorizing those strokes and its order needs huge amount of time and effort. Writing square shaped Chinese characters is also challengeable for native Sinhala speakers as they get used to write round shaped letters in their first language.

Sinhala native speakers in the university also think grammatical issues makes it difficult to learn Chinese. In terms of grammar, language structure, adverbs, prepositions, wrong word choice, punctuation marks and measure words can be considered as the major difficulties in learning Chinese grammar. Majority of native Sinhala learners have responded that, structural difference of Chinese and Sinhala make them difficult to learn Chinese. Chinese language follows the subject + verb + object order in a sentence and the learner finds it difficult as the sentence of L1 follows subject + object +verb structure in a sentence.

Ex: mamə pa:salatə a:wemi. (I came to school.)

Error identification: 我 <sup>wǒ</sup> <sup>xué</sup> <sup>xiào</sup> <sup>lái</sup> <sup>le</sup> 了。 (The correct sentence should be 我 <sup>wǒ</sup> <sup>lái</sup> <sup>xué</sup> <sup>xiào</sup> <sup>le</sup> 了。)

According to the above example, it can be identified that Sinhala speaking students tend to think in L1 first and then translate that idea into L2 due to the impact of their first language sentence structure.

Similarly, according to the Sinhala native speakers, the using the words in the right context is also difficult due to the interference of their L1 in Chinese language learning. Chinese language is rich in various words and expressions. Therefore, learner find confuse when using its words in right context while speaking or writing.

Ex: a:chchi:—grandmother

But in Chinese there are two different words for the meaning of “grandmother”, “奶奶”<sup>nǎinai</sup>—  
“grandmother on father’s side”, “外婆”<sup>wàipó</sup>— “grandmother on mother’s side”. Similarly,  
Chinese language is rich of various expressions such as “不用谢”<sup>búyòngxiè</sup> (no thanks), “不好意思”<sup>bùhǎoyìsī</sup> (feel embarrassed, “不客气”<sup>búkèqì</sup> (you are welcome) which do not directly exist in  
leaners’ first language. As a result, the learner hardly use such phrases when they  
communicate in Chinese since they do not find them in their native language background.  
Therefore, this can be considered as another negative transfer.

42.43% learners responded as sound similarities of learning Chinese as one of another major problems. Chinese language has the sound “ü” which is not existing in Sinhala language. Therefore, the learners who are native speakers of Sinhala find difficult to pronounce the words with “ü” sound. Chinese language also has the sounds “ch, sh, and zh”. Native Sinhala speakers do not find difficult to produce these sounds as they appear in Sinhala alphabet. But, when the learner speaks in Chinese or listen Chinese people talking, they confuse with the sound “ch, sh, zh” with “q, x, j”. They also cannot differentiate the sounds “ü/u”, “g/k”, “d/t” when they hear Chinese natives speaking.

Ex: cannot differentiate the word “狗”<sup>gǒu</sup> (dog) from “口”<sup>kǒu</sup> (mouth) and the word “都”<sup>dōu</sup> from “头”<sup>tóu</sup> due to the sound similarities.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed at highlighting Chinese learning difficulties among native Sinhala speakers including linguistics complexities and L1 interference and give some suggestions to overcome the negative cognitive reactions related to learning Chinese. The data was collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicated that different types of sounds and words, Chinese characters and tones in Chinese language were the major issues in learning Chinese among Sinhala native speakers. Through the above analysis, it was revealed that Sinhala negative transfer to learning Chinese as a foreign language exists at each levels of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar and culture. Since negative transfer of the mother tongue impede Chinese language learning, certain countermeasure should be taken to minimize those issues. Similarly, both Chinese language teachers and learners should take these issues into consideration and attempt to clarify areas of expected difficulty with regard to the learners first language. Teaching and learning Chinese language would be effective if the native Sinhala students are taught how to avoid the interference of their mother tongue, Sinhala. Then learners would be become good at Chinese character writing, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar and their Chinese language learning would be greatly enhanced. The Chinese language teachers are suggested to encourage the learner for imitation, listening and speaking, reading aloud in order to improve their skill of Chinese pronunciation.



The teachers should train the learners to put themselves in native Chinese speaker's shoe and think in their way while increasing authentic learning. In addition, the teachers should provide the learners with strategies and methods in order to enable the learners to use the Chinese language successfully. It is also suggested that to consider the development and integration of technologies in teaching Chinese learning, ex: use technology to make the Chinese character teaching and learning easy. The native Sinhala learners also must have a good plan and use the effective techniques to overcome the difficulties of learning Chinese such as practicing, have more contacts with native Chinese speakers etc. Furthermore, we hope that, this study will be able to guide the students with Chinese language learning difficulties positively in order to use the existing native language knowledge to learn L2. Finally, an integration of TCFL learning is needed to deal with the complexities of Chinese language acquisition and provide empirical evidence for the improvement of teaching methodology, syllabus designs and teaching techniques in Chinese language teaching classroom in Sri Lanka.

## 7. Limitations

It is a limitation of this study that the present study focuses on the difficulties of Sinhala speaking students in higher education system in Sri Lanka. It is thus suggested that the future researches should survey the Chinese learning difficulties of Chinese language learners in general education system in Sri Lanka. The differentiated and larger sample should be considered in order to obtain a more inclusive and overall picture of Chinese language learning difficulties among Sinhala speaking learners in TCFL classroom in Sri Lanka.

## 8. Acknowledgement

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Professor, Wang Ji Hong for the guidance and encouragement in carrying out this research. Also, my completion of this project could not have been accomplished without the support of my supervisor for the master degree dissertation, Associate professor Ms. Ji Wei, for her keen interest, inspiring guidance, constant encouragements with my work during all stages. I also thank Chinese language learning undergraduates of University of Kelaniya who found the time to fill the questionnaires and answer my questions in the field. Finally, to my caring, loving and supportive family: my deepest gratitude. Your encouragements when the times got rough are much appreciated.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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**Citation:** Sammanie Upadya Kandambi. 2020. The Difficulties in Chinese Language Learning by Sinhala Speaking Students, Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 4(10): 8-17.

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