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## Character-based, Word-based, or Two-way Approach

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### Abstract

The system of students' native language, the importance of characters in that language system, and students' knowledge of characters are the premises of the discussion on character-based approach or word-based approach in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL). This paper discusses the positions and the functions of character-based approach and word-based approach in TCSL in the case of Japanese students. Japanese and Chinese belong to the same sphere of Chinese character culture. Japanese students have mastered about two thousands characters before learning Chinese. Should character-based approach or word-based approach be used in teaching Japanese the Chinese language? Based on minor adjustments of the concept of "based" (Ben Wei) or "standard", the author puts forward the "Two-way Approach": word-based approach for Chinese beginners or learners for oral Chinese; and character-based approach for learners at intermediate and advanced levels, or learners of Chinese linguistics.

**Key words:** character-based approach; word-based approach; TCSL for Japanese; two-way approach

### Introduction

"Ben Wei" ("Based") means the basic unit of language structure and the basis of linguistic studies (Liu, 2009). Is there a "Ben Wei" in language teaching? Is this "Ben Wei" the basis of the whole language teaching? There are two main viewpoints of either "character-based" or "word-based" on this issue in the field of TCSL. Are there situations as a combination of both or two of them taking turns? "Ben Wei" in this discussion is more of the basis of language teaching than that of linguistic studies.

"Character-based" approach takes characters as the basic and structural units as well as the starting point and main thread of Chinese teaching whereas "word-based" approach considers words having those roles. "Word-based" approach, which is a dominant teaching method in alphabetic languages, has had a strong influence on Chinese language teaching. However, in recent decades, more scholars of Chinese linguistics and TCSL have raised the concept of "character-based," which is grounded in the characteristics of Chinese language and pedagogy especially in the areas of writing and linguistics. Some scholars hold the view that "characters" in Chinese are equivalent to "words" in English, and "words" in Chinese equivalent to "phrases" in English (Jiang, 2013). In this sense, "character-based" approach of Chinese teaching is identical to "word-based" approach of English teaching, which brings a new perspective to this debate. According to this opinion, characters are the basic units of Chinese language, so as words are those of English language.

The debate between “character-based” or “word-based” in Chinese language teaching is actually a debate between “word-based approach” or “phrase-based approach” in English language teaching.

### **“Character-based” or “Word-based” Approach**

One of the premises of “character-based” or “word-based” approach debate is the specific language skill of leaning. Chinese learning can be divided into two parts: language and character, or four aspects: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The way of teaching phonetics is different from that of font styles and word formation. The methodologies of teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all different. The starting point and main thread vary depending on teaching methodologies. While “character-based” approach is usually used for teaching Chinese characters, “word-based” approach is more suitable for teaching Chinese language. Human gains its oral and written capacities by receiving different types of information in various ways through organs of the body and later related trainings. There must be differences in terms of the starting points and perspectives of cultivating these abilities. The comprehension of important words and their arrangement in sentences are the keys to listening and speaking. In author’s observation, it is easier for students to understand and master sentences decomposed into words than those decomposed into characters. The communicative function of pronunciation based on units of characters is far less efficient than that based on units of words. However, Chinese language is based on characters that are the foundation of the Chinese language and what are seen in Chinese media, and of which words, phrases, and sentences consist. Oral Chinese without the knowledge of characters can only reach up to the entry level.

Another premise of this debate is the characteristics of Chinese language learners, which can be divided into L1 Chinese learners and L2 Chinese learners. L1 Chinese learners have been living in a Chinese environment for quite a few years when they start taking Chinese courses at school. In order to train them in writing characters, sentences and essays, the whole process starts from learning Chinese characters according to the degree of difficulty and the frequency of use. In terms of Chinese linguistics, the learning process has to be based on both characters and words depending on their functional importance in the system. Since most Chinese characters have meanings by themselves, and adds new meanings with another character, learning the basic meaning of individual characters is indispensable first step. To those of L2 Chinese learners, or in the field of TCSL, the system of learners’ native language and their basis of Chinese characters should be taken into consideration while choosing an approach between “character based” or “word based.” This includes two distinctions: 1) the distinction between students from the sphere of Chinese character culture and students from the sphere of non-Chinese character culture; and 2) the distinction between students with the basis of Chinese characters and students without the basis of Chinese characters. These two distinctions divide students of Chinese into two categories: 1) students from the sphere of Chinese character culture with Chinese character basis at different levels; and 2) students from language systems with Roman letters who have no knowledge of Chinese characters, which therefore are difficult to those students. Categorizing students according to their bases of Chinese characters should be the starting-point for selecting teaching methodology in TCSL, as well as the focus in the debate of “character-based” or “word-based” approach. The “character-based” approach is more suitable for students who are native-language learners with the basis of Chinese language in a natural environment for oral learning. These students need to begin with characters, learn them one by one, and word-formation in layers with learned characters in order to match character learning with language learning. The “character-based” approach can also be used for teaching beginners who have never studied Chinese characters. The success of this case depends on the methodology of Chinese character teaching including selecting the initial characters and rational links of word-formation in layers. The “word-based” approach is more suitable for teaching

beginners of L2 Chinese who lack a natural environment for oral learning. Based on the knowledge of their native language including the most commonly used vocabulary, basic structures of sentences, and other linguistic common sense, they take words as the starting-point and main thread, and formulate sentences that are communicatively useful. The “word-based” approach may also be suitable for teaching students from countries that belong to the sphere of Chinese character culture but not of Chinese origins to focus on the differences of language systems and functions of Chinese characters.

In supporting “character-based” approach, Cao (2013) considers characters and a writing ability the teaching focus of Chinese and oral proficiency the teaching focus of Indo-European languages. It is because the most fundamental uniqueness of Chinese language is that its written and spoken systems are independent and parallel with a complementary relationship. But in Indo-European languages, the writing system is derived from the spoken system with a relationship between primary (spoken system) and secondary (writing system). In order to get rid of the influence from the “word-based” approach of learning alphabet languages and declare the uniqueness of Chinese language system, scholars presented a “character-based” theory. In his *Introduction to “Character-based” Grammar of Chinese*, Xu (2008) systematically elaborates the characteristics of Chinese language, and its structure and expressions based on characters. The book focuses more on grammatical roles and linguistic functions of characters. In the field of TCSL, professor Joel Bellassen proposed to use “character-based” approach to teach French students Chinese in 1996, and has been one of the major representatives of “character-based” approach. As a L2 Chinese educator, he suggested to separate teaching activities between listening-speaking and reading-writing, which has become the consensus among L2 Chinese teachers in France (Allanic, 2013). An important argument for Bellassen’s view on the “character-based” approach is that Chinese characters indicate meanings, and we can form words in layers based on individual characters (Bellassen & Zhang, 1989). The two key concepts of Bellassen are “Rapid Literacy in Chinese” and “Word-Formation in Layers” that are the basic practices of “character-based” approach. The two concepts are widely used as references to the “character-based” approach (Liu, 2009).

### Character Foundation of Japanese Students and “Rapid Literacy in Chinese”

“Character-based” approach is suitable for students from alphabet language systems. To these students, character recognition and writing are among the most difficult parts in learning Chinese language. They have to learn Chinese characters from the very beginning. Using the “character-based” approach has the following benefits to them. First, it is an easy way to start the character learning including the way of writing and their individual meanings. Second, it can help them to have a solid foundation in terms of the basic units of Chinese. Third, it is beneficial for learning Chinese words and efficient accumulation of Chinese vocabulary in the future. Fourth, knowing the shape and sound of characters helps enhance the audio and oral abilities that are based not on alphabets but on the pronunciation of characters.

In the case of Japanese students, there is no need to apply the “character-based” approach except for Chinese lexicology majors. Before learning Chinese, Japanese students have already known or were familiar with 81% of HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test run by Chinese government worldwide) characters at levels one and two, or 74% of HSK characters at the first three levels (Lincoln, 2009). This phenomenon is the premise while considering the teaching methodology in TCSL to Japanese students.

Japanese students start practicing character writing strictly since elementary school, including stroke order, writing rules and meanings of characters. However, all these practices are combined with Japanese Kana and based on the Japanese meanings of Chinese characters within the whole system of Japanese language. In Japan, elementary students first learn the 50-tone diagram, and then learn the Chinese characters or Japanese Kanjis within the system of Japanese pronunciation and word-formation. According to the

Japanese elementary curriculum, every student has to master 1006 characters in six years with an order different from that of character learning for elementary students in China (Lincoln, 2009). In their secondary education, Japanese students continue learning a similar amount of characters that they have learned during elementary school years. In this way, every Japanese student has to learn more than two thousands of the most commonly used characters in total when they graduate from high school. On the one hand, these characters are the important part of the Japanese language. On the other hand, they are not the dominant elements in the system. Japanese pronunciation is based on Kana articulation. Although most Japanese characters have kept the phonemes of “Tang Tone” (pronunciation based on that of Tang Dynasty of China) or “Wu Tone” (pronunciation based on that of Wu in the Period of Three Kingdoms of China) when they were introduced, they also have their Kana tones.

Compared with other foreign students, Japanese students have a good foundation of Chinese characters. But the characters Japanese students have learned are much fewer than those of Chinese students. For instance, Japanese students only learn 80 characters at grade one whereas their Chinese counterparts have to be able to recognize 950 Chinese characters. However, when Japanese students learn a character, they learn both the common words which consist of this character as well as various articulations of this character. For instance, when learning the character “思”, they also learn the words combining this character and Kana such as “思う” (to think) and the words combining this character and another character according to Japanese word-formation such as “思い出す” (to think out) as well as the words consisting of “思” and other characters such as “思想” (thoughts) and “思考” (to think). The characters Chinese students learn are usually categorized according to their meanings, for instance, numbers, family members, natural phenomenon, and parts of human body. The characters Japanese students learn are often arranged according to their orders in the 50-tone diagram. In addition, it is very important for Chinese students to understand the radicals while learning characters, which is helpful for their understanding of the categorizing and the characteristics of Chinese word-formation, meanings of characters, and the rules of word-formation in layers. In contrast, Japanese characters are within a relatively stable and static system. It does not emphasize the role of radicals in understanding characters’ meanings and the importance of character categorizing.

As mentioned above, TCSL in Japan must be from the perspectives of the Japanese language system and the characteristics of Japanese students’ Chinese learning. The first characteristic is the recognition of Chinese characters. Among the 1006 characters Japanese learn at elementary schools, 53.91% of them (538 out of 996) are exactly the same as their matching Chinese characters. Among the other 458 characters, 147 are only slightly different in writing, which does not affect students’ recognition of them, and 104 are with traditional Chinese radicals that are not difficult to remember. Most of the remaining 207 are traditional Chinese characters, with only a few of them being Japanese created characters (Lincoln, 2009). In addition, the meanings of most Japanese characters, especially those words consisting of two characters, are exactly the same as their Chinese counterparts. The second characteristic, as mentioned above, is that there are big differences between Chinese characters and Japanese characters in terms of their roles in respective language systems and their lexical functions. The third characteristic is that the most common mistake Japanese students make in Chinese writing and conversation is word order confusion (Lincoln, 2004). Based on the three characteristics mentioned above, the author of this article suggested that the main thread of TCSL and textbook composition be “formula + meaning of words” (“公式 + 词义”) (Zhu, 2011). “Formula” means the sentence patterns of Chinese language, and “meaning of words” indicate students’ understanding of words in sentences. Thus, it is a view closer to “word-based” theory. “Formula + meaning of words” utilizes Japanese students’ foundation in characters and their understanding of vocabulary consisting of characters, and overcomes their word order confusion through “formula”.

In conclusion, “Rapid Literacy in Chinese” is one of the efficient methods of learning Chinese characters, especially for students whose native language is an alphabet one. However, TCSL in Japan does not

necessarily need this link of “Rapid Literacy in Chinese” since Japanese students have a good basis for character writing and understanding. “Rapid Literacy in Chinese” is more suitable for TCSL to students whose native languages belong to an alphabet system, as well as for teaching Chinese to native speakers. If TCSL to Japanese students uses the “character-based” approach, and focuses on recognizing characters at the very beginning, the teaching at the early stage becomes “comparative character study.” Thus, TCSL to Japanese students cannot directly move onto the main task and take advantage of Japanese students’ knowledge in characters neither can it contribute to a positive transfer of Japanese characters in learning Chinese vocabulary. Instead, students spend a large amount of time on “comparative character study” that has no direct relationship to language learning.

### **Japanese and Chinese Characters and Word-Formation in Layers**

As mentioned above, Japanese and Chinese belong to the same sphere of Chinese character culture. However, the position and the role of characters in these two languages are different. Firstly, characters are ideographic symbols and the whole writing system of Chinese language. They are also the smallest and the only units that compose Chinese vocabulary and sentences, which is the most important argument of the “character-based” approach. Characters are always the starting-point and the central task in learning Chinese. Japanese language has kept a big number of Chinese characters that are continuously developing and evolving within the Japanese language system. Overall, Japanese is an ideographic language. But in addition to Chinese characters, Japanese includes a large amount of Kana. Secondly, although Japanese language has kept many Chinese characters, what ordinary Japanese people master and use are only about two thousands of them. The main units in the Japanese language system are those of Kana as the starting-point of Japanese learning. Thirdly, since characters account not for the whole, but only a certain proportion, in the Japanese language system, word-formation in Japanese consists of not only combinations of characters, but also more combinations of character and Kana, whereas the feature of Chinese is using characters as the units to form words in layers. In composing sentences, the word order in Japanese is also very different from Chinese.

While Japanese students understand the meanings of Japanese characters originated from Chinese, the lexical function of these characters in Japanese is completely different from that in Chinese language. Due to the differences in word-formation between building words in layers based on characters in Chinese and combining character and Kana in Japanese, the methodology of learning Chinese characters is not suitable for learning Japanese characters. Although Chinese sentences and essays are written one character by one character, brain storming and processing of writing are not based on characters but on words that consist of one to four characters. However, it is not to simply put single characters together without grammatical orders, neither to group characters according to their orders in Japanese language. It takes time for beginners to master the rules and the characteristics of word-formation in layers in Chinese characters.

The differences in word order between Japanese and Chinese are due to the different language categories they belong to (Lincoln, 2004). As an agglutinative language, Japanese forms words by gluing morphemes together in two major ways: 1) using suffixes or prefixes whose meaning is unique, and which are concatenated one after another, such as “お” in front of some words, and “ました” at the end of verbs; 2) the meanings and positions of nouns or pronouns in a sentence are decided by function words or case markers. As an isolating language, Chinese does not use affixes or root modifications at all. In Chinese, each word is invariable. Meanings of sentences have to be modified by inserting additional words (Xu Ci), and fixed word order, or understood by context. On the one hand, Modern Chinese has evolved from Ancient Chinese, which has kept a large number of tone-character words. In other words, the majority of Chinese characters can stand alone with their own meanings. For instance, the character “来” can be by itself

and express certain meanings. On the other hand, as an isolating language, Chinese formulates unlimited words with limited characters, and makes new words with existing characters. For instance, characters of “来” and “去” can form a new word together as well as being independent words with their own meanings. Japanese characters originated from Chinese. Although Japanese created some of its own characters, it has generally kept the writing system of traditional or simplified Chinese characters. There are two ways of forming words with Japanese characters, either through putting two characters together or adding one or a few Kanas after a character. For instance, the Chinese character “来” becomes the Japanese word “来る” with the same basic meaning, although “来” in Chinese has other meanings that “来る” does not have. In conclusion, the discussion of “character-based” or “word-based” approach should consider the different ways of, and their roles in, word-formation between Japanese and Chinese characters, as well as the characteristic of Japanese that have kept a large number of characters. It is difficult to understand various syntactic and semantic structures built in the extension of Chinese word groups, even for Japanese students who have mastered many Chinese characters.

Japanese and Chinese belong to the same sphere of Chinese character culture. However, they have different language systems and categories, and their ways of word-formation, word order and rules are all different to a certain extent. Using word-formation in layers of the “character-based” approach in character teaching cannot produce an efficient result in TCSL to Japanese students as that in teaching Chinese to native speakers, neither as that in TCSL to students from the Indo-European language systems or the cultural sphere of non-Chinese characters. Especially for Chinese beginners among Japanese students, they need to master those Chinese characters that are similar to their Japanese counterparts at any time. Although there are a large amount of characters in the Japanese language, and Japanese students master many characters that are the same or similar to Chinese characters in writing and meaning, it is easy for Japanese students to be affected by the negative transfer of Japanese characters while learning single Chinese characters due to the different rules of word-formation and word order between Japanese and Chinese. Only with words consisting of pure characters, will there be more positive transfer than negative transfer. Entering Chinese word-formation prematurely will increase the confusion between Japanese and Chinese characters and the negative transfer of Japanese characters due to the differences of word-formation between Japanese and Chinese. In terms of students from the Indo-European language systems or the cultural sphere of non-Chinese characters, whether teaching them Chinese in “character-based” approach or “word-based” approach is still a question worthy of discussion.

Based on students’ Chinese competence, the process of TCSL can be divided into two stages (two-way approach). At stage one, Chinese beginners mainly focus on learning Chinese orally; at stage two, Chinese learners at intermediate or advanced level targeting the whole system of Chinese language. In terms of their learning goals, there are five categories of students. The “character-based” approach is more suitable for teaching characters to: 1) alphabet language natives without any background knowledge of Chinese characters who aim at all skills of Chinese, 2) students at a high-level of L2 Chinese who aim at the expansion of Chinese vocabulary and the knowledge of Chinese linguistics, and 3) Chinese natives who aim at learning either Chinese language or Chinese linguistics. The “word-based” approach is more suitable to: 1) elective beginners of a comprehensive Chinese course; and 2) students who target oral Chinese but lack a natural environment for learning Chinese. For alphabet language students, learning Chinese conversation with a “word-based” approach means their oral learning is purely based on the sound, not on the shape, and in the same way as they have learned their native languages without knowing the character base of a certain pronunciation. For Japanese students, listening-speaking and reading-writing are more connected in learning Chinese in units of words through characters. They have to learn the accurate pronunciation while learning characters in a “character-based” approach and apply the accurate pronunciation of characters in listening-speaking acquisition in a “word-based” approach. The two-way approach may contradict



the original concepts of “character-based” and “word-based”, or it may be only an issue of understanding, interpretation, and acceptance. “Character-based” and “word-based” approaches in the “two-way” approach are not simultaneously applied to students of the same category, neither to learning of the same language skill. There are no logical issues such as “flimsy” and “blurring the line between characters and morphemes” (Guan, 2008).

### Conclusion

Students’ high efficient learning is the target of teaching. The high efficient learning of foreign language involves various aspects of linguistics, education and psychology. Students’ native language should be one of the premises in the discussion of “character-based” and “word-based” approaches. Coming from the sphere of Chinese character culture, Japanese students have a solid character foundation, so they do not need a phase of “Rapid Literacy in Chinese” as students with a language background of alphabetic systems do. In terms of “Word-Formation in Layers,” whether it is necessary for Japanese students depends on the property of the course. There are different lexical and syntactic rules between Japanese and Chinese although the two languages share a large number of characters. “Word-Formation in Layers” is an applicable teaching method for a writing course at an intermediate level and above or a linguistic course on lexical and syntactic rules of Chinese. But in a two-credit elective course or an oral course, “word-based” approach is more appropriate. Learning Chinese in a non-Chinese environment, Japanese students do not have the same advantage in Chinese pronunciation and conversation as that in Chinese character recognition and writing. Instead of focusing on individual characters, they need to learn the Chinese pronunciation in words, and practice and improve their Chinese conversation in sentences within contexts. If “character-based” approach is a necessary way for natives of alphabet languages to learn the Chinese writing system and for students of Chinese linguistics, “word-based” approach is a sufficient way for all L2 Chinese students to be able to communicate in Chinese.

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