Tonal Errors of Japanese Students Learning Chinese:
A Study of Disyllabic Words

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Abstract

To foreigners, how to manage tone is the greatest challenge in learning Chinese. What causes foreign students to be unable to distinguish different tones is the phonological system of their native language. The accent in standard Japanese (Tokyo dialect) is distributed in the pitch change within each syllable, and the first syllable must be the opposite of the second in accent. The discrepancy between the tonal production of Japanese students learning Chinese and that of Chinese native speakers was investigated in this study. It is found that the two Japanese students in this study made the most frequent mistakes in reading Chinese disyllabic words when the first syllable was tone 2 or tone 3, and the tonal errors were mostly found in disyllabic words with tone combinations of 2-1, 2-4, and 3-4. We also found that in Group B (2-1, 2-2, 2-3, 2-4), whatever the original tones were, the two subjects always mispronounced them as 2-3. This is primarily attributed to the fact that, in Japanese, only one pitch peak is allowed in disyllabic compounds.

Keywords: Japanese Students Learning Chinese, Disyllabic Words, Tonal Errors

1. Introduction

One of the most distinct features of Chinese is tone, in which each syllable has its own fixed tone, including both high-low distinctions and rising-falling variations. The acoustic characteristics of tones are mainly determined by pitch value. Tones are relatively defined. This so called "relativity" is the stability of pitch within the pitch range of an individual speaker.

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