

Introducing a new protagonist in L2 Chinese narratives

What this research was about and why it is important

Building a complex discourse is not an easy task for learners of a second language (L2). In order to construct a cohesive narrative, they need to clearly tell the hearer what is given and new information. This study investigated which syntactic constructions are used to add a new protagonist to a narrative and relate it to what is already known in the story. The procedure consisted of the analysis of an oral corpus collected from French-speaking learners of L2 Chinese. The results showed that low level learners mostly followed the canonical Subject-Verb word order, while intermediate level learners demonstrated more syntactic diversity but still differed from native speakers in how they managed information. Advanced level learners came close to achieving native-like proficiency, with one notable exception: the type of verb used.

What the researchers did

- The oral corpus collection was based on a comic strip telling the journey of a little dog (main protagonist). It was composed of eight target sequences of four images. The third image revealed the sudden and unexpected appearance of a supporting protagonist (new information) that came out of a location introduced in the second image (given information).
- The 110 participants in this study fell into five groups: two groups of native speakers (French and Chinese) and French-speaking learners of L2 Chinese divided in three groups. Low and intermediate learners were university students in France, and respectively achieved A2 and B2 level on the CEFR scale. Advanced learners were teachers of L2 Chinese in the French secondary education.
- The researcher assigned the task to each participant individually. He briefly presented the support, the main protagonist and his journey, and then gave the instructions to the participant. He/she was asked first to browse the entire comic strip, in order to get familiarized with the overall story, then to narrate it using the images as if He/she was speaking to a native adult speaker who was not physically present during the collection.

What the researchers found

- Chinese native speakers referred to given information before introducing new information after the verb in a presentative construction (e.g., *dòng lǐ pǎo-chū-lái yī-gè tùzǐ* <hole inside run-out-hither one-CLF rabbit> ‘A rabbit runs out of the hole’).
- Low learners, as well as French native speakers, mainly introduced the new protagonists as the subject of a Subject-Verb construction (e.g., *yī-zhī māo chū-lái* <one-CLF cat exit-hither> ‘a cat comes out’) and rarely referred to given information.
- Intermediate learners showed more diversity by using several syntactic constructions (e.g., *yǒu yī-gè tùzǐ chūxiàn* <exist one-CLF rabbit appear> ‘there is a rabbit that appears’) but did not follow the Given-New order as Chinese native speakers.
- Advanced learners used a presentative construction. When compared to Chinese native speakers, they used respectively less verbs of motion (e.g., *tiào* ‘jump’ or *zuān* ‘slip’) and more existential (e.g., *lǐmiàn yǒu yī-zhī tùzǐ* <inside exist one-CLF rabbit> ‘There is a rabbit inside’).

Things to consider

- Low and intermediate learners showed little understanding of how new information interacts with word order in Chinese. This was likely not due to the influence of their L1 but to characteristics of the presentative construction: either those learners didn’t identify the function of this construction or they hadn’t full command of this non canonical word order construction.
- Advanced learners achieved the target word order but demonstrated that postposing a new protagonist after a motion verb was more challenging than after the existential verb: although new protagonist can only be introduced in post-verbal with the existential verb, it can occur in post-verbal position (presentative construction) or pre-verbal position (Subject-Verb construction) with the motion verb. The fact that the new protagonist is always in the same position with the existential verb could be a facilitating factor.

Material, data, open access: Materials available on IRIS database <https://www.iris-database.org/> at <https://doi.org/10.48316/2geGp-UjBsv>

How to cite this summary: Arslangul, A. (2023). Introducing a new protagonist in L2 Chinese narratives. *OASIS Summary* of Arslangul, A. (2023) in *Language Teaching Research*. <https://oasis-database.org>

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