

# An Examination of the Proficiency of Chinese Japanese learners in Using Filler Words

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**Abstract:** In this study, the use of the filler words by Chinese learners of Japanese was quantitatively compared with the actual conversation of Japanese learners. A quantitative comparative analysis of the use of the filler words “anou”, “eeto”, “maa” and “nannka” was conducted. The results showed that, firstly, In terms of the frequency of use of each filler word, the frequency of use and the type of use showed different trends as learners’ proficiency increased. Advanced Japanese learners used “anou” and “maa” significantly more frequently than intermediate Japanese learners. Second, the frequency of each usage of filler words increased with the learners’ proficiency, and the frequency and types of usage also showed different tendencies. Third, although the frequency of use increased with proficiency, the learners did not grasp the multifunctional nature of filler words in terms of their use of conversation functions. Thus, teachers should strengthen the guidance of filler words in current Japanese language teaching.

**Keywords:** Filler word acquisition; Conversational function; Proficiency; T-test

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## Introduction

When we observe the natural conversation of native Japanese speakers, we can see that while inserting words such as “anou”, “eeto”, “maa” and “nannka” are inserted into the conversation, while the tone of the conversation is adjusted to expand the topic, so that the conversation can be smoother. In order to master natural Japanese, it is important to use filler words appropriately. However, in general, Chinese learners have limited contact with Japanese people and have few opportunities to learn Japanese filler words from actual usage. Meanwhile, in Japanese language teaching, (Isato Okuhara 2010) points out that “the frequent occurrence of “maa” and “nannka” in natural conversation is basically not reflected in the textbooks. “ This indicates that the description of filler words in the textbook is still inadequate and the instruction of filler words is not paid attention to. As a result, it is difficult for Chinese learners to understand filler words correctly. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a survey on the use of filler words in order to provide learners with systematic guidance on filler words.

## 1. Previous research and the position of this paper

Japanese scholars such as (Shiozawa 1979), (Yamane 2002) and Nakajima (2011) have studied the conversational function of Japanese filler words. (Yamane 2002) examined filler words in terms of their phonological and acoustic aspects, their position in speech and conversation, their role, and their relationship with attributes, and classified the conversation function of filler words into “conversation regulation function” and “person regulation function”. The “conversation regulation function” was divided into “topic introduction”, “speech maintenance”, “time delay”, and “speaker alternation”. “speaker alternation”, “person regulation” is divided into “tone of voice”, “hesitation”, and “shared understanding”. “shared understanding”. In this paper, we use (Yamane’s 2002) classification to analyze the content of conversation.

However, the research methods used in the above studies all lacked quantitative analysis methods, making the findings somewhat limited. Therefore, a more in-depth examination of the relationship between learners’ Japanese proficiency and the use of filler words is necessary.

In summary, in order to fill in the existing gaps and shortcomings, this paper has conducted a quantitative comparative analysis of the use of filler words “anou”, “eeto”, “maa” and “nannka” by Chinese learners of Japanese based on their actual conversations. “Therefore, based on the purpose of analyzing the use of filler words by Chinese learners in conversation, this paper proposes the

following two topics.

Question 1: Whether there is a difference in the frequency of using “anou”, “eeto”, “maa” and “nannka” among learners of different levels. There is no difference in the frequency of use.

Question 2: Whether there are differences in the frequency of use of each talk function by learners of different levels.

## 2. Survey subjects

In this study, Chinese intermediate learners of Japanese and Chinese advanced learners of Japanese were surveyed. The method of data collection in this paper is a role play conducted to clarify the actual state of use. First, the conversation data from the role play was textualized to create a conversation profile. Second, the filler words used by Chinese intermediate learners of Japanese and Chinese advanced learners of Japanese were extracted from that conversation data. Then, the number of filler words used and the conversation function of filler words were compared and contrasted with the actual use of filler words by Chinese intermediate learners and Chinese advanced learners.

## 3. Research results and analysis

### 3.1 Differences in the frequency of use of “anou”, “eeto”, “maa”, and “nannka”, between intermediate Japanese language learners and advanced Japanese language learners

The specific number of filled word usage and the frequency of births for intermediate Japanese learners and advanced Japanese learners are summarized in Table 3 below. Individual differences in the frequency of intermediate and advanced Japanese learners using “anou”, “eeto”, “maa”, and “nannka”, will next be analyzed, by an independent sample t-test.

#### 3.1.1 The difference in the frequency of using “anou” between intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese.

A t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between the means of the frequency of use of “anou” by intermediate Japanese learners and advanced Japanese learners. After confirming the results of the chi-square test, the variance was judged to be chi-square ( $F=9.086$ ,  $p=.004^{***}$ ), and the results of the t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the frequency of using “anou” among Japanese learners with different levels of proficiency ( $t=3.129$ ,  $p=.004^{***}$ ). This indicates that advanced Japanese learners use “anou” significantly more frequently than intermediate Japanese learners.

#### 3.1.2 Differences in the frequency of using “eeto” between intermediate and advanced Japanese learners.

A t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between the means of the frequency of use of “eeto” by intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese. After confirming the results of the chi-square test, it was determined that the variance was chi-square ( $F=9.086$ ,  $p=.149$ ), and the results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the frequency of using “eeto” among Japanese learners with different levels of proficiency ( $t=1.483$ ,  $p=.149$ ). This indicates that there is no significant difference in the frequency of using “eeto” between advanced Japanese learners and intermediate Japanese learners.

#### 3.1.3 The difference in the frequency of using “maa” between intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese.

A t-test was conducted to check whether there was a significant difference between the means of the frequency of using “maa” by intermediate Japanese learners and advanced Japanese learners. The results of the chi-square test were confirmed and the variance was judged to be chi-square. ( $F=9.086$ ,  $p=.105$ ), the results of the t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the frequency of use of “maa” among Japanese learners with different levels of proficiency ( $t=1.557$ ,  $p=.031^{**}$ ). This indicates that advanced Japanese learners used “maa” more frequently than intermediate Japanese learners.

#### 3.1.4 Differences in the frequency of using “nannka” between intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese.

A t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between the means of the frequency of use of “nannka” by intermediate and advanced Japanese learners. The results of the chi-square test were confirmed and the variance was judged to be chi-square ( $F=9.086$ ,  $p=.105$ ), and the results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the frequency of using “nannka” among Japanese learners with different levels of proficiency ( $t=1.673$ ,  $p=.105$ ). This indicates that there is no significant difference in the frequency of using “nannka” between intermediate Japanese learners and advanced Japanese learners.

From the above results, it can be seen that advanced Japanese learners use

“anou” and “maa” significantly more frequently than intermediate Japanese learners. In particular, the use of “anou” ( $p < .01$ ) showed a significance of 1%, which indicates that there is a significant difference in the use of “anou” between intermediate and advanced Japanese learners.

### 3.2 Use of filler word conversation function by Japanese learners of different levels

This section examines the differences between intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese in terms of the use of the filler word conversation function, based on the analysis of conversation data, based on the two functions of filler words, “conversation

regulation function” and “person regulation function.

It is clear from this survey that both advanced and intermediate speakers are more aware of the “conversation moderation function” of “smooth communication” than the “person moderation function”.the proportion of “procrastination” for both advanced and intermediate level participants was the same, including “conversation regulation” and “person regulation”.In terms of the “human regulation function,” the use of “common understanding” as a way to express the feelings that the senior person wants to share with the listener in order not to damage the other person’s mood was the highest, accounting for nearly 13.3% of the total, followed by the use of “euphemistic expressions,” which accounted for 9.2% of the total. Moreover, the total usage rate of “moderating tone” and “expressing hesitation” among intermediates was much lower than the usage rate of “common understanding”. It is clear that intermediate learners are less aware of using filler words as a conversation strategy to capture good interpersonal relationships. It is clear that intermediate learners do not grasp the multi-functional nature of filler words, and that the use of filler words as an interpersonal strategy should be taught in Japanese language education.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

Based on previous studies, this paper categorizes the Japanese language proficiency of Chinese Japanese learners into intermediate and advanced levels, and analyzes longitudinally the real state of filler word usage among Japanese learners of each Japanese language level, followed by an examination of filler word talk functions. The results are as follows.

First,In terms of the frequency of use of each filler word, the frequency of use and the type of use showed different trends as learners’ proficiency increased. Advanced Japanese learners used “anou” and “maa” significantly more frequently than intermediate Japanese learners.

Secend,In terms of the conversational function of filler words used by Japanese learners, both intermediate and advanced learners used more filler words for the “conversation regulation function” than for the “person regulation function” overall. Moreover, compared to advanced learners, advanced learners used more of the talk functions such as “right to speak”, “time delay”, “tone of voice”, and “expression Hesitation” and other conversational functions. This shows that intermediate learners do not grasp the multi-functional nature of filler words, and that the use of relational functions should be taught more intensively in Japanese language education.

In the future, we will collect more corpus and analyze more comprehensively the use of filler words by Japanese learners of different levels, starting from the position of occurrence.

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