Mandarin is one of the classifier languages throughout the world (Allan 1977). Classifiers are morphemes or words within the same noun phrase as the noun they qualify (Senft 2000). Because each individual classifiers can be used with a set of different nouns, these classifiers together define a system of categories, based on features such as animacy, shape, and function (Chao 1968; Norman 1988). Classifier categories are important in providing a classification of how humans interact with those things (Lakoff 1987). Therefore, from cognitive linguistics perspective, it is generally accepted that the nouns grouped by a classifier reflect a process of human categorization and form a concrete category which may serve as an orientation point from which to uncover conceptual principles of human cognition and culture (Jiang 2009). While many previous studies that concentrated on the relation between Chinese classifiers and cognitive processing, mainly focusing on the difference among Chinese native speakers and native speakers of other languages (Srinivasan, 2010; Li P. et.al, 2009), little attention has been devoted to Chinese L2 learners. Therefore, the research question of this study is do L2 Chinese learners categorize nouns with classifiers as native speakers.

Semantic priming is used in the study to test the research question. Twenty advanced Chinese L2 learners and twenty Chinese native speakers will be recruited in the experiment. There are twenty experimental trials. Each trial contains 1). two pictures describing the main features of two different objects that can be modified by the related classifiers; 2). one phrase in the format of “Numeral+ CL+ Noun”, matches one of the pictures. Two classifiers will be tested (10 trials each), namely zhang and tiao, describing something with flat and long shapes respectively. Two lists will be created from the experimental trials by picking the picture and one of the phrase from each trial. The participants will see the target picture for ten seconds and do a lexical decision task by judging whether the phrase matches the picture or not. Reaction time of “picture-phrase matched” group and “picture-phrase non-matched” group will be compared. In the same time, the reaction time differences between those two groups from L2 learners and native speakers will also be compared.

With semantic priming effect, the reaction time will be shorter if the picture matches the phrase. That is to say, if the classifier affects Chinese L2 learners’ noun categorization, then there should be priming effect; if the L2 learners do not categories nouns as native speaker, priming effect should not show. Meanwhile, the differences between “picture-phrase matched” group and “picture-phrase non-matched” group from L2 learners and native speakers should not be statistic significant to judge there is priming effect among L2 learners.