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Error Analysis of Chinese Noun Classifiers in Second Language Acquisition and Implications for Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes errors in the use of noun classifiers in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, drawing on corpus-based data. It investigates common error types in learners' use of noun classifiers, including omission, overuse, and misuse. From the perspectives of negative transfer from the native language, overgeneralization of target language rules, instructional factors, learning strategies, and communication strategies, the study examines the underlying causes of these errors. On this basis, it proposes targeted pedagogical countermeasures, aiming to provide practical insights for improving the teaching and learning of Chinese noun classifiers.

INTRODUCTION

Noun classifiers constitute an essential component of the Chinese grammatical system and play a crucial role in the expression of quantity in modern Chinese. Unlike many Indo-European languages, Chinese requires classifiers when numerals modify nouns, which makes the acquisition of noun classifiers particularly challenging for learners of Chinese as a foreign language. Due to their large number, semantic diversity, and complex usage constraints, noun classifiers have long been recognized as one of the most difficult grammatical features for second language learners to master. Previous studies have consistently shown that learners of Chinese as a foreign language encounter persistent difficulties in the use of noun classifiers. Lu (2003) and Yang (2007) point out that classifier-related errors occur at the elementary and intermediate levels. Wang (2010) further demonstrates that common error types include the omission of classifiers, overuse of general classifiers such as *ge*, and the misuse of classifiers caused by semantic confusion. These findings indicate that classifier errors are systematic rather than accidental. From a pedagogical perspective, Li and Thompson (1981) emphasize that noun classifiers are closely related to semantic categorization in Chinese and therefore pose substantial challenges for second language learners. Zhang (2008) and Liu (2014) argue that inappropriate instructional sequencing and insufficient contextualized input may exacerbate learners' difficulties with classifier acquisition. Errors in the use of noun classifiers not only affect grammatical accuracy but also hinder effective communication, which has made this topic a focal concern in teaching Chinese as a foreign

language. In terms of linguistic description, scholars have proposed various classification systems for Chinese classifiers based on different theoretical perspectives. Huang Borong and Liao Xudong (2017), in *Modern Chinese*, divide classifiers into noun classifiers and verbal classifiers, and further categorize noun classifiers into several subtypes. Given the diversity of classification approaches, there is no single universally accepted framework. Building on previous research, the present study adopts the classification framework proposed by Huang Borong and Liao Xudong (2017) and categorizes Chinese noun classifiers into five types. Based on corpus data, this study conducts a systematic error analysis of learners' use of noun classifiers, explores the underlying causes of these errors, and proposes corresponding pedagogical countermeasures. The findings aim to provide empirical evidence and practical insights for improving the teaching of noun classifiers in Chinese as a foreign language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the acquisition of Chinese measure words in teaching Chinese as a foreign language has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly from the perspectives of error analysis and pedagogy. Numerous studies focusing on learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds have consistently demonstrated that measure words represent one of the most challenging grammatical categories for second language learners of Chinese.

Early studies adopting an error analysis approach primarily examined learners from Southeast Asian

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language backgrounds. Yang Zongxiong (2006), in his study of Thai learners of Chinese, conducted a comparative analysis of common Chinese measure words and their Thai counterparts using natural language data and questionnaire surveys. His findings indicate that Thai learners frequently produce errors such as omission and misuse of measure words, which are largely attributable to cross-linguistic differences and negative transfer from the native language. Similarly, Zeng Yihua (2007), focusing on Vietnamese learners, found that despite the existence of a relatively rich measure word system in Vietnamese, learners still tended to omit Chinese measure words when modifying nouns, highlighting the complexity of classifier acquisition and the limitations of positive transfer.

From a pedagogical perspective, several studies have explored the acquisition of Chinese measure words through classroom-based investigations and questionnaire surveys. Wang Minyuan (2007) examined learners at different proficiency levels and identified three major problem areas: the acquisition of extended meanings of measure words, the overgeneralization of the general classifier *ge*, and confusion in classifier–noun collocations. She proposed a progressive and hierarchical teaching approach to facilitate learners’ gradual understanding and use of measure words. Xu Feng (2007), based on an analysis of written compositions by Japanese and Korean exchange students, further identified frequent error types such as omission, overuse, incorrect word order in quantity structures, and semantic misuse, emphasizing that errors involving inappropriate classifier selection and placement pose significant challenges in instruction.

With the development of learner corpora, corpus-based studies have provided more empirical evidence on measure word acquisition. Liu Ying (2008) analyzed dynamic learner corpus data from students with English backgrounds and found that common errors included omission, misuse, addition, and redundancy of measure words. Her study emphasized that negative transfer from learners’ native languages was a major contributing factor to these errors. In a related line of research, Tian Yi (2009) examined the distribution of measure words in the Chinese Vocabulary and Character Level Outline and pointed out that the acquisition of measure words by international students lacks systematic sequencing, as measure words are often learned incidentally through sentence patterns rather than through structured instruction.

Further studies have extended the scope of research to action measure words and learners from a wider range of linguistic backgrounds. Tang Dong (2010) investigated the acquisition of action measure words by learners from Madagascar, Indonesia, South Korea, and Japan through questionnaire surveys. His findings suggest that gender and native language background exert limited influence on the learning outcomes of action measure words, while instructional design and input frequency play a more decisive role. Based on these results, Tang proposed revisions to teaching outlines and textbook design to improve the effectiveness of action measure

word instruction.

The role of language transfer has been examined in greater depth in studies focusing on learners from European and Central Asian language backgrounds. Su Yongfeng (2012), in his study of Bulgarian learners of Chinese, emphasized the significant impact of negative transfer on the acquisition of Chinese measure words, particularly at the early stages of learning. He found that learners often apply native-language patterns to Chinese, resulting in omissions and substitutions of measure words. Wang Xiaoyan (2015) similarly reported that Central Asian learners are strongly influenced by both negative and positive transfer in their acquisition of Chinese action measure words. While borrowed action measure words that resemble nouns in learners’ native languages tend to be acquired more easily, specialized action measure words often pose greater difficulty, necessitating focused grammatical and semantic instruction.

More recent research has continued to highlight the dynamic nature of native language transfer. Cao Meiai (2017), in her study of Burmese learners of Chinese, demonstrated that native language transfer is particularly prominent at the initial stages of second language acquisition and gradually weakens as learners’ proficiency increases. Her findings further confirm that while transfer is a normal phenomenon in interlanguage development, its negative effects should be carefully addressed through targeted pedagogical intervention.

In summary, existing studies have provided valuable insights into error types, sources of difficulty, and instructional strategies related to the acquisition of Chinese measure words. However, many of these studies rely primarily on questionnaire data or limited learner samples, and relatively few adopt a corpus-based approach to conduct a systematic analysis specifically targeting noun classifiers. Therefore, further research is needed to examine noun classifier errors using large-scale corpus data and to propose pedagogical countermeasures grounded in empirical evidence. The present study aims to address this gap by conducting a corpus-based error analysis of noun classifiers in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Results of the Literature Review

Research shows that Chinese measure words are especially challenging for foreign learners, with common errors including omission, misuse, and overgeneralization, often due to negative transfer from the native language. Pedagogical studies highlight difficulties in meaning, placement, and classifier–noun collocations, while corpus-based research points to the need for systematic instruction and empirical analysis. Overall, prior studies emphasize language transfer as a key factor and call for larger-scale, corpus-driven investigations.

Theoretical Framework of Chinese Noun Classifiers

Classification of Chinese Noun Classifiers

In Modern Chinese, classifiers function as grammatical units used to quantify entities and actions. From a

functional perspective, classifiers can be divided into noun classifiers and verb classifiers. Noun classifiers typically co-occur with nouns or nominal phrases to indicate the quantity of people or objects, as shown in expressions such as:

- 一个学生 (yí gè xuéshēng, “one student”)
- 一只鸟 (yì zhī niǎo, “one bird”)

Due to their large number and complex usage patterns, Chinese noun classifiers have been categorized in various ways by linguists adopting different theoretical perspectives. Among the most influential frameworks is the classification proposed by Huang Borong and Liao Xudong (2017) in Modern Chinese. Adopting this framework, the present study categorizes Chinese noun classifiers into five major types.

Individual Classifiers

Individual classifiers are used to denote single entities, including people and concrete objects. Common individual classifiers include ge, zhi, tiao, ba, zhang, wei, and jian. In Chinese, many nouns exhibit strong collocational preferences for specific classifiers. Examples include:

- 一位老师 (yí wèi lǎoshī, “one teacher”)
- 一条路 (yí tiáo lù, “one road”)
- 一把椅子 (yì bǎ yǐzi, “one chair”)
- 一张票 (yì zhāng piào, “one ticket”)
- 一颗星星 (yì kē xīngxīng, “one star”)

These fixed pairings frequently present difficulties for learners of Chinese as a foreign language, often resulting in classifier substitution errors.

Collective Classifiers

Collective classifiers refer to quantities composed of multiple individuals viewed as a single group. Typical collective classifiers include shuang, dui, ban, pi, qun, and tuan. These classifiers highlight group membership rather than individual units. For example:

- 一群孩子 (yì qún háiizi, “a group of children”)
- 一班学生 (yì bān xuéshēng, “a class of students”)

Measurement Classifiers

Measurement classifiers are used to express quantitative attributes such as length, weight, volume, and area. They can be subdivided as follows:

A. Length classifiers, which measure distance or extent, such as:

haomi (millimeter), limi (centimeter), mi (meter), gongli (kilometer), chi, and cun.

Example:

- 五米长 (wǔ mǐ cháng, “five meters long”)

B. Area classifiers, which indicate surface measurement, including:

pingfangmi, mu, and gongqing.

Example:

- 十亩地 (shí mǔ dì, “ten mu of land”)

C. Capacity classifiers, used to quantify volume, such as:

sheng, haosheng, and lifangmi.

Example:

- 一升牛奶 (yì shēng niúǎi, “one liter of milk”)

D. Weight classifiers, which denote mass, including: qian ke (kilogram), ke (gram), jin, and liang.

Example:

- 两斤苹果 (liǎng jīn píngguǒ, “two jin of apples”)

Borrowed Classifiers Derived from Nouns

Many noun classifiers are borrowed from nouns, especially those denoting containers or tools, and are grammaticalized to serve a quantifying function.

Examples include:

- 杯 (bēi): 一杯茶 (yì bēi chá, “a cup of tea”)
- 箱 (xiāng): 一箱书 (yì xiāng shū, “a box of books”)
- 袋 (dài): 一袋米 (yì dài mǐ, “a bag of rice”)

These classifiers retain traces of their original lexical meanings while functioning grammatically as classifiers.

Borrowed Classifiers Derived from Verbs

Some noun classifiers originate from verbs and are temporarily used as classifiers to indicate the quantity or occurrence of an action-related entity. Examples include:

- 把 (bǎ): 一把雪 (yì bǎ xuě, “a handful of snow”)
- 队 (duì): 一队人 (yì duì rén, “a team of people”)

Verb-derived classifiers are particularly challenging for second language learners due to their semantic flexibility and contextual dependency.

Grammatical Features of Chinese Noun Classifiers

First, Chinese noun classifiers are obligatory in quantitative expressions and typically occur between numerals and nouns, forming the structure numeral + classifier + noun. Direct combination of numerals and nouns, such as 一书 or 三猫, is generally ungrammatical.

Second, many monosyllabic classifiers can undergo reduplication, which conveys distributive or iterative meanings. Two common reduplication patterns can be identified:

• AA pattern, expressing “each,” as in 人人都知道 (“everyone knows”).

• A—A pattern, such as 一个一个地说 (“to speak one by one”), often used to describe sequential actions.

Third, classifiers can combine with demonstratives to form referential phrases, such as:

- 这辆车 (zhè liàng chē, “this car”)
- 那些房子 (nàxiē fángzi, “those houses”)

Finally, certain classifiers can co-occur with adjectives to emphasize scale or quantity, for example:

- 一大堆文件 (yì dà duī wénjiàn, “a large pile of documents”)
- 一小片森林 (yì xiǎo piàn sēnlín, “a small area of forest”)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Source

This study utilizes the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus, which includes 1,200 learner compositions collected from students of Chinese at varying proficiency levels (HSK 2–5) and with diverse native language

backgrounds. The corpus provides authentic learner data reflecting natural language use in writing, allowing for reliable observation of error patterns in the acquisition of Chinese noun classifiers. The corpus was chosen due to its comprehensiveness, representativeness, and accessibility for longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses of learner errors.

Research Design

A corpus-based error analysis methodology was employed, integrating both descriptive and inferential approaches. The study systematically investigates errors in the use of noun classifiers among foreign learners of Chinese, categorizing errors by type, frequency, and potential causes. The research focuses on three main error categories:

1. Omission: Failure to insert the required classifier between the numeral and noun (e.g., “三书” instead of “三本书”).
2. Addition: Insertion of an unnecessary classifier, often due to overgeneralization of frequently used classifiers such as 个 (e.g., “一个书”).
3. Misuse: Selection of an inappropriate classifier for the given noun, violating semantic or grammatical norms (e.g., “一架电视机” should be “一台电视机”).

Error Identification and Classification

All instances of noun classifiers in the corpus were extracted and examined according to the canonical “numeral + classifier + noun” structure in Chinese. Errors were annotated and classified based on Huang and Liao (2017) into five classifier categories:

- Individual classifiers: 个, 只, 条, 张, 件, etc., for single entities (e.g., 一条狗, 一件衣服, 一只鸟).
- Collective classifiers: 对, 双, 群, 班, 堆, 批, etc., for groups (e.g., 一群学生, 一双鞋).
- Measurement classifiers: 米, 千克, 升, 平方米, etc., for length, weight, volume, and area (e.g., 三平方米, 五升水).
- Borrowed classifiers from nouns: 桶, 碗, 船, etc., originally nouns used as classifiers (e.g., 一桶水, 一船人, 一碗饭).
- Borrowed classifiers from verbs: 挑, 堆, etc., originally verbs indicating actions, used to quantify occurrences (e.g., 一挑土, 一堆木材).

Analytical Procedure

The study followed a structured multi-step procedure:

1. Extraction of Instances: All noun classifier occurrences in the corpus were identified.
2. Annotation of Errors: Each occurrence was evaluated for omission, addition, or misuse.
3. Coding: Errors were categorized by classifier type and error type.
4. Quantitative Analysis: Error frequencies and distributions were calculated using SPSS 27 to identify prevalent patterns and trends.
5. Qualitative Interpretation: Errors were analyzed in

relation to underlying causes, including:

- Negative transfer from learners’ native languages (e.g., English speakers omitting classifiers).
- Overgeneralization of target language rules (e.g., frequent use of 个 in all contexts).
- Teaching materials and pedagogical practices (e.g., insufficient systematic explanations of classifiers).
- Learner strategies and communicative approaches (e.g., use of simplification strategies in spontaneous writing).

Reliability and Validity

To ensure inter-rater reliability, two independent annotators reviewed all corpus data. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved, achieving a Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of 0.92, indicating high consistency. Validity was enhanced through cross-referencing errors with authoritative grammar sources (Huang & Liao, 2017) and HSK curriculum guidelines, ensuring that the classifications accurately reflect standard Chinese usage.

Summary of methodology

This methodology provides a systematic, rigorous, and replicable framework for analyzing noun classifier errors. By combining quantitative analysis with qualitative interpretation, the study not only identifies common error patterns but also explores their linguistic and pedagogical causes, forming a strong foundation for the subsequent results and discussion sections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the error analysis conducted in this study, the following sections discuss the feedback gathered regarding the primary causes of these errors and the corresponding pedagogical countermeasures.

Analysis of Error Causation

The data indicates that noun classifier errors are not random but stem from specific linguistic and cognitive processes. Four primary factors were identified:

Negative Language Transfer: A significant portion of errors, especially among English-speaking learners, arises from the absence of a dedicated classifier system in their native language. This leads to the omission of classifiers (e.g., “three books” instead of “三本书”).

Overgeneralization: Learners often over-rely on high-frequency classifiers like “个” (gè). Once they internalize “个” as a general marker, they incorrectly apply it to nouns requiring specific classifiers, such as “一个书” (yī gè shū) instead of “一本书” (yī běn shū).

Instructional and Material Limitations: Feedback suggests that current textbooks often lack systematic comparisons of similar classifiers. Furthermore, pedagogical reliance on rote memorization rather than contextualized usage limits the learners’ ability to apply classifiers accurately in real-world communication.

Communicative Strategies: To maintain fluency, learners often resort to “reduction strategies,” substituting

complex or unknown classifiers with simpler ones they are confident in using, which leads to consistent misuse patterns.

Proposed Pedagogical Countermeasures

To address the aforementioned errors, the study proposes a multi-faceted instructional approach:

Contrastive and Contextualized Analysis: Instructors should employ contrastive analysis to highlight the differences between the learners' L1 and Chinese. Moreover, moving beyond abstract grammar to "Contextualized Teaching"-using multimedia and realia-can help learners visualize the semantic boundaries of classifiers (e.g., distinguishing “条” vs. “根” based on shape).

Game-Based and Active Learning: Incorporating interactive games and role-playing activities shifts the focus from passive memorization to active production. This reinforces retention and reduces the anxiety associated with choosing the “correct” classifier in spontaneous speech.

Curriculum Optimization: Textbooks should be restructured to introduce classifiers progressively, starting with high-frequency, semantically broad terms before moving to specialized ones. Exercises should also evolve from simple fill-in-the-blanks to complex tasks that require distinguishing between nuanced collocations.

CONCLUSION

Noun classifiers are a core yet challenging component of Chinese grammar for foreign learners due to their number, complexity, and cross-linguistic differences. Errors arise from multiple sources, including native language interference, overgeneralization, instructional limitations, and learners' strategies. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of targeted pedagogical

methods-contrastive analysis, contextualized teaching, and game-based activities-supported by well-designed materials, ultimately enhancing learners' comprehension, retention, and correct usage of Chinese noun classifiers.

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