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Error Analysis and Teaching Strategies for the Acquisition of the Chinese Prepositions 和," 跟," 同," and 与," for Burmese Intermediate Students

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Abstract

With the growing popularity of Chinese language learning among Myanmar students, accurate use of synonymous connectives such as “和” (hé), “跟” (gēn), “同” (tóng), and “与” (yǔ) has become a persistent challenge for intermediate learners. Despite their high frequency in daily communication, these words are often misused interchangeably, revealing gaps in semantic understanding and contextual appropriateness. To address this issue, this study employs a corpus-based and mixed-method approach, combining data from the *HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 2.0* and the *Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus Retrieval System* with questionnaires on learner perception and a classroom teaching experiment designed to test targeted corrective strategies. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal that learners’ errors stem primarily L1 (first language, i.e., Burmese) transfer and incomplete conceptualization of semantic distinctions among the connectives. The experimental teaching phase demonstrates that hierarchical instruction, supported by situational and contrastive exercises, significantly reduces misuse rates. This study provides empirical evidence of connective acquisition patterns among Burmese learners and offers pedagogical implications for improving Chinese language teaching in Myanmar contexts. This study is derived from the origin of Master’s thesis.¹

Keywords: Chinese prepositions; Burmese learners; error analysis; interlanguage; teaching strategy

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the learning of Chinese in Myanmar has gained unprecedented momentum under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As bilateral cooperation deepens in trade, education, and culture, the number of Myanmar students pursuing Chinese studies both domestically and abroad has increased sharply (Xue et al, 2022; Chen & Perfetti, 2024). Chinese has evolved from a specialized foreign language to an essential tool for economic participation and intercultural communication, particularly in border trade zones and Chinese-funded projects (Maret, 2024; Xinhua, 2024, April 21). However, despite the expansion of teaching programs and the proliferation of language institutes, functional words such as prepositions and conjunctions remain an underexplored and under-taught area in Chinese education in Myanmar. For intermediate learners in particular, these function words constitute one of the most persistent sources of grammatical error and pragmatic misunderstanding, as they involve subtle semantic and stylistic distinctions that differ significantly from Burmese linguistic structures (James, 1998).

Among the most challenging function words are the four prepositions “和”, “跟”, “同”, and “与”. These words not only indicate coordination, accompaniment, and comparison but also differ subtly in their stylistic, grammatical, and contextual usages. For example, “和” and “跟” are frequent in spoken language, while “同” and “与” tend to appear in formal or written contexts. Yet for Burmese learners, whose native language lacks an equivalent system of prepositions, such distinctions are often blurred. As a result, learners frequently overgeneralize, omit, or redundantly use these words, leading to expressions that are inaccurate or inappropriate to the communication context. These difficulties reflect not only the interference of the mother tongue but also an incomplete conceptualization of Chinese prepositional semantics, both of which warrant systematic pedagogical attention.

Despite a growing body of literature on Chinese preposition acquisition among learners from Southeast Asia, most existing studies adopt a regional perspective and rarely focus on the Burmese context. Research targeting intermediate Burmese learners, who are transitioning from basic sentence patterns to more complex syntactic structures, remains limited. Furthermore, while earlier works have identified frequent misuses of individual prepositions such as “跟” or “与,” few have provided an integrated analysis of the four words in comparison or proposed

empirically validated teaching solutions. This gap highlights the need for focused, data-driven research that captures the specific linguistic and cognitive patterns of Burmese learners and translates them into effective classroom strategies. Accordingly, this study is guided by three key research questions:

1. What types of errors do Burmese intermediate learners make when using “和,” “跟,” “同,” and “与”?
2. What are the main causes of these errors?
3. What teaching strategies can effectively reduce these errors?

To address these questions, this research combines corpus-based analysis, questionnaire investigation, and classroom experimentation. Error data were extracted from the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus and the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus, supplemented by questionnaire responses from Myanmar students and Chinese language teachers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to identify patterns of misuse and their underlying causes, while experimental teaching interventions were designed to test corrective and contextual strategies. The findings reveal that error patterns among Burmese learners stem largely from L1 transfer (from their first language, Burmese), lack of functional word awareness, and insufficient exposure to contextualized practice.

The study contributes both theoretically and practically. It enriches second language acquisition research by providing empirical evidence on interlanguage development and cross-linguistic influence in Burmese learners, and offers pedagogical implications for improving Chinese language teaching in Myanmar. Specifically, by proposing a hierarchical teaching framework and situational contextualization strategies, this research provides actionable models for error correction and curriculum design. In doing so, it bridges the gap between theoretical linguistics and classroom practice, offering valuable insights for teachers, textbook developers, and scholars in international Chinese education.

2. Literature Review And Theoretical Framework

2.1 Overview Of Studies On Chinese Preposition Acquisition And Function Word Teaching

Research on Chinese prepositions has a long tradition within modern Chinese linguistics. From Ma Jianzhong's *Ma's Wen Tong* (1898) to contemporary studies, scholars have explored the grammatical status, diachronic development, and semantic roles of prepositions such as 和, 跟,

同, and 与. These words are multifunctional—often serving as both conjunctions and prepositions—and their meanings vary across registers and dialects. Studies by Lü Shuxiang (1980), Huang Borong and Liao Xudong (2006), and others have clarified that 和 and 跟 are common in spoken language, while 同 and 与 convey greater formality or written tone. The high frequency and polysemous nature of these prepositions make them critical yet challenging for second language learners.

In the field of international Chinese education, functional words—including prepositions, conjunctions, and particles are often recognized as one of the most difficult aspects for non-native speakers to master. As noted by Cui Xiliang (2005) and Zhao Kuixin (2000), prepositions pose unique challenges because their meanings cannot be fully inferred from context, and their syntactic functions vary subtly. Learners often display confusion between prepositions with overlapping meanings, such as 和 and 跟, or fail to distinguish between written and spoken usage. Despite extensive comparative work on learners from Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, and Europe, research specifically addressing Burmese learners remains scarce. Moreover, while many studies have analyzed general preposition errors, few have conducted systematic comparisons among these four function words or designed targeted pedagogical interventions.

In teaching practice, functional word instruction tends to receive limited emphasis. Textbooks often list 和, 跟, 同, and 与 together without adequate differentiation, and classroom explanations rarely engage with cross-linguistic contrasts or pragmatic appropriateness. As a result, intermediate Burmese learners, who have moved beyond basic grammar but still rely on L1 conceptual frameworks, face persistent difficulties. The absence of explicit, context-based instruction contributes to repeated misuse and fossilization of errors, highlighting the urgent need for empirical research that integrates linguistic analysis and pedagogical design.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations: Error Analysis And Interlanguage Theory

This study draws primarily on Error Analysis theory (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994) and Interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972) as its theoretical foundation. Error Analysis (EA) provides a framework for identifying, classifying, and interpreting the linguistic errors made by second language learners. According to Corder (1967), learner errors are not mere signs of failure but valuable evidence of the internal learning process. EA emphasizes analyzing error types such as

omission, redundancy, substitution, and word-order errors to reveal the underlying learning mechanisms and developmental stages. Ellis (1994) further refined this approach, proposing that systematic analysis of learner errors can uncover both interlingual (L1 transfer-related) and intralingual (target language-related) causes. Within this study, EA serves as a methodological tool for examining how Burmese learners misuse 和, 跟, 同, and 与, allowing for the identification of cognitive and linguistic sources of these errors.

Interlanguage theory, introduced by Selinker (1972), complements Error Analysis (EA) by conceptualizing learners' developing language as an intermediate system between their mother tongue and the target language. This "interlanguage" reflects both the influence of prior linguistic habits and the learners' attempts to internalize new linguistic rules (Corder, 1971; Ellis, 1994). It is dynamic, rule-governed, and susceptible to fossilization, meaning that certain erroneous forms may become stable and resistant to change despite further learning (Han & Selinker, 2005; Tarone, 2012). For Burmese learners of Chinese, the frequent confusion among the four prepositions reflects precisely such interlanguage characteristics. The learners often overgeneralize familiar structures or rely on incomplete conceptual understanding, producing systematic yet non-native forms (James, 1998; Odlin, 1989). Interlanguage theory thus provides a theoretical lens to interpret not only what errors occur but also why they persist despite continued exposure.

2.3 Native Language (L1) Transfer And Cross-Linguistic Influence

A key explanatory mechanism in both EA and interlanguage frameworks is L1 (native language) transfer, or the influence of the learner's native language (L1) on second language acquisition (SLA). L1 transfer occurs when linguistic features from the first language are applied to the second language, potentially facilitating or hindering the learning process (Alonso, 2017). Cross-linguistic influence manifests in phonology, syntax, and semantics, and is particularly salient when structural differences between languages are large. In Burmese, syntactic relations are primarily expressed through particles and word order rather than prepositions. The language lacks direct equivalents to Chinese function words such as 和, 跟, 同, and 与, which encode coordination, accompaniment, or contrast. Consequently, Burmese learners tend to transfer native strategies—such as juxtaposition or the use of clause-final markers when constructing

Chinese sentences. This results in errors such as omission of prepositions, misuse in formal contexts, or overreliance on a single preposition (和) regardless of context. Understanding these structural disparities is therefore crucial for explaining error patterns and designing effective teaching interventions.

2.4 Research Gap, Theoretical And Practical Contributions

Previous studies have advanced our understanding of Chinese prepositions and L2 (second language) error patterns, where L2 refers to any language learned after the learner's first language (L1) (Ortega, 2013). However, no empirical research to date has specifically examined the acquisition of “和,” “跟,” “同,” and “与” by Burmese intermediate learners, leaving a significant gap in the literature. Existing research tends to focus on broad regional groups or single-word analysis, neglecting the unique syntactic and pragmatic challenges posed by Burmese learners' linguistic background. This study fills that gap by combining corpus-based error analysis, questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and classroom experiments to explore both the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of these errors. By integrating the principles of Error Analysis, Interlanguage Theory, and cross-linguistic comparison, it establishes a comprehensive framework for diagnosing learner difficulties and developing hierarchical, context-based teaching strategies.

This article is practically significant for two reasons. First, it helps teachers understand the typical difficulties Burmese intermediate learners face with “和,” “跟,” “同,” and “与,” enabling more targeted lesson design and classroom guidance. Second, by analyzing common errors, it provides insights for improving textbooks and learning materials, making them more practical, learner-centered, and suited to intermediate and advanced students.

3. Research Design And Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the acquisition and misuse of the Chinese prepositions 和 (hé), 跟 (gēn), 同 (tóng), and 与 (yǔ) among Burmese intermediate learners of Chinese. The research design is structured to capture both the frequency of specific error types and the underlying

cognitive and pedagogical factors contributing to these errors, thereby providing a comprehensive basis for instructional recommendations.

The study involved 60 Burmese intermediate learners of Chinese, aged between 18 and 28, recruited from three universities in Myanmar offering Chinese language programs. Participants had completed at least two years of formal Chinese instruction, corresponding to an HSK Level 3–4 proficiency range, and represented diverse educational backgrounds in liberal arts, business, and engineering. In addition, six experienced Chinese language teachers were engaged for semi-structured interviews to gain professional insights into learners' difficulties and effective teaching strategies.

Four data sources were employed to ensure triangulation. First, written production data were drawn from the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 2.0 and the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus Retrieval System, which provide authentic learner texts reflecting varied contexts and proficiency levels. These corpora facilitated the identification and categorization of preposition misuse in naturally occurring written Chinese. Second, a questionnaire was administered to participants to investigate their usage patterns and perceptions regarding the target prepositions, including self-reported difficulties, error awareness, and contextual preferences. Third, semi-structured interviews with teachers explored pedagogical perspectives, common errors observed in classrooms, and instructional strategies employed to address these issues. Finally, experimental teaching sessions were conducted with a subset of participants to test the effectiveness of corrective strategies, including hierarchical instruction and situational exercises.

Data analysis integrated quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, error types were coded and subjected to frequency analysis, enabling a statistical overview of the most prevalent misuses and patterns across learners. Qualitatively, representative misuse cases were analyzed in depth to uncover underlying causes, including L1 interference, conceptual misunderstanding, and context-dependent selection. Classroom experimental data were then evaluated to determine the effectiveness of targeted teaching interventions, comparing pre- and post-test error rates to measure improvement.

The study followed standard ethical protocols, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity of responses. To enhance reliability and validity, multiple coders independently reviewed error categorizations, and triangulation across corpora, questionnaires,

interviews, and experimental outcomes was implemented. The research design ensured that findings are both empirically grounded and pedagogically relevant, supporting evidence-based recommendations for teaching Chinese prepositions to Burmese learners.

4. Findings And Analysis

This section presents the core empirical results of the study, examining the misuse of Chinese prepositions 和 (hé), 跟 (gēn), 同 (tóng), and 与 (yǔ) among Burmese intermediate learners, analyzing error types, underlying causes, and the effectiveness of targeted teaching interventions. The findings integrate corpus analysis, learner questionnaires, teacher interviews, and experimental classroom data.

4.1 Error Classification

Analysis of the learner corpora revealed four principal categories of prepositional misuse: overgeneralization, context-inappropriate use, syntactic misplacement, and semantic confusion. Overgeneralization occurred when learners applied a single preposition indiscriminately across contexts. For example, 跟 (gēn) was frequently used as a substitute for 和 (hé) in formal writing, such as “我跟你们公司合作” instead of the standard “我和你们公司合作,” reflecting a tendency to favor conversational usage patterns. Similarly, 同 (tóng) was over-applied in casual contexts, indicating learners’ uncertainty about stylistic registers.

Context-inappropriate use included errors in formal versus informal registers. 与 (yǔ), a formal preposition commonly appearing in written Chinese and academic texts, was often replaced with 和 (hé) or 跟 (gēn), especially in essays and business correspondence. Conversely, 跟 (gēn) appeared in formal statements where a more formal preposition would be expected, indicating learners’ difficulty in aligning preposition choice with social and textual context.

Syntactic misplacement was another recurrent error type. Prepositions were sometimes positioned incorrectly in relation to verbs and nouns. For example, learners wrote “我和她昨天见面” instead of the contextually appropriate “昨天我和她见面” in temporal ordering, or

inserted prepositions redundantly, such as “我跟和他去市场,” reflecting interference from Burmese syntactic patterns, which differ in topic-comment structure and prepositional use.

Semantic confusion arose from misunderstanding subtle distinctions in meaning and usage. For instance, learners confused 和 (hé) and 同 (tóng) when expressing “together with,” or used 与 (yǔ) interchangeably with 和 (hé) in coordinating verbs, ignoring stylistic nuances. These errors demonstrate that learners’ conceptualization of Chinese prepositions is still incomplete and context-sensitive. A frequency analysis summarized these findings (see Table 1). Among 1,200 corpus instances, overgeneralization accounted for 38% of errors, context-inappropriate use 27%, syntactic misplacement 21%, and semantic confusion 14%. This distribution highlights the predominance of overgeneralization, emphasizing the need for explicit attention to register and contextual norms in instruction.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Prepositional Errors among Burmese Learners

| Error Type | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Overgeneralization | 456 | 38% |
| Context-inappropriate use | 324 | 27% |
| Syntactic misplacement | 252 | 21% |
| Semantic confusion | 168 | 14% |
| Total | 1,200 | 100% |

4.2 Causes Of Errors

The study identifies three primary sources contributing to these errors: mother tongue transfer, target language complexity, and instructional gaps.

Mother tongue transfer is a major factor. Burmese lacks direct equivalents for many Chinese prepositions and employs a flexible syntactic order that often contrasts with Chinese structure. For instance, Burmese uses post-nominal particles to indicate coordination or accompaniment, leading learners to misplace prepositions or insert redundant markers in Chinese. Similarly, the absence of formal vs. informal prepositional distinctions in Burmese results in

inappropriate register selection. Questionnaire responses confirmed that 72% of participants attributed some errors to interference from their native syntax.

Target language complexity also contributes to errors. Chinese prepositions are multifunctional, with overlapping meanings depending on context, verb valency, and syntactic positioning. Learners often struggled to differentiate 和 (hé) and 跟 (gēn) in spoken versus written contexts, and 同 (tóng) versus 与 (yǔ) in formal writing. Teachers noted that learners' overgeneralization and semantic confusion stemmed from incomplete internalization of these distinctions, compounded by irregular collocational patterns in authentic texts.

Instructional gaps further exacerbate difficulties. Textbooks and classroom materials tend to simplify prepositional rules, focusing on isolated examples rather than contrasting usage or context-sensitive application. Interviews with teachers revealed that limited contrastive explanation and insufficient emphasis on register distinctions hindered learners' ability to generalize appropriately. Consequently, students often relied on intuition rather than systematic understanding, leading to persistent errors.

4.3 Empirical Evidence Of Teaching Intervention

To address these errors, a targeted teaching intervention was implemented, combining situational exercises, hierarchical error correction, and context-based drills. Instruction was sequenced from concrete, frequent-use scenarios to more abstract and formal contexts, allowing learners to internalize distinctions gradually.

Observational data during the intervention indicated a significant reduction in error frequency. In pre-test compositions, the average error rate per student was 17.4 instances per 200 words; after the intervention, it decreased to 6.2 instances, representing a 64% improvement. Students demonstrated increased awareness of register-appropriate usage, accurate syntactic positioning, and refined semantic understanding. Quantitative comparisons confirmed these gains. Table 2 illustrates before-and-after results for each error category:

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention Error Rates

| Error Type | Pre-Test | Post-Test | Improvement (%) |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|
| Overgeneralization | 7.2 | 2.5 | 65% |
| Context-inappropriate use | 5.0 | 1.8 | 64% |
| Syntactic misplacement | 3.5 | 1.2 | 66% |
| Semantic confusion | 1.7 | 0.7 | 59% |
| Total | 17.4 | 6.2 | 64% |

Representative examples further illustrate learning outcomes. For instance, the sentence “我跟你们公司合作” was corrected to “我和你们公司合作” in formal writing, reflecting appropriate register; “我跟和他去市场” was simplified to “我跟他去市场”, correcting syntactic redundancy. Learners reported improved confidence in selecting prepositions according to context, with interviews confirming heightened metalinguistic awareness. The findings demonstrate that preposition misuse among Burmese learners stems from a combination of L1 transfer, target language complexity, and instructional gaps, and that structured, context-sensitive teaching interventions can substantially improve accuracy. The integration of corpus-based analysis, learner perceptions, and empirical teaching trials provides a robust foundation for pedagogical recommendations, highlighting the need for hierarchical instruction, contrastive explanation, and situational practice to foster accurate prepositional use.

5. Discussion

The present study provides a comprehensive examination of Burmese intermediate learners' misuse of the Chinese prepositions 和 (hé), 跟 (gēn), 同 (tóng), and 与 (yǔ), offering insights into the interplay between first language (L1) transfer and interlanguage development, and its implications for Chinese language pedagogy. The findings show that learner errors are not random but systematically shaped by cross-linguistic influences, cognitive processing, and instructional factors, therefore validating the error analysis framework as a valuable theoretical lens.

5.1 Interplay Between L1 Transfer And Interlanguage Development

Consistent with interlanguage theory (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994), Burmese learners' prepositional errors show transitional stages in their developing Chinese. L1 transfer is an important factor: Burmese word order, flexible syntax, and lack of formal/informal prepositional distinctions often cause mistakes. For example, learners may add unnecessary prepositions or place them incorrectly, and they may overuse colloquial prepositions in formal contexts. These errors are systematic attempts to approximate the target language rather than simple carelessness. Corpus data and examples show that cross-linguistic influence interacts with learners' evolving interlanguage, shaping how errors occur and are corrected.

5.2 Validation Of The Error Analysis Framework

The classification of errors into overgeneralization, context-inappropriate use, syntactic misplacement, and semantic confusion aligns closely with classical error analysis principles. Quantitative frequency analysis identified dominant error patterns, while qualitative examination revealed underlying causes rooted in L1 transfer, target language complexity, and instructional gaps. This dual approach confirms that error analysis remains a robust framework for both diagnostic and pedagogical purposes. Notably, the study extends traditional applications by integrating corpus-based evidence, questionnaire insights, and experimental teaching data, offering a holistic view of learner difficulties and illustrating the framework's adaptability to Southeast Asian learners of Chinese.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest four practical strategies for teaching Chinese to Burmese learners. First, contrastive teaching that highlights differences between Burmese and Chinese prepositions can help learners notice and reduce transfer errors. Second, contextualized practice with varied situations and registers, especially for multifunctional prepositions like 和 and 跟, improves learning. Third, a tiered correction approach—from immediate feedback to reflective review—helps learners retain knowledge and monitor their own errors. Finally, textbooks should include contrastive notes, authentic examples, and graded exercises that target common Burmese learner

errors. Together, these strategies promote more accurate and context-appropriate prepositional use.

5.4 Reflection On Cross-Linguistic Transfer Research

Beyond the Burmese context, the study contributes to understanding cross-linguistic transfer among Southeast Asian learners, many of whom share typological traits such as tonal systems, flexible word order, or limited prepositional distinctions. The interplay of L1 influence, target language complexity, and instructional scaffolding observed in this study likely generalizes to learners from neighboring countries, offering insights for regional curriculum design and teacher training. By foregrounding empirical evidence and classroom-tested interventions, this research highlights the importance of context-sensitive, contrastive pedagogy in supporting interlanguage development and minimizing persistent error patterns.

The study, thus, illuminates the complex interactions between L1 transfer, interlanguage formation, and instructional practice, demonstrating that learner errors are systematic, interpretable, and pedagogically actionable. By integrating error analysis, corpus evidence, and experimental teaching, it advances both theoretical understanding and practical approaches to teaching Chinese prepositions to Burmese learners and potentially other Southeast Asian contexts. The findings reinforce the value of contrastive, contextualized, and tiered instructional strategies, while also emphasizing the necessity of adapting teaching materials to meet learners' specific linguistic and cognitive needs.

6. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study examined the misuse of Chinese prepositions 和 (hé), 跟 (gēn), 同 (tóng), and 与 (yǔ) among Burmese intermediate learners, employing a combination of corpus analysis, questionnaires, teacher interviews, and experimental teaching sessions. The findings demonstrate that learner errors are systematic and predictable, primarily influenced by L1 transfer, target language complexity, and instructional gaps. Overgeneralization, context-inappropriate use, syntactic misplacement, and semantic confusion were identified as recurring error types, highlighting specific areas for pedagogical focus. Empirical teaching interventions including situational exercises, hierarchical error correction, and context-based drills proved effective in

reducing error frequency and improving learners' accuracy in contextual usage, with observed improvements of over 60% across error categories.

The study carries significant implications for Chinese language education. First, curriculum design should incorporate explicit contrastive instruction, graded exercises, and varied contextual examples to address learners' specific difficulties. Second, teacher training programs should emphasize metalinguistic awareness of common cross-linguistic errors and equip instructors with strategies for tiered correction and contextualized feedback. Third, textbook compilation should be adapted to the Burmese learner profile, integrating contrastive notes, authentic examples, and exercises targeting frequent prepositional errors, thereby bridging the gap between interlanguage tendencies and target norms.

For future research, the study suggests two avenues. First, expansion to advanced learners could investigate whether similar patterns persist at higher proficiency levels and whether interventions yield long-term retention. Second, comparative studies with learners from other Southeast Asian contexts, such as Thai or Vietnamese students, could further elucidate cross-linguistic transfer effects and inform region-specific pedagogical strategies. Collectively, these efforts would deepen understanding of Chinese preposition acquisition and contribute to more effective, context-sensitive instructional practices for Southeast Asian learners.

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