

Corpus-based error analysis and teaching strategy research on the acquisition of pivotal sentence by Chinese learners from universities in China

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Abstract: Anyone who has taught Chinese grammar to international students will recognise the pivotal construction as something learners keep getting wrong, no matter how many times it is explained. It is simply too different from the syntactic devices that most other languages use for causative and imperative meanings. In this paper, we take a close look at how this construction is actually acquired, drawing on a combined corpus of 3,648 pivotal-construction utterances produced by international students studying in China—708 of which turned out to contain errors once we had worked through the annotation. What we found is not a single neat picture but a layered one. Syntactic problems account for the largest share of errors, at 58.2%, followed by semantic issues at 31.5% and pragmatic ones at 10.3%. Missing constituents, wrong choice of pivotal verb, and register confusion stand out as the most recurring sub-types. Perhaps the most interesting finding is how differently learners from Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines struggle with the structure—each group shows a distinctive error profile that mirrors the typological distance between their mother tongue and Chinese. Behind these patterns lie not one cause but several: the construction's own nested complexity, first-language transfer, overgeneralisation of what has already been learned, weak learning strategies, and shortcomings in textbooks and teaching. Based on what the data suggest, we sketch out a five-step corpus-driven teaching model and offer concrete suggestions across four areas: textbook design, classroom methods, learner strategies, and practice activities.

Keywords: International Chinese Language Education; pivotal construction; error analysis; corpus; teaching strategy

0. Introduction

If you spend any time marking international students' Chinese essays, you will sooner or later come across sentences like "朋友叫去买东西" or "老板使我去出差". Something about the 兼语句—the Chinese pivotal construction—seems to resist straightforward mastery. Structurally, it follows the pattern "N1 + V1 + N2 + V2," in which N2 does double duty: it is at once the object of the first verb and the subject of the second^[1]. That one nominal element should bear two grammatical roles inside a single clause is precisely what makes the construction unusual—and what makes it such a stubborn source of difficulty for second-language learners.

Seen from a typological angle, this is not really surprising. Indo-European languages tend to handle causative and imperative meanings through subordinate clauses, infinitives, or participial constructions, with morphological marking or conjunctions making the relationship explicit. Chinese, by contrast, achieves syntactic embedding through the pivotal function of a noun phrase, with no morphological markers and no connecting word to signal what is happening. For learners whose L1 has nothing comparable, the very idea that a single noun can be both object and subject at once can take a long time to sink in^{[2][3]}. It is this typological gap, we suspect, that makes the pivotal construction such a persistent teaching challenge.

Chinese grammarians have, of course, been studying pivotal constructions for well over a century. Interest in the pattern goes back at least to *Mashi Wentong*, and Wang Li's treatment of what he called "successive-series constructions" gave the field its first clearly articulated account of the pivot's dual grammatical status^[4]. From the 1980s onwards, research moved in several directions at once. Xiao Fan applied the three-level grammar perspective to produce a more systematic analysis^[5]; Fuyi Yi worked through classification and features from a semantic-relational point of view^[6]; and Jiaxuan Shen brought valency grammar to bear on the problem^[7]. Each of these lines of inquiry has deepened our theoretical understanding, though none was designed with second-language acquisition specifically in mind.

On the applied side, things developed somewhat later. Jianji Lu was among the first to bring error-analysis theory into Chinese-as-a-foreign-language teaching in a systematic way, and his work set up the methodological framework that most subsequent studies have worked within^[8]. Dazhong Li, for his part, pioneered focused research on pivotal-construction errors with his study of 使-sentence mistakes^[9]. After the turn of the century, Xiqiang Xiao made an important contribution by using interlanguage corpus methods to look at Chinese syntactic errors more broadly, giving pivotal-construction research a more solid empirical base^[10]. In the last ten years or so, scholars such as Zhang Linfang^[11] and Huiling Wang^[12] have extended the inquiry into learner errors from a range of angles. Even so, much of the existing work focuses on describing errors rather than explaining why they arise or testing how they might be addressed in the classroom.

We decided early on that a single theoretical lens would not be enough. Our own framework draws on three bodies of work: Corder's five-step procedure for error analysis, which gives us a way of moving systematically from identification to explanation^[13]; Selinker's interlanguage theory, which helps us see learner errors as systematic and developmental rather than simply random^[14]; and Lado's contrastive analysis hypothesis, which suggests where first-language interference is most likely to be at work^[15]. Our aim in this paper is not just to catalogue what goes wrong—though we do that—but to trace the patterns, identify the causes, and see what the findings imply for how pivotal constructions might better be taught.

1. Theoretical Overview of Pivotal Constructions

1.1 Definition and Syntactic Properties

Before we look at the errors themselves, we should be clear about what we mean by a pivotal construction. At its simplest, it is a sentence in which a pivotal phrase sits at the heart of the predicate, following the basic schema "N1 + V1 + N2 + V2." Inside that pattern, N2—the pivot—functions simultaneously as the object of V1 and as the subject of V2, carrying two grammatical identities and two semantic roles at once^{[1][5]}. Readers coming to the construction for the first time sometimes find this dual-function idea hard to accept; after all, in most grammatical traditions each constituent has just one job. But that is precisely the point: the pivotal construction is defined by this nesting quality, by the fact that one syntactic unit has another subject-predicate structure tucked inside it.

This double grammatical life of the pivotal element is what really sets the construction apart. At the level of syntax, N2 is object with respect to the first verb phrase and subject with respect to the second. Semantically, it is at once the patient of V1 and the agent of V2—two thematic roles rolled into one nominal element within a single clause. It is worth pausing on how unusual that is. In serial verb constructions, by comparison, both verbs share the same subject; in sentences where a subject-predicate phrase functions as the object, the object itself is a full clause, not a single noun. The pivotal construction is something genuinely different, and that distinctiveness is part of why learners struggle.

Learners are not the only ones who sometimes confuse pivotal constructions with similar patterns;

grammarians have also debated the boundaries. Drawing on the standard accounts, we can draw the lines reasonably clearly. Serial verb constructions have two verbs that share a single subject, so there is no dual-function element at all. Subject-predicate object constructions, for their part, contain a complete subject-predicate unit in object position—whereas in a pivotal construction N2 remains a single nominal element, not a full clause. These distinctions matter because much of what we see in learner errors is not just wrong morphology or wrong word order but a failure to grasp which construction they are dealing with in the first place.

1.2 Semantic Classification

When it comes to classifying pivotal constructions by meaning, there are several schemes in the literature. For our purposes, we follow Fan's framework^[5], though we have adapted it somewhat to fit what we actually see in learner data and what seems most useful for teaching. We work with four main semantic types: imperative, causative, assistance/companionship, and miscellaneous. Not every scholar would draw the lines in exactly the same place, and that is fine; the classification here is meant to be pedagogically workable rather than theoretically perfect (see Table 1).

Table 1 Classification and Semantic Features of Pivotal Constructions

Category	Semantic Feature of V1	Common V1 Verbs	Example Sentence
Imperative type	Command or request meaning	让、叫、请、派、命令	经理派员工去出差
Causative type	Cause or result meaning	使、令、致使	这个消息令大家兴奋
Assistance/ companionship type	Help or accompany meaning	帮、陪、协助	我陪朋友去看病
Miscellaneous type	Naming, existence, etc.	叫、称、有、没有	大家叫他老杨 / 有人找你

The imperative type is in many ways the most basic and the most frequent. Verbs like 让、叫、请、派 and 邀请 all fall into this group, and what unites them is that V1 carries a clear command or request meaning, with V2 happening as a direct result of that command. Causative pivotal constructions, by contrast, have V1 as the source of causation and V2 as the resulting state—think of 使、令 and 致使. The assistance/companionship type is somewhat different again: here V1 expresses helping or accompanying, and the action of V2 is carried out jointly by N1 and N2 together, with 帮、陪 and 协助 as representative verbs. Finally, the miscellaneous category gathers together less common types such as naming/addressing constructions and existential pivotal constructions. There is no claim that these four types are exhaustive or mutually exclusive in every case; they are simply the categories that have proved most useful for organising the error data.

2. Research Design

2.1 Data Sources

We should say a word about why we built the corpus the way we did. Early on in the project, it became clear that relying on a single corpus would give us a skewed picture—either too narrow in L1 backgrounds or too limited in text type. We therefore decided to put together a multi-source dataset, drawing on three different kinds of learner material: the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus from Beijing Language and Culture University, the International Student Interlanguage Corpus maintained by Jinan University, and a smaller set of learner writing that we collected ourselves, mostly from homework assignments and oral recordings (see appendix).

Table 2 Corpus Sources and Quantity Statistics

Corpus Source	Total Instances	Error Instances	Error Rate (%)
BLCU HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus	1,588	440	27.70
Jinan University International Student Learner-language Corpus	1,734	190	10.96
Supplementary corpus (homework + oral recordings)	326	78	23.93
Total	3,648	708	19.41

Each source adds something different. The HSK corpus has the advantage of size—its coverage is broad, its sample large, and its annotation reasonably standardised—so it gives us a good overall picture of how learners from different L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels use the construction. The Jinan University corpus, for its part, offers a wider range of written genres. Our own supplementary data, collected from Southeast Asian students at Jinzhou Medical University, was added partly because we noticed that existing corpora under-represent Southeast Asian nationalities, and partly because we wanted error examples that we could place in a richer instructional context. Across all three sources we extracted 3,648 pivotal-construction instances, of which 708 contained identifiable errors—an overall error rate of 19.4% (Table 2).

2.2 Research Methodology

How did we actually analyse those 708 errors? We ended up using four methods in combination, since no single approach seemed adequate on its own (Table 3). Corpus analysis gave us the basic quantitative picture—how often each error type appeared, how frequencies broke down by nationality, and so on. Error analysis, guided by Corder's procedure and Lu Jianji's classification criteria, was what allowed us to sort the errors into syntactic, semantic and pragmatic categories in the first place. Contrastive analysis then helped us compare patterns across L1 backgrounds and see where first-language transfer might be at work. Finally, case analysis let us zoom in on representative examples and give the quantitative findings some flesh and blood. We found that the four methods reinforced one another: the corpus statistics told us where to look, error analysis gave us the categories, contrastive analysis explained some of the differences, and case analysis kept us honest about what the numbers actually meant.

Table 3 Research Methods and Descriptions

Research Method	Specific Procedure	Function
Corpus analysis	Retrieval, filtering, annotation, and statistical analysis	Generating data on error types, frequency, and cross-national distribution
Error analysis	Corder's procedure + Lu Jianji's classification criteria	Grouping errors into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic categories
Contrastive analysis	Comparing errors across L1 backgrounds, proficiency levels, and sentence patterns	Revealing cross-national characteristics and distinguishing difficulties
Case analysis	Selecting representative cases for contextualized analysis	Providing targeted evidence for instructional recommendations

3. Analysis of Pivotal Construction Error Types

Working our way through all 3,648 utterances was not a straightforward job. Some errors were obvious as soon as we saw them, but others sat right on the boundary between "ungrammatical" and "just a bit awkward," and deciding which side of the line they fell on took considerable back-and-forth between the two annotators. Once we had finished, though, a fairly clear picture emerged. Errors clustered at three linguistic levels: syntactic structure, semantic relations, and pragmatic usage, accounting for 58.2%, 31.5% and 10.3% of the total respectively. That syntactic

errors should be the largest category did not really surprise us—we had suspected as much from our teaching experience—but we had not expected pragmatic errors to be quite so small a share (Tables 4–6).

3.1 Syntactic Structure Errors

By syntactic structure errors, we mean deviations where something goes wrong with the core building blocks of the construction—elements are left out, extra ones are added, or the order gets mixed up. At 58.2% of all errors, this is comfortably the biggest category. Within it, we identified four main sub-types: missing constituents, redundant constituents, word-order errors, and structural blending. Readers might wonder why we did not use a finer-grained classification; the answer is that once you go below these four headings, the counts get too small to support reliable generalisations, at least with a corpus of this size.

Table 4 Syntactic Structure Error Types and Examples

Error Type	% of Syntactic Errors	Error Example	Correct Version
Missing constituent	42.3%	* 朋友叫去买东西	朋友叫我去买东西
Redundant constituent	18.7%	* 要求让法院同情他	要求法院同情他
Word-order error	25.1%	* 叫母亲再做多一份	叫母亲再多做一份
Structural blending	13.9%	* 把对方成为我想象的人	使对方成为我想象的人

Missing constituents are by some way the most common syntactic error, making up 42.3% of all errors in this category. What happens, essentially, is that a required structural element has been left out—and more often than not, it is the pivotal element N2 that goes missing. Consider "朋友叫去买东西", where the pivot 我 has been omitted, or "老师请参加活动", where 同学们 is nowhere to be found. We were struck by how concentrated this error is among beginning and lower-intermediate learners. During the annotation process, we came to feel that what lies behind it is partly a failure to fully grasp the nested "V1 + N2 + V2" structure and partly a kind of L1 interference—learners whose mother tongue allows comparable ellipses seem to transfer that habit into Chinese without always realising that the rules are different.

Redundant constituents account for 18.7% of syntactic errors, and the clearest examples involve two pivotal verbs piled on top of each other. Take "他要求让法院同情他": the words 要求和让 are both doing the same kind of pivotal work here, and one of them should not be there. It is almost as though the learner, uncertain about which verb to choose, simply uses both. We saw this pattern quite often with learners who had recently been introduced to a new pivotal verb and seemed to be hedging their bets.

Word-order errors make up a further 25.1% of syntactic errors and show up in several forms: misplaced adverbials, misplaced attributives, and sometimes the pivotal element itself in the wrong position. We found adverbial-placement mistakes to be especially common among Filipino learners, which makes sense when you consider that English—and Tagalog too, to some extent—places certain kinds of modifiers differently from Chinese. The classic example is "叫母亲再做多一份" instead of "叫母亲再多做一份": the adverb 再 has been slotted into the position where an English speaker would expect it, before the whole verb phrase, rather than right before the verb it modifies.

Structural blending errors, at 13.9%, are in some ways the most interesting of the syntactic sub-types. What happens here is that a learner mixes the pivotal construction together with another pattern—the 把-construction, the 被-construction, or a subject-predicate object sentence—and produces a hybrid that belongs to neither. Consider "老师让把学生作业交了", which tries to combine a pivotal structure with a 把-sentence structure and ends up with neither. To us, these errors suggest that learners have not really internalised the boundaries between different sentence

patterns; when they want to express something complicated, they reach for whatever pieces they have and put them together, hoping it will work.

3.2 Semantic Relationship Errors

If syntactic errors are about whether the structure is right, semantic errors are about whether the meaning inside the structure makes sense. In these cases the basic shape of the pivotal construction is more or less intact, but something has gone wrong with the internal semantic relations. This category accounts for 31.5% of all errors and breaks down into three main kinds: wrong choice of pivotal verb, semantic collocation mismatch, and semantic logical contradiction.

Table 5 Semantic Relationship Error Types and Examples

Error Type	% of Semantic Errors	Error Example	Correct Version
Pivotal verb misuse	53.2%	* 老板使我去出差	老板让我去出差
Semantic collocation mismatch	32.6%	* 使我体会到缺点	使我认识到缺点
Semantic logical contradiction	14.2%	* 因下雨使我按时到达	虽下雨我仍按时到达

Wrong choice of pivotal verb is by far the largest sub-type, at 53.2% of semantic errors. The confusion between 使 and 让 is the classic example, and we saw it again and again in the data. The two verbs are not interchangeable: 使 primarily carries causative meaning and usually has an inanimate subject, whereas 让 covers imperative and permissive meanings and tends to take a human subject. Yet learners regularly treat them as synonyms, producing sentences like "老板使我去出差" when what they mean is "老板让我去出差". We found ourselves wondering whether some textbooks do not do enough to mark this distinction; in many teaching materials the two verbs are introduced in separate chapters and never directly compared.

Semantic collocation mismatches, at 32.6%, occur when the pairs inside the construction—V1 with N2, V2 with N2, or V1 with V2—do not go together semantically. A good example is "老师让作业完成了": the sentence is structurally fine, but 老师 and 让作业 just do not form a natural collocation. The error feels, to a native speaker, like the wrong kind of agency is being attributed. We noticed that this type of error is harder to catch with purely structural checking and really requires semantic judgment, which is partly why we think learners make it so often.

The smallest semantic sub-type, at 14.2%, is what we have called semantic logical contradiction—cases where the causal or logical relationship the sentence is trying to express does not actually hold. Take "因为下雨, 使我按时到达了". Structurally it is a perfectly fine causative pivotal construction, but there is no logical causal link between 下雨 and 按时到达; if anything, rain would make you late, not on time. These errors are interesting because they suggest that some learners have mastered the form of the causative construction without yet having a secure feel for when it is appropriate to use it.

3.3 Pragmatic Usage Errors

Pragmatic errors are the ones where both the structure and the semantics are basically right, but the sentence would still sound odd in a real communicative situation. At 10.3% of all errors, this is the smallest of our three main categories, though we suspect it may be somewhat under-represented in written corpus data. We distinguished three sub-types: inappropriate register, contextual mismatch, and overuse or underuse.

Table 6 Pragmatic Usage Error Types and Examples

Error Type	Specific Manifestation	Error Example	More Natural Expression
Inappropriate register	Confusing formal and informal pivotal verbs	* 老师使我们完成作业 (oral language)	老师让我们完成作业
Contextual mismatch	Improper word choice for formal/informal contexts	* 妈妈致使我多穿衣服	妈妈让我多穿衣服
Overuse / underuse	Using pivotal constructions unnecessarily or omitting them where needed	* 让我自己吃饭	我自己吃饭

Inappropriate register errors happen when learners mix up the stylistic level of pivotal verbs. 使、令、致使 mostly belong to written, formal Chinese; 让、叫 are much more at home in speech. Learners, though, often treat them as interchangeable. You get sentences like "老师使我们完成作业" in what is clearly an informal, spoken context, when 让 would be far more natural. During annotation, we found these errors quite easy to recognise in principle but sometimes hard to judge in marginal cases—much depends on who is speaking to whom, and that information is not always recoverable from a written corpus.

Contextual mismatch is closely related to register but slightly different: here the problem is not the formality level as such but whether the construction fits the communicative situation. Using the very informal 叫 in a formal request can come across as disrespectful; using the formal 致使 between close friends can sound cold and distant. What struck us about these errors is how rarely they are addressed in textbooks; most teaching materials focus almost entirely on structure and meaning, and leave learners to figure out the pragmatics for themselves.

The overuse/underuse pair is in some ways the most revealing pragmatic error type. Overuse means the learner reaches for a pivotal construction when a simpler structure would do—"让我自己吃饭" instead of just "我自己吃饭". Underuse is the opposite: a pivotal construction would be the natural choice, but the learner avoids it and says something else. We read underuse in particular as a sign of the avoidance strategy that Selinker wrote about: when learners are not confident about a structure, they simply do not use it, which means the error never shows up on the surface but remains hidden as a gap in their competence.

3.4 Cross-National Differences in Error Patterns

One of the questions we most wanted to answer was whether learners from different language backgrounds make the same kinds of mistakes. We focused on three Southeast Asian nationalities—Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines—because we had enough data for each to make a comparison meaningful and because the three languages represent rather different typological situations with respect to Chinese. Table 7 gives the numbers; what they show, briefly put, is that each group has its own error profile.

Table 7 Comparison of Major Pivotal Construction Error Rates among Cambodian, Lao, and Filipino Learners (%)

Pivotal Construction Type	Cambodia	Laos	Philippines	Overall
"叫" pivotal construction	5.56	6.53	10.20	7.58
"使" pivotal construction	11.48	16.67	23.68	14.73
"让" pivotal construction	14.10	9.18	11.49	11.46
"请" pivotal construction	4.11	3.63	6.78	4.81
"陪" pivotal construction	0	18.52	9.52	13.46
"送" pivotal construction	14.29	9.09	10.00	10.45
"帮" pivotal construction	11.36	9.33	11.49	11.17
"鼓励" pivotal construction	0	25.00	33.33	18.18

Cambodian learners' errors are concentrated in three verb categories—让 (14.10%), 送 (14.29%), and 帮 (11.36%)—and what they mostly get wrong is the structure: missing constituents and redundant constituents dominate. To us, this pattern looks like a classic case of what happens when a language has nothing comparable to the pivotal construction at all. Khmer does not have a nested structure of this kind, and so the very idea that one noun phrase can do two grammatical jobs at once takes time to absorb. Learners seem to know they need something like a pivotal verb, but they have not yet mastered what has to come with it.

Lao learners show a rather different profile. Their highest error rates are for 鼓励 (25.00%), 陪 (18.52%), and 使 (16.67%), and the problems are mainly semantic rather than structural. This makes a certain amount of sense. Lao is much closer to Chinese typologically than Khmer is, so learners can get the basic structure right without too much difficulty—but the semantic ranges of corresponding verbs in the two languages do not line up neatly, and that is where things go wrong. A verb that seems like the equivalent of 鼓励, for instance, may cover a somewhat different range of uses in Lao, and learners transfer that range into Chinese.

Filipino learners are different again. Their highest error rates are for 鼓励 (33.33%), 使 (23.68%), and 帮 (11.49%), and the characteristic mistakes are word-order errors and structural blending. Here the L1 interference is unmistakably English. English habitually places attributives after the noun and handles causative meanings through clause structures, and Filipino learners—who have usually had considerable exposure to English—tend to transfer those patterns directly into Chinese. The result is adverbials in the wrong place, relative-clause-like structures where they do not belong, and hybrid sentences that try to be pivotal constructions and something else at the same time.

4. Causes of Pivotal Construction Errors

So where do all these errors come from? No single explanation will do; in our view they arise from the interaction of several factors, some to do with the construction itself, some with the learner's first language, some with how the target language is developing in the learner's mind, some with learning strategies, and some with textbooks and classroom teaching. Table 8 summarises the main categories; each is worth a closer look.

Table 8 Analysis of Pivotal Construction Error Causes

Cause Category	Specific Manifestations	Typical Error Example
Inherent complexity of pivotal constructions	Special nested structure; polysemous pivotal verbs; fuzzy boundaries with similar constructions	Confusion between coordinated sentences and compound verbs/sentence structures where the subject and predicate serve as objects
L1 interference	Word-order transfer, sentence-pattern transfer, semantic transfer	International students from the Philippines (with the attributive placed after the noun)
Negative transfer of target-language knowledge	Overgeneralization of ellipsis rules, verb usage, and sentence patterns	"The boss sent me on a business trip" ("send" used in a generalized sense)
Inadequate learning strategies	Avoidance strategy, guessing strategy, biased memory strategy	The compound sentence should have been used, but it was not (avoidance).
Textbook and instructional factors	Textbook design shortcomings, monotonous teaching methods, misaligned teaching focus	The structure is there, but it isn't being used.

4.1 Inherent Structural Complexity of Pivotal Constructions

The first and most obvious factor is simply that pivotal constructions are inherently hard. Three aspects of their complexity struck us as particularly important. First, there is the nested structure

itself. The "N1 + V1 + N2 + V2" pattern, with N2 acting as both object and subject, runs counter to the default syntactic intuition that each constituent has one and only one function. Second, pivotal verbs are heavily polysemous; the same verb can belong to different semantic categories depending on context, and that adds a lot to the learning burden. Third, the boundary between pivotal constructions and other sentence patterns is not always sharp, even for native speakers, and learners can find it genuinely difficult to tell which construction they are dealing with in any given case.

4.2 Negative L1 Transfer

First-language interference is, of course, a familiar story in second-language acquisition, and it is clearly at work here too. We saw it operating in three main ways. Word-order transfer shows up most clearly in learners whose L1 has post-nominal attributives—Filipino learners, with their strong English influence, are the clearest case—and it produces the misplaced modifiers we discussed earlier. Sentence-pattern transfer is what happens when learners assume that an L1 pattern such as the English "make sb. do sth." maps directly onto Chinese pivotal constructions, when in fact the correspondence is only partial. And functional transfer occurs when learners choose pivotal verbs on the basis of L1 expression habits, leading to errors of register or semantic function^[15]. What is interesting is that these three forms of transfer do not affect all learners equally; which one dominates depends very much on how similar the learner's L1 is to Chinese in the relevant respects.

4.3 Negative Transfer of Target-Language Knowledge

Not all errors come from the first language, though. A good number come from what learners have already learned of the target language itself—what is usually called overgeneralisation. This is a perfectly normal stage of interlanguage development, and in our data it takes several forms. The most common is overgeneralisation of ellipsis rules: learners know that the subject N1 can be dropped when it is recoverable from context, and they extend that rule to the pivotal element N2 as well, producing missing-constituent errors. Sentence-pattern overgeneralisation is also frequent: learners take the structural pattern of one pivotal verb and apply it to others, without noticing that different verbs have different collocation requirements. We came to see these errors not so much as signs of failure but as evidence that learners are actively working with the rules they have acquired—which is, after all, what you want them to do.

4.4 Learning Strategies and Textbook/Instructional Factors

Learning strategies are another piece of the puzzle. The guessing strategy, in which learners try to work out how a pivotal construction works on the basis of very limited knowledge, often produces semantic or structural deviations that are recognisably guesswork. The avoidance strategy is in some ways more insidious: when learners are not confident about a structure, they simply find another way to say what they mean, so the error never surfaces as an error—it surfaces as an absence, as underuse. We also saw what could be called transfer strategy, where learners deliberately import L1 expression patterns into Chinese because those patterns feel safe, even when they produce awkward or incorrect sentences.

Finally, we cannot ignore the role of textbooks and classroom teaching. Textbooks, it seems to us, often present pivotal constructions in a rather piecemeal way: a verb here, a pattern there, without much effort to draw the different parts together or to help learners see how one pivotal verb relates to another. Different verbs are rarely compared side by side, and variant structures get short shrift. Classroom teaching, too, tends to lean heavily on explanation and drilling rather than giving learners hands-on experience with real corpus data. None of this is surprising—curriculum time is limited, and textbooks have a lot of ground to cover—but it does mean that the teaching side of the picture is something we can usefully improve.

5. Building a Corpus-Based Pivotal Construction Teaching Model

If the errors are caused by several factors working together, then the teaching response probably needs to be multi-layered too. In this section we sketch out a corpus-based instructional model that we think addresses the main difficulties we found in the data. It is not the only way to teach pivotal constructions, and we do not claim it has been empirically validated—that would take a proper intervention study. But it grows directly out of what we observed in the error corpus and from what we know about how students learn best. The model is built on data-driven learning (DDL) principles: rather than passively receiving rule explanations from the teacher, learners work with authentic corpus data and induce the rules themselves^[16].

5.1 Teaching Philosophy and Principles

Why data-driven learning? Because at its core DDL puts learners in direct contact with real language use. Instead of being told what the rules are, they observe patterns in actual data and work the rules out for themselves—an approach that Johns, one of the early advocates of corpus-based teaching, argued leads to deeper and more durable learning^[17]. For pivotal constructions in particular, we think this makes a lot of sense. The hardest thing about the construction is not its surface form, which learners can memorise reasonably quickly, but its subtle conditions of use—when you use 使 as opposed to 让, what kinds of subjects each pivotal verb takes, what register each one belongs to. Those are exactly the kinds of things that learners tend to grasp better through exposure to many examples than through a single rule statement. The model also tries to shift the classroom dynamic from the traditional "teacher explains, students practise" model towards something more investigative, where learners take more responsibility for their own learning^{[18][19]}.

5.2 Operational Procedure of the Teaching Model

How does the model actually work in the classroom? We have structured it as a sequence of five steps. Why five, rather than four or six? Partly because we wanted enough steps to give the process some shape—from initial exposure through to consolidation—and partly because each step corresponds to a distinct kind of learner activity: retrieving, reading, discussing, problem-identifying, and practising. Table 9 lays out the full sequence and the roles of teacher and learner at each stage.

Table 9 Steps of the Corpus-Driven Pivotal Construction Teaching Model

Step	Teaching Activity	Teacher Role	Learner Activity
1. Corpus retrieval and screening	Retrieve corpus according to teaching objectives; correct-to-error ratio = 3:1	Provides retrieval guidance and screening criteria	Conducts autonomous retrieval; develops initial usage awareness
2. Micro-text creation	Integrate into "typical cases → error analysis → rule summary" format	Creates micro-texts; distills rules	Reads cases; builds perceptual understanding
3. Teacher-guided comparative analysis	Case presentation → group discussion → commentary and summary → L1 comparison	Guides analysis; provides commentary and summary	Participates in group discussion; presents findings
4. Learner-identified key difficulties	Learners raise difficulties; teacher confirms focus using error frequency data	Establishes teaching priorities; addresses difficulties	Raises questions; clarifies learning priorities
5. Consolidation exercise design	Tiered design: basic → intermediate → extension exercises	Designs tiered exercises; provides feedback	Completes exercises; consolidates learning

The first step, corpus retrieval and screening, is where the whole process begins. Teachers draw on a corpus to pull out pivotal-construction examples matched to the teaching objective, selecting representative cases at a rough ratio of three correct examples to one error example. The 3:1

ratio is not sacred—it is just what we have found works well in practice, giving learners enough positive models to form a clear picture while still exposing them to what goes wrong. From there the lesson moves through micro-text creation, in which the selected examples are assembled into short case-study texts organised around the pattern "typical cases → error analysis → rule summary"; then teacher-guided comparative analysis, where learners discuss the cases in groups and the teacher helps them draw out the generalisations; then learner-identified key difficulties, where students themselves raise what they found hard and the teacher uses error-frequency data to confirm what the real priorities are; and finally consolidation exercises, designed in tiers so that learners at different levels all get appropriate practice^[20].

A concrete example may make the model easier to picture. Suppose the teaching point is the distinction between 使 and 让—something our data showed to be a major source of confusion. Instead of opening with a rule explanation, the teacher would first present a set of authentic examples of both verbs, some correct and some taken from learner errors, and simply let students read them. In our experience, even intermediate learners can often sense that something is off in the error examples, even if they cannot yet say what. A comparative discussion follows, guided by the teacher, in which the class works together to figure out the core difference: that 使 mainly takes inanimate subjects and expresses causation, while 让 mainly takes human subjects and expresses imperative or permissive meaning. Then, crucially, learners get a chance to say what they find confusing—often the teacher learns something here too—and the teacher can show frequency data to back up which difficulties are the real ones. Targeted practice exercises, matched to what the students actually found hard, round off the lesson. We have tried something like this in our own teaching, and it does seem to help; whether it helps significantly more than traditional methods is something we would like to test properly.

6. Recommendations for Pivotal Construction Teaching Strategies

Beyond the specific teaching model, there are several broader things we think could improve how pivotal constructions are taught. Drawing on the error analysis and causal discussion above, and using the familiar three-factor framework of teacher, textbook, and teaching method as a rough organising device, we offer recommendations across four areas: textbook content, classroom methods, learner strategies, and language practice (Table 10). These are not all equally easy to implement, and some will matter more than others depending on the teaching context, but taken together they point in what we think is the right direction.

Table 10 Summary of Pivotal Construction Teaching Recommendations

Recommendation Area	Specific Measures	Expected Outcome
Optimizing textbook content design	Systematic knowledge organization; enhanced error warnings; nationally targeted exercises; supplementary authentic corpus materials	More systematic and targeted textbooks
Innovating teaching methods and technology integration	Corpus-driven instruction; contrastive teaching; multimedia instruction; situational teaching	Strengthened empirical foundation; improved discriminative ability
Guiding scientific learning strategies	Developing corpus literacy; strengthening semantic comprehension; training self-monitoring for errors; encouraging communicative use	Enhanced autonomous learning capacity
Strengthening language practice	Increased targeted exercises; interactive activities; writing practice; Chinese conversation corners	Improved pragmatic and communicative competence

6.1 Optimizing Textbook Content Design

Textbook design is probably the single most promising lever for improvement, because what is in

the textbook shapes what happens in almost every classroom. Three things seem to us particularly worth doing. First, the knowledge system for pivotal constructions should be organised more systematically, with a clear progression from structure to semantics to pragmatics. At the beginner level, stick to basic structures and high-frequency verbs—让、叫、请. At the intermediate level, introduce causative and assistance/companionship types. At the advanced level, bring in pragmatic differences and register choices. The idea is that learners build up their understanding layer by layer, rather than meeting all the complexity at once. Second, semantic discrimination needs much more attention: easily confused verbs should be presented side by side, with clear examples of how they differ—something that most current textbooks do surprisingly little of. Third, nationally targeted content would help, especially in contexts where most learners come from a particular L1 background; exercises can be designed to address the specific error profiles of those learners, rather than treating all learners as the same.

6.2 Innovating Teaching Methods and Technology Integration

When it comes to teaching methods, our main suggestion will come as no surprise given the model we have just outlined: use corpus data more. Bringing frequency information, common collocations, and error distributions into the classroom makes the teaching more concrete and gives learners something real to think about, rather than just rules to memorise. Beyond that, we think contrastive teaching could be deepened—sentence-transformation exercises, for example, can help learners see more clearly where the boundary between pivotal constructions and other patterns lies. And multimedia technology, used thoughtfully, can help create more authentic communicative contexts, making the lessons more vivid and giving learners a better sense of when and why you would actually use a pivotal construction. We would not want to overstate the impact of technology on its own; it works best when it supports good pedagogy, not when it replaces it.

6.3 Guiding Scientific Learning Strategies

Learners themselves are not just passive recipients of teaching; their strategies matter a great deal, and some of those strategies can be taught. We would suggest three areas of focus. First, basic corpus literacy. Learners do not need to become corpus linguists, but knowing how to use a few publicly available corpus resources and how to run basic searches can turn them into more autonomous learners who can check their own usage questions. Second, semantic comprehension strategies. Working with the idea of semantic fields—building associative networks among pivotal verbs, seeing which ones overlap and where they differ—can help learners develop a more organised understanding of what is otherwise a long list of individual verbs. Third, self-monitoring. Encouraging learners to keep personal error notebooks and review them regularly may seem like an old-fashioned suggestion, but it is still one of the most effective ways we know of helping students notice what they keep getting wrong.

6.4 Strengthening Language Practice

None of the above will make much difference, though, without enough practice—and not just any practice, but practice that is matched to the learner's level and targeted at the actual difficulties. We would argue for tiered exercise design: at the beginner level, pattern drills and error-correction exercises make sense, because what beginners need most is structural control. At the intermediate level, verb-discrimination exercises and sentence transformation come into their own, addressing the semantic issues that become the main stumbling block. And at the advanced level, paragraph writing and oral expression exercises help learners move from knowing the rules to using the structure naturally in context. Beyond structured exercises, task-based activities—role-plays, projects, Chinese conversation corners—give learners the chance to use pivotal constructions in real communicative interaction, which is ultimately what they need most.

7. Conclusion

Let us step back and see what we have learned. Working with a corpus of 3,648 pivotal-construction instances—708 of which contained errors—and combining surface-level structural analysis with a deeper look at cognitive mechanisms, we have tried to give a systematic account of what international students get wrong with this construction, why they get it wrong, and what might be done about it. The picture that has emerged is not simple, but it is, we think, reasonably clear.

The first main finding is that errors fall into three broad categories—syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic—with syntactic errors the most numerous at 58.2%, semantic errors next at 31.5%, and pragmatic errors the least frequent at 10.3%. Within those categories, missing constituents are the single most common syntactic sub-type, and wrong choice of pivotal verb accounts for more than half of all semantic errors. These are the high-frequency problems that any teaching approach needs to address first.

Second, the causes are multiple and interconnected. The nested structure of the pivotal construction and the polysemy of pivotal verbs create an inherent learning difficulty that no amount of good teaching will entirely remove. On top of that, L1 transfer produces different error patterns in different learner groups, target-language overgeneralisation generates its own characteristic mistakes, learners' strategies can either help or hinder, and textbooks and classroom practice often do not give the construction the systematic attention it deserves. No single cause explains everything, which is why no single intervention is likely to be enough.

Third, the cross-national variation is real and substantial. Cambodian, Lao, and Filipino learners do not all struggle with the same things, and their error profiles line up fairly well with what you would expect from the typological distance between each L1 and Chinese. This is not just an academic point; it has direct implications for teaching. A class of Cambodian beginners needs rather different emphasis from a class of Filipino intermediate learners, and treating them as if they had the same difficulties will waste both teacher time and student effort.

Fourth, we think a corpus-based teaching model, structured in five steps from retrieval through to consolidation, is a promising way forward. It directly addresses the kind of learning that pivotal constructions seem to require—learning through many examples, through comparison, through noticing patterns—rather than the learning-through-rule-explanation that textbooks traditionally rely on. We would not claim the model is perfect, or that it will work equally well in every context, but on the basis of the error evidence and what we know about DDL, we think it is well worth trying.

That said, there are real limitations to what we have done, and we would not want to overstate our conclusions. The teaching model we have proposed grows out of error analysis and theoretical considerations, but it has not yet been tested in a proper classroom intervention; whether it actually produces better learning outcomes is an empirical question that remains to be answered. Our corpus, moreover, draws mainly on Southeast Asian learners, and we cannot be sure how far the findings generalise to learners from other regions—European learners, for example, or learners from other East Asian contexts. And our error categories, while we have tried to make them defensible, are to some extent a matter of analytical choice; other researchers might draw the lines differently and get slightly different numbers. Looking ahead, we hope to expand the corpus to cover a wider range of L1 backgrounds and to carry out quasi-experimental studies that can put the teaching model to a proper test. Until then, what we offer is a data-informed sketch of where the problems lie and how they might be addressed—not the last word on the subject, but we hope a useful contribution.

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Appendix 1. Names and Affiliated Universities of Chinese Interlanguage Corpus Resources

Table 1. Written Language Corpora (笔语语料库)

No.	Name	Affiliated University
1	HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus (HSK 动态作文语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University
2	Capital International Students' Chinese Text Corpus (首都外国留学生汉语文本语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University
3	International Students' Interlanguage Corpus (留学生中介语语料库)	Sun Yat-sen University
4	Foreign Students' Chinese Interlanguage Error Information Corpus (外国学生汉语中介语偏误信息语料库)	Nanjing Normal University
5	Korean Students' Chinese Interlanguage Corpus (韩国留学生汉语中介语语料库)	Ludong University
6	International Students' Chinese Written Corpus (外国留学生汉语笔语料库)	Beijing Chinese Language and Culture College
7	Foreigners' Chinese Acquisition Dynamic Composition Corpus (外国人汉语习得动态作文语料库)	Shanghai Jiao Tong University
8	TOCFL Learner Corpus (TOCFL 学习者语料库)	National Taiwan Normal University

Table 2. Spoken Language Corpora (口语语料库)

No.	Name	Affiliated University
1	Chinese Learners' Spoken Corpus (汉语学习者口语语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University
2	Small-Scale Foreign Students' Spoken Interlanguage Corpus (小型外国学生口语中介语语料库)	Soochow University
3	Language Acquisition Chinese Spoken Corpus (语言习得汉语口语语料库)	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
4	Telephone Oral Test-Based Corpus (根据电话口语考试建设的语料库)	Peking University
5	Chinese Interlanguage Spoken Corpus (汉语中介语口语语料库)	Nanjing University

Table 3. Chinese Character Error Corpora (汉字偏误语料库)

No.	Name	Affiliated University
1	Chinese Language Learners' Character Error Database (华语文学习者汉字偏误数据资料库)	National Taiwan Normal University
2	Chinese Character Error-Annotated Continuous Interlanguage Corpus (汉字偏误标注的汉语连续性中介语语料库)	Sun Yat-sen University
3	Online Platform for Wrong-Character Database of Non-Chinese Cultural Sphere Students (非汉字文化圈国家学生错别字数据库网络应用平台)	Beijing Language and Culture University

Table 4. Other Corpora (其它语料库)

No.	Name	Affiliated University
1	International Students' Chinese Interlanguage Corpus (留学生汉语中介语语料库)	College of Chinese Language and Culture, Jinan University
2	Guangwai-Lancaster Chinese Learner Corpus (Guangwai Lancaster 汉语学习者语料库)	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies — Lancaster University
3	Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus (全球汉语中介语语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University
4	Chinese Monosyllabic Speech Corpus (汉语单音节语音语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University
5	Chinese Interlanguage Speech Corpus for Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (面向计算机辅助正音的汉语中介语语音语料库)	Beijing Language and Culture University