

Article

A Study on the Acquisition Errors and Pedagogical Strategies of the Near-Synonyms "Consistently" and "Continuously" in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language-----A Case Study of Central Asian International Students

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Abstract: The acquisition of near-synonymous vocabulary represents a significant challenge in the field of teaching Chinese as a second language, particularly for learners attempting to master nuanced temporal expressions. This paper focuses specifically on the Chinese near-synonymous time adverbs "Consistently" and "Continuously," which frequently cause comprehension and application difficulties. Based on a comprehensive questionnaire survey administered to 51 intermediate-level Central Asian international students, this study systematically examines the learners' acquisition processes and outcomes from three critical linguistic dimensions: semantic interpretation, syntactic structure, and pragmatic application. The quantitative and qualitative survey data indicates a widespread and general confusion between the two target words among the participant demographic. Detailed analysis reveals that the primary error types consist predominantly of contextual misuse and stylistic misplacement within sentence structures. Furthermore, the investigation demonstrates that these specific acquisition errors are significantly influenced by first language (L1) negative transfer, alongside other cognitive and instructional factors. Utilizing established error analysis theory as a foundational framework, this paper systematically categorizes these linguistic deviations and subsequently proposes targeted, evidence-based pedagogical strategies. These recommended instructional approaches include enhanced cognitive construction techniques, systematic semantic gradient training, and rigorous contrastive training exercises designed to clarify subtle lexical boundaries. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a robust theoretical and practical reference for educators, thereby improving the efficacy of teaching Chinese near-synonyms to Central Asian international students and advancing second language acquisition methodologies.

Keywords: second language acquisition; error analysis; pedagogical strategies; near-synonyms; language transfer; chinese teaching

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1. Introduction

Distinguishing synonyms is one of the core difficulties in teaching Chinese as a second language. Chinese has a rich vocabulary of synonyms with complex semantic overlaps [1]. After mastering basic meanings, learners often make systematic errors due to an insufficient grasp of subtle differences in deep semantics, syntactic restrictions, and pragmatic conditions. Time adverbs, being the most numerous and complex category of modern Chinese adverbs, have always been a focal point and difficulty in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. "Shizhong" and "yizhi" are two such time adverbs with similar meanings. Both express a "durative meaning," but they have differences at deep semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic levels, making them highly susceptible to confusion by Chinese learners.

Specialized research targeting Central Asian international students has also gradually increased in recent years [2]. The Central Asian international student group includes Dungan and other students. In particular, the Dungan people and their language, "Dungan," is based on Northwestern Chinese dialects and influenced by Russian and Turkic languages. Therefore, this group shows both advantages and special negative native language transfer issues in learning Chinese. As "shizhong" and "yizhi" are cross-level synonyms, they inherently have a high difficulty of differentiation. Therefore, for Central Asian international students, teaching the distinction between "shizhong" and "yizhi," and similar synonyms, is even more necessary.

Based on this, this paper adopts a questionnaire survey method, taking Central Asian international students with intermediate Chinese proficiency as the survey subjects [3]. It investigates learners' acquisition status of "shizhong" and "yizhi" by distributing questionnaires, collects and analyzes learners' true error types, and proposes targeted teaching strategies. The aim is to provide referential suggestions for the differential teaching of "shizhong" and "yizhi" and this type of synonym.

2. Ontological Differentiation of "Shizhong" and "Yizhi"

Although the synonym pair "shizhong" and "yizhi" are often both translated into English as "always" or "all the time," they display clear differences in semantic focus, syntactic constraints, and stylistic nuances, necessitating careful distinction [4].

2.1. Semantic Differentiation

Both "shizhong" and "yizhi" express a durative meaning, but their semantic focuses have some differences. "Yizhi" emphasizes "continuity" and "uninterruptedness" on a timeline [5]. It can be long or short and may indicate the continuation of a specific action or an abstract state. "Shizhong" highlights the "constant nature of the whole process" from beginning to end, implying features such as "consistent from beginning to end" and "never changing." Thus, although both are related to time, their perspectives differ. The two contrast in "uninterrupted process" versus "constant state." For example:

1. The rain fell continuously all night.
2. No matter how the environment changes, he consistently sticks to his ideals.

The context of the first sentence emphasizes that the process of "raining" has no pause and has been ongoing, so only "yizhi" can be used. The second sentence emphasizes that this person's "ideal" remains the same from the very beginning to the end; no matter how the external environment changes, this ideal is constantly in a state of "being stuck to," making "shizhong" more appropriate [6].

Additionally, there is another semantic difference: the word "shizhong" carries the semantic feature of a "bounded" continuous process (having a beginning and an end), while "yizhi" can represent "unbounded continuation." This is because the word "shizhong" originally expressed the specific meanings of "start and end" (shi and zhong, respectively). Over time, it abstracted to mean the process of "from beginning to end," eventually grammaticalizing into a time adverb meaning "continuing unchanged." Therefore, when distinguishing these two time adverbs, one can also consider whether the continuous process of the action in the sentence is bounded [6].

2.2. Syntactic Differentiation

At the syntactic level, both words function as adverbials, positioned after the subject and before the predicate. However, they exhibit differences in syntactic constraints and collocation potential [7].

2.2.1. Whether a specific time period can be added after the word

If a specific time period appears in a sentence expressing a durative meaning, it generally indicates the duration of an event or state. In such cases, if "yizhi" is used, a

specific time period can follow it; however, if "shizhong" is used, this is not possible [3]. For example:

1. He studied yizhi for three hours.
2. *He studied shizhong for three hours.

This context emphasizes that "he" studied for a prolonged period and that the action of "studying" was continuous throughout the three hours; thus, "yizhi + time period" is appropriate. If replaced with "shizhong," the term attempts to highlight the "completeness" of the studying behavior from start to finish [8]. This creates redundancy with the specific time period of "three hours," which already conveys completeness, making the usage unnatural. Therefore, "shizhong + time period" is incorrect.

2.2.2. Special usage for describing space

Apart from the syntactic differences mentioned earlier, there is another key distinction in usage: "yizhi" in a sentence can convey not only the continuation of time and action but also linear extension in space, whereas "shizhong" cannot be used in this manner [9]. For example:

1. This road leads yizhi to the top of the mountain.
2. *This road leads shizhong to the top of the mountain.

Consequently, when encountering a sentence with a durative meaning that describes spatial extension, only "yizhi" is appropriate.

2.3. Pragmatic Differentiation

At the pragmatic level, the differences between "shizhong" and "yizhi" are mainly reflected in stylistic tone and emotional nuance [10].

In terms of stylistic tone, "yizhi" is used in both spoken and written Chinese, with a higher frequency in spoken language. "Shizhong" has a stronger association with written contexts and frequently appears in books, news, or formal speeches, conveying a serious and steady tone. Regarding emotional nuance, compared to "yizhi," "shizhong" often carries a strong emotional tendency and subjective evaluation. It is usually employed to praise someone's firm will (such as "consistent from beginning to end") or to express lamentation about something difficult to change. Analysis has shown that among 712 "shizhong" sentences, 17% demonstrated a clear sense of contrast and subjective evaluation, expressing emotions such as admiration, appreciation, criticism, or helplessness. "Yizhi," on the other hand, is more objective and neutral [1]. It simply informs the listener that an event or action has continued without interruption, without conveying significant subjective emotion. For example:

1. Over his long revolutionary career, he shizhong firmly believed in communism and never wavered in his faith.
2. The rain fell yizhi, and we didn't go out.

The first sentence is more formal, emphasizing "his" adherence to his beliefs. The tone is more solemn and carries the speaker's subjective positive evaluation and admiration for "him." The second sentence simply states the objective fact that it was raining, which resulted in not going out, without any evaluation or subjective emotion [11].

In summary, "shizhong" and "yizhi" are not completely interchangeable synonyms [12]. The differences between the two in semantics, syntax, and pragmatics provide a theoretical foundation for targeted teaching strategies focused on this pair of words.

3. Analysis of the Acquisition Situation of the Surveyed Central Asian International Students

This study utilized a questionnaire survey method and purposive sampling, targeting Central Asian international students with intermediate Chinese proficiency from countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. A total of 55 questionnaires were distributed, with 51 valid responses recovered, resulting in an effective recovery rate of 92.7%. The respondents' Chinese proficiency levels were primarily HSK Level 4 and Level

5. Regarding native language backgrounds, Dungan and Russian constituted the majority, with a smaller proportion of samples using Kyrgyz or Turkmen. The following section provides an analysis of the specific conditions reflected in the recovered questionnaires [1].

3.1. Semantic Differentiation Analysis

The questionnaire included a scale question asking whether the meanings of "shizhong" and "yizhi" are the same [11, 12]. The responses indicated that 56.86% of learners believed they are "almost the same, but with a slight difference," 19.61% thought they are "very different," 7.84% considered them "exactly the same," and 15.69% stated "I don't know." This data suggests that while the majority of intermediate learners recognize a difference, there remains cognitive ambiguity regarding the specific connotations of this distinction.

Among the learners who perceived a "difference," a multiple-choice question explored the nature of this difference. Of these, 90.2% attributed it to stylistic variations, 50.98% identified a difference in time reference, and only 31.37% selected the core semantic meaning that "shizhong" emphasizes "remaining unchanged from beginning to end." This disparity in responses reveals that learners are most attuned to explicit stylistic differences and have some awareness of temporal distinctions, but their understanding of the core semantic features that define the fundamental difference between the two words is relatively weak [9, 10].

It is notable that nearly a quarter of the learners (23.53%, combining those who chose "exactly the same" and "I don't know") either believe the two words are identical or are uncertain about any difference [12]. This indicates that a significant proportion of learners have yet to establish a basic awareness of the distinction between the two terms.

The questionnaire also included substitutability judgment questions, providing specific contexts to intuitively assess the participants' ability to semantically differentiate the two words. The following data reflects whether two example sentences could be substituted:

I shizhong remember your help. → I yizhi remember your help [7].

Regarding whether "shizhong" could be replaced by "yizhi" in this sentence, 72.55% of learners thought it was "completely okay," 1.96% felt it was "barely okay, but feels a bit different," 9.8% believed it was "not okay," and 15.69% were "uncertain."

This road leads yizhi to the river. → This road leads shizhong to the river.

Regarding whether "yizhi" could be replaced by "shizhong" in this sentence, 64.71% of learners thought it was "not okay," 25.49% were "uncertain," and only 9.8% believed it was "completely okay" or "barely okay."

This sharp contrast highlights that learners have a relatively clear understanding of the spatial limitations unique to "shizhong." In the second sentence, over 60% of learners correctly judged that "shizhong" cannot be used in a spatial extension context and is irreplaceable. In contrast, for the first sentence, over 70% believed "shizhong remember" could be completely replaced by "yizhi remember." This suggests that learners' understanding of the semantic difference between the two words in abstract contexts is somewhat lacking, as they fail to grasp the subtle distinction between the constant state of "never forgetting from start to finish" emphasized by "shizhong" and the continuous state of "remembering for a long time" expressed by "yizhi."

3.2. Linguistic Intuition Judgment Analysis

To investigate learners' judgment of the naturalness of sentences using "shizhong" and "yizhi," the questionnaire created different contexts using target sentences and measured them on a five-point scale (1 = very unnatural, 5 = very natural). The results are as follows: (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Learners' Naturalness Judgments of the Given Example Sentences (5-Point Scale)

Sentence	Very Unnatural	Unnatural	Neutral	Natural	Very Natural	Naturalness Score ①
"I have shizhong wanted to learn Chinese martial arts."	41.18%	39.22 %	15.69%	1.96%	1.96%	1.84
"From 8 AM to now, he has been shizhong in a meeting."	37.25%	43.14 %	13.73%	3.92%	1.96%	1.90
"He has yizhi not forgotten the promise to his friend."	1.96%	11.76 %	9.80%	29.41%	47.06%	4.08
"His grades have been yizhi improving."	1.96%	13.73 %	5.88%	33.33%	45.10%	4.06
"No matter where I go, I shizhong love my hometown."	33.33%	33.33 %	23.53%	5.88%	3.92%	2.14

Note: The naturalness score is a weighted average. A higher score indicates a more natural sentence.

The data shows that intermediate-level Central Asian international students have an extremely low acceptance of "shizhong" in emotional and dynamic contexts. Relatively speaking, learners highly approved of "yizhi" in contexts of continuous action, finding its naturalness extremely high [6, 7].

From the perspective of HSK level differences, 56% of HSK 5 learners evaluated "shizhong love my hometown" as unnatural, lower than the 76.92% of HSK 4 learners. This indicates that higher-level learners have a slightly higher acceptance of "shizhong" in specific abstract contexts, such as emotional ones. However, overall, even for HSK 5 learners, the mastery and acceptance of the correct usage of "shizhong" still need further improvement.

On one hand, these data reveal learners' understanding of the usage boundaries of "shizhong": when "shizhong" is collocated with dynamic verbs, its naturalness drops sharply. This shows learners have a strong natural intuition regarding the incompatibility between "shizhong" and dynamic contexts. However, their awareness of the compatibility of "shizhong" with emotional verbs is insufficient, as they feel such collocations are not natural enough [7]. On the other hand, the high ratings given by learners to the two target sentences using "yizhi" demonstrate that learners' approval and usage of "yizhi" remain high.

3.3. Metacognition and Learning Strategy Analysis

To understand where learners' metacognition of the difference between the two originated, the questionnaire asked respondents where they first learned the difference [5]. To this, 75.9% chose "the teacher explained it in class," 9.73% chose "saw it myself in a

textbook or dictionary," 10.61% chose "understood it through use in daily conversation," and 3.76% chose "don't know the difference between the two." This distribution reveals that classroom teaching is the primary input channel for learning the distinction, accompanied by secondary methods like dictionary learning and daily oral communication. Sources of knowledge are diverse, but a small portion of learners still report being unclear about the systematic differences.

To observe what coping strategies learners use when uncertain whether to use "shizhong" or "yizhi" in a given context, the questionnaire provided multiple-choice strategy options. Based on this distribution, it is evident that over 70% show an "avoidance tendency" by choosing the more familiar "yizhi" when uncertain. Over 40% adopt a "fuzzy strategy" of "picking one randomly," reflecting a passive attitude toward the differences. This pattern, where most learners lean towards "avoidance" and "fuzzy" strategies, is a significant reason for the overuse of "yizhi" and the underuse of "shizhong" among intermediate Central Asian students during output. Some scholars have noted that international students often "avoid the difficult and choose the easy, avoid the new and stick to the old," a learning psychology that leads to the solidification of errors [10].

It is worth noting that through analyzing the overall accuracy rate of the questionnaire, learners who chose "try hard to recall the rules" (54.9%) generally had higher overall accuracy rates than those who chose "pick one randomly" or "avoid using it." This result indicates that the strength of metacognitive awareness and active learning strategies are positively correlated with learners' actual mastery of the target words. Therefore, cultivating learners' active differentiation awareness and encouraging more active output are key to improving the teaching effectiveness of differentiating the two words [9].

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that intermediate-level Central Asian international students' acquisition and differentiation of "yizhi" and "shizhong" are still at a stage of "knowing the how but not the why." They can perceive the existence of the two words and identify some differences, but fail to establish a relatively systematic and specific cognitive schema, thus leading to errors [4, 11].

4. Analysis of Error Types

Synthesizing the previous data analysis, intermediate-level Central Asian international students demonstrate two primary types of errors when distinguishing and using "yizhi" and "shizhong": substitution errors and stylistic mismatches.

4.1. Substitution Errors

Substitution errors often manifest as two-way confusion, such as mistakenly using "yizhi" instead of "shizhong" in a context requiring "shizhong," or vice versa. According to the survey data, the distribution of these two types of substitution is highly uneven [4, 8].

4.1.1. Misusing "yizhi" instead of "shizhong"

This is the main type. Most substitution errors involve using "yizhi" in contexts that require "shizhong," particularly in period-constant contexts and abstract state contexts. For example, in the sentence "No matter where I go, I shizhong love my hometown," 66.67% of learners found it unnatural. This indicates that learners have yet to grasp the pragmatic usage of "shizhong" in abstract state contexts and fail to fully understand the constant meaning of "never changed no matter what" emphasized in the sentence.

4.1.2. Misusing "shizhong" instead of "yizhi"

This primarily occurs in contexts involving spatial extension and imperatives [1]. For example, in the question "When describing a road leading from the foot to the top of the mountain, you would choose __," 15.69% mistakenly selected "shizhong." In the imperative context question "When you want to encourage someone to keep persisting,

you should say ___" 13.39% mistakenly chose "shizhong." However, the error rate in these contexts is significantly lower than the first type, suggesting that learners have a clearer understanding of the spatial and imperative limitations of "shizhong." Combined with their preference for "yizhi," the overall error rate remains low.

The uneven distribution indicates that learners possess a strong intuition about the inappropriate contexts for "shizhong" and can generally avoid using it incorrectly [11]. However, they lack a clear understanding of the appropriate contexts for "shizhong," which leads to its underuse and the overgeneralization of "yizhi."

4.2. Stylistic Mismatch

Stylistic mismatch errors occur when learners recognize stylistic differences more as a retrospective understanding rather than an active application during language production. While they can often correctly identify these differences when directly questioned, they fail to consistently apply this knowledge in practice. In a survey, 90.2% of participants could identify stylistic differences; however, in a situational multiple-choice question asking how to express "this principle has never changed" in a formal article, only 27.45% selected "This principle shizhong remains unchanged," whereas 66.67% opted for "yizhi." This highlights a disconnect between stylistic knowledge and practical usage, particularly with "shizhong." A contributing factor may be the predominance of colloquial input in learners' daily exposure, which limits their familiarity with formal expressions like "shizhong." This insufficient exposure hinders the development of pragmatic competence in stylistic application [3].

4.3. Implicit Errors Caused by Avoidance Strategies

Unlike the first two explicit errors, errors caused by avoidance strategies generally manifest implicitly. According to the survey, when uncertain, 72.55% will "choose the safer 'yizhi'," and 33.33% "avoid using it and change the expression." These strategies seemingly avoid obvious grammatical mistakes and make the sentences sound fine, but the "pseudo-correct" sentences output through avoidance hide the problems deeper. When a learner says "I yizhi hold firm ideal beliefs," the sentence itself is correct, but it cannot convey the constant meaning of "never changed, engraved in the heart" contained in "I shizhong hold firm ideal beliefs." By replacing "shizhong" with "yizhi," learners superficially complete the expression but actually lose emotional precision. Over time, "yizhi" is infinitely generalized, "shizhong" is marginalized, and the richness and precision of Chinese expressions are lost.

In summary, the acquisition errors regarding "yizhi" and "shizhong" among intermediate-level Central Asian international students are the result of the interplay of multiple factors. To resolve this issue, one cannot merely address surface-level symptoms; rather, it is necessary to implement systematic measures across multiple dimensions.

5. Suggestions for Teaching Strategies

This section proposes teaching strategies from three dimensions: cognitive construction, gradient training, and comparative deepening, based on the analysis.

5.1. Cognitive Construction and Extension Based on Prototypical Usages

Current textbooks' treatment of these words often stops at general definitions and simple exercises, resulting in a fragmented presentation that leads to cognitive ambiguity. Effective teaching must emphasize the importance of context. Educators can extract core prototypical usages from extensive authentic corpora to assist learners in establishing clear contextual reference points [1].

For "yizhi," its spatial extension meaning can serve as the prototype (e.g., "Walk yizhi along this road"). Since "shizhong" cannot be applied in this context, this usage is the most effectively mastered by learners, with a correct rate of 84.31%. Building on this foundation, educators can guide students to comprehend the metaphorical extension from spatial

contexts to temporal and abstract ones: progressing from "walk yizhi forward" to "wait yizhi until dark" to "be yizhi happy."

For "shizhong," the prototype can be identified as the "constant attitude" (e.g., "I shizhong believe hard work pays off"). This usage best reflects its core semantic meaning and is relatively well understood. From this starting point, educators can guide learners to explore its extension from attitude constancy to process constancy and further to abstract constancy. Research on the grammaticalization process of "shizhong" provides theoretical support for this approach.

5.2. Implementing Continuous Semantic Gradient Training

Surveys indicate that learners often exhibit a "binary opposition" between theoretical understanding and practical application. While they grasp fixed usages, they struggle with dynamic processes in the middle ground, such as "wind is strong" or "in a meeting," revealing insufficient awareness of semantic overlap. Using a gradient analysis framework, educators can design semantic gradient sentences that transition from "dynamic continuation" to "state constancy," enabling students to better understand the scope of these terms.

Dynamic Continuation End → Rain falls yizhi → He talks yizhi → He has been yizhi healthy → He yizhi believes me → He shizhong believes me → He shizhong sticks to principles → He is shizhong consistent → State Constancy End

The further left a term is positioned, the more "yizhi" is preferred; the further right, the more "shizhong" is preferred. The middle ground represents a zone where both terms can coexist, albeit with differing pragmatic effects.

5.3. Utilizing Stylistic Comparison Training to Cultivate Pragmatic Awareness

Learners' recognition rate of "shizhong's" written tone is 90.2%, but its actual usage rate in formal writing is under 30%. This phenomenon of "knowing but not using" highlights a disconnect. Instruction should move beyond isolated sentence training and incorporate stylistic comparisons within authentic discourse contexts.

Teachers can select contrasting styles, such as formal editorials from authoritative publications compared to daily dialogue transcripts [1]. In editorials, "shizhong" frequently appears alongside policy-related verbs like "persist" and "implement," whereas in dialogues, "yizhi" is more common with everyday verbs such as "wait" and "think." Teachers can also design stylistic conversion exercises, such as rewriting casual dialogue into formal speech, to identify where "yizhi" should be replaced by "shizhong," allowing learners to experience subtle stylistic shifts.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the Chinese synonyms "shizhong" and "yizhi," focusing on their acquisition among 51 intermediate-level Central Asian international students through a questionnaire survey. The findings reveal significant cognitive ambiguity regarding their distinctions, with errors primarily involving substitution and stylistic mismatches. Notably, "shizhong" demonstrates very low acceptance in dynamic contexts. Drawing on error analysis theory, this paper suggests teaching strategies such as cognitive construction, semantic gradient training, and stylistic comparison training to enhance the conversion of theoretical knowledge into precise pragmatic skills. Future research could involve longitudinal tracking of the current sample to explore the developmental trajectory of acquisition.

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