

THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY NATIVE UYGHUR SPEAKERS IN LEARNING PUTONGHUA AND CORRESPONDING TEACHING STRATEGIES

JiaLin Liu

Zaozhuang School of Technology, Zaozhuang 277000, Shandong, China.

Abstract: This study investigates the difficulties faced by native Uyghur speakers in learning Putonghua and proposes corresponding teaching strategies. Through contrastive analysis, the study examines the systematic differences between Uyghur and Chinese at four levels: phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatics. These difficulties are primarily attributed to negative transfer from the mother tongue, insufficient language input outside the classroom, and individual learner differences. The study recommends targeted teaching strategies, including systematic tone awareness training, comparative pronunciation instruction using vowel charts, development of contrastive teaching materials, optimization of classroom interaction, and enhanced teacher training. This study provides practical implications for Putonghua instruction among the Uyghur population.

Keywords: Putonghua; Uyghur; Language acquisition; Teaching strategies

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Significance

1.1.1 *The historical mission of promoting the national common language*

As the standard form of Modern Chinese, Putonghua serves as China's national common language and, more importantly, as a vital bridge for communication, exchange, and integration among all ethnic groups. The promotion and popularization of the national common language is a state language policy rooted in China's national conditions and carries profound practical significance. Mutual intelligibility is a fundamental dimension of cultural identity and constitutes the linguistic foundation for building a shared spiritual homeland for all ethnic groups. Improving proficiency in Putonghua is also closely linked to individuals' employment opportunities, income growth, skill acquisition, and social mobility, thereby providing a linguistic guarantee for people in ethnic minority regions to benefit from reform and development.

Located in China's northwestern border area, the Uyghur Autonomous Region is a multi-ethnic and multilingual region. Promoting Putonghua in there not only facilitates interethnic linguistic and cultural exchange and the dissemination of fine traditional Chinese culture, but also serves as a key measure for improving living standards, and advancing social development. However, it still faces considerable difficulties and challenges in this endeavor.

Southern area is the main settlement area of the Uyghur people. In Kashi, the Putonghua proficiency rate among Uyghur residents was only 67.5%, with 35.4% at a relatively high level, pointing to the urgency of Putonghua promotion in minority regions [1].

1.1.2 *Specific difficulties faced by native Uyghur speakers in acquiring Putonghua*

From a linguistic perspective, the difficulties encountered by native Uyghur speakers in learning Putonghua are systematic in nature. Uyghur belongs to the Turkic branch of the Altaic language family, whereas Chinese is a Sino-Xizang language. This fundamental genealogical difference gives rise to profound divergences in phonological systems, lexical formation, and grammatical rules. For Uyghur learners, the internalized phonological and grammatical patterns of their mother tongue exert a strong influence on their acquisition of Putonghua. An in-depth investigation of these difficulties and their underlying causes, along with the development of targeted teaching strategies based on such findings, is of significant theoretical and practical value for improving Putonghua instruction in this region.

1.2 Scope and Methods

1.2.1 *Scope of the study*

This study focuses on the typical difficulties that native Uyghur speakers encounter in acquiring Putonghua, with particular attention to systematic differences at four levels: phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatics.

1.2.2 *Research methods*

The following methods are adopted in this study:

- (1) Literature review. Key works in contrastive studies of Uyghur and Chinese, research on Chinese acquisition by Uyghur learners, and second-language phonological acquisition are reviewed to establish a theoretical foundation and identify current research frontiers.
- (2) Contrastive analysis. Systematic comparisons are made between Putonghua and Uyghur at the phonological, lexical, and grammatical levels to identify points and degrees of divergence, thereby providing a linguistic basis for predicting

and explaining learner errors.

2 MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN UYGHUR AND CHINESE AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Chinese, which belongs to the Sino-Xizang language family, and Uyghur, which belongs to the Altaic language family, exhibit fundamental typological differences in linguistic structure, and such differences permeate all levels including phonology, lexicon, and syntax. Previous research has systematically examined the research progress on the Uyghur language, reviewing the current state of research from the dimensions of phonology, grammar, and lexicon, and explicitly pointing out the issue of unbalanced development across these subfields [2]. From the perspective of teaching practice, a comprehensive understanding of the structural differences between Chinese and Uyghur constitutes an important prerequisite for accurately grasping the difficulties that native Uyghur speakers encounter in acquiring Chinese as a second language.

2.1 Differences at the Phonological Level

2.1.1 Comparison of vowel systems

The vowel system of Putonghua is far more complex than that of Uyghur. Putonghua has ten simple vowel finals, including the dorsal vowels a, o, e, ê, i, u, ü, the apical vowels ɿ and ʅ, and the retroflex vowel er. These vowels differ in place of articulation (tongue position), tongue height, and lip rounding versus non-rounding. In addition, Putonghua has thirteen diphthong finals, including ai, ei, ao, ou, ia, ie, ua, uo, üe, iao, iou, uai, uei, as well as 16 finals ending in nasal consonants. In contrast, Uyghur has only monophthongs and no diphthongs. There are eight vowel phonemes: a, e, ê, i, o, u, ø, y, all articulated with the tongue body. Based on tongue position (frontness/backness), the eight vowels of Uyghur can be divided into three categories: three front vowels (front of the tongue) — /ɛ/, /ø/, /y/; three back vowels (back of the tongue) — /ɑ/, /o/, /u/; and two central vowels (middle of the tongue) — /e/, /i/. Compared with Putonghua, Uyghur vowels tend to be articulated at a more posterior position overall [3].

Furthermore, since Uyghur lacks the apical vowels [ɿ] and [ʅ], native Uyghur speakers find it difficult to distinguish between -i[ɿ] (front apical), -i[ʅ] (back apical), and i. Meanwhile, Putonghua has a rich inventory of compound vowel finals, in which tongue position and lip shape undergo dynamic changes during articulation. Because Uyghur speakers lack such syllable patterns in their native language, they tend to simplify compound vowels into monophthongs or shorten the articulatory movement trajectory, resulting in pronunciation errors.

2.1.2 Comparison of consonant systems

Consonants are sounds produced when the airflow is obstructed in the oral or pharyngeal cavity. Modern Chinese has 21 consonants that can serve as initial consonants, which are classified according to place of articulation into bilabials, labiodentals, apicals, dorsals and velars. Uyghur has 24 consonants, and compared with Putonghua, it additionally has laminal consonants and laryngeals, both articulated further back.

Compared with Putonghua initials, Uyghur consonants tend to have a more posterior place of articulation. For retroflex consonants in Chinese that do not exist in Uyghur, such as zh, ch, sh and r, Uyghur speakers sometimes substitute similar sounds from Uyghur.

2.1.3 Syllable structure and tone

Chinese syllables follow a relatively fixed pattern: each syllable consists of an initial and a final, and with the exception of rhotacized syllables, one character corresponds to one syllable. Vowels serve as the syllabic nucleus, and consonants cannot form a syllable independently. Uyghur syllable structure is more varied, allowing syllables to consist of a vowel alone, a vowel plus a consonant, a consonant plus a vowel, a consonant-vowel-consonant sequence, or a vowel followed by two consonants. Crucially, Uyghur permits consonant clusters (e.g., in coda position), whereas Putonghua does not.

Tone presents another major challenge. Putonghua is a tonal language in which the four tones, high level, rising, falling-rising, and falling, distinguish lexical meaning. For instance, the syllable “ma” can mean four different things depending on its tone (mā, má, mǎ, mà). Uyghur has no lexical tones; instead, it uses word stress, typically on the final syllable of polysyllabic words, to convey semantic and grammatical information. Since tone is entirely absent from their native phonological system, Uyghur learners face a novel and persistent difficulty in mastering Putonghua tones.

2.2 Differences at the Lexical Level

Language reflects culture, and the cultural differences between Uyghur and Chinese societies are deeply embedded in their vocabularies.

First, Uyghur contains many words that reflect the unique cultural practices of the Uyghur people, for which Chinese often lacks precise equivalents. Uyghurs spread a “dastikhan” (which means “tablecloth”) when hosting guests and place food on it. A generous host is described as having a “dastixiniñon” (which means “big tablecloth”), and a person who is polite and well-mannered is said to have “dastixan korgen” (which means “seen the tablecloth”). Every year when the first snow falls, Uyghurs celebrate the Snow Festival. During the festival, friends jointly write a “snow greeting letter” to the recipient, in which they first extend good wishes for the family’s safety upon the arrival of the first snow, and then request that the recipient hold an entertainment party according to custom and specify the activities. This gives rise to the unique Uyghur word “qarliq”, which means “snow letter” [4].

Second, differences in cultural imagery endow certain animal words with different symbolic meanings. The magpie symbolizes happiness and good fortune in Chinese culture, whereas its counterpart “segizgan” in Uyghur is associated

with gossip and backbiting.

Furthermore, the Chinese kinship system is notable for its high degree of elaboration and intricacy, drawing clear boundaries between paternal and maternal relatives, between the parental and maternal generations, and between senior and junior members. The Uyghur kinship system, however, is organized along markedly different lines. Modern Uyghur makes no terminological distinction between paternal and maternal kin, maintains relatively blurred generational divisions, and employs a single term for cousins regardless of their paternal or maternal origin [5]. These systematic differences constitute a major source of persistent errors among Uyghur-speaking students in the acquisition and use of Chinese kinship terms.

2.3 Differences at the Grammatical Level

2.3.1 Fundamental difference in word order (continued)

Chinese is an analytic language with little inflectional morphology; grammatical relations are primarily expressed through word order and function words. Its basic constituent order is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), as in “I eat apples”, and this order is highly fixed. Uyghur, by contrast, is a synthetic language with a rich inflectional system, in which grammatical relations are chiefly marked by morphological changes on words, with word order playing a secondary role. Its basic order is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). However, because case endings and verbal inflections sufficiently indicate grammatical relations, actual word order in Uyghur is relatively flexible, and constituent reordering does not normally alter the core grammatical relationships in a sentence. This fundamental difference means that Uyghur learners must abandon their native linear sequencing habits when constructing Chinese sentences, and word-order errors are accordingly common.

2.3.2 Differences in the use of function words

As an analytic language, Chinese relies heavily on function words, including prepositions, conjunctions, and particles, along with word order, to encode grammatical meanings. Uyghur, being synthetic, conveys these meanings primarily through morphological inflections such as case, number, person, and tense. A key manifestation of this typological difference lies in prepositions. Chinese has an extensive inventory of prepositions marking temporal, locative, directional, recipient, and purposive relations. Uyghur has no prepositions as an independent word class; the corresponding meanings are expressed by nominal case suffixes (e.g., allative, ablative, locative) or by postpositions. Postpositions play a very important role in the expression of modern Uyghur, and their grammatical functions are similar to those of Chinese prepositions [6].

2.3.3 Differences in the expression of passive voice

Chinese passive constructions are typically formed with function words such as “bei” “jiao” “rang” “gei”, in combination with word order. Pragmatically, the passive in Chinese has traditionally been more common in adversative contexts. Uyghur, in contrast, marks the passive voice morphologically by adding passive suffixes directly to verbs, a synthetic device with no direct syntactic parallel in Chinese.

2.3.4 Other grammatical differences

There are also many other differences between Uyghur and Chinese grammar. For example, Uyghur has a rich case system, including the nominative case marked by a zero form, the genitive case marked by the suffix “-ning”, the accusative case marked by the suffix “-ni”, and some other cases [7]. Chinese, by contrast, does not have such morphological case markings.

Another example is that Chinese has a rich and complex classifier (measure word) system, with selective collocational restrictions between nouns and their classifiers; Uyghur, however, does not have a classifier word class, and quantity is expressed directly by numerals followed by nouns. These differences all pose learning difficulties to varying degrees.

3 CAUSES OF UYGHUR STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN CHINESE ACQUISITION

3.1 Negative Transfer from the Mother Tongue

Negative transfer from the mother tongue is the most fundamental cause of errors in the acquisition of Chinese by native Uyghur speakers. Second language acquisition theory holds that when learners acquire a target language, their existing knowledge of and habits in the mother tongue inevitably transfer into their production in the target language. When the rules of the mother tongue and those of the target language are similar, positive transfer facilitates acquisition; when they differ, negative transfer gives rise to errors [8].

Differences in phonological systems lead to difficulties in perception and production. Through long-term use of their native phonological system, speakers have developed a perceptual pattern for distinguishing phonemes in their mother tongue. When the phonological system of the mother tongue differs from that of the target language, learners find it difficult to perceive phonemic contrasts that do not exist in their mother tongue. Since Uyghur does not have tonal contrasts, learners face certain difficulties in perceiving Chinese tones. They can perceive differences in pitch height and pitch movement, but have difficulty converting these physical differences into phonemic categories that distinguish meaning. Similarly, phonological phenomena that do not exist in the mother tongue are also hard to perceive and thus prone to production errors.

Grammatical differences, especially in morphology and word order, may lead to syntactic errors. Uyghur learners, accustomed to an SOV word order, have internalized a processing pattern that places objects before verbs. This pattern automatically surfaces when they produce Chinese sentences, causing recurrent word-order errors. Moreover, since

Uyghur has no preposition category, learners lack a ready grammatical mechanism for marking relations through independent function words, forcing them to build this aspect of Chinese grammar from the ground up, a cognitively demanding task.

3.2 Learning Environment and Input Quality

Another major obstacle is the limited input available outside the classroom. In most cases, the classroom remains the primary channel through which Uyghur learners encounter Putonghua. Yet class time is restricted, and the amount of comprehensible input learners receive falls well short of what is needed for effective second language acquisition. Outside school, genuine opportunities to use Putonghua in daily communication are scarce, and learners have few chances or incentives for productive output. This combination of insufficient input and inadequate output severely undermines acquisition, making it difficult for phonological and grammatical knowledge acquired in class to develop into automatic communicative competence.

Teacher proficiency also plays a crucial role. Some Uyghur teachers of Putonghua are themselves not fully proficient in the language. Given that teacher speech constitutes a major source of input for learners, such errors can be internalized by students, resulting in fossilized errors that persist over time.

3.3 Learning Strategies and Individual Differences

Learning strategies and individual differences further shape acquisition outcomes. Some learners adopt avoidance strategies, deliberately reducing their use of complex Chinese structures like the passive or the *ba*-construction. While this tactic may reduce immediate errors, it ultimately hinders the development of grammatical competence. Others rely excessively on word-for-word translation from Uyghur, producing sentences that deviate significantly from standard Chinese usage.

Individual learner characteristics are equally consequential. Aptitude, motivation, and the affective filter all influence how well learners acquire Putonghua. When Uyghur learners interact with Han Chinese speakers and worry about their own Putonghua proficiency, their anxiety level rises. This elevated affective filter in turn reduces their capacity to absorb and process new language input.

4 TEACHING STRATEGIES AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Teaching Strategies Addressing Phonological Problems

4.1.1 Systematic development of tone awareness

Given that Uyghur is a non-tonal language, tone instruction should begin with cultivating tonal awareness rather than simply teaching the pitch values of the four tones. At the outset, teachers need to make it clear that tones in Chinese are lexically distinctive and that mispronouncing them can lead to communication breakdowns. Minimal-pair drills, such as “mā-má-mǎ-mà” and “shū-shú-shǔ-shù”, can then be used to sharpen students' perception and discrimination of tonal contrasts. Instruction should highlight the defining contour of each tone: the high level of Tone 1, the rising glide of Tone 2, the falling-rising of Tone 3, and the falling of Tone 4, helping students form stable mental representations of their acoustic properties. Gestures can reinforce this learning: an upward finger movement for Tone 2, a downward-then-upward movement for Tone 3, and similarly for the others. Such multimodal input, combining visual and kinesthetic cues, helps students build accurate tonal schemas.

Once students have a grasp of single-syllable tones, instruction should move systematically to tone sandhi in connected speech. Putonghua has a rich array of sandhi phenomena, including third-tone sandhi, the alternating patterns of “*yī*” and “*bu*”, neutral tone, rhotacization, and the tonal changes of the particle “*a*”. Uyghur does have assimilation and weakening at the phrasal and utterance levels, but the specific patterns differ considerably from those of Chinese. Teachers should therefore integrate sandhi rules into the curriculum in a structured way and design targeted exercises that guide students step by step from accurate isolated syllables, to correct tone combinations in disyllabic words, and ultimately to natural tonal production in continuous speech. Particular attention should be given to the rule that Tone 3 is realized as a half-third tone before non-third tones and as Tone 2 before another Tone 3; these patterns require extensive practice through reading phrases and sentences until they become automatic.

4.1.2 Comparative teaching using vowel charts

Vowel charts are a useful visual aid for teaching vowel systems. By plotting Putonghua vowels alongside their Uyghur counterparts on the same chart, teachers can give students a clear picture of how the two systems differ. This comparative presentation helps students identify features unique to Chinese, such as apical vowels and the retroflex vowel, as well as the dynamic tongue movement involved in diphthong production. During pronunciation practice, teachers should pay particular attention to diphthongs, where learners often produce insufficient tongue movement. Slow, exaggerated demonstrations can help students perceive the glide from the starting position to the ending position of each diphthong.

4.1.3 Comparison and correction of consonant places of articulation

For the retroflex initials *zh*, *ch*, *sh*, and *r*, teachers should begin with a clear explanation and demonstration of the place of articulation: the tongue tip curls upward to touch or approach the front of the hard palate. The voiceless initials *zh*, *ch*, and *sh* are produced without vocal fold vibration, whereas *r* is voiced. Comparing these sounds with similar Uyghur

consonants, such as the laminal series, can effectively highlight the articulatory differences.

4.2 Development of Targeted Teaching Materials

The design of teaching materials is central to improving instructional quality. Ideally, materials should adopt a contrastive perspective, systematically presenting the phonological, lexical, and grammatical differences between Chinese and Uyghur. This allows learners to see clearly where their mother tongue aligns with the target language and where it does not.

In phonology, textbooks should include dedicated sections addressing features unique to Chinese, such as polyphonic characters, neutral tone, and rhotacization, with ample imitation and repetition drills supported by high-quality audio recordings. Tone exercises should be woven throughout the materials, progressing progressively from single-syllable tones to disyllabic tone combinations, and finally to tonal patterns in connected speech.

In grammar, textbooks should provide focused practice on areas that Uyghur learners find particularly challenging, including prepositions, word order, aspect particles, and classifiers. A three-step exercise format can be effective: students begin by identifying and correcting erroneous sentences, then work through the correct usage via contrastive analysis, and finally reinforce their learning through production practice.

In the domain of culture and vocabulary, textbooks should incorporate content that highlights cross-cultural differences, such as variations in address terms, color symbolism, and the connotations of animal words. Such content helps cultivate learners' intercultural awareness and pragmatic sensitivity.

Material selection and compilation should follow a graded approach, with difficulty levels matched to learners' actual proficiency. At the elementary level, the focus should be on pronunciation and basic sentence patterns; at the intermediate level, vocabulary and syntactic structures can be expanded; and at the advanced level, attention should shift to discourse-level expression and pragmatic competence. Where feasible, digital supplements such as pronunciation models, interactive repetition exercises, and situational dialogues can be included to support self-study outside the classroom.

4.3 Optimization of Teaching Organization and Classroom Interaction

Given the wide variation in Putonghua proficiency among Uyghur students, a one-size-fits-all teaching pace fails to address the needs of learners at different levels. A more effective approach is to group students by proficiency and tailor instruction accordingly, with differentiated objectives, content, and pacing for each level. Research suggests that such small-class grouping allows teachers to better attend to individual differences and offer more targeted feedback.

Group work can also play a valuable role in the classroom. Mixing students of varying proficiency levels within groups encourages peer learning and mutual support. Activities can include topic-based discussions, where students communicate around assigned themes, and peer review, where they correct each other's pronunciation and grammatical errors. This format not only increases each student's opportunities for oral practice but also lowers the anxiety that often accompanies speaking directly to the teacher.

When it comes to error correction, teachers should be mindful of both strategy and timing. For phonological errors, repeating the learner's utterance in the correct form is preferable to overt negative feedback, as it avoids discouraging students from speaking. For grammatical errors, guided correction can be effective: teachers use questions or hints to lead students to identify and correct their own errors, thereby strengthening their grammatical awareness.

4.4 Leveraging Media and Digital Technology

Audiovisual media can serve as a valuable source of language input beyond the classroom. Students should be encouraged to engage with Putonghua through radio broadcasts, television programs, and online videos. Watching films and TV series in Putonghua, listening to news programs, and following recitation performances are all practical ways to increase exposure and develop an ear for the language.

It is of great importance to establish a coordinated, three-tiered promotion network involving schools, families, and communities. This approach extends language learning from the classroom into the home, giving students sustained opportunities for both input and output in authentic family communication settings. Through joint activities such as parent-child reading, conversational practice in Putonghua, and watching Putonghua programs together, students can reinforce what they have learned in class in a relaxed and natural environment while also enhancing their expressive abilities and communicative confidence through real-life use. At the same time, family members' participation encourages parents themselves to improve their own Putonghua proficiency and daily use, effectively advancing the spread of Putonghua from schools to households and the wider community. Schools should take a leading role by providing primary and secondary school students with systematic learning resources and practical guidance, equipping them with effective strategies for promoting Putonghua within their families, and in doing so, fostering a coordinated, three-tiered promotion network involving schools, families, and communities.

4.5 Teacher Training and Intercultural Teaching Awareness

Some Uyghur teachers of Putonghua need to improve their own language proficiency, making in-service training and assessment a priority. Training should address not only pronunciation accuracy, including tones, neutral tone, and

rhotacization, but also current second-language teaching methodologies. Teachers should become familiar with key findings from second language acquisition research, such as contrastive analysis and error analysis, and learn to apply these insights in the classroom. Research has documented persistent issues among some Uyghur teachers, including tonal errors, inaccurate production of neutral tone and rhotacized syllables, and difficulties with connected speech and phrasing. These problems call for systematic training and sustained practice over time.

Familiarity with the learners' mother tongue is another valuable asset. Experience in teaching Chinese as a foreign language has shown that when teachers understand the phonological and grammatical features of the learners' native language, they are better able to anticipate and explain errors, making instruction more targeted. Therefore, it would be highly beneficial for teachers here—especially Han Chinese teachers—to possess knowledge of the Uyghur phonological system and grammatical structure.

Cultural contrasts should also be integrated into language instruction. When teaching kinship terms, for example, teachers can compare the two kinship systems and explain the patriarchal values embedded in Chinese terminology. When covering animal vocabulary, they can highlight how the same animal may carry different symbolic meanings across the two cultures. Such contrasts not only help students grasp the cultural connotations of words and reduce pragmatic errors, but also foster mutual cultural understanding and respect, contributing to a more inclusive and positive classroom atmosphere.

Finally, teacher development should not rely on one-off training sessions. A sustainable model requires an ongoing teaching-research infrastructure that supports teachers throughout their careers. Schools with a high concentration of Uyghur teachers should consider establishing Putonghua teaching-research groups that regularly organize peer observation, collaborative lesson planning, and case discussions focused on learner errors. Through such collegial exchange and reflection, teachers can continually refine their understanding of error patterns, improve their classroom strategies, and create a virtuous cycle of professional growth.

5 CONCLUSION

The acquisition of Putonghua by native Uyghur speakers is a challenging process. This study has examined the difficulties Uyghur learners face in four areas, phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics, and has traced these difficulties to three main sources: negative transfer from the mother tongue, limitations in the learning environment and input quality, and learner-specific factors such as learning strategies and individual differences.

Promoting the national common language is essential for fostering exchange, communication, and integration among ethnic groups. A thorough understanding of how Uyghur learners acquire Putonghua, including where and why they struggle, provides a necessary foundation for designing effective instruction. It is our hope that this study will offer insights for both theoretical research and teaching practice regarding the promotion of the national common language and script among ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs, and contribute to language education in ethnic minority regions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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