

Differences in Tense Expression between Chinese and English: Insights and Reflections on Language Teaching

XINSHENG CAO

M.A. in Teaching Chinese Language and Culture
Irish Institute for Chinese Studies, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
Email: morantimeday@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study explores how tense is expressed differently in English and Chinese and how these differences can inform classroom instruction. English uses verb changes to show tense, while Chinese relies more on context, time words, and aspect markers. These structural differences often lead to errors when learners transfer between the two systems.

Using a contrastive analysis approach, this paper compares tense use in the two languages across three areas: form, meaning, and use in real communication. It also draws on multimodal learning theory and cognitive load principles to suggest practical teaching strategies. These include visual timelines, bilingual example sentences, scaffolded storytelling tasks, and collaborative tools like Padlet and Quizlet.

Based on classroom observations and a mock weekend lesson in Chinese, the study shows how visual and task-based scaffolds can reduce confusion and help learners better understand how tense works across languages. The framework can be adapted to different proficiency levels and classroom settings. It offers a flexible way to include focused tense instruction in both ESL and CFL lessons.

The findings offer practical insights for teachers working at the intersection of contrastive linguistics and multimodal teaching.

Keywords: contrastive analysis; tense instruction; multimodal pedagogy; language transfer; Chinese as a foreign language

Introduction

Tense and aspect are essential for expressing time. In English, tense is mainly expressed by changes in verb forms, such as adding "-ed" to indicate past actions, or modifying auxiliary verbs to distinguish between perfective and progressive aspects (Bardovi-Harlig, 2021). This approach provides different forms for the past, present, and future tenses of verbs. In Chinese, however, it does not rely on verb changes to indicate changes in tense, but rather uses context, temporal adverbs, and aspect markers (such as "了" and "在") to indicate the aspect or time changes of events (Zhang, 2016). This is a big challenge for beginners, especially when they apply native language rules to their second language, which can lead to negative transfer errors.

In addition, the use of tenses also reflects the different perspectives on time in Chinese and English cultures. In Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, English speakers view time as a linear progression from past to future, which highlights the need to mark tense distinctions clearly. In contrast, the concept of time in Chinese is more event-oriented and context-dependent, with its meaning shaped by discourse and situational clues rather than explicit word morphological changes (Yu, 2022). Hall (1959)'s distinction between high-context and low-context cultures is very appropriate: "English, as a low-context language, relies heavily on explicit grammatical markers; while Chinese, as a high-context language, presupposes common knowledge and understanding of context to convey time information."

These differences affect how learners from different language backgrounds learn the tenses and morphology of a new language. Research in second language acquisition (SLA) shows that learners often transfer cognitive and linguistic patterns from their native language to their second language (Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), which is known as negative transfer. For example, it is more difficult for native Chinese learners to master the present perfect or progressive tense in English because these forms do not exist in Chinese. Similarly, native English speakers may overuse or misuse aspect markers such as 了 and 在 when learning Chinese because they are not familiar with the fact that time changes in Chinese are not accomplished solely by 了 (Xu & Lu, 2019).

These issues highlight the need for teaching strategies that explicitly address the contrasts between the two tense systems. A purely rule-based explanation is often insufficient. Learners benefit more when instructional methods consider the underlying logic of each system and help students recognize how tense is constructed differently. Therefore, this study adopts a contrastive analysis approach to examine how tense is expressed in English and Chinese, with attention to form, semantic function, and use in real-life communication. The goal is to identify common sources of learner error and to use these findings to inform multimodal instructional strategies that reduce confusion and support language development.

By combining linguistic theory with classroom experience, this paper aims to build a teaching framework that supports both ESL and CFL learners. It focuses on practical methods that make tense more visible, understandable, and teachable across different language backgrounds. The following sections explore the relevant literature, outline the contrastive and pedagogical approach used, and present classroom-based illustrations of the proposed strategies.

Review of Literature

This section reviews four key areas to the challenges that learners face in learning tenses and how to design teaching that meets the needs of learners.

Contrastive Linguistics and Tense Acquisition

It is important to identify the difficulties learners may encounter due to structural differences between their native and target languages? Contrastive analysis is a good way to do this. There are significant differences between tenses in English and Chinese. According to Bybee (2021), English has a morphologically rich tense and aspect system, which uses a variety of verb forms to indicate different time frames and action types. For example, verbs in English can change their morphology to indicate past tense (“ate”), ongoing tense (“is eating”), and completed actions (“has eaten”). These features create a clear and accessible tense system. In contrast, Chinese does not use verb morphology to express tense. It relies on aspect markers, such as “了 (le)” or “过 (guo)”, and adverbs, such as “已 (yǐjīng, already)” or “正在 (zhèngzài, currently)” to indicate the time and status of an event (Zhang, 2016).

Because of this difference, learners often apply patterns from one language to the other in ways that cause misunderstanding. English speakers learning Chinese might expect every past action to require a verb change, while Chinese speakers learning English may ignore verb endings that mark tense. Guo (2023) observes that these mismatches in expectation often come from learners not being fully aware of how each system works. Therefore, teaching should not only explain new rules but also show how they differ from the learners’ first language.

Cultural Models of Time and Temporal Thinking

Grammar does not operate in isolation—it reflects deeper cultural views. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe how time in English is often imagined as space: people speak of "looking forward to the weekend" or "putting the past behind them." This metaphor shapes how English speakers understand time, reinforcing the use of linear grammar structures. In contrast, Chinese culture and language reflect a more context-driven view. Yu (2020) points out that time in Chinese discourse is shaped by situational relationships, not just sequence.

In Chinese, as a high-context language, time is often left unstated and instead shaped by what speakers assume the listener already knows. This makes interpretation more dependent on shared understanding (Hall, 1959). For English learners, who are used to seeing tense clearly marked in the verb, this indirectness can feel vague or incomplete. Chinese learners, by contrast, may not feel the same need to “mark time” in the sentence, since they’re more used to drawing meaning from context. These habits don’t just reflect grammar—they reflect how each culture tends to approach time.

English communication often shows a short-term mindset, favoring order and deadlines, while Chinese tends to reflect a long-term orientation, with time unfolding more flexibly across discourse. This pattern aligns with Hofstede’s (2001) time orientation dimension, which explains how cultures differ in how they plan, sequence, and talk about the future. In summary, teachers can use this understanding to better explain how the two systems work.

Multimodal Learning and Cognitive Support

Tenses are not just a language rule, so they are difficult to understand because they require learners to visualize and organize things in their minds. For this reason, researchers often take a multimodal approach. Paivio’s (1986) dual coding theory suggests that when we see and hear information at the same time, we process it better because we understand it. Mayer (2020) further argues if too much information is input at once, it may overload learners and have a negative effect, especially when dealing with abstract grammar like tenses. For teachers, this means that timelines, pictures, and interactive tools are not only practical, but also necessary support to make tenses more concrete and easier to understand.

In practice, tools like Padlet and Quizlet allow learners to link grammar forms with meaning through visuals and collaboration. Guo (2023) and Kalyuga (2021) show that these methods can reduce confusion and help students retain new structures. However, not all multimodal input is helpful—when poorly managed, it can overwhelm students, especially in grammar-heavy lessons. Teachers need to design tasks carefully and introduce support in stages.

Language Transfer in Second Language Learning

The influence of a learner’s first language on their second language learning is well documented. Odlin (1989) defines language transfer as the use of knowledge from one language in learning another. Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) distinguish between positive transfer, which helps learning, and negative transfer, which causes errors. In tense learning, transfer problems often arise from deep-level assumptions about how time is expressed.

For example, English learners may struggle with the indirect way Chinese uses particles and context to show time. Chinese learners, on the other hand, may not use English tense forms consistently or may overgeneralize patterns like the present simple. These tendencies show the

value of a teaching approach that makes such contrasts visible. As research suggests, students benefit from understanding not just what tense forms mean, but how and why they are used differently in each language.

Methodology

This study follows a reflection-based and theory-driven approach that combines contrastive linguistic analysis with practical classroom insight. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the research focuses on a systematic comparison of tense and aspect across English and Chinese and offers teaching strategies grounded in classroom experience. The methods used support the dual aim of this paper: to explain how tense is structured differently in the two languages, and to propose instructional ideas that help learners deal with these differences.

Contrastive Analysis as a Methodological Basis

This study uses contrastive analysis as a way to explore the formal, semantic, and functional differences between English and Chinese tense systems. Contrastive analysis allows researchers and educators to highlight where learners are most likely to face challenges due to differences in grammar structures (Bybee, 2021; Odlin, 1989). In this case, the study compares how English and Chinese handle verb tense through different means: English through morphological verb changes and auxiliary structures, and Chinese through particles, time expressions, and context.

The analysis is based on grammar references, previous research, and classroom-based examples that show how learners interpret and use tense. The aim is not only to describe the two systems, but to explain how the differences create learning difficulties, especially when learners transfer expectations from one language to another. This understanding serves as a base for the teaching strategies proposed in the following sections.

Classroom Illustration: A Weekend Chinese Lesson

To connect theory with teaching practice, this study includes a classroom-based illustration drawn from a weekend Chinese lesson at a community language school in Dublin. The class included 24 young learners aged 8 to 10, with proficiency levels ranging from Pre-A1 to A1 on the CEFR scale. The lesson focused on using the particle “了” (le) to describe past actions.

The instructor used a task-based learning approach with three key scaffolds:

Visual modeling – Learners watched a short animated timeline showing when and how “了” is used in Chinese. The video included labeled examples and comparisons with “过” (guo) to show differences between perfective and experiential uses.

Collaborative storytelling – In pairs, learners built simple past-tense narratives using sentence frames, such as “昨天我去了...” (“Yesterday I went to...”). These frames were based on a narrative schema inspired by Biber (2020).

Peer feedback through Padlet – Learners posted short stories on Padlet with drawings and voice recordings. Peers gave feedback using a simple rubric adapted from Fulcher (2010), focusing on temporal clarity.

The activity sequence was designed to reduce overload and support learner autonomy. At first, students were given visual guides and sentence stems. As the tasks progressed, the supports were gradually removed to encourage independent use of tense markers. Observations and informal feedback from learners indicated that the visual timeline helped them better understand when to use “了” and avoid overusing it.

This classroom illustration is not presented as formal data, but as an example of how tense-focused instruction can be implemented in practice. It illustrates the multimodal teaching suggestions discussed in the next section.

Findings: A Comparative Analysis of Tense Expression

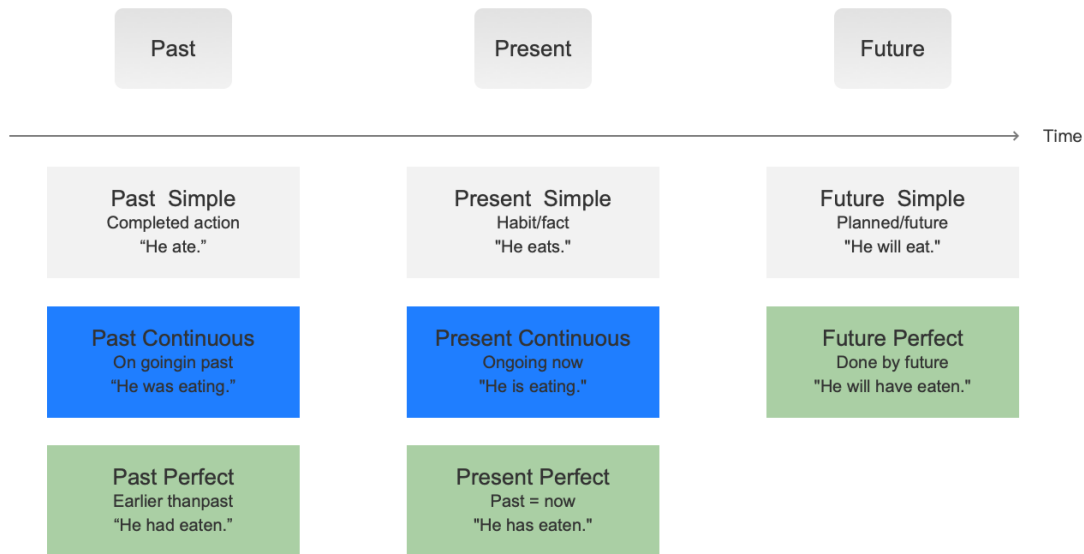
This section compares how English and Chinese express tense across three core areas: form, semantic meaning, and pragmatic use. The findings are based on contrastive analysis and are supported by classroom illustrations and teaching observations.

Differences in Form

English expresses tense mainly by changing the verb form. For example, verbs like “eat” become “ate” in the past, or take auxiliary forms like “is eating” or “had eaten” to indicate progressive or perfect aspects. Teachers often use timelines to help students visualize these verb forms in relation to time (see Figure 1). These changes are part of the verb system itself and provide clear signals about when the action took place.

Figure 1

Systemic Timeline of English Tenses(Source: Author's own design)



Chinese does not inflect verbs to mark tense. Instead, it uses temporal adverbs (like “昨天” for “yesterday” or “明天” for “tomorrow”) and aspect markers such as “了 (le),” “过 (guo),” and “正在 (zhèngzài).” These words work together to build a time frame around the verb. For example:

“他昨天去了商店” (He went to the store yesterday) – uses “昨天” and “了” to indicate a past completed action.

“他正在吃饭” (He is eating now) – uses “正在” to mark an ongoing action.

This indirect way of showing time requires learners to pay attention to the whole sentence rather than just the verb. Figure 2 shows a visual summary of how time is expressed in Chinese.

Figure 2

Conceptual Structure of Temporal Expression in Chinese(Source: Author's own design)

Past-过去 (Yesterday)	Present-现在 (Now)	Future-未来(Tomorrow)
Time Word: 昨天 (yesterday)	Time Word: 现在,这会儿, 此时(now)	Time Word: 明天 (tomorrow)
Aspect Marker: 了 ("了" is a perfective aspect marker indicating that an action has been completed.)	Aspect Marker: 在/正在 ("在" and "正在" are progressive aspect markers, indicating that an action is currently in progress.)	Modal Verb: 要 ("要" is a modal verb expressing future plans or intentions.)
Example: 他昨天去了 (He went yesterday.)	Example: 他正在吃饭 (He is eating.)	Example: 他明天要去学校 (He will go to school tomorrow.)

Differences in Semantic Meaning

Besides showing when an action happened, tense forms also express how an action unfolds—whether it is completed, ongoing, or repeated. In English, this is often built into the tense form itself. For example:

“I have finished my homework.” (present perfect: completed with relevance to the present)

“She is writing a letter.” (present continuous: action in progress)

Chinese uses adverbs and aspect markers to show the same ideas. For example:

“我已经写完作业了。” – uses “已经” and “了” to show that the action is finished.

“我正在写作业。” – uses “正在” to show that the action is currently happening.

Rather than changing the verb, Chinese adds meaning through combinations of markers and context. These semantic functions are spread across the sentence, which makes tense less visible but still clearly expressed through structure.

Differences in Pragmatic Use

English often uses verb tense to make event sequences clear. For example, in the sentence “He had left before I arrived,” the use of the past perfect “had left” helps mark that this action happened earlier than “I arrived.” This grammatical clarity fits well with English as a low-context language, where meaning is made explicit through words (Hall, 1959).

Chinese relies more on context and shared understanding. In “他昨天去北京” (He went to Beijing yesterday), there is no aspect marker like “了.” The listener must infer from context that the trip likely finished. This kind of interpretation depends on Gricean implicature (Grice, 1975), where meaning comes from common knowledge and assumptions. For learners used to explicit time marking, this can be confusing.

Chinese speakers rely more on discourse-level clues than on strict chronological order. As Tao (2022) observes in classical works like *Zuo Zhuan*, events tend to connect by topic or cause rather than by when they occurred. This flexible sense of time can be hard for learners of languages like English, where grammar usually locks events into a clear sequence. For learners, this can lead to the habit of overusing 了 or omitting 了 when it is needed.

In conclusion, tense is not merely grammar - it also reflects how a language conveys meaning. For teachers, this means that when designing courses, they should be able to help learners notice and apply these patterns instead of merely relying on rules or translations.

The next part of this paper introduces teaching ideas based on these insights, with practical suggestions for both ESL and CFL classrooms.

Suggestions and Recommendations

This section presents a few classroom-based suggestions that address the key differences between English and Chinese tense systems. These ideas are not only based on the earlier contrastive analysis, but also draw from practical teaching experience. The goal is to make tense instruction clearer, more interactive, and easier for learners to apply. Whether learners are Chinese speakers studying English or English speakers learning Chinese, these suggestions aim to support their understanding and use of tense in real communication.

Using Visual Timelines to Show Contrast

What is the clearest way to teach tenses? One way is to use a timeline. It can clearly help learners compare how English and Chinese express the same meaning in different ways. For example, in the English sentence "He had eaten before she arrived" uses the past perfect tense to indicate the order of time. Its Chinese version might be "他吃过了饭,然后他来了", using the particle "过" and the word "然后" to indicate the order. Using a timeline can intuitively highlight the logic behind the English and Chinese sentence structures.

Practical ideas:

Students can be asked to create a timeline for a short story using tense markers in both English and Chinese. Tools like Canva or Padlet can help them turn their stories into visual charts. Another option is to organize group activities where students compare sentence pairs in the two languages and match them to points on a timeline.

These activities use visuals and collaboration to make the link between tense and event sequence more concrete. They also reinforce the functional role of tense in expressing time clearly.

In task-based learning, students use language while completing meaningful tasks. This increases both the frequency and accuracy of tense use. For example, in a weekend Chinese class, learners began their responses with “昨天...” (“Yesterday...”) to describe what they did the day before. By posting their sentences on Padlet and giving peer feedback, they produced longer sentences, showed better grammar accuracy, and became more confident in speaking.

Practical ideas:

When assigning tasks, students can be asked to refer to pictures and describe their activities last weekend in sentences (such as "昨天, 我..."). Students need to upload pictures related to the content and briefly describe them using the tense structures they have learned, such as 昨天我去公园."

To improve the accuracy of language use, teachers can provide scoring criteria or peer review checklists, focusing on whether the time expression is clear and whether the aspect markers (such as "了") are correct. Peer feedback can help students check and adjust their language output in actual contexts.

This kind of activity makes tense use more natural and less abstract.

Cross-Linguistic Awareness and Contrastive Input

Learners often carry over patterns from their first language. Helping them notice these patterns—both helpful and misleading—can improve tense accuracy. Contrastive input highlights differences and gives students a clear sense of what to look out for.

Practical ideas:

Show pairs of example sentences in both languages and ask learners to spot the differences.

Use short guided reflections: “How would you say this in your first language? How is it different?”

Explain not only the rules but the reasons behind them.

This approach helps learners build metalinguistic awareness and avoid common transfer errors (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Odlin, 1989).

Managing Cognitive Load with Step-by-Step Scaffolding

Multimodal input is powerful, but too much information at once can overwhelm students. Scaffolding helps by introducing support gradually and reducing it over time. This makes learning more sustainable.

Practical ideas:

Begin with a visual animation of tense use, followed by matching tasks.

Move from sentence completion to free storytelling.

Use checklists to guide attention (e.g., “Did I include a time word?” “Did I use ‘了’?”).

This kind of progression matches how students build confidence and understanding over time (Mayer, 2020; Kalyuga, 2021).

Adapting to Different Learner Profiles

Mixed-level classrooms are common in both ESL and CFL contexts. Learners vary in language background, age, and exposure. Teaching tense requires flexible strategies that meet different needs.

Practical ideas:

Offer sentence frames for beginners and open-ended prompts for advanced learners.

Use pair work so more experienced students can model correct use.

Let students choose how to show their understanding (writing, speaking, visuals).

By giving options and scaffolds, teachers can support all learners without lowering expectations.

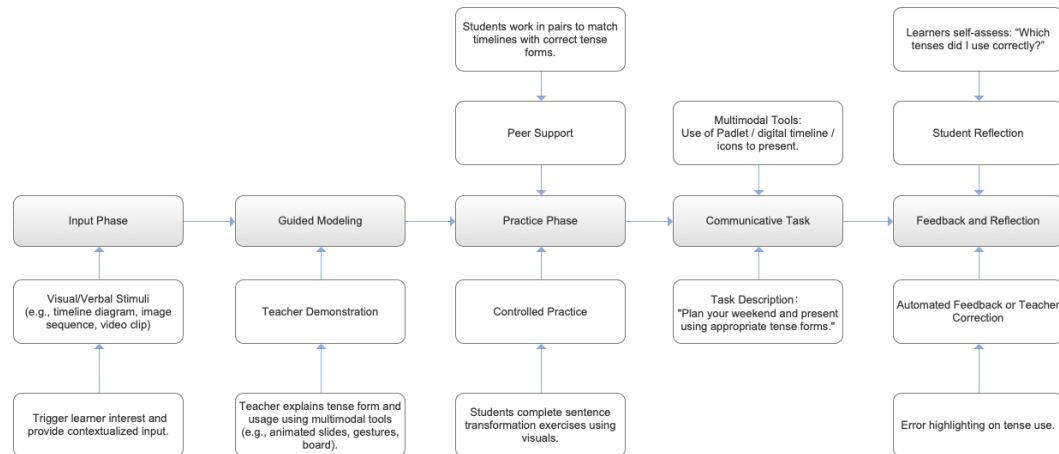
Visual Summary: A Stepwise Framework for Tense Instruction

Figure 3 provides a summary of the suggested instructional process, showing how tense instruction can be built up through visual support, interactive tasks, and structured reflection. The framework combines multimodal input, gradual scaffolding, and peer interaction. It follows Paivio’s (1986) and Mayer’s (2020) principles of multimedia learning and cognitive load

management. Each phase of the framework connects with one or more strategies discussed above and can be adapted to various classroom settings.

Figure 3.

A Stepwise Framework for Tense Instruction Using Multimodal Tools (Source: Author's own design)



Summary of Key Strategies

These teaching suggestions aim to make tense instruction more visible, relevant, and manageable. They combine contrastive analysis, multimodal support, and flexible task design. By focusing on how learners process and use tense, teachers can reduce confusion and help students develop confidence in both English and Chinese.

Conclusion

This paper examined the differences in how English and Chinese express tense, with a focus on how these differences affect language learning and teaching. Many studies have noted that English uses verb forms to mark time, while Chinese relies on context, time expressions, and aspect markers such as “了” and “正在.” These structural contrasts often lead to transfer-related errors in second language learning (Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

To address these challenges, the study proposed a teaching framework based on contrastive analysis and supported by multimodal learning theory (Paivio, 1986; Mayer, 2020). It recommended tools like visual timelines, bilingual examples, scaffolded tasks, and interactive platforms such as Padlet and Quizlet. These strategies were illustrated through a classroom case

where young CFL learners practiced past-tense narration with the particle “了,” supported by visual modeling and peer interaction (Kalyuga, 2021).

The proposed instructional model is adaptable to different classroom settings. Teachers in tech-equipped environments can use digital tools for interactive practice, while low-tech classrooms can apply the same ideas using printed visuals and collaborative tasks. This flexibility makes the model widely applicable across ESL and CFL contexts.

While this paper is reflective in nature and does not include empirical data, it offers a foundation for future studies. One promising direction is to design quasi-experimental research that compares the effectiveness of traditional rule-based instruction with multimodal, contrastive strategies. This could involve pre- and post-tests of tense accuracy, classroom observations, and learner interviews to examine how different approaches affect understanding and production of tense over time.

By linking linguistic theory with classroom practice, this study supports a clearer, more practical approach to teaching tense. Tense is more than grammar—it reflects how people think about time. Helping learners understand and use it effectively requires both insight and instructional care.

References

- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2021). Thirty years of studying lexical aspect in L2 acquisition. *Language Teaching*, 54(2), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000456>
- Bybee, J. (2021). *Language change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Guo, X. (2023). Multimodality in language education: Implications of a multimodal affective perspective in foreign language teaching. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1283625. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1283625>
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jarvis, S., & Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. London: Routledge.

Kalyuga, S. (2021). The expertise reversal principle in multimedia learning: Recent developments and challenges. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(2), 509–528. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-020-09558-5>

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mayer, R. E. (2020). *Multimedia learning* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108858894>

Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paivio, A. (1986). *Mental representations: A dual coding approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tao, H. (2022). An interactive perspective on topic constructions in Mandarin: Some new findings based on natural discourse data. In C. Huang & Y. Li (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Chinese Linguistics* (pp. 123–140). Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Xu, X., & Lu, X. (2019). Acquisition of the Chinese particle *le* by L2 learners: A corpus-based approach. *Language and Linguistics*, 20(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lali.00001.x>

Yu, N. (2022). *The moral metaphor system: A conceptual metaphor approach*. Oxford University Press.

Zhang, H. (2016). 时体系统对外汉语教学的影响 [The influence of tense-aspect systems on CFL instruction]. *Chinese Language Teaching and Research*, 48(3), 15–22. [In Chinese]