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Types and causes of errors in focus marking in the Chinese *bǎ*-construction among second-language learners of Chinese

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Abstract. The acquisition of the Chinese *bǎ*-construction by second-language learners of Chinese has long been a major focus and a persistent challenge in international Chinese language education. Existing studies have primarily examined this construction from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives, while relatively little research has investigated learner errors in terms of information structure and focus expression. Using focus theory as its analytical framework, this study reexamines errors in the acquisition of the *bǎ*-construction within the broader context of information structure and identifies three types of errors in focus marking. The first is syntactic marking errors, including the omission, inappropriate addition, and substitution of focus-sensitive operators, as well as misidentification of their scope. The second is prosodic marking errors, manifested in incorrect stress placement, the omission of stress, and inappropriate prosodic phrasing. The third is word-order marking errors, primarily involving avoidance of the construction, overuse of the construction, and mismatches between word order and the intended focus structure. The study further examines the causes of these errors from three perspectives: first-language transfer, overgeneralization of target-language rules, and a lack of awareness of focus marking. It also compares the relative difficulty of acquiring the three marking strategies: syntactic, prosodic, and word-order marking. By offering a new perspective on the underlying mechanisms of *bǎ*-construction acquisition among second-language learners, this study provides practical pedagogical insights into fostering learners' awareness of focus expression in the *bǎ*-construction in international Chinese language classrooms.

Keywords: second-language learners of Chinese, *bǎ*-construction, focus marking, error types, causes of errors

1. Introduction

The *bǎ*-construction is one of the most typologically distinctive constructions in Modern Chinese and is widely recognized as both a major teaching focus and a persistent learning challenge in international Chinese language classrooms. Previous research has largely concentrated on syntactic constraints, semantic properties, and pragmatic functions, with relatively few studies systematically examining actual acquisition patterns among second-language learners from the perspectives of information structure and focus expression. From a logical and communicative perspective, the *bǎ*-construction arises from pragmatic needs. By departing from the canonical word order, speakers move the object denoting the affected entity, which is already known to both participants in the conversation, to a position before the verb. They place the predicate, which carries

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new information and greater communicative value, toward the end of the sentence, allowing it to serve naturally as the focal point of the utterance. Huang Zanhui [1] observes that the definiteness of the object in the *bǎ*-construction is closely related to the information-structural principle of placing old information before new information. Cheng Qianwen [2] also points out that this arrangement, characterized by a preposed object and a prominent predicate, constitutes a marked form–meaning correspondence in its own right.

In recent years, the application of focus theory to Chinese grammatical research has become increasingly sophisticated, and a growing number of scholars have recognized that the choice to use the *bǎ*-construction is never merely an isolated syntactic operation. Rather, it is intrinsically linked to the information-structural organization of the entire sentence. The central communicative purpose of choosing this construction is to highlight changes in the affected entity resulting from an action, including changes in its outcome or state, thereby making the predicate the primary focus of the sentence. The research conducted by Guo Jia et al. [3] confirms that stable patterns govern the distribution of focus in Chinese syntax and the corresponding marking devices. These devices include the natural placement of sentence-final stress, auxiliary emphatic elements within the sentence, and dedicated cleft constructions, all of which can serve to express focus. However, in actual second-language learning contexts, learners must first accurately identify the focus within a specific context and then flexibly employ different marking strategies, including syntactic adjustment, prosodic variation, and word-order reorganization, to express it. The acquisition patterns underlying this ability remain far from fully understood. A review of existing research on the acquisition of the *bǎ*-construction reveals that most studies have focused on the selection of syntactic structures and strategies for preventing learner errors [4, 5], while relatively few have directly examined the construction from the perspective of focus marking.

Taking the focus-marking properties of the *bǎ*-construction as its point of departure, this study reexamines errors in its acquisition within the theoretical framework of information structure and addresses three specific questions. First, what types of errors do second-language learners of Chinese make when acquiring focus marking in the *bǎ*-construction? Second, since these errors do not arise without cause, what underlying cognitive difficulties and pragmatic deviations account for them? Third, what patterns emerge in the relative difficulty learners experience when acquiring three levels of focus-marking strategies: syntactic restructuring, prosodic stress placement, and the reorganization of canonical word order? This study aims not only to deepen our understanding of actual acquisition patterns among learners but also to offer practical guidance for fostering awareness of focus expression in the *bǎ*-construction in international Chinese language classrooms.

2. Definition of core concepts

2.1. Focus marking

Focus refers to the informational core conveyed by a sentence, that is, the linguistic element that the speaker considers to carry the greatest amount of information for the listener and to be most in need of explicit prominence within the sentence as a whole. To ensure that the listener accurately identifies this core, the semantic content of words alone is often insufficient. Instead, a series of explicit formal cues must work together to signal it. The devices that perform this identifying function are collectively referred to as *focus markers*. From a linguistic typological perspective, focus-marking devices across languages can be classified into three broad categories: structural adjustments at the syntactic level, stress variations at the prosodic level, and positional changes at the word-order level.

2.1.1. Syntactic marking

Syntactic marking refers to the use of specific syntactic structures or function words to indicate the position of focus. In Chinese, the most typical syntactic focus markers are focus-sensitive operators, commonly including adverbs such as *dōu* (都, all), *yě* (也, also), *zhǐ* (只, only), and *shènzhì* (甚至, even). It is important to note that these adverbs are not themselves equivalent to the focus constituents. Rather, they establish associations with specific focus constituents in the sentence and enhance their prominence within the sentence as a whole through mechanisms such as quantificational restriction and parallel comparison. Li Kesheng [6] discusses the mechanisms underlying these operators, explaining that *dōu* establishes an association with a focus constituent in the sentence, activates a set of alternatives corresponding to that focus, and conveys a meaning of meeting or even exceeding the maximum expectation. The focus structures triggered by *dōu* and *shènzhì*, moreover, differ substantially. For example:

a. "他都把作业写完了" (He has even finished all the homework) — The focus associated with *dōu* in this sentence is "homework", and the operator conveys a universal quantificational meaning.

b. "他也把作业写完了" (He has also finished the homework) — The focus associated with *yě* in this sentence is "homework", and the operator establishes a parallel comparison between this event and other similar events.

2.1.2. Prosodic marking

In addition to syntactic adjustments, speakers can indicate the position of focus through phonetic variations in stress, pauses, and intonation. These devices are known as prosodic marking. The Focus-Stress Principle, widely recognized in linguistic research, holds that focus constituents occupy a prosodically prominent position in a sentence. Such prominence may be realized through a rise or fall in pitch, increased duration of articulation, or greater vocal intensity. Shi Feng and Xia Quansheng [7] systematically examined the prosodic manifestations of different types of focus in Standard Mandarin and summarized ten principles governing focus realization, including those associated with neutral focus, emphatic focus, and contrastive focus. Their work provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the correspondence between focus and prosody. Specifically, in the *bǎ*-construction examined here, the main sentence stress typically falls on the predicate, reflecting the construction's communicative function of foregrounding the action itself and highlighting the resulting state.

2.1.3. Word-order marking

In addition to using functional adverbs and prosodic variation to mark focus, speakers of Chinese commonly indicate focus by adjusting the linear order of sentence constituents. This strategy is known as word-order marking. Chinese has relatively few morphological changes available for focus marking, and sentence-final position naturally serves as a locus of information focus. Constituents placed at the end of a sentence generally carry the newest and most communicatively significant information that the speaker intends to convey and therefore naturally constitute the focal core of the sentence. From the perspective of linguistic information structure, Lu Jianming [8] reinterprets the essential nature of the *bǎ*-construction and reveals the word-order logic underlying it. In this construction, the affected object, which might otherwise occupy sentence-final position, is deliberately moved forward to a position immediately following *bǎ*. As a result, this constituent is removed from the sentence-final focus position and presented instead as given information and an established topic. The predicate remaining at the end of the sentence consequently becomes the natural focus of the sentence as a whole.

2.2. The concept of learner errors

According to the framework of Interlanguage Theory proposed by Selinker in 1972, errors made by language learners are not accidental slips of the tongue or pen (*mistakes*). Rather, they are systematic manifestations of the interlanguage system that learners are in the process of developing, reflecting their current stage of linguistic development. Error Analysis refers to the systematic collection and classification of learner error data, the inference of the underlying linguistic rule system that learners are developing, and the investigation of the deeper causes of these errors [9].

In the specific context of acquiring the *bǎ*-construction, researchers have observed a common pattern: second-language learners of Chinese tend to avoid using this construction and make various types of errors when learning it. The specific forms these errors take are often closely associated with learners' first-language backgrounds and current levels of language proficiency [10]. For the purposes of this study, *errors* specifically refer to systematic deviations made by second-language learners of Chinese when using the *bǎ*-construction to convey focus. Common manifestations include the omission, inappropriate addition, and misuse of focus markers, as well as errors in their placement.

3. Literature review

3.1. Review of research on focus structures in the *bǎ*-construction

The focus properties and information structure of the *bǎ*-construction have long been prominent topics in Chinese grammatical research. Traditional studies have largely approached this construction from the perspective of disposal, arguing that its core pragmatic function is to express how the subject acts upon an affected entity through a particular action, ultimately bringing about a definite change in that entity. This central approach, known as the disposal-based account, has continued to inform subsequent studies of synchronic structures and diachronic developments, while also being supplemented, reconsidered, and revised over time [11]. With the introduction of information structure theory into Chinese grammatical research, scholars began to reexamine the nature of the *bǎ*-construction in terms of information transmission and the principles governing focus expression. A review of existing studies reveals two main lines of inquiry within this approach: the information-structural characteristics of the *bǎ*-construction itself and the distribution of focus positions within it.

3.1.1. Information-structural characteristics of the bǎ-construction

From the perspective of information structure, scholars have reached a broad consensus that moving the affected object to a position before the verb in the *bǎ*-construction is essentially a way for speakers to reorganize information and highlight the communicative point. From the perspective of expressive prominence, Liu Tanzhou [12] proposed the *salience-through-immersion* account of the *bǎ*-construction, arguing that speakers deliberately place the affected object before the verb to foreground the action itself and the resulting state, thereby allowing the predicate to become the information focus of the sentence as a whole. The information structure of the *bǎ*-construction, however, cannot be reduced to a simple binary distinction between primary and secondary information. In her analysis of constructions involving *bǎge*, Huang Jing [13] found that the *bǎ*-construction can accommodate several types of focus simultaneously, including ordinary information focus, contrastive focus, and topic focus. Even the degree of informational prominence assigned to constituents following *bǎ* can be flexibly adjusted through specific syntactic markers. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the information structure of the *bǎ*-construction is both systematic and complex, and that focus is never restricted to a single constituent.

3.1.2. Distribution of focus positions in the bǎ-construction

No consensus has yet emerged regarding the precise positions and realization patterns of focus in the *bǎ*-construction. One line of research approaches the issue from the perspective of prosodic realization, maintaining that focus is highlighted through prosodic variation and that its precise position is not fixed but changes dynamically according to the constituent with which it is associated. Xia Quansheng et al. [14] experimentally investigated the prosodic realization of semantic focus in sentences containing *dōu* (都). Their findings showed that constituents associated with focus receive deliberate prominence along acoustic dimensions such as pitch and duration, and that focus position shifts according to changes in the associated constituent. Another line of research places greater emphasis on distinctions among focus types. Qin Peng [15] distinguished between information focus and contrastive focus and compared their realization patterns. The findings indicated that although both types are realized through prosodic means, they differ systematically in their strategies: information focus is highlighted by enhancing the acoustic properties of the focus constituent itself, whereas contrastive focus not only emphasizes the focus constituent but also more noticeably weakens or suppresses the prosodic prominence of non-focus constituents. Therefore, the focus position in the *bǎ*-construction is not fixed. It may occur in the sentence-final predicate, but it may also shift according to the specific type of focus, the marking devices employed, and the contextual conditions. This variability in focus position provides considerable scope for investigating the acquisition of focus among second-language learners.

3.2. Applications of focus theory in second-language acquisition research

The application of focus theory to second-language acquisition has emerged as a relatively new research direction over the past two decades. Traditional second-language acquisition research has primarily focused on the acquisition of syntactic forms, while the ways in which second-language learners acquire information structure and focus expression have long received insufficient attention. Only after focus-sensitive operators and the relationship between focus and prosody became prominent research topics did the acquisition of focus-marking systems by second-language learners gradually attract scholarly attention.

3.2.1. Research on the acquisition of focus markers

Research on second-language learners' acquisition of target-language focus-marking systems has primarily examined their use of focus-sensitive operators such as *dōu* (都), *yě* (也), and *zhǐ* (只). Existing studies indicate that second-language learners of Chinese generally exhibit systematic errors in acquiring these operators. Taking the scope adverb *dōu* as an example, Huang Huiting [16] examined 325 compositions written by Thai students and classified the errors into four categories: omission, substitution, addition, and incorrect word order. The error rates followed the distribution pattern of omission > substitution > addition > incorrect word order. The main causes were negative first-language transfer and overgeneralization of target-language rules. A similar pattern was observed in the use of *yě*. Based on an interlanguage corpus, Jian Taojun [17] found that the errors made by Korean learners of Chinese were likewise concentrated in these four categories. Japanese learners face broadly similar acquisition difficulties, with problems primarily involving the distinction between *yě* and semantically related adverbs such as *dōu* and *hái* (还) [18]. Overall, these errors are largely associated with the syntactic positions of focus constituents and the elements with which the operators are associated, indicating that learners have not yet fully mastered the mechanisms governing the association between focus-sensitive operators and focus.

3.2.2. Research on the acquisition of focus–prosody correspondences

The correspondence between focus and prosody constitutes another important area of second-language acquisition research. Existing studies indicate that second-language learners of Chinese continue to experience

substantial difficulties in realizing focus prosodically. These difficulties are particularly evident in the misplacement of stress, insufficient prominence, and inadequate prosodic realization of focus constituents. Wang Gongping [19] conducted a longitudinal investigation of the production of focus stress in Mandarin declarative sentences by native Korean speakers. The results revealed several developmental trajectories in the acquisition of focus stress, including positive convergence, negative divergence, and persistent stabilization. Stress realization varied according to both focus type and focus position. These findings suggest that learners' control over stress placement and degrees of prominence develops through a gradual process of adjustment. Accordingly, acquiring focus–prosody correspondences requires learners not only to identify focus constituents accurately but also to use stress effectively. This represents a substantial underlying challenge for second-language learners.

4. Analysis of error types in focus marking in the *bǎ*-construction

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, this study classifies errors in focus marking in the *bǎ*-construction among second-language learners of Chinese into three categories: syntactic marking errors, prosodic marking errors, and word-order marking errors. These three categories correspond to the three means by which focus marking is realized. Each is discussed in turn below.

4.1. Syntactic marking errors: the functions of focus-sensitive operators in the *bǎ*-construction and the difficulties of acquisition

Focus-sensitive operators, such as *dōu* (都), *yě* (也), *zhǐ* (只), and *shènzhì* (甚至), are important syntactic focus markers in the *bǎ*-construction. They function by establishing an association with a particular constituent in the sentence, thereby indicating the position and scope of focus. Taking *dōu* as an example, Xing Xueming and Dai Huilin [20] argue that it is a typical universal quantifier that must operate on every member within its quantificational domain and adhere to the principle of "prohibiting double binding", whereby it can bind only one variable. This property requires the associate and scope of *dōu* to correspond precisely to the quantificational elements in the given context, which in turn creates difficulties for learners. Studies based on interlanguage corpora have also found that English-speaking international students commonly make errors involving the omission, addition, substitution, and misordering of the scope adverb *dōu* [21]. Accordingly, this study further divides syntactic marking errors into the following four categories.

4.1.1. Omission of focus-sensitive operators

When the NP following *bǎ* is plural or denotes a universally quantified set, *dōu* is generally required to associate with it and convey the focus meaning of universal quantification. If learners omit *dōu*, the focus association is lost.

Example 1:

a. Correct expression: 这些书他都读完了 (He has finished reading all these books).

b. Learner error: 这些书他读完了 (He has finished reading these books).

Analysis: "这些书" (these books) is a plural noun phrase, and *dōu* is needed to mark the focus meaning of universal quantification. Although the sentence remains syntactically acceptable when *dōu* is omitted, its information structure no longer emphasizes the scope of "all the books", making the expression inconsistent with native speakers' customary usage.

4.1.2. Addition of focus-sensitive operators

In contrast to omission, learners sometimes insert *dōu* or *yě* in contexts that do not require a focus-sensitive operator, resulting in redundant focus marking.

Example 2:

a. Correct expression: 他把那本书读完了 (He has finished reading that book).

b. Learner error: 他都把那本书读完了 (He has even finished reading that book).

Analysis: "那本书" (that book) is a singular definite noun phrase and does not, in itself, provide the contextual conditions for universal quantification or contrast. Therefore, *dōu* is not required to mark focus. Its inappropriate addition often results from learners' tendency to overassociate the *bǎ*-construction with *dōu*.

4.1.3. Substitution of focus-sensitive operators

Although *dōu* and *yě* are both focus-sensitive operators, they differ in their patterns of association. *Dōu* expresses universal quantification and applies to all members of a plural set, whereas *yě* expresses analogy or contrast and establishes a parallel relationship with other entities in the context. Learners often have difficulty distinguishing these functions and consequently confuse the two operators.

Example 3:

a. Correct expression: 小明把作业写完了,小红也把作业写完了 (Xiaoming has finished his homework, and Xiaohong has finished hers, too.) — Expressing analogy.

b. Learner error: 小明把作业写完了,小红都把作业写完了 (Xiaoming has finished his homework, and Xiaohong has finished her homework, all).

Example 4:

a. Correct expression: 这些学生都把作业写完了 (All these students have finished their homework.) — Expressing universal quantification.

b. Learner error: 这些学生也把作业写完了 (These students have also finished their homework).

Analysis: In Example 3, "小红" (Xiaohong) is an individual corresponding to "小明" (Xiaoming), so *yě* should be used to express a parallel relationship. In Example 4, "这些学生" (these students) denotes a plural set, so *dōu* should be used to express universal quantification. Such substitutions indicate that learners have not yet developed a sufficiently thorough understanding of the semantic functions and association conditions of focus-sensitive operators.

4.1.4. Misidentification of the association domain

A key characteristic of focus-sensitive operators is that they establish an association with a particular focus constituent, while the scope of this association must be determined according to the context. When learners misidentify the association domain of an operator, their interpretation of focus deviates from the intended meaning.

Example 5:

a. Correct interpretation: 他都把这些衣服洗了 (He has washed all these clothes) — *Dōu* is associated with "这些衣服" (these clothes), indicating that every item of clothing has been washed.

b. Learner misinterpretation: 他都把这些衣服洗了 — The learner incorrectly assumes that *dōu* is associated with "洗了" (has washed), interpreting it as indicating the completeness of the action.

Example 6:

a. Correct expression: 连他都把作业写完了 (Even he has finished his homework) — In the *lián...dōu...* construction, "他" (he) is the focus.

b. Learner error: 他把作业都写完了 (He has finished all the homework) — The focus is shifted from "他" (he) to "作业" (homework) or "写完" (finished writing).

Analysis: Identifying the association domain is one of the major difficulties in second-language acquisition. In the *lián...dōu...* construction, *dōu* should associate with the focus constituent introduced by *lián*. However, learners often overlook the presence of *lián* or misidentify the constituent with which *dōu* is associated.

4.2. Prosodic marking errors: the correspondence between nuclear stress and information focus and the difficulties of acquisition

Prosodic marking is an important means of realizing focus. According to the Focus-Stress Principle, focus constituents must receive prosodic prominence. In Standard Mandarin Chinese, the realization of focus words is often accompanied by a rise in pitch, lengthening of duration, and post-focus pitch compression. The strength of prosodic boundaries also interacts with focus encoding [22]. Second-language learners of Chinese exhibit various errors in the prosodic realization of such sentences, which can be classified into the following three categories.

4.2.1. Incorrect stress placement

According to the rules governing nuclear stress in Chinese, the nuclear stress of the *bǎ*-construction should fall on the sentence-final predicate. However, learners often misplace stress on the noun phrase following *bǎ* under the influence of the prosodic rules of their first language.

Example 7:

a. Native-speaker prosodic pattern: 他把饭吃完了 (He finished eating the meal) — Stress falls on "吃完了" (finished eating).

b. Learner's prosodic error: 他把饭吃完了 (He finished eating the meal) — Stress falls on "饭" (meal).

Analysis: For native speakers of English and other SVO languages, the object is often the locus of information focus, so stress naturally falls on the object. The Chinese *bǎ*-construction, however, differs in this respect: the object following *bǎ* represents given information or a topic and should not bear the nuclear stress. This misplacement of stress essentially results from the negative transfer of first-language prosodic rules into Chinese. An experiment involving Japanese learners also showed that the production of focus stress in Chinese is influenced by learners' prosodic experience in their first language. Accurate stress placement can be improved only through targeted training [23].

4.2.2. Absence of stress

Closely related to incorrect stress placement is the absence of stress. This error occurs when the predicate appears at the end of the sentence but lacks sufficient pitch prominence and durational lengthening, resulting in inadequate focus prominence.

Example 8:

a. Native speakers' acoustic realization: 他把饭吃—完了 (He finished eating the meal) — "完了" (finished) is produced with a higher pitch and longer duration.

b. Learners' acoustic realization: 他把饭吃完了 (He finished eating the meal) — The pitch remains relatively level, with no obvious prosodic prominence.

Analysis: Previous studies have shown that focus words are primarily highlighted prosodically through pitch rises and durational lengthening, while post-focus pitch compression and related features are also regulated by prosodic boundaries. Second-language learners generally lack the ability to make such prosodic adjustments, making both excessive and insufficient stress likely. In the *bǎ*-construction, learners are particularly prone to overlooking the need to highlight the predicate as the focus, causing the sentence to sound flat and lacking in expressive force.

4.2.3. Inappropriate prosodic phrasing

Prosodic phrasing refers to the placement of pauses and prosodic boundaries within a sentence. In the *bǎ*-construction, the placement of the prosodic boundary between the NP following *bǎ* and the predicate is closely related to information structure. Learners often insert pauses in inappropriate positions, leading to misinterpretation of the information structure.

Example 9:

a. Native-speaker prosodic phrasing: 他把那本书/读完了 (He finished reading that book) — The pause occurs after the *bǎ*-phrase.

b. Learner's prosodic error: 他把/那本书读完了 (He finished reading that book) — The pause occurs immediately after *bǎ*.

Analysis: *Bǎ* and the object that follows it form a complete prepositional phrase, which should not be interrupted by a pause. If learners pause immediately after *bǎ*, they disrupt the integrity of the phrase, making the sentence sound unnatural. Previous studies have found that prosodic boundary strength and focus encoding are correlated: boundaries affect both post-focus pitch compression and the duration of syllables preceding the boundary. Consequently, in contexts involving contrastive focus, learners must select appropriate pause positions according to the information structure to mark focus boundaries. This poses a considerable challenge for second-language learners.

4.3. Word-order marking errors: the syntactic position of the NP following *bǎ*, focus configuration, and the difficulties of acquisition

Word order is the most direct means of focus marking in the *bǎ*-construction. Its function is to prepose the object and thereby reorganize the distribution of information focus. Errors made by second-language learners of Chinese in this respect primarily fall into three categories.

4.3.1. Avoidance of the bǎ-construction when its use is required

Avoidance is one of the most common types of errors in the acquisition of the *bǎ*-construction. When the context requires the construction to express focus, learners instead use the ordinary SVO sentence pattern, resulting in inadequate focus expression.

Example 10:

Context: Emphasizing the result that the homework has been completed.

a. Native-speaker expression: 他把作业写完了 (He has finished writing the homework) — The focus is on "写完了" (has finished writing), emphasizing the result.

b. Learner's avoidance expression: 他写完了作业 (He has finished writing the homework) — The focus falls on "作业" (homework), which does not meet the communicative requirements of the context.

Example 11:

Context: Emphasizing the result of an action affecting an object.

a. Native-speaker expression: 他把杯子打碎了 (He broke the cup).

b. Learner's avoidance expression: 他打碎了杯子 (He broke the cup).

Analysis: Research on sentence-pattern errors among international students from English-speaking countries indicates that omission of *bǎ*, or avoidance of the *bǎ*-construction, is one of the most prominent sentence-pattern errors among elementary and intermediate learners. The main causes are differences between Chinese and English patterns of thinking and insufficient mastery of the rules governing the Chinese *bǎ*-construction [24]. Avoidance primarily arises for two reasons. First, the *bǎ*-construction is structurally complex, making learners apprehensive about making errors. Second, learners may not recognize the focus-marking function of the construction and therefore may not understand the contexts in which it should be used.

4.3.2. Overuse when the construction is not required

Overuse, or overgeneralization, occurs when learners use the *bǎ*-construction in contexts where it is unnecessary, resulting in inappropriate sentence patterns.

Example 12:

a. Correct expression: 他喜欢音乐 (He likes music).

b. Learner's overuse: 他把音乐喜欢 (He likes music).

Example 13:

a. Correct expression: 他看见了朋友 (He saw his friend).

b. Learner's overuse: 他把朋友看见了 (He saw his friend).

Analysis: Overuse is a typical manifestation of target-language rule overgeneralization. Such overgeneralization of Chinese grammatical rules is an important cause of sentence-pattern errors among learners from English-speaking countries. After first learning the *bǎ*-construction, learners often apply it indiscriminately to transitive verbs without distinguishing between the contexts in which the construction is appropriate and those in which it is not.

4.3.3. Mismatch between word-order configuration and information-structural requirements

Even when learners use the *bǎ*-construction correctly, their word-order configuration may not meet the requirements of the information structure. A typical manifestation is inappropriate selection of the NP following *bǎ*: a constituent that should function as focus is placed after *bǎ*, in a position associated with given information, while a constituent that should convey given information remains in the focus position.

Example 14:

Context: Emphasizing that "that old book" was sold, rather than the new book.

a. Correct word order: 他把那本旧书卖了, 新书还留着 (He sold that old book, while the new book was kept).

b. Learner's mismatched word order: 他卖了那本旧书, 新书还留着 (He sold that old book, while the new book was kept) — The *bǎ*-construction is not used, leaving the intended focus insufficiently clear.

Example 15:

Context: Emphasizing that the homework has been completed, rather than some other task.

a. Correct word order: 他把作业写完了, 还没开始复习 (He has finished writing the homework but has not yet started reviewing).

b. Learner's mismatched word order: 他都写完了作业, 还没开始复习 (He has finished writing all the homework but has not yet started reviewing) — *Dōu* is placed in an inappropriate position, making its focus association unclear.

Analysis: Matching word-order configuration to information structure represents a more advanced requirement in the acquisition of the *bǎ*-construction. Learners must not only master its syntactic form but also understand its information-structural function. They must be able to determine whether the construction is appropriate in a given context and to arrange sentence constituents accordingly to meet the communicative requirements of focus.

5. Causes of errors in focus marking

The three types of focus-marking errors discussed above do not arise from a single factor. Rather, they result from the interaction of multiple factors, including first-language transfer, overgeneralization of target-language rules, and a lack of awareness of focus marking.

5.1. First-language transfer

First-language transfer is one of the fundamental causes of errors in second-language acquisition. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the greater the differences between the first language and the target language in a particular linguistic feature, the more likely learners are to make errors. In research on second-

language acquisition of Chinese, systematic cross-linguistic comparison is also frequently regarded as a theoretical starting point for explaining and predicting learner errors [25].

5.1.1. First-language transfer at the syntactic level

Focus-marking systems differ considerably across languages. For learners whose first languages belong to the Indo-European language family, focus in English and other languages is primarily marked through stress and word order, and these languages do not have a system of focus-sensitive operators equivalent to that of Chinese. Consequently, native English speakers often encounter considerable difficulties when acquiring operators such as *dōu* (都) and *yě* (也). Consider the relationship between *all* and *dōu*. In English, *all* can precede the subject, as in "All the students came", whereas in Chinese, *dōu* must follow the subject, as in "学生都来了" (All the students came). This difference in syntactic position can easily lead to word-order errors, such as "都学生来了", instead of the correct form "学生都来了".

5.1.2. First-language transfer at the prosodic level

First-language transfer at the prosodic level is a major cause of errors in stress placement. English is a stress-timed language with a relatively diverse range of stress patterns, whereas Chinese is a tonal language in which stress is realized through a more complex set of mechanisms. When speaking Chinese, native English speakers often transfer English stress patterns directly to Chinese, causing stress placement to diverge from the information-focus structure of the target language. They tend to place stress on the object, which typically conveys new information in English. In the Chinese *bǎ*-construction, however, the object following *bǎ* represents given information and should not bear nuclear stress.

5.1.3. First-language transfer at the information-structural level

The principles governing information-structural organization vary across languages. Some languages, such as Chinese, rely heavily on word order to mark focus, whereas others make greater use of morphological devices. If learners are unfamiliar with the principles of information structure in Chinese, they may be inclined to organize focus according to the conventions of their first language, resulting in inappropriate focus configurations.

5.2. Overgeneralization of target-language rules

Overgeneralization refers to the excessive extension of an acquired target-language rule to contexts in which it does not apply. It is a major source of intralingual errors. With regard to the *bǎ*-construction, investigations of errors made by Korean students have shown that predicate-related errors and the misuse of *bǎ* are essentially attributable to the overuse of the construction and can therefore be classified as instances of overgeneralization.

5.2.1. Overgeneralization of the bǎ-construction

After first learning the *bǎ*-construction, learners often formulate the oversimplified rule "transitive verb + object → *bǎ*-construction" and indiscriminately apply the construction to transitive verbs. This results in numerous overuse errors, such as "他把音乐喜欢" (He likes music) and "他把朋友看见了" (He saw his friend).

5.2.2. Overgeneralization of focus-sensitive operators

After acquiring the basic usage of *dōu*, learners often overgeneralize its use to positions following all subjects, overlooking the requirement that *dōu* must be associated with a plural or universally quantified constituent. Similar problems arise in the acquisition of *yě*. Learners may substitute *yě* for *dōu* when *dōu* is required, or use *yě* in contexts that do not involve a parallel or contrastive relationship.

5.2.3. Overgeneralization induced by teaching

Textbooks and teaching methods may also contribute to rule overgeneralization. If textbook explanations of the *bǎ*-construction focus exclusively on its syntactic pattern—"subject + *bǎ* + object + verb + complement"—while giving only cursory attention to its pragmatic functions and focus conditions, learners may develop a one-sided understanding of the construction. They may come to regard the *bǎ*-construction as a purely syntactic transformation without recognizing that its use is constrained by information structure.

5.3. Lack of awareness of focus marking

Some second-language learners focus exclusively on the syntactic correctness of the *bǎ*-construction without recognizing that it essentially serves as a means of focus expression. This lack of awareness is an underlying cause of various types of errors. Specifically, learners may not understand the contexts in which the *bǎ*-construction should be used to foreground focus, how focus-sensitive operators can be employed to delimit the scope of focus, or how prosodic devices can be used to strengthen focus expression.

6. Conclusion

Using focus theory as its analytical framework, this study systematically examines errors in focus marking in the Chinese *bǎ*-construction among second-language learners of Chinese from the perspective of information structure. The errors are classified into three categories: syntactic marking errors, prosodic marking errors, and word-order marking errors. At the syntactic level, the main errors involve the omission, addition, and substitution of focus-sensitive operators, as well as misidentification of their association domains. At the prosodic level, the principal errors include incorrect stress placement, the absence of stress, and inappropriate prosodic phrasing. At the word-order level, the errors manifest as avoidance of the construction, overuse of the construction, and mismatches between word-order configuration and information-structural requirements. These three types of errors do not occur in isolation. Their underlying causes can be traced to first-language transfer, overgeneralization of target-language rules, and a lack of awareness of focus marking. These factors interact and collectively contribute to the underlying difficulties learners encounter in acquiring focus marking in the *bǎ*-construction.

The foregoing analysis also indicates that errors involving the *bǎ*-construction should not be regarded merely as syntactic mistakes. They also reflect whether learners can master the three types of marking strategies—focus, prosody, and word order—and understand the conditions governing their respective uses. Among these factors, developing awareness of focus marking may be particularly important. This also helps explain, to some extent, why repeated reinforcement through syntactic instruction alone is unlikely to eliminate these errors effectively.

The present analysis is based primarily on existing research. The proposed classification of error types and assessment of their relative difficulty still require validation through larger-scale empirical data. Future research could incorporate systematic interlanguage corpora to conduct quantitative analyses of the frequency and distribution of different error types. The scope of investigation could also be extended to additional focus-sensitive operators, such as *shènzhì* (甚至, even) and *lián* (连, even), as well as learners from different first-language backgrounds, in order to further test and refine the classification framework proposed in this study.

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