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# A Review of Research on Teaching Chinese Separable Words as a Foreign Language in the Past Ten Years

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**Abstract:** Separable words have always been a difficult and important problem in teaching area. Because its definition is controversial, it always been evaded in early teaching. However, as people increasingly realize that the purpose of learners learning Chinese is to be able to communicate, more and more scholars have avoided controversial and divergent aspects in recent years, mainly by studying the errors in learners' acquisition process and directly exploring more effective teaching methods. In this process, the research angle, the research method, the language material source, the teaching countermeasure and so on are more and more detailed. Generally speaking, at present, domestic studies are mushrooming, opening up new ideas, providing more powerful theoretical support and teaching guidance, promoting students' learning. However, there are still some problems in research in this field: such as the pattern of research ideas, lack of national research, and the theory has not been tested in practice.

**Keywords:** Chinese Language Teaching; Separable Words; Research Status; Teaching Methods.

## 1. Introduction

Although the academic community has gained some understanding of separable words, there is still a lot of controversy over whether separable words are words or phrases. Therefore, many textbooks avoid providing detailed explanations and explanations, and some teachers may evade teaching. Therefore, separable words have always been a difficult and important issue in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. In recent years, more and more scholars have noticed the research gap in this field and its importance in teaching, as well as how to effectively teach separable words, which has led to more research. In the past decade (2014-2023), CNKI has collected a large number of articles related to separable words. I conducted a search on CNKI with the theme of "Teaching Separable Words", selected articles with over 200 downloads for review, and supplemented them with references from these papers. Finally, more than 60 articles were selected for reading, analysis, summarizing their research status and identifying beneficial methods for teaching separable words in Chinese as a foreign language. In addition, I proposed future prospects based on the shortcomings in the research and the significance that this research brings to the academic community.

## 2. The Current Research Status of Teaching Separable Words

### 2.1. Regarding Research Methods

Traditionally, most scholars have used questionnaire surveys for research. In recent years, comparative research methods have been increasingly used, especially in studies involving nationalization issues. For example, Hu Qingyuan compared the teaching content of *"Great Wall Chinese*" with "*New Chinese Proficiency Outline*" and "*Chinese Proficiency Vocabulary and Character Level Outline*" to identify commonly used separable words that are suitable for learners' current Chinese proficiency, and based on this, determined the extended usage of separable words.[2]Hong Yingxia used the "*HSK Standard Course*" (Indonesian version) to summarize and classify Chinese separable words in the textbook, and tried to translate them into bilingual Indonesian corresponding expressions as much as possible, attempting to find appropriate translation methods through comparison for students to learn separable words.[3]

Qualitative and quantitative analysis methods are also widely used. For example, Yan Sishi used quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to comprehensively summarize the types and semantic features of the extended forms of verb complement separable words.[4]Tian Zhaoping focused on quantitative analysis while also considering qualitative analysis, and conducted statistical analysis on the segregation rate, main forms of segregation, and types of errors of compound words.[5]Mo Shulin used the "*Teaching Syllabus for the Primary Stage of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*" and the "*General Curriculum Syllabus for International Chinese Language Teaching*" (revised version) as references, and used quantitative analysis and comparative analysis to analyze the quantity and level of separable words in the "*Chinese Course*" (3rd edition).[6]

In addition, statistical analysis, observation, and literature research are also commonly used research methods in recent years. Liu Yan investigated and analyzed the acquisition of Chinese verb object separable words by Mongolian high school students through classroom observation, collection of student assignments, composition materials, and design of test questionnaires.[7]On the basis of previous research, Cui Pengzhen collected and analyzed language materials through literature research, test investigation, statistical methods, etc. And summarized the errors and causes of Korean international students' acquisition of Chinese separable words.[8]Lv Xinmei comprehensively used statistical analysis, comparative analysis, questionnaire survey, and interview survey methods to study the grammar errors of disyllabic declarative object separable words among elementary level Korean students, and explored the causes of grammar errors.[9]

### 2.2. Regarding the Source of Corpus

The research on separable words mainly focuses on corpora.

In recent years, research ideas have been opened up, and the sources of language materials have become more extensive and targeted. Zhao Yihua utilized existing achievements to conduct multi-dimensional statistics and analysis on 482 separable words in the latest 2010 "*Classification of Chinese International Syllable Chinese Vocabulary*" (Classification), using relevant linguistic theories, in order to provide theoretical and practical basis for teaching compound words in Chinese as a foreign language. [1] Huo Jijiao extracted all the separable words from two intermediate level learning dictionaries to build a corpus. By comparing the differences in word collection between the two, she attempted to explore the performance of separable words in learning dictionaries.[10]Zhou Ting analyzed and sorted out the separable words in the "*Modern Chinese Dictionary*" (6th edition), identified the general rules of semantic pragmatics, and then conducted a survey on the separable words that international students need to master in the "*Chinese Proficiency Level Standards and Grammar Level Outline*".[11]Ruan Liwei Xin used the CCL corpus, BCC corpus, "*Modern Chinese Clutch Word Usage Dictionary*", "*Chinese Commonly Used Clutch Word Usage Dictionary*", "*Modern Chinese Clutch Word Learning Dictionary*", and examples of separable words in teaching Chinese as a foreign language to analyze the Vietnamese translation characteristics and rules of 186 Chinese separable words.[12]Scholars also choose words from textbooks for research. Zheng Xiaojiao has organized and summarized the separable words in the primary synthesis of "*Developing Chinese Language*", analyzed their advantages and disadvantages, and provided suggestions.[13]Ouyang Leyan selected the verb object separable words from the widely used and latest revised third edition of the "Chinese Course" series of textbooks as the research object. Based on previous research, she found problems such as unclear part of speech tagging and confusion, and selected 20 words for usage investigation.[14]

Among them, in national teaching, research is mostly conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and collection of natural language materials. For example, Dai Xiaoqin[15] and Deng Qingyin[16] both conducted questionnaire tests on students, conducted statistical analysis on valid questionnaires, sorted out the situation of learners' acquisition of Chinese separable words, and provided teaching suggestions.

## 2.3. Regarding Teaching Strategies

As people gradually realize that Chinese learners learn separable words for communication services, they unanimously avoid theoretical differences and conduct research based on practical principles to provide countermeasures. Moreover, a consensus has been reached in the academic community regarding the use of phased teaching, gradual progression, emphasis on teaching "integration" before "separation", emphasis on "separation" over "integration", intensive teaching and practice, and the adoption of comparative teaching methods.

### 2.3.1. In Terms of Textbook Writing:

Ouyang Leyan proposed to improve the reproduction rate of various types of verb object separable words and the reproduction rate of separable forms of verb object separable words, and to supplement relevant exercises on the grammar points of verb object separable words. [14] Pang Qian proposed to improve the outline writing and strengthen the emphasis on teaching separable words starting from guiding documents. [17] Huang Xiaoyan's ultimate goal is to improve and perfect the teaching of verb object separable words. She has put forward specific improvement suggestions for the textbook from the aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and exercise writing, based on the "Grade Standards" and its supporting outline and grammar manual. [18]

### 2.3.2. In Terms of Teachers:

Gong Hexueqi [19] and Wang Xiaomei [20] proposed to teach students according to their aptitude, adopting corresponding teaching methods based on different learning motivations, ages, and levels of students. Zhou Yuting emphasized the pragmatic value of using separable words, making it clear to students that the separation form of using separable words is an important expression form in Chinese, reducing students' fear of difficulties and adopting avoidance strategies. [21] Lang Junchen proposed that teachers should enhance their awareness of errors in separable words, strengthen comparative research on Chinese and learners' mother tongue related content, improve teaching pertinence, and improve and enrich teaching methods. [22]

These studies have pointed out a clearer direction for teachers' teaching, which is to analyze specific problems on a case by case basis, combine them with practice, and practice flexibly.

### 2.3.3. In Terms of Students:

Pang Qian [18] and Shi Manhong [23] proposed to guide students to enhance their Chinese thinking ability, commonly using Chinese thinking learning, thinking, and expression. Wang Xinying [24], He Qian [25], Ning Jiajing [26] emphasized the transformation of students' learning motivation, the increase of learning initiative, the importance of students' subjectivity, and the increase of classroom communication and feedback to understand students' learning level. Gong Hexueqi [20], Zhang Fan [27], Jin Mei [28] proposed to increase the practice of outputting separable words in practice. After reaching a certain output level, a sense of language will naturally form and progress will be made. Wu Chao [29] and Yu Biyao [30] encourage learners to establish reasonable learning and communication strategies, especially focusing on guiding students to strengthen the use of metacognitive and communication strategies in the learning process, actively monitoring the learning process and making appropriate adjustments, and daring to use conjunctions for daily communication.

Fundamentally, it is necessary to enable students to apply what they have learned in practical communication, enhance their output, and subtly improve their communication skills through practical operations. With smoother communication and positive feedback, students will inevitably have greater subjective initiative to learn.

### 2.3.4. In Terms of Choosing Teaching Methods:

In addition to the commonly used deductive teaching method, task-based teaching method, contextual teaching method, and chunk teaching method, Pang Qian [18], Liao Li [31], and Jiang Xian [32] suggest using a cyclic progressive compound teaching method. After students master the "combination", they can then explain the "division". Different stages should highlight different key points, pay attention to the connection before and after, and promote cyclic progression to ensure the mastery of old knowledge and the understanding of new knowledge. IRINA Z [33] suggested the association method, which he found from comparative experiments that the grouping association

method is very convenient and effective for memorizing specific types of vocabulary such as disjointed words. Through a given topic, students are asked to associate similar forms of words together. Li Muyao [34], Wang Ying [35], Wang Jingjing [36] suggest using template teaching method, which can help learners establish a relatively complete diagram in the primary stage, facilitate further systematic learning and mastery, and also help learners have confidence at the beginning of learning. Zhang Qi [37] suggests using the discovery based teaching method, which guides students to discover the differences between separable words and ordinary words at the beginning of learning, allowing them to try to summarize and deepen their understanding.

#### 2.3.5. In Other Aspects of Teaching:

In terms of teaching arrangement, Zhao Yihua proposed the following viewpoint: to determine the teaching focus, high-frequency vocabulary from the corpus can be directly used, and 19 high-frequency separable words can be selected from the "*Classification of Grades*" based on separation degree and usage frequency, summarizing the pragmatic and semantic features of high-frequency separable words. [1] These high-frequency separable words can serve as a core demonstration, enhancing learners' ability to acquire separable words in both receptive and productive ways, laying a foundation for the teaching and learning of other separable words.

In terms of teaching aids: Yang Qinghui proposed in her early years that students could use the "*Dictionary of the Usage of Clutch Words*" as a silent teacher for readers, which could indicate the specific usage of separable words to them. [38] The author believes that this classic method is still applicable to the learning of separable words nowadays. Teachers should guide students to have the awareness of actively thinking and consulting dictionaries when encountering problems. In terms of dictionary writing, Wang Xiaofeng suggests uniformly annotating separable words, selecting representative, typical, comprehensive, and commonly used example sentences to help international students understand separable words more accurately from the dictionary. [39]

Yu Ge provided a comprehensive and detailed discussion on teaching strategies earlier on. In terms of teaching principles, he proposed to highlight individuality, be relatively dispersed, use both language and words, but with "language" being greater than "words", and the frequency of using separable words determines teaching design. [40]The proposal of this viewpoint contributes to the further development of teaching practice and provides reference for future research. Yang Hanying [41], Liu Ruonan, and Hong Lin [42] advocate for the combination of vocabulary and grammar. When explaining vocabulary, it is important to emphasize the meaning of the word itself, as well as explain the relevant grammar knowledge and extended forms clearly, so that students can accurately grasp its meaning and usage. Li Yifei [43], Zhou Juanxiu [44], and Sun Tiantian [45] suggest using mind maps as an auxiliary teaching tool to timely summarize and organize rules during the learning process, helping students form visual memory and improve learning efficiency. I believe that this method is very suitable for national teaching, and can be compared and organized according to the characteristics of different languages in different countries to improve teaching efficiency. Li Yifei also advocates highlighting the characteristics of Chinese characters in teaching. Highlighting the status of Chinese characters can help students have an impression of the two characters that make up separable words. [43] If we can emphasize the combination of "word groups" in teaching while teaching the whole of separable words, then students will also be more easily able to understand when learning separable forms.

### 2.4. Regarding the Basic Trends and Shortcomings of Research

Based on the collected literature, I analyze the research on teaching Chinese as a foreign language with separable words from distant to recent times. The overall trend is that research methods are constantly increasing, research perspectives are constantly broadening, language sources are becoming more extensive, teaching methods are more specific and targeted. In addition, the number of research papers in this field is constantly increasing, with a growing proportion of master's degree theses. Although most of them still rely on error analysis, some papers clearly point out innovative points. For example, Shang Hongling explicitly proposed the use of chunk theory in the teaching design of clutch words .[47] Hou Tingting's article is innovative in both theory and practice: the theoretical innovation lies in the hierarchy of separable words, while the practical innovation includes a comparison of teaching situations in China and Russia, HSK syllabus, domestic textbooks, and a summary and comparison of errors in corpora, as well as classified teaching. [47]This indicates that more and more young scholars have gained practical experience, explored and researched in this field, and proposed more targeted teaching methods for everyone to learn from.

But there are still areas that need improvement in the research:

#### 2.4.1. Lack of National Research

In the study of separable words, although some articles involve research on the teaching of separable words to learners from different countries. For example, Jiang Man [48], Luo Renjie [49], Lv Xinmei [9] and others have studied related content in Korea. Zhou Yongpan [50], Hou Tingting [48], and others conducted research on the teaching situation of Japanese separable words. Dai Xiaoqin [16], Ning Jiajing [26], Wu Chao [51] and others conducted research on the teaching situation in Thailand. Jinmei [28], Yi Cong [52]and others have studied the teaching situation in Russia. Li Muyao [34], Fang Linqing [53], Wang Yali [54] and others have studied the Indonesian classroom. Zhang Wennan [55], Ruan Liweixin [56], NGUYEN THI THU HUYEN [57] and others conducted research on the teaching situation in Vietnam. Liu Yan [7] and Zhang Qi [38] conducted research on the relevant teaching situation in Mongolia. Cai Weiya [15] and Wang Xinying [24] conducted research on the teaching situation in Myanmar. Wang Yihua [58] studied the teaching situation in Romania. Liao Li [31] studied the teaching situation in Madagascar. Li Xiaolu [59] studied the teaching situation in Cameroon, Africa. Shi Manhong [23] studied the situation of Laotian students learning separable words. Yin Yanhua [60] studied the relevant situation in Bangladesh. Salwa Fareed Babiker Hamed [61] studied the situation in Arabia. Zhao Qiuyan [62] conducted research on the learning situation in Sri Lanka.

It can be seen that compared to countries that teach Chinese, countries that conduct specialized research on teaching separable words are not very abundant. Although the academic community has summarized some common teaching methods, there is no corresponding translation

method for separable words in many languages, and learners from different language backgrounds may have different biases due to the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Therefore, there is great room for research on nationalization.

#### 2.4.2. Theory has not Been Fully Applied to Practice

With the continuous increase of related research, more and more theoretical suggestions have been proposed, although some have been applied in practice and tested. For example, Wang Jingjing [36] selected three of the five teaching methods proposed by Yu Ge [41] and applied them to teaching, and provided feedback. In addition, most of the relevant papers are master's theses, but most researchers are in the internship stage and lack rich teaching experience. Although there are still shortcomings in the teaching design, and there is not much follow-up practical feedback, so whether the teaching design is feasible and effective still needs to be examined.

#### 2.4.3. Standardization of Research Ideas

According to the literature collected in the past decade, most of the literature focuses on studying learners' biases, categorizing and analyzing the reasons, and then proposing teaching methods. Even earlier literature is like this, resulting in many articles having similar writing ideas and research conclusions, lacking innovation.

## 3. Future Prospects of Research on Teaching Clutch Words

In response to the parts that have not received widespread attention from scholars, I believe that in an ideal state, there should be more comprehensive research targeting different countries, language backgrounds, and levels. Chinese language teachers for different countries can directly find targeted and most suitable teaching methods for themselves, which requires more scholars to conduct more teaching practices and related research. And we hope that in the future, more scholars will boldly apply the theoretical methods proposed by predecessors to teaching practice, explore the most suitable teaching methods and theories faster, and promote the teaching of separable words. I also hope that in the future, there will be more perspectives for research to make the issue of teaching separable words clearer and more visible.

## 4. The Research Value in this Field

Separable words have always been a difficult problem in teaching Chinese as a foreign language due to their scattered distribution and complex expansion forms. With the continuous deepening of research on separable words, theoretical knowledge has become increasingly rich, providing strong theoretical support for teaching, direction for improving textbook writing, and specific assistance for teaching. This has greatly alleviated the difficulty of teaching separable words, effectively provided teachers with teaching inspiration, enriched practice methods, and helped teachers master more accurate teaching skills. At the same time, it helps learners reduce errors and obstacles, better grasp the usage of separable words, and learn more efficiently and conveniently, so that they can apply them appropriately, accurately, and properly in oral communication and written expression.

## 5. Epilogue

The research on the teaching of separable words is gradually maturing and has achieved many achievements, but the author still hopes that the academic research will become more in-depth and the perspective will become broader. There will be a clear definition of separable words, and richer research will be conducted based on more materials and teaching practices to propose more efficient and targeted teaching methods.

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