

# An Inquiry into Teaching Strategies for Chinese *Lianmianci* in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the teaching strategies and significance of disyllabic *Lianmianci* (联绵词) in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). As a unique lexical phenomenon in Chinese, *Lianmianci* are characterized by phonetic harmony and semantic indivisibility, presenting both challenges and focal points for learners. The study first analyzes the definition, classification, and features of *Lianmianci*, then examines their current pedagogical status and existing problems in TCFL. Finally, targeted teaching suggestions and methods are proposed. The findings indicate that systematic instructional design and diversified practice methods can effectively enhance learners' mastery of *Lianmianci*, thereby improving the idiomaticity and fluency of their Chinese expression.

**Keywords:** Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL), *Lianmianci* (联绵词), Vocabulary instruction, Teaching strategies, Chinese learners.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous development of international Chinese education, vocabulary teaching, as a fundamental component of language learning, has received increasing attention. Among various Chinese lexical phenomena, *Lianmianci* (联绵词) have emerged as a distinctive area in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language due to their unique characteristics in form, pronunciation, and meaning. Meanwhile, their inherent attributes also make them both challenging and critical focuses in teaching.

*Lianmianci* are monomorphemic disyllabic compounds in Chinese, where two syllables form an indivisible semantic unit. These words express a single meaning through the combination of characters, which cannot be interpreted separately. For example “窟窿” (kūlong, /k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>55</sup>luŋ/) means “hole”, but neither “窟” nor “窿” carries independent meaning in this context. Similarly, “蝴蝶” (húdié /xu<sup>35</sup>tié<sup>214</sup>/, “butterfly”), “葡萄” (pútáo, /p<sup>h</sup>u<sup>35</sup>təu/, “grape”), and “犹豫” (yóuyóu, /iəu<sup>35</sup>y<sup>51</sup>/, “hesitate”) follow this pattern.

For non-native Chinese learners, the comprehension and application of disyllabic *Lianmianci* present significant challenges, stemming not only from their unique linguistic structure, but also from their profound cultural connotations. This study aims to explore pedagogical strategies for teaching *Lianmianci* in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL), analyze current instructional shortcomings, and propose targeted improvements to enhance learners' mastery and practical usage of these lexical items.

## 2. DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LIANMIANCI

*Lianmianci* represent a unique category of disyllabic monomorphemic compounds in Chinese lexicology. These words consist of two phonetically linked syllables that form an inseparable semantic unit, representing a single morpheme. Their meanings are holistic and cannot be deduced from the literal interpretations of individual characters.

From a Phonological Perspective, Alliterative *Lianmianci* refer to words where the two syllables share the same initial consonant, for example, in “伶俐” (lǐng lì /liŋ<sup>35</sup>li<sup>51</sup>/), both syllables “伶” and “俐” have the initial consonant “l”. Another example is “枇杷” (pípá/p<sup>hi</sup>35 p<sup>h</sup>A<sup>35</sup>/), where both syllables start with the consonant “p”, etc.

Assonant *Lianmianci* are those in which the two syllables share the same final vowel (rhyme), take “骆驼” (luòtuó /luo<sup>5</sup>t<sup>h</sup>uo<sup>35</sup>/) as an instance: the final vowels of both “骆” and “驼” are “uo”. Similarly, “彷徨” (páng huáng /p<sup>h</sup>aŋ<sup>35</sup> xuɑŋ<sup>35</sup>/) has the final vowel “ang” in both syllables. Non-alliterative and non-assonant *Lianmianci* involve two syllables that share no specific phonological relationship in terms of initial consonants or final vowels, for example, in “芙蓉” (fúróng /fu<sup>35</sup> zʊŋ<sup>35</sup>/), the first syllable “芙” has the initial consonant “f” and final vowel “u”, while the second syllable “蓉” has “r” as the initial consonant and “ong” as the final vowel—no matching consonants or vowels. Another example is “蝴蝶” (húdié /xu<sup>35</sup> tie<sup>35</sup>/): the first syllable “蝴” has “h” (initial) and “u” (final), while the second syllable “蝶” has “d” (initial) and “ie” (final), with neither alliteration nor assonance between them, etc.

From a Semantic Perspective, the meaning of *Lianmianci* is emergent from the combination, take “狼狈” (lángbǎi /laŋ<sup>35</sup> pei<sup>51</sup>/) as an example. Individually, “狼” (láng) and “狈” (bǎi) refer to the names of two different animals. However, as a *Lianmianci*, “狼狈” expresses the meaning of “in a difficult or awkward situation”, which has no direct connection to the original meanings of the animals “狼” and “狈”. If learners try to understand it based on the meanings of individual characters, they will misinterpret it.

From an orthographic perspective, *Lianmianci* typically exhibit two or more written forms, particularly in classical Chinese. For instance, the word “逡巡” (wēi yíwei<sup>55</sup> i<sup>35</sup>/, meaning “hesitant” or “wandering”) has as many as 83 variant forms, including “𢀛𢀛” “𢀛𢀛” “𢀛𢀛” “𢀛𢀛” “𢀛𢀛” “𢀛𢀛”, etc. Many *Lianmianci* have numerous strokes, complex structures, and varied forms, which increases the difficulty of learning for Chinese language learners.

A clear definition and understanding of the characteristics of *Lianmianci* are essential for their accurate identification and analysis in subsequent research, thereby laying a solid foundation for exploring pedagogical approaches to teaching these words in Chinese as a foreign language education.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF TEACHING DIFFICULTIES FOR LIANMIANCI IN TCFL

#### 3.1 Challenges in Phonetic Acquisition

The unique phonetic forms of Chinese *Lianmianci*, including alliterative ones (such as “惆怅”, chouchàng /tʂ<sup>h</sup>ou<sup>35</sup> tʂ<sup>h</sup>aŋ<sup>51</sup>/), rhyming ones (such as “窈窕”, yǎo tiǎo /iau<sup>214</sup> thiau<sup>214</sup>/), and those neither alliterative nor rhyming (such as “芙蓉”, fúróng/fu<sup>35</sup> zʊŋ<sup>35</sup>/), add a distinctive phonological beauty to the Chinese language. However, for non-native Chinese learners, these phonetic features pose significant challenges. Learners whose native languages lack similar sound combinations often struggle to accurately master the initials or finals when pronouncing alliterative or rhyming *Lianmianci*, leading to inaccurate pronunciation.

Alliterative *Lianmianci* require learners to precisely grasp the pronunciation of the same initial consonant and maintain consistency and coherence in connected speech across both syllables, take “参差” (cēn cī/tʂ<sup>h</sup>ən<sup>55</sup>ts<sup>h</sup>i<sup>55</sup>/) as an example: the initial consonant “c” is an unvoiced fricative. Some learners may find it difficult to master this pronunciation and instead pronounce it as a similar sound, such as turning “c” into “z”, thus misreading “参差” as “zēn zī/tsən<sup>55</sup>tsi<sup>55</sup>/”.

Rhyming *Lianmianci* place higher demands on learners' ability to pronounce finals accurately, for instance, in “骆驼” (luòtuó /luo<sup>5</sup>t<sup>h</sup>uo<sup>35</sup>/), both syllables have the final “uo”, which requires a natural glide from “u” to “o” when pronounced. However, due to differences in the phonetic characteristics of their native languages, learners from different linguistic backgrounds may struggle with this final, often producing an insufficiently full or accurate sound that sounds vague or disjointed.

The tones of Chinese *Lianmianci* also present a challenge for learners. Chinese is a tonal language, where each syllable has a fixed tone, and changes in tone can alter word meanings. The two syllables in *Lianmianci* each have their own tones, so learners must not only accurately pronounce the initials and finals of each syllable but also master the rising and falling changes of the tones, for example, in “惆怅” (chouchàng /tʂ<sup>h</sup>ou<sup>35</sup> tʂ<sup>h</sup>aŋ<sup>51</sup>/), “惆” (chóu) is in the rising tone (阳平 yángpíng) with a tone value of 35, pronounced by ascending from a mid pitch; “怅” (chàng) is in the falling tone (去声 qùshēng) with a tone value of 51, pronounced by descending from a high pitch. If learners fail to

accurately grasp these tones—for example, pronouncing “惆” as the high-level tone (阴平 yīn píng) or the rising tone (上声 shǎngshēng), or “悵” as the rising tone or the dipping tone—the pronunciation of the entire word will sound unnatural and may even lead to misunderstandings of its meaning.

To help learners overcome these phonetic difficulties, teachers can adopt diverse teaching methods. For example, by demonstrating pronunciation, learners can visually observe the teacher’s mouth shape, tongue position, and articulatory movements, then practice imitation. Voice software such as “Chinese Learning Treasure” or “Duolingo” can be used for learners to follow and compare their pronunciation, with real-time feedback on accuracy to help correct errors promptly. Organizing phonetic games like “*Lianmianci* Chain Game”—where learners take turns to say a *Lianmianci* with accurate pronunciation — can also stimulate interest and improve their pronunciation skills through a playful format.

### 3.2 Difficulties in Semantic Comprehension

*Lianmianci* are characterized by holistic semantics and rich cultural connotations, meaning their meanings cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of their individual characters. This differs from words formed by traditional disyllabic word-formation methods, increasing the difficulty of vocabulary learning. Take “狼狈” (lángbǐ /lɑŋ<sup>35</sup>peɪ<sup>5</sup> /) as an example: individually, “狼” (láng) and “狈” (bǐ) refer to two types of animals, but as a *Lianmianci*, “狼狈” expresses the meaning of “distressed or embarrassed”, with no direct connection to the animals’ original meanings. If learners interpret the word based on the meanings of its individual characters, they will misunderstand it. Many learners, upon first encountering “狼狈”, assume it merely refers to a combination of wolves and bǐs (mythical creatures), failing to grasp its contextual meaning of “embarrassment”, which leads to errors in reading comprehension and oral expression.

*Lianmianci* often embody rich cultural connotations, which are particularly challenging for learners from different cultural backgrounds to understand. For instance, “窈窕” (yǎo tiǎo /iəu<sup>214</sup>thiəu<sup>214</sup> /) in Chinese culture is used to describe a woman with both inner beauty and elegant demeanor, reflecting traditional Chinese aesthetic

concepts of women’s virtues and grace. However, learners from Western cultural backgrounds may lack completely corresponding concepts or aesthetic standards, making it difficult for them to deeply appreciate the delicate emotions and cultural charm conveyed by “窈窕”.

To help learners better understand the semantics of *Lianmianci*, teachers can use contextual teaching methods. Integrating *Lianmianci* into specific contexts such as sentences, short passages, or dialogues allows learners to infer and grasp meanings through context. Teachers can also explain related cultural background knowledge, such as historical stories, literary works, or cultural traditions, to help learners accurately understand the cultural connotations behind *Lianmianci*.

### 3.3 Difficulties in Writing and Memorization

The complex and diverse glyphs of *Lianmianci*, with their numerous and intricate strokes, coupled with the weak connection between glyphs and semantic meaning, pose significant challenges for learners in writing and memorization. Take “尴尬” (gāngàkǎn<sup>55</sup> kA<sup>5</sup> /) as an example: the character “尴” contains 13 strokes, while “尬” has 7 strokes, and both have unique structural components. For learners with a weak foundation in Chinese characters, writing these characters is highly challenging. Common errors during writing include incorrect stroke order, omitted strokes, or miswritten structural components. Unlike ideographic or phono-semantic characters, where glyphs can roughly infer meaning, *Lianmianci* lack an obvious logical link between their shapes and meanings. Learners can only rely on rote memorization, lacking effective cues or methods, which further increases the difficulty of learning.

To address this, teachers should first use standardized and universally accepted glyphs in instruction. For example, the *Lianmianci* “逶迤” once had over 80 variant forms but is now fixed as the standard glyph, reducing the cognitive and writing burdens caused by multiple forms. Visual mnemonics can also be employed: linking the glyphs of *Lianmianci* to specific images or scenes helps learners memorize them. When teaching “蜿蜒” (wānyán/uān<sup>55</sup>iēn<sup>35</sup> /), for instance, teachers can show pictures of winding rivers or mountain paths, guiding learners to associate the curving shape with the characters’ structures through visual imagery. Additionally, decomposing characters into structural components and analyzing their

formations can aid learners in understanding and retaining the glyphs.

### 3.4 Negative Transfer in Word Formation

The formation of Chinese *Lianmianci* differs significantly from other disyllabic words in word-formation methods. This makes learners highly susceptible to interference from their native language's word-formation habits, leading to negative transfer and errors in understanding and using *Lianmianci*. Traditional word-formation methods in Chinese include compounding (复合式 fùhéshì), affixation (附加式 fùjiāshì), reduplication (重叠式 chóngdiéshì), etc. As a unique word-formation pattern, *Lianmianci* consist of two syllables linked to form a single meaning, inseparable into independent morphemes. Since no exact equivalent of this structure exists in other languages, learners often unconsciously apply their native word-formation logic when encountering *Lianmianci*. For example, in English, many disyllabic words like "sunrise" (composed of "sun" and "rise") can have their meanings inferred from their component words. However, this approach fails with Chinese *Lianmianci*: when learners encounter "葡萄" (pútáo/p<sup>hu</sup>35tau/), they may feel confused, as the characters "葡" and "萄" individually carry no clear meaning related to "grape". Trying to deduce the word's meaning from its components (as in English) leads to misunderstanding.

To address negative transfer caused by differences in word-formation rules, teachers should emphasize contrastive teaching. Compare *Lianmianci* with similar disyllabic words, detailing differences in word-formation, semantic comprehension, and usage. Through abundant examples, help learners recognize the uniqueness of *Lianmianci* and break free from the interference of their native word-formation patterns. Additionally, targeted exercises—such as filling in the blanks, sentence composition, and error correction—can deepen learners' understanding and mastery, improving their ability to use *Lianmianci* correctly in practice.

## 4. TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR LIANMIANCI IN CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

### 4.1 Multimedia-assisted Teaching

With the rapid development of modern information technology, multimedia has become increasingly widespread in education. In teaching *Lianmianci* to foreign learners, multimedia can provide intuitive and vivid learning materials, transforming abstract knowledge about these words into engaging visual and auditory information. This enhances learning outcomes and stimulates learners' interest. For example, when explaining the assonant *Lianmianci* "婀娜" (ē nuó<sup>55</sup>nuo<sup>35</sup>), teachers can show images of a graceful woman dancing. Through visuals, learners can directly observe the light, soft, and elegant posture described by "婀娜", which aids comprehension more effectively than textual explanations alone. Teachers can also play a dance video where the performer's graceful movements harmonize with the music, deepening learners' sensory understanding of the word. Pausing the video at key moments to describe the dancer's motions using "婀娜" helps learners grasp the term's meaning in context.

### 4.2 Context-based Teaching

Language learning is inseparable from context. Teaching *Lianmianci* within specific contexts helps learners understand their meanings and usage in different scenarios, improving their language application skills. For instance, when explaining "朦胧" (mónglóng/məŋ<sup>35</sup>luŋ<sup>35</sup>/), provide example sentences in varied contexts to illustrate its polysemy: it can describe blurred objects ("The mountain peaks were 朦胧 in the fog") or abstract concepts like unclear thoughts ("His ideas remained 朦胧."). Contrasting these examples enables learners to master the word's multiple meanings and usage, enhancing their ability to select appropriate meanings in real-life communication.

Teachers can also guide learners to create their own contexts through writing or speaking exercises. For example, ask students to describe a travel experience using *Lianmianci* like "蜿蜒" (wānyǎn/wān<sup>55</sup>yan<sup>35</sup>/, winding), "踌躇" (chóuchú/chóu<sup>35</sup>chú<sup>35</sup>/, hesitant).etc. This process requires learners to thoughtfully integrate the words into meaningful contexts, reinforcing their understanding and memory while exercising language organization skills—truly applying knowledge in practice.

### 4.3 Teaching Strategies for Word Formation Differences

Contrastive analysis is a highly effective method in teaching *Lianmianci*. By comparing them with other word-formation patterns, learners can grasp the unique characteristics of *Lianmianci* and reduce negative transfer from their native languages.

Traditional word-formation methods (e.g., derivation, as in “happy” + “-ness” = “happiness”; compounding, as in “black” + “board” = “blackboard”) differ fundamentally from Chinese *Lianmianci*, which consist of two inseparable syllables forming a single meaning (e.g., “徘徊” páihuái, “伶俐” língrì “葡萄” pútáo). Take “葡萄” vs. “grape”: the former is a non-alliterative, non-assonant *Lianmianci* where “葡” and “萄” have no independent meaning related to “grape”, while “grape” is a standalone English word with no phonetic or graphic connection to its Chinese counterpart. Learners must memorize “葡萄” as a whole rather than analyzing its components.

In practice, teachers can create comparison tables or PPTs listing *Lianmianci* alongside their pronunciations, meanings, and word-formation characteristics, contrasted with equivalent words in learners’ native languages. Guided discussions help learners identify structural differences independently, deepening their understanding. This approach enables learners to accurately grasp *Lianmianci*’s essence and improve learning efficiency.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For teachers, a deep understanding of *Lianmianci*’s characteristics and teaching challenges is crucial for optimizing instructional methods and enhancing teaching quality. By designing targeted activities—such as rhythmic exercises for pronunciation, context-based tasks for semantic comprehension, and comparative analyses for grammatical functions—teachers can make instruction more effective, improving learners’ experience and efficiency. Research into *Lianmianci* teaching in Chinese as a foreign language holds significant practical value, paving the way for more nuanced and learner-centered approaches.

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