

CHINESE AS A THIRD LANGUAGE: BIH TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE, LEARNING DIFFICULTIES, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: This paper examines the learning and teaching of Chinese as a third language (L3) in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the perspective of Chinese language teachers, with particular attention to cross-linguistic influence, learning difficulties, motivational factors, and didactic practices. Anchored in contemporary Third Language Acquisition (TLA) theory, the study draws on recent key insights and recent empirical research highlighting the dynamic and non-linear interaction between previously acquired languages and additional language learning. The empirical component combines semi-structured questionnaires with Chinese language teachers working in higher education and secondary education contexts in BiH - including institutional settings such as university sinology departments and Confucius Institutes - with a learner corpus consisting of students' written assignments produced across different proficiency levels. By combining teacher perspectives with corpus-based evidence, the study seeks to provide an empirically grounded account of the specific challenges and pedagogical implications associated with teaching Chinese as an L3 in a multilingual European context. Qualitative thematic analysis of teacher interviews reveals recurring challenges related to negative transfer from students' first language (Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian) and dominant second languages (primarily English), particularly in the domains of syntax, lexical selection, word order, and the use of function words. Corpus-based analysis corroborates these perceptions by identifying systematic error patterns attributable to cross-linguistic interference, limited metalinguistic awareness, and insufficient exposure to authentic input. Teachers further highlight motivational fluctuations linked to the perceived difficulty of Chinese orthography, tonal pronunciation, and delayed communicative payoff, as well as institutional constraints affecting curriculum design and instructional time. The findings are interpreted within recent TLA models that view multilingual competence as a dynamic and non-linear system, shaped by typological distance, proficiency asymmetries, and instructional context. The paper argues that targeted pedagogical interventions - such as contrastive awareness-raising, strategic use of previously acquired languages, corpus-informed feedback, and motivation-sensitive task design - can significantly enhance learning outcomes. The study concludes with practical implications for improving Chinese language teaching in Bosnia and Herzegovina and contributes to the broader European discussion on multilingual education and less commonly taught languages.

Keywords: Chinese as a third language; third language acquisition; language interference; teacher perspectives; Chinese language pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

This study takes teacher cognition as its primary analytical lens, complemented by insights from third language acquisition (TLA) and learner corpus research. Teacher cognition - what teachers think, know and believe about language learning - shapes classroom decision-making, task design and interpretations of learner difficulties (Borg, 2003). In this study it is operationalised through a structured questionnaire for Chinese language teachers in BiH, focusing on perceived learner difficulties across skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), pronunciation (especially tones), characters, grammar, anxiety, motivation and contextual constraints such as limited exposure and institutional conditions. The questionnaire is designed to capture how teachers interpret multilingual learners' struggles in Chinese and which factors they see as most salient for progress.

Within this teacher-centred perspective, we draw on TLA to frame learners' repertoires as dynamic multilingual systems, where both L1 and L2 can influence L3 development through cross-linguistic influence, shaped by typological distance, language status and learner experience (De Angelis, 2007; Luan et al., 2024, Guo, 2025). In typologically distant combinations where alphabetic L1/L2 backgrounds meet Chinese, difficulties are particularly evident in tones, characters and various aspects of grammar, including word order and morphosyntax (Chan et al., 2022; Gong & Lai, 2024). A small learner corpus and error analysis provide a second lens, allowing us to identify recurrent error patterns and link them to plausible sources of transfer (Granger et al., 2015). Taken together, the teacher questionnaire and the learner corpus enable us to relate what teachers report to what learners produce in writing, situating both within a TLA framework centred on CLI, typological distance and multilingual repertoires.

Against this backdrop, the study aims to examine Chinese as a third language in Bosnia and Herzegovina by integrating teacher perceptions with corpus-based evidence from learner writing. Specifically, it seeks to (a) describe

how teachers conceptualise the influence of students' Chinese learning difficulties, (b) identify recurrent error patterns in learner texts that can plausibly be attributed to cross-linguistic influence, and (c) relate these findings to motivational and institutional conditions of Chinese teaching in BiH.

Chinese language teaching in BiH

Chinese language education in Bosnia and Herzegovina has developed rapidly over little more than a decade, driven largely by expanding political and economic ties with China and implemented through a small but dense network of university programmes and Confucius Institutes. A first milestone was the establishment of the Department of Sinology at the University of East Sarajevo in September 2011, the first such department in the country; it later added a master's programme in 2016 and doctoral studies in 2018 and has since become a key hub for Chinese language and culture in BiH (Cai, 2022). In 2022, a second sinology department was opened at the University of Banja Luka's Faculty of Philology (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1271316.shtml>). Parallel to these degree programmes, BiH has developed an institutional infrastructure for non-degree Chinese language learning. The first Confucius Institute (CI) in the country was founded at the University of Sarajevo in April 2015 as a joint project between Hanban and the university; it was mandated to provide Chinese language courses and cultural activities and is described in Chinese aid data as the first CI in BiH (<https://china.aiddata.org/projects/42855/>). A second Confucius Institute was established at the University of Banja Luka in 2018, with high-level political backing from the government of Republika Srpska and Chinese partners. In addition, an elective Chinese language course was introduced at the University of Mostar in March 2018, indicating a broader diffusion of Chinese beyond the two main sinology centres (Cai, 2022).

At the same time, available evidence suggests that Chinese remains a less commonly taught language in BiH. It is largely offered as an elective at universities and in a limited number of primary and secondary schools, rather than as a fully institutionalised foreign language in the national curriculum. Provision is also heavily dependent on Chinese funding, visiting teachers and a small core of local sinologists, making the system vulnerable to shifts in international politics and to the individual engagement of a few key academics (Cai, 2022). For the purposes of the present study, this constellation positions Chinese in BiH as a paradigmatic example of a less commonly taught language in a multilingual European context, where questions of motivation, cross-linguistic influence and teacher cognition are likely to be especially salient.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopts a mixed-methods, exploratory design combining teacher-reported data with learner production data. Qualitative data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire completed by Chinese language teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through a small written learner corpus. This design allows us to relate teachers' perceptions of learners' difficulties and cross-linguistic influence to attested error patterns in Chinese as an L3, and to identify areas of convergence and divergence between beliefs and actual learner performance.

The research was conducted in formal educational settings where Chinese is taught in BiH, namely at university programmes and Confucius Institutes, with direct links to secondary-school teaching through those institutions. The teacher sample consists of 12 Chinese language teachers currently involved in teaching in BiH. Their teaching experience ranges from 1 year to more than 10 years. Four teachers are local (Serbian/Bosnian/Croatian L1, from now on SBC), while eight are of Chinese nationality, reflecting the mixed staffing model typical of Confucius Institutes and university programmes in the region. Institutionally, participants are affiliated primarily with the University of East Sarajevo and the Confucius Institute at the University of Sarajevo. The learner corpus comprises written texts produced by 22 adult learners (aged 18 and above). According to the accompanying student questionnaire, all learners have reported SBC as L1 - in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian are three closely related, mutually intelligible standard varieties of the South Slavic language continuum that function as the main official languages of the country's constituent peoples. The vast majority of students reported English as their main L2 (21 out of 22 students reported English as their L2). Their proficiency in Chinese ranges from beginner to intermediate, per teachers' reports. Learner data consist of short in-class written assignments (e.g. brief essays, narrative or descriptive compositions) produced as part of regular coursework. Each of the 22 students contributed at least five texts, resulting in a small but focused corpus of L3 Chinese writing anchored in real classroom practice (114 text in total). Although the primary focus is on written production, teachers' questionnaire responses also provide complementary insights into oral difficulties observed in learners' spoken Chinese (e.g. tones, word order, hesitation and code-mixing), which are taken into account. The learner corpus was subjected to error analysis. All texts were manually annotated for errors in (a) syntax and word order, (b) function words and particles, (c) lexical choice, and (d) characters/orthography.

3. RESULTS

Teachers' perspectives on learning difficulties and motivation

Questionnaire responses from twelve Chinese language teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlight a fairly consistent cluster of perceived linguistic difficulties for learners of Chinese as an L3. Across institutions, teachers emphasise the complexity of Chinese orthography as a central obstacle: students struggle with memorising characters and linking form, meaning and pronunciation, and many require repeated practice before they can use characters confidently in spontaneous writing. Tonal pronunciation is described as another major challenge, particularly for learners whose L1 (SBC) and dominant L2 (mainly English) do not encode lexical tone; teachers report persistent problems with tone production and tone sandhi and note that tone errors often impede intelligibility. Grammar is perceived as somewhat less daunting in the early stages, but teachers report that difficulties emerge in areas such as word order, aspect marking and the use of function words, which teachers frequently attribute to negative transfer from learners' first and second languages.

Teachers also stress that these language-specific challenges are intensified by limited exposure and time-on-task. Chinese is typically offered as an elective subject with a relatively small number of weekly contact hours, and learners have few opportunities to encounter Chinese outside the classroom (e.g. in media or daily life). As a result, even motivated students find it hard to consolidate characters and tones between lessons. Several teachers explicitly link insufficient exposure and compressed timetables to slow progress and fossilisation of early errors in both spoken and written Chinese, echoing the broader pattern, summarised in the abstract of this study, whereby limited input and practice opportunities are seen as key constraints on L3 development.

In terms of motivation, teachers describe a pattern of initial enthusiasm followed by fluctuation. Many learners are reportedly drawn to Chinese by curiosity, the perceived prestige of learning a "difficult" language, and the promise of scholarships or career opportunities. Over time, however, teachers observe dips in motivation when the cumulative difficulty of characters and tones becomes apparent and when learners perceive a delayed communicative payoff - that is, the feeling that substantial effort yields only modest gains in spontaneous communication.

Finally, teachers point to several institutional factors that shape both learning difficulties and motivation. These include the elective status of Chinese within curricula, which makes enrolment and retention sensitive to timetable clashes and competing obligations; the limited number of teaching hours allocated per week; and uneven access to up-to-date teaching materials and technological resources across institutions. Such constraints, they argue, restrict the scope for extensive reading and communicative practice and make it challenging to provide systematic, individualised feedback on written work. Taken together, these perspectives portray a teaching context in which structural limitations (curricula, timetabling, resources) interact with the intrinsic demands of Chinese orthography and phonology to produce the learning difficulties and motivational fluctuations observed in the study.

Error patterns in Chinese L3 from corpus and (dis)alignment with teachers' perspectives

The learner corpus, consisting of 114 short essays produced by 22 students, shows error patterns that align closely with teachers' perceptions of the main learning difficulties in Chinese as an L3. In the syntactic domain, learners frequently produce sentences whose word order and adverbial placement mirror SBC rather than Chinese. For example, in 我想买礼物为他 *Wǒ xiǎng mǎi lǐwù wèi tā* ("I want to buy a gift for him") the prepositional phrase 为他 *wèi tā* appears after the verb, following L1/L2 logic, instead of the more natural pre-verbal structure 我想为他买礼物 *Wǒ xiǎng wèi tā mǎi lǐwù*. Attributive constructions show similar transfer: forms like 系的英语 *xì de yīngyǔ* ("department of English") reflect the post-nominal SBC pattern ("катедра за англиски језик"), whereas in Chinese the compound 英语系 *yīngyǔ xì* ("English department") is the only acceptable one. Teachers' reports that students "think through" L1 structures when forming Chinese sentences are thus clearly reflected in the written data, where many clauses can be read as near word-for-word translations from SBC.

The corpus also confirms teachers' concern about learners' difficulties with small grammatical and functional elements. There are numerous instances of redundant or misused verbs in predicate structures, such as 她是很漂亮 *tā shì hěn piàoliang* instead of the target-like 她很漂亮 *tā hěn piàoliang* ("She is very beautiful"), where the copula 是 is transferred from L1 and L2 patterns into a context where Chinese normally omits it. Non-idiomatic prepositional use is illustrated by sentences like 他于中国上学 *tā yú Zhōngguó shàngxué* ("He is studying in China"), where learners select 于 on the basis of dictionary equivalence with "in/at", although only 在 is natural in this adverbial position (他在中国上学 *tā zài Zhōngguó shàngxué*). Misinterpretation of conjunctions appears in examples such as 我生气和说: 你必须来! *Wǒ shēngqì hé shuō: nǐ bìxū lái!* ("I got angry and said: you must

come!”), where 和 is used to link an adjective / adverb and a verb in line with SBC *u* “and”, instead of adverbial 地 in 我生气地说... *wǒ shēngqì de shuō*... (“I said angrily...”). These written examples closely match teachers’ descriptions of persistent problems with word order, prepositions and function words.

In the lexical domain, the texts display many dictionary-driven choices and false synonyms, again echoing teacher observations that students rely heavily on bilingual dictionaries and L2 English glosses. A typical case is 天气漂亮 *tiānqì piàoliang*, a direct transfer from English *the weather is beautiful* or SBC *epujeme je nujeno*, where idiomatic Chinese prefers 天气好 *tiānqì hǎo* (“the weather is good”); similar collocational transfer appears in 茶很漂亮 *chá hěn piàoliang* (“the tea is beautiful”) instead of 茶很好喝 *chá hěn hǎo hē* (“the tea tastes good to drink”). Learners also, for example, map a single SBC word onto distinct Chinese lexemes, as in 我今年 18 年 *Wǒ jīnnián 18 nián* (“This year I am 18 years”) rather than 我今年 18 岁 *Wǒ jīnnián 18 suì* (“I am 18 years old”), treating 年 and 岁 as interchangeable “year”. Other examples show overextension of verbs, such as 开自行车 *kāi zìxíngchē* (“drive a bicycle”) on the model of SBC *vozumu biciklo*, where Chinese requires 骑自行车 *qí zìxíngchē* (“ride a bicycle”). Calques based on SBC expressions also occur, e.g. 波黑的表面不大 *Bōhēi de biǎomiàn bù dà* (“the surface of BIH is not big”) instead of 波黑的面积不大 *Bōhēi de miànjī bù dà*, reflecting a semantic distinction between 表面 and 面积 that is neutralised in SBC *površina* (“surface/ territorial area”).

When it comes to specific sentence structures such as 把 *bǎ* and 被 *bèi*, the corpus suggests a pattern of avoidance and simplification that partly confirms, and partly nuances, teachers’ perspectives. Teachers describe 把 *bǎ* - and 被 *bèi* - sentences as structurally demanding for learners, given that neither has a straightforward equivalent in SBC or in the students’ dominant L2 English. In the written data, 把 *bǎ* constructions are relatively rare; learners tend to opt for simpler SVO patterns (我放书在桌子上 *wǒ fàng shū zài zhuōzi shàng*) instead of target-like 把 *bǎ* sentences (我把书放在桌子上 *Wǒ bǎ shū fàng zài zhuōzi shàng*), which supports teachers’ reports that students avoid forms they perceive as complex or “risky”. Where 把 *bǎ* does appear, word-order problems and incomplete complements are common, again reflecting L1-driven linearisation. Also, 被 *bèi* -sentences occur even less frequently and, when they do, are often used in contexts where Chinese would normally prefer an active construction, suggesting that learners sometimes overgeneralise textbook explanations or transfer the high functional load of passive constructions in SBC and English into Chinese. This pattern indicates a broad alignment with teacher perceptions of 把 *bǎ* / 被 *bèi* structures as problematic, while also showing that in written production learners’ primary strategy is omission and simplification rather than frequent, overtly erroneous use.

Finally, the written corpus offers only indirect support for those difficulties that teachers locate primarily in the oral domain, such as tones and segmental pronunciation. Teachers consistently rank tones, phonology and the visual complexity of characters among the most serious obstacles and link them to motivational fluctuations, but the present data set consists exclusively of written assignments and therefore cannot document tonal or phonological errors directly. What it does show, however, is that the combination of L1- and L2-based transfer in syntax and lexis, together with unstable control of grammatical particles, sentence patterns such as 把 *bǎ* / 被 *bèi*, and other “small words”, produces exactly the kind of persistent written difficulties that teachers report alongside problems with tones, characters and limited exposure.

4. DISCUSSION

Interpretation within tla, multilingual perspectives and pedagogical implications

The findings of this study fit well with TLA models that propose combined transfer from multiple previously acquired languages rather than privileging the L1 alone (De Angelis, 2007; Hammarberg, 2009). Both the teacher data and the learner corpus point to a strong role of L1 SBC in shaping Chinese L3 syntax and word order (e.g. adverbial placement, attributive constructions), while lexical choices are additionally influenced by learners’ L2 English, often mediated by bilingual dictionaries and English-based teaching materials.

At the same time, the typological distance between Slavic L1s (and Germanic L2s) and Chinese is clearly visible in learners’ heavy reliance on linear translation strategies. Many errors represent attempts to “fit” SBC or English conceptual and syntactic patterns into Chinese - which is consistent with accounts that highlight structural similarity and cognitive economy as important conditions for non-facilitative transfer in L3 acquisition (Luan et al., 2024). Our data therefore support TLA perspectives that conceptualise learners as operating within a dynamic multilingual system, in which all previously acquired languages remain psycholinguistically active and available, rather than as

moving through a simple L1→L2→L3 sequence (Jessner, 2006; Cenoz, 2013). Teachers' own accounts, which routinely refer to students "thinking in their mother tongue" or in English when writing Chinese, also reflect this multilingual orientation: they rarely describe learners in "L1 vs L2" terms, but rather as users of a repertoire of languages, even when they do not explicitly use TLA terminology.

The results underline the importance of teacher cognition and the institutional context in shaping how Chinese as an L3 is taught and learned in BiH. Teachers' beliefs about major learning difficulties - particularly cross-linguistic interference from L1 and L2, the burden of characters and tones, and the role of limited exposure - are largely supported by the learner corpus. They correctly identify word order, function words and collocation as persistent trouble spots, and the written data provide concrete examples that mirror these intuitions. At the same time, teachers' strong emphasis on oral-phonological issues (tones, pronunciation) cannot be directly corroborated here because our corpus is written; this gap illustrates how teacher cognition is inevitably shaped by day-to-day classroom interaction, which may foreground oral errors more than written ones.

The combination of teacher perspectives and corpus evidence points to several pedagogical implications. First, the high salience of cross-linguistic transfer suggests the value of explicit contrastive activities that systematically compare SBC and English structures with Chinese ones. Activities might, for example, ask students to reformulate L1/L2-based sentences such as 天气漂亮 *tiānqì piàoliang* or 我今年 18 年 *Wǒ jīnnián 18 nián* into more idiomatic Chinese (天气好 *tiānqì hǎo*, 我今年 18 岁 *wǒ jīnnián 18 suì*), or to explore different ways of expressing adverbials and attributes without relying on literal translation. Such tasks can help turn transfer from a largely unconscious process into an object of reflection.

Second, the data support carefully controlled translanguaging strategies. Rather than banning SBC or English from the classroom, teachers can use them strategically as bridges: to highlight why 她是很漂亮 *tā shì hěn piàoliang* is structurally different from "She is very beautiful", or to show how SBC *возмуже* *взуклго* maps onto 骑自行车 *qí zìxíngchē* rather than 开自行车 *kāi zìxíngchē*. This aligns with views of multilingual learners as resourceful users of their full repertoires, while still insisting on the specificity of Chinese forms.

Third, the corpus provides a basis for error-informed materials. The recurring patterns observed - misuse of prepositions, particles, 和, avoidance and misformation of 把 *bǎ* / 被 *bèi*, collocational transfer, calques of SBC expressions - could be compiled into short, focused practice units or mini "error corpora" for classroom use. Learners could be invited to correct real anonymised sentences from the corpus, discuss the underlying L1/L2 influence, and formulate "rules of thumb" for avoiding similar errors.

Finally, the motivational dynamics reported by teachers point to the importance of motivation-sensitive task design. Since learners often experience a dip in motivation when progress feels slow and the effort of characters and tones is high, tasks that yield visible outcomes - such as preparing a short written profile using correct classifiers and age expressions, or successfully using a small set of high-frequency 把 *bǎ*-sentences - may help sustain engagement. Linking written work to tangible goals (e.g. HSK preparation, project-based collaborations with Chinese partners, or cultural products) can also reinforce the perceived value of Chinese alongside other foreign languages in the BIH context.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. The teacher sample is small and context-specific (12 teachers from two main institutions), and the learner corpus, while rich in error types, is likewise limited in size (114 texts by 22 students) and focused on beginner to intermediate adult learners. Methodologically, the learner data are entirely written, meaning that crucial aspects of L3 Chinese - particularly tones, phonology and interactional competence - could not be analysed directly, even though teachers view them as central.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Longitudinal designs following learners over multiple semesters would allow researchers to track how cross-linguistic transfer patterns and error types change with proficiency, and whether certain errors fossilise or diminish over time. Adding spoken data - for example, recorded classroom tasks or semi-structured oral interviews - would make it possible to examine tonal and phonological development and to compare oral and written transfer patterns. Finally, comparative studies across different countries and learner profiles could clarify which of the patterns observed here are specific to BiH and which are more general features of L3 Chinese acquisition in European multilingual settings.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has offered an empirical description of Chinese as a third language (L3) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a context where Chinese is a less commonly taught but strategically positioned language. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, it has combined teacher perspectives with a small learner corpus of written Chinese, interpreted

within a Third Language Acquisition framework. The teacher questionnaire highlighted characters, tones, grammar and limited exposure as key difficulties, alongside fluctuating motivation shaped by institutional constraints and learners' expectations. The learner corpus analysis corroborated these perceptions for written language, revealing systematic L1- and L2-based transfer in syntax and lexis - especially in word order, function words, collocation and the avoidance or simplification of structures such as 把bǎ/被 bèi- while also underscoring the limits of written data in capturing oral-phonological problems.

By bringing together teacher cognition and corpus-based evidence, the study underlines the importance of viewing learners as multilingual users whose prior languages function as both resources and sources of interference in L3 Chinese. It shows how typological distance, transfer from SBC and English, and local institutional conditions interact to shape learning trajectories. More broadly, the findings contribute to debates on multilingual education and less commonly taught languages in Europe, illustrating both the opportunities and the vulnerabilities of introducing Chinese into educational systems where European languages dominate. While necessarily limited in scope, the study provides a grounded starting point for further work on L3 Chinese in European multilingual settings and for pedagogical innovation that fully acknowledges learners' complex linguistic repertoires.

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