

An Error Analysis of English-Speaking Learners' Usage of the Chinese Verbs Tiyan ("to experience") and Tihui ("to realize")

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Abstract. In the field of teaching Chinese as a second language, vocabulary instruction represents a significant focus and a particular difficulty for native English-speaking learners. This paper investigates the two easily confused lexical items “tiyan” and “tihui” as the main subject of study, drawing on authentic examples extracted from the CCL corpus. A comparative analysis is conducted from three aspects: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. Based on this analysis, the paper further statistically analyzes the errors made by native English speakers when using these two words, revealing that the mutual misuse of these two terms constitutes a salient error type among learners. In order to address this issue, the paper summarizes and categorizes the specific reasons for these errors by examining definitions in dictionaries, definitions in international Chinese textbooks, and classroom vocabulary instruction, then offering pedagogical suggestions to enhance vocabulary instruction and promote learners’ accurate word usage.

Keywords: tiyan, tihui, differentiation, native English speakers learning Chinese, errors

1. Introduction

A word is the smallest independent lexical unit in a language, while vocabulary constitutes the sum of all words in a language, serving as the foundation and building material of the language. Vocabulary teaching is a crucial component of international Chinese language education. However, Chinese contains a large number of synonyms, near-synonyms, and easily confused words, which pose significant challenges for learners.

In the paper *An Analysis and Suggestions on the Treatment of “Synonyms/Near-Synonyms” in Foreign Chinese Learning Dictionaries* [1], the author first integrated the study of synonyms/near-synonyms with the interlanguage theory. She defined the concepts of “synonyms,” “near-synonyms,” and “easily confused words,” arguing that these three concepts intersect rather than stand in parallel or opposition. Subsequently, she further categorized easily confused words in Chinese interlanguage into six types and identified five key issues to consider when studying them [2]. Later, she summarized four characteristics of easily confused words: high frequency of misuse, widespread distribution, diverse types of inter-word relationships, and both unidirectional and

bidirectional misuse [3]. It is evident that easily confused words are a critical aspect of both teaching and research in international Chinese language education.

When communicating with intermediate and advanced Chinese language learners, the author has noticed that many students struggle with accurately distinguishing and using the two words “tiyan”(体验 tǐ yàn) and “tìhui.” (体会 tǐ huì)Learners frequently exhibit difficulty in accurately distinguishing and applying these two lexical items. For example, one American learner wrote the following sentence in a modern advanced Chinese reading course:

*其实我也很想体会那种一放学父亲就迎上来把我抱在怀里的感觉。(The truth is, I've always longed to know that feeling—the feeling of my father meeting me after school and wrapping me in a hug.)

In this sentence, the learner incorrectly used “tìhui” instead of “tiyan.” This error is common, since these two words have similar meanings and can both be roughly translated as "experience" in English. Both words are categorized as level three vocabulary in the International Chinese Language Education Proficiency Level Standards and are considered basic vocabulary for beginners. They are frequently used in daily oral communication and written expression. However, intermediate and advanced learners still encounter difficulties when using them correctly.

A review of the relevant literature reveals that, regarding this pair of near-synonyms, in the paper Corpus-based instruction of near-synonyms in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, the author mentioned their abstract definitions and similar translation in 1700 Pairs of Near-Synonyms in Usage Comparison, but did not focus on distinguishing between them [4]. Therefore, further analysis is needed to help learners reduce errors in usage.

Based on this, the article first distinguishes the similarities and differences between “tiyan” and “tìhui” using real data from native speakers. It then extracts error data from Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus to systematically analyze the errors made by native English speakers learning Chinese.

2. A distinction between “tiyan” and “tìhui”

The distinction between the two terms can be analyzed from three perspectives: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics [5].

2.1. Semantics

According to The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, 7th edition [6] (《现代汉语词典(第七版)》), the definitions of “tiyan” and “tìhui” can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions, part of speech, and examples of “tiyan” and “tihui” in Xiandai Hanyu Cidian (7th ed.)

Content	tiyan	tihui
Definition	通过实践来认识周围的事物;亲身经历	通过实践认识,理解事物;指实践后形成的感受和理解
Part of Speech	Verb	Verb
Examples	(1)作家到群众中去体验生活. (The writer went to live among the masses to gain life experience.)(2)有了孩子之后,他才深深体验到了父母的艰辛. (It wasn't until he had children of his own that he truly understood his parents' hardships.)	(1)只有深入基层,才能真正体会群众的思想感情. (Only by going to the grassroots level can one genuinely understand the thoughts and feelings of the people.)(2)座谈会上大家畅谈了个人的体会. (At the symposium, everyone freely shared their personal insights.)

From the above, it is clear that both terms emphasize “practice.” Thus, both “tiyan” and “tihui” presuppose personal experience or engagement in practice. The examples also show that both involve an individual’s subjective response to external matters, which means they are highly subjective and vary across individuals.

However, their semantic focuses differ. “tiyan” highlights “practice” and “personal experience.” It refers only to matters that one has directly undergone, emphasizing the process and carrying a certain concreteness. In the contrast, “tihui,” emphasizes the “feelings and understanding” that are formed. What one “tihui” does not necessarily have to be something personally experienced; as long as one has thoughts, reflections, or emotional insights, it can be called “tihui.” It stresses the result and is more abstract in nature. For example:

(1)从小成长于农村的方智远,更能体验农民的辛劳,他深知“人误田一时,田误人一年”的道理. (self-constructed)(“Having grown up in a rural area, Fang Zhiyuan is better able to ‘体验’ farmers’ hardships; he fully understands the proverb ‘one season’s neglect of the field harms one for a year’.”)

(2)从小成长于农村的方智远,更能体会农民的辛劳,他深知“人误田一时,田误人一年”的道理. (People’s Daily, 2020)(“Having grown up in a rural area, Fang Zhiyuan is better able to ‘体会’ farmers’ hardships; he fully understands the proverb ‘one season’s neglect of the field harms one for a year’.”)

In this example, both “tiyan” and “tihui” are acceptable. But the choice conveys different nuances. Using “tiyan” suggests that Fang must have done the same farm work as the farmers, and only through his own experience did he come to “tiyan” their hardships. Using “tihui,” on the other hand, does not necessarily imply that he engaged in farm work himself. He may simply have observed, reflected on, or empathized with the farmers’ efforts and difficulties, thereby coming to “tihui” their hardships.

2.2. Syntax

In terms of syntax, an analysis of the results output from the CCL corpus shows that “tiyan” can function in a sentence as subject (often as the head of a modifier–head structure serving as subject),

predicate, object, or attributive. It cannot independently serve as an adverbial, but it can combine with a preposition to form a prepositional phrase functioning as an adverbial.

Examples are as follows:

(1) (Modifier-head structure functioning as subject) 这种情感体验主要决定于成人的态度,声调. (“Such emotional experience is mainly determined by adults’ attitudes and intonation.” Fang Fuxi & Fang Ge, *Children’s Psychology*)

(2) (Functioning as predicate) 他不过是顺手儿逛逛市场,只觉得热闹,用不着体验什么,思索什么. (“He merely wandered through the market casually, only feeling the liveliness, without needing to experience or reflect upon anything.” Lao She, Dr. Wen)

(3) (Functioning as object) 它并不是要求文艺为临时的,直接的政治任务做简单化的宣传,而是要求根据文艺的特征和规律,将进步的政治思想转化为作者对生活的真切情感体验,并体现在有审美感染力的生动的艺术形象中. (“It does not require literature and art to serve as simplified propaganda for temporary and immediate political tasks, but rather demands that progressive political ideas be transformed into the author’s genuine emotional experience of life, embodied in vivid artistic images with aesthetic appeal.” *People’s Daily*, 1992)

(4) (Functioning as attributive) 尤为重要是,随着用户需求和体验的升级,用原有的互联网商业模式继续提供低质量产品和服务,既是对用户的不负责任,也无法永远赢得用户. (“What is particularly important is that as user demand and experience upgrade, continuing to provide low-quality products and services through the original Internet business model is both irresponsible to users and incapable of securing them forever.” *People’s Daily*, 2018)

(5) (Prepositional phrase functioning as adverbial) 我一定要根据自己的体验,看清楚这个战争的悲惨,吸取这个教训,瞻望前途,反对战争,为和平而进行斗争. (“I must, on the basis of my own experience, see clearly the misery of this war, draw lessons from it, look to the future, oppose war, and fight for peace.” *People’s Daily*, 1956)

“tíhuì” can function as subject (often as the head of a modifier-head structure serving as subject), predicate, object, or attributive. It cannot directly serve as an adverbial, but it can form a prepositional phrase functioning as an adverbial, or it can be modified by an adverb to form a modifier-head adverbial structure.

Examples are as follows:

(6) (Modifier-head structure functioning as subject) 名理上的推论,趣味上的体会,尽可取来互证. (“The logical inferences in theory and the experiential appreciations in taste may well be taken as mutual corroboration.” Yu Pingbo, Mian Yue)

(7) (Functioning as predicate) 从车安抵城站后,我就体会得一种归来的骄傲,直到昂然走入自己常住的室为止. (“From the moment the train arrived at the city station, I experienced a sense of pride in returning, until I strode proudly into my usual dwelling.” Yu Pingbo, Zhan Cheng)

(8) (Functioning as object) 这一好处,长春煤气厂厂长有了深刻的体会. (“This benefit, the director of Changchun Gas Plant came to a profound realization of.” *People’s Daily*, 1950)

(9) (Functioning as attributive) 目前,在我国农村正在开始的伟大变革,对于我们的作者,编导,演员,也有一个消化的过程,一个认识和体会的过程. (“At present, the great transformation unfolding in China’s countryside is also a process of assimilation, a process of understanding and realization, for our writers, directors, and actors.” *People’s Daily*, 1981)

(10) (Prepositional phrase functioning as adverbial) 他们也通过切身体会看到工人阶级个人利益和国家利益的一致. (“They also, through personal realization, perceived the unity of the workers’ individual interests with those of the nation.” *People’s Daily*, 1954)

(11) (Modifier-head adverbial structure functioning as adverbial) 许多干部深有体会地说:“这样的算账真是算出了冲天干劲”. (“Many cadres said with profound realization: ‘Such accounting

truly inspires boundless enthusiasm.” People’s Daily, 1959)

Thus, in terms of syntactic function, both “tiyan” and “tihui” exhibit dual categorical functions, serving as either verbs or nouns. Both of them can directly or indirectly serve as subject, predicate, object, attributive, or adverbial, though generally they cannot serve as complements. In addition, they can both combine with prepositions or prepositional phrases to form prepositional structures, both can be modified by adverbs, and both can serve as the head of attributive phrases—demonstrating significant similarities.

Nevertheless, they remain notable differences in syntactic function. When the two are used as verbs in verb–object constructions, “tiyan” may be directly followed by a bare noun or by a modifier–head structure, as in “体验生活” (experience life), “体验文化” (experience culture), “体验大时代的真滋味” (experience the true flavor of a great era), or “体验到民主幸福的生活” (experience the happy life of democracy). By contrast, “tihui” is more frequently followed by a modifier–head structure and seldom takes a bare noun directly, as in “体会得出他们的心情” (apprehend their feelings), “体会我的意思” (understand my meaning), “体会别人的感受” (apprehend others’ emotions), or “体会母亲的良苦用心” (apprehend a mother’s painstaking care). When used in verb–complement constructions, the complements of “tiyan” are usually resultative or verb–measure complements, such as “体验到” (experience to/realize) or “体验一下” (have a hands-on experience), whereas those of “tihui” are generally resultative or degree complements, such as “体会出” (apprehend/realize) or “体会得深刻.” (apprehend profoundly)

Table 2. Comparison of the syntactic functions of “tiyan” and “tihui”

Syntactic Function	tiyan	tihui
As noun	√	√
As verb	√	√
As subject (modifier–head structure)	√	√
As predicate	√	√
As object	√	√
As attributive	√	√
As adverbial	√(mainly in prepositional phrases)	√ (in prepositional phrases / modifier–head adverbial structures)
As complement	×	×
As verb in verb–object constructions	Collocates with bare nouns or modifier–head structures	More often collocates with modifier–head structures
As verb in verb–complement constructions	Collocates with resultative or verb–measure complements	Collocates with resultative or degree complements

2.3. Pragmatic

At the pragmatic level, both “tiyan” and “tihui” can combine with a wide range of words or phrases of different parts of speech and semantic categories to form new expressions. Lexical items co-occurring with “tiyan” tend to be concrete, referring to things, activities, or environments that can be directly experienced and perceived. By contrast, the content following “tihui” tends to be more abstract, usually requiring an internalized process of comprehension and reflection.

Table 3. A comparison of the pragmatic functions of “tiyan” and “tihui”

	X+“tiyan”	“tiyan”+X	X+“tihui”	“tihui”+X
X = Noun or Modifier–Head Structure	情感体验,游戏体验,购物体验(emotional experience; gaming experience; shopping experience)	体验生活,体验人生,体验文化 (experience life; experience life as a whole; experience culture)	心得体会,学习体会,工作体会 (insight and realization; learning reflection; work reflection)	体会其中的意味,体会人生,体会母亲的良苦用心 (grasp the meaning therein; understand life; appreciate a mother’s painstaking care)
X = Adjective	丰富的体验,全新的体验 (rich experience; brand-new experience)	体验丰富,体验深刻 (experience richness; experience depth)	深刻的体会,强烈的体会 (profound realization; strong realization)	体会错了 (misunderstand)
X = Adverb	反复体验,重新体验 (repeatedly experience; re-experience)		深刻地体会 (deeply realize)	
X = Verb	获得体验,得到了深刻的体验 (gain experience; obtain profound experience Perceive)	体验出,体验到 (experience)	深有体会 (have a deep realization)	体会出来,体会到 (come to realize; perceive)
X = Preposition	我本人所体验到的 (what I myself experienced)		我所体会到的 (what I have realized)	
X = Pronoun	你体验过生命的狂热吗? (Have you ever experienced the intensity of life?)		你体会到了吗? (Have you realized it?)	
X = Coordinated Element	感受和体验 (feeling and experience)	体验和感受 (experience and feeling)	感受和体会 (feeling and realization)	体会和感受 (realization and feeling)

3. Error analysis of the use of “tiyan” and “tihui” among English-speaking learners of Chinese

3.1. Statistical results of errors

By analyzing the learner corpus produced by native English speakers, it is possible to obtain a more precise account of the errors involving these easily confused words, as well as to classify the error types and identify the specific causes underlying them. The data used in this study are drawn from the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus and the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0. The author manually screened and compiled all instances in which English-speaking learners of Chinese used these two words, with the statistical results shown in the following table.

Table 4. Error rates in the use of “tiyan” and “tihui” among English-speaking learners of Chinese

Lexical Item	Total Sentences	Correct Sentences	Erroneous Sentences	Error Rate	Bidirectional Misuse Rate
tiyan	61	49	12	19.7%	16.7%
tihui	84	65	19	22.6%	36.8%

Analysis of the corpus statistics indicates that, in the Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus and the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0, the error rates for “tiyan” and “tihui” display different characteristics. Both items, however, exhibit a phenomenon of bidirectional misuse: learners tends to use “tiyan” when “tihui” is appropriate and sometimes use “tihui” when “tiyan” is appropriate. Furthermore, the bidirectional misuse rate for “tihui” is higher than that for “tiyan,” which suggests that, in communicative and expressive contexts, learners more frequently misuse “tiyan” as “tihui.”

3.2. Misuse of “tiyan”

(12)*我把和尚的故事引申至国家社会,体验到的是人与人必须相亲,互相体谅关怀,在工作中发挥人性的美,让品德从退了色的泥泞中闪烁出它的光辉,这就是我做人的原则,也是我对国家人民的期待与盼望. (HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0)

In (12) the learner cannot use “tiyan” to express moral lessons and gains from a story that they themselves have not lived through; what one can do in such a case is “tihui” — come to understand or appreciate certain truths. The learner therefore commits an error here.

In addition, other types of misuse involving “tiyan” include substituting “tiyan” for “shouhuo” (收获 shōu huò, gains), for “ganshou” (感受 gǎn shòu, feelings), for “yingyan” (应验 yìng yàn, to be borne out), or confusing “tiyan” with “shiyan” (试验 shì yàn, experiment/test). For example:

(13)*在短短十七天内,我体验到了不胜枚举的经验,但留下最深刻印象的却仍然是北京和上海. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(14)*下午的时候我们可以去弄堂采访几个上海人,我们可以体验上海方言. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(15)*对许多商人而言,有人同你一起搞投资,固然是一件好事.因为,资金就会比较宽裕,人力资源也会增加.这样,或许体验了“人多好办事”. (HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0)

(16)*最重要的是他们自己觉得对得起自己,对得起别人,对得起生命给他们的试验. (HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0)

From these erroneous examples it is apparent that learners have not yet accurately grasped the core semantic feature of “tiyan” — namely, that it requires firsthand, embodied experience and emphasizes process perception — and consequently they substitute “tiyan” for other lexical items.

3.3. Misuse of “tihui”

First, the specific error pattern in which “tiyan” is wrongly replaced by “tihui” is exemplified below:

(17)*我知道我所提倡的原则听起来是笑话,但是亲身体会了与自然界很接近的生活方式后,就不得不服气. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(18)*对我们没有亲身体会大战的人来说,战争对人身上的影响难以理解,但是大战使很多人得以(反战). (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(19)*其实我也很想体会那种一放学父亲就迎上来把我抱在怀里的感觉. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(20)*当考古学家给我机会旅游到很多地方,而旅游给我机会体会人生的苦难. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(21)*我认为当上导游应该可以看到各个国家的气候和风俗民情,可以到各国家去体会一下. (HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0)

(22)*在我的学习生涯里,就曾经亲身体会了一次面临重大挫折的经历. (HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus 3.0)

In (17)–(22) the learners place objects after “tìhui” that are all concrete, tangible life events or experiences — respectively: 生活方式 (a lifestyle), 大战 (a great war), 一种感觉 (a particular feeling), 人生的苦难 (the hardships of life), 气候和风俗民情 (climates and customs), 一次经历 (an experience). Semantically, these objects emphasize direct knowledge obtained through first-hand participation or contact; they therefore collocate better with the practice-oriented verb “tīyan” rather than with “tìhui,” which stresses inward understanding and cognitive or emotional internalization.

(23)*所以吃美国菜,庆贺美国佳节,听美国音乐,和去城市你可以体会美国的传统文化. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

Moreover, In (23), expressions of the form “体会传统文化” are relatively infrequent: the CCL corpus records only 19 instances, most of which are from web texts, suggesting low acceptability. By contrast, the collocations “感受传统文化” and “体验传统文化” are much more common in the CCL corpus (283 and 87 occurrences, respectively), and include examples from normative outlets such as People’s Daily.

Analysis of the above error patterns suggests that learners sometimes fail to grasp the experiential nuance of “tīyan” as opposed to the inner, reflective process implied by “tìhui.” For native English learners, negative transfer in vocabulary learning is likely an important source of these errors: since both Chinese terms can be glossed in English under the general label “experience,” learners who do not distinguish their core meanings are prone to confuse them, producing bidirectional misuse.

In addition to the misuses described above, English-speaking learners also produce other error types when attempting to use “tìhui,” for example substituting “tìhui” for “tìxiàn”(体现 tǐ xiàn, reflect) or for “jīhuì.”(机会 jī huì, chance) Representative cases include:

(24)*然而,美国也体会了中国特色. (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

(25)*请让我介绍我的家庭,我我的家庭有四个人,我的太太和我两个孩子,我的女儿是嗯嗯娇娇,儿子12岁,我们都是从澳大利亚来的,我们都喜欢聚在成都,如果我们有体会的话,我们想想要去一一男或者新疆旅行! (Global Chinese Interlanguage Corpus)

In conclusion, a corpus search keyed on “tīyan” and “tìhui” reveals that bidirectional confusion between the two terms is a typical error type. Learners’ conflation of these two items with other semantically similar or morphologically related words is also not uncommon, indicating a general lack of semantic distinctness in their interlanguage representations of the two items.

4. Analysis of causes of errors and pedagogical recommendations

A systematic investigation and analysis of the sources of learners’ errors is necessary if instructors are to identify the key difficulties when teaching easily confused words, and thereby help learners avoid such errors at the early stages of acquisition. The error patterns that English-native learners produce when using “tīyan” and “tìhui,” especially bidirectional confusions between the two items, are influenced by multiple factors.

4.1. Analysis of error causes

4.1.1. Dictionary definitions and negative transfer from the learner's first language

In the New Chinese–English Dictionary [7] (《新汉英大辞典》), “tiyan” is glossed as “learn through practice; learn through one’s personal experience; experience,” with the phrase example “体验生活” (“experience life”). “tahui” is glossed as “know from experience; learn from experience; realize; experience; understanding,” with examples such as “体会言外之意” (“Perceive the implied meaning”) and “你参加了这次科学讨论会,有什么体会?” (“You attended this scientific seminar—what are your takeaways?”) The dictionary’s entry for “tiyan” emphasizes its practical, hands-on character — for example, wording such as “practice” and “one’s personal.” The entry for “tahui,” by contrast, highlights processes of internalization and insight — for example, “know,” “realize,” and “understanding.” From the contrast between “learn through one’s personal experience” and “learn from experience,” learners can relatively clearly infer that events described by “tiyan” must be ones the speaker has personally carried out. Nevertheless, some ambiguous points also remain: both entries in English rely heavily on the label “experience.”

In The Commercial Press Learner's Dictionary of Chinese [8] (《商务馆学汉语词典》), “tiyan” is listed as a verb defined as “to undergo in person; to understand or know by personally experiencing.” examples include “体验山村贫苦的生活” (“experience the hardship of rural village life”), “为了写一部反映当代工人生活的小说,作家到工厂去体验生活” (“to write a novel reflecting contemporary workers’ lives, the writer went to factories to experience life”), and “她对农村的生活体验得很深刻” (“her experience of rural life is very profound”). For “tahui,” when treated as a verb the dictionary defines it as “to feel personally and to gain understanding or insight,” with example sentences such as “你体会不到我的感受” (“you cannot empathize with my feelings”), “好好体会一下,你就能从这件事中得到一些启发” (“reflect on it well and you will gain some insight from this matter”), and “不参加劳动就体会不到劳动的艰辛” (“without participating in labor one cannot appreciate the hardship of work”). When “tahui” is analyzed as a noun, it is defined as “the feeling or gains obtained after practice,” with examples such as “几点体会” (“a few points of takeaways”), “体会很多” (“gained a lot”), “交流一下参观的体会” (“exchange impressions of the visit”), and “畅谈实习后的体会” (“talk freely about the insights gained after the internship”). Compared with the New Chinese–English Dictionary, The Commercial Press Learner's Dictionary of Chinese more accurately abstracts the core semantics of the two items, offers greater differentiation in its glosses, and provides more prototypical collocations and example sentences that are frequent in conversational and communicative contexts.

In commonly used outward-facing dictionary applications for Chinese learners — for example, the JUZI Chinese —when looking up results for “tiyan” and “tahui,” “tiyan” as a verb is glossed as “to learn through one’s personal experience; to learn through practice,” and as a noun is glossed simply as “experience.” “tahui” as a verb is glossed as “to know (or learn) from experience; to realize,” and as a noun as “knowledge; understanding.” A search keyed to the English lemma “experience” returns 138 Chinese entries, including both “tiyan” and “tahui.”

The definitions of “tiyan” and “tahui” in JUZI Chinese are highly similar to those found in The New English-Chinese Dictionary, with their English explanations heavily relying on the term “experience.” As easily confused words, “tiyan” and “tahui” not only share the same morpheme structure, but also, as evidenced by dictionary entries, correspond to the same polysemous English term. This overlap often leads to negative transfer in the learning process, due to the conflation of meanings in their native language, learners may confuse the nuanced distinctions between these Chinese terms, thus resulting in bidirectional misuse of “tiyan” and “tahui.”

4.1.2. Definitions in common international Chinese textbooks

Taking the widely used HSK Standard Course as an example, “tiyan” first appears in HSK Standard Course 5B [9], Lesson 28, “最受欢迎的毕业生.” The textbook glosses it in English as “to feel and experience,” and lists its part of speech as a verb. Relevant sentences and phrases in the lesson include: “来到现场,他发现,果然有一家公司有适合他的职位—旅游体验师.” (“When he arrived on site, he discovered that, sure enough, one company had a position suitable for him—a tourism experience specialist.”), as well as collocations such as “体验生活” (experience life), “体验快乐” (experience happiness), and “体验新产品” (try/experience a new product).

“tahui” first appears in HSK Standard Course 5A [10], Lesson 17, “在最美好的时刻离开.” Its English glosses are given as “to learn from experience; to realize; feeling,” and it is treated as either a verb or a noun. Example sentences include: “虽然很多人并不了解‘峰终定律’,但是,他们能从经验中体会这种做法的重要性.” (“Although many people do not fully understand the ‘peak-end rule,’ they can, from experience, appreciate the importance of this practice.”) and “我刚开始学滑雪的时候,最大的体会就是要放松,越紧张越容易摔倒.” (“When I first started learning to ski, my principal insight was to relax: the more tense one is, the more easily one falls.”) Later, “tahui” recurs in HSK Standard Course 5 (lower volume), Lesson 30, “竞争让市场更高效,” where it is glossed as “feeling; understanding” and treated as a noun in contexts such as “看到这里,你有什么感想和体会呢?” (“Having read this far, what impressions and insights do you have?”), “让孩子体会到自己的意见,受到尊重这一点很重要.” (“It is important that children experience that their opinions are respected.”), and the collocation “体会深刻” (have a deep/profound appreciation).

Most of the textbook’s example sentences and collocations successfully foreground the core meanings of these lexical items in context. For instance, “旅游体验师”(“travel experience officer”) emphasizes first-hand travel in order to have an experience; “体验新产品”(“test a new product”) implies actual use of a new product; “从经验中体会这种做法的重要性”(“Understand the importance of this approach from experience”) indicates that “tahui” requires reflection on prior experience; and “体会深刻”(“have a deep understanding”) is a highly conventional expression. However, the English glosses provided are somewhat ambiguous. In particular, the gloss for “tiyan”—“to feel and experience”—fails to clearly signal the practice-oriented nature of “tiyan.” When “tahui” is introduced a second time, the textbook explicitly helps learners contrast “tahui” with “ganxiang”(感想 gǎn xiǎng, thoughts) and presents its nominal use, but it does not sufficiently help learners distinguish between “tiyan” and “tahui.” Since both items’ glosses employ the term “feeling,” learners may glean from glosses such as “learn,” “understanding,” and “realize” that “tahui” involves cognitive reflection and insight, but it is difficult for learners to perceive the practical, enactment-based aspect of “tiyan” from the gloss “to feel and experience.”

4.2. Pedagogical recommendations

4.2.1. Optimize dictionary and reference-book glosses to strengthen lexical distinctiveness

Dictionaries and reference books work as crucial resources for learners’ vocabulary acquisition, especially during autonomous study. They function not only as tools for looking up definitions but also as primary bases for semantic analysis and productive language use. If lexicographic resources improve and refine their treatment of easily confused items—enhancing the semantic distinctiveness between near-synonyms—then the likelihood of bidirectional misuse by learners will be substantially reduced.

When defining “tiyan” and “tahui,” dictionaries should minimize uncritical reliance on the single English gloss “experience” and instead foreground the characteristic features that differentiate the two terms. In presenting collocations and example sentences, resources should both summarize high-frequency combinations and prototypical contexts e.g., “体验生活,” (“experience life”) “心得体会” (“insights and reflection”) and supply vivid, authentic discourse contexts. In compiling entries, dictionary editors can draw systematically on attested usages by L1 Chinese speakers from corpora such as CCL and BCC, placing headwords in context so that learners can perceive subtle semantic contrasts in naturalistic settings. Furthermore, dictionaries might incorporate a dedicated “contrastive analysis” or “commonly confused” note within entries to alert learners to the distinctions between items like “tiyan” and “tahui.” Such explicit guidance would raise learners’ awareness during vocabulary study and help prevent negative transfer and error.

4.2.2. Anticipating errors and employing contrastive analysis to reduce L1 negative transfer

Reference works and textbooks cannot always anticipate every learner profile or exhaustively prevent all potential errors. In such cases, international Chinese teacher should exercise pedagogical agency in the classroom to enhance the quality and efficiency of lexical instruction. When teaching “tiyan” and “tahui,” teachers should judge—based on instructional goals and learners’ proficiency—whether a comparative analysis of the two items is warranted; when appropriate, they can also elicit from students whether they can already deploy the two items accurately before deciding to provide explicit instruction.

In classroom explanation, teachers should avoid collapsing both terms under the undifferentiated English gloss “experience.” Instead, they should explicate the distinction through contextualized examples. A useful pedagogical technique is contrastive substitution: present the same context with “tiyan” and “tahui” inserted separately so that learners observe the divergent pragmatic and semantic effects. For example (as above):

“从小成长于农村的方智远,更能体验/体会农民的辛劳,他深知‘人误田一时,田误人一年’的道理。” (“Having grown up in a rural area, Fang Zhiyuan is better able to ‘tiyan’ / ‘tahui’ farmers’ hardships; he fully understands the proverb ‘one season’s neglect of the field harms one for a year’.”)

By substituting each Chinese word in turn and discussing how the sentence’s focus and implicature shift, the teacher can make salient that one choice foregrounds enacted, first-hand participation while the other highlights cognitive reflection or empathic understanding.

If teachers provide this kind of immediate, contrastive clarification at the point of lexical introduction, they can reduce the incidence of errors at the source. Such instruction not only minimizes negative transfer but also substantially improves the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching and learners’ ability to use these lexical items accurately in productive language use.

5. Conclusion

In sum, this paper examined the use of the two Chinese lexical items “tiyan” and “tahui” by learners whose first language is English. Drawing on attested examples from the CCL corpus, it conducted a contrastive analysis of the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic similarities and differences between “tiyan” and “tahui.” The study also compiled and analyzed learners’ data from global interlanguage corpora and the HSK Dynamic Composition 3.0 corpus—documenting the errors produced by English L1 learners, particularly the bidirectional misuse of “tiyan” and “tahui”—and interpreted these errors with reference to concrete corpus evidence. Finally, through examination of dictionaries,

textbooks, and classroom teaching practices, the paper identified sources of these errors and proposed practicable pedagogical strategies and recommendations. The findings offer direct pedagogical implications for teaching this pair of easily confused words in international Chinese instruction and provide a useful model for the explanation and contrastive analysis of synonyms, near-synonyms, and other commonly confused lexical items for English-speaking learners.

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