

A Study on Avoidance Behaviors in Chinese-Portuguese Learners' Oral Production: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective

Li Li

*Department of Languages and Translation, Macao Polytechnic University, Macao, China
p2319489@mpu.edu.mo*

Abstract. This study focuses on the grammatical avoidance behaviors exhibited by Chinese learners in their oral production of Portuguese. While avoidance has long been a central topic in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), relatively little research has examined the phenomenon within the typologically distant pair of Chinese and Portuguese. Portuguese, with its complex verb inflection system, subjunctive mood, and embedded subordinate structures, poses particular challenges for Chinese learners whose native language is analytic in nature. The study recruited approximately thirty undergraduate students majoring in Chinese–Portuguese Translation at the Macau Polytechnic University, divided into a Macau group and a Mainland China group. The research originally intended to include five oral tasks targeting high-difficulty grammatical structures. However, due to limited research resources and practical constraints, only three tasks were ultimately implemented: subjunctive mood, passive voice, and subordinate/conditional clauses. Data were collected through audio-recorded oral tasks and language background questionnaires, then transcribed, coded, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. Findings reveal that Chinese learners of Portuguese exhibited significant avoidance of the targeted structures, particularly through simplification and substitution with less complex forms. Notably, differences were observed between the two groups: the Macau group displayed a greater tendency to attempt complex structures, albeit with a higher rate of errors, while the Mainland group exhibited a higher overall avoidance rate and adopted more conservative expression strategies. This study confirms the prevalence of grammatical avoidance among Portuguese L2 learners and highlights its pedagogical implications: teachers should increase exposure to complex structures, lower learners' affective barriers, and provide scaffolding to reduce avoidance. Crucially, instructors should also explicitly raise learners' awareness of avoidance behaviors, fostering metalinguistic awareness and self-monitoring. It should be noted, however, that the findings are context-specific to Macau and are not intended to be generalized universally.

Keywords: Avoidance Behaviors, Chinese Learners of Portuguese, Cross-Linguistic Influence, Subjunctive/Passive Voice/Subordinate Clauses, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

1. Introduction

With the growing economic, educational, and cultural exchanges between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, the demand for Portuguese language learning in China has increased substantially. Universities in both Mainland China and Macau have established Portuguese programs, attracting a steadily expanding pool of learners. Nevertheless, empirical SLA research on Chinese native speakers learning Portuguese remains limited.

Portuguese poses unique challenges for Chinese learners. As an isolating language, Chinese lacks morphological inflection, whereas Portuguese is a highly inflectional language, characterized by intricate verb conjugations, mood distinctions, and frequent use of embedded subordinate clauses. To cope with such difficulties, learners often resort to avoidance strategies—deliberately omitting, substituting, or simplifying target grammatical structures to reduce risk in production.

Research on avoidance can be traced back to Schachter [1] and Tarone [2], who showed that learners tend to avoid structures absent from their L1 to mitigate cognitive load and communicative risk. Later studies further examined avoidance as part of broader compensatory strategies in SLA [3]. While avoidance has been extensively studied in the contexts of English and Spanish, studies focusing on Portuguese, particularly among Chinese learners, remain scarce. This gap underscores the significance of the present research, which also aligns with broader perspectives in SLA on the role of avoidance and interlanguage development [4].

Furthermore, the importance of examining Chinese learners' avoidance of Portuguese structures also stems from the unique sociolinguistic context. With the growing role of Macau as a bridge between China and Lusophone countries, the number of students learning Portuguese in both regions has steadily increased. However, Portuguese remains a relatively “low-frequency” foreign language in China compared to English, meaning that learners typically encounter fewer opportunities for authentic communicative use. This imbalance highlights the urgency of studying how learners manage linguistic difficulty when faced with limited exposure. Moreover, the sharp typological distance between Chinese and Portuguese—involving inflectional morphology, mood systems, and syntactic embedding—makes avoidance not only a performance strategy but also a window into deeper cross-linguistic influence.

1.1. Research objectives and questions

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- (1) To identify and classify the types of grammatical avoidance behaviors employed by Chinese learners of Portuguese in oral production.
- (2) To examine whether learners from Macau and Mainland China differ significantly in the frequency or patterns of avoidance.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the most common types of avoidance behaviors among Chinese learners of Portuguese?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in the frequency or types of avoidance strategies between Macau and Mainland learners?

1.2. Hypotheses

H1: Chinese learners of Portuguese will frequently exhibit grammatical avoidance, particularly through substitution and simplification of complex structures.

H2: Learners from Macau, due to their multilingual environment, will display different avoidance patterns and frequencies compared to their Mainland peers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Approximately thirty undergraduate students from the Chinese–Portuguese Translation program at Macau Polytechnic University participated in the study. Participants were aged 19–22 and had an estimated CEFR proficiency level of B1–B2. The grammatical structures targeted in the study are core content explicitly covered in the curriculum. The participants have encountered these structures multiple times in class, exams, and oral practice. Therefore, if they fail to use these structures during the tasks, it is more likely due to intentional avoidance, rather than a lack of knowledge or incomplete learning.

2.2. Grouping

- Macau learners: Cantonese as their first language, Mandarin and English acquired early in schooling, and Portuguese usually as a third or fourth language.
- Mainland learners: Mandarin as L1, English as L2 (introduced from primary school), and Portuguese as a newly acquired third language in university.

2.3. Instruments

(1) Oral Tasks

Originally, five oral tasks were designed (subjunctive mood, passive voice, subordinate/conditional clauses, compound tenses, clitic pronouns). Due to practical constraints, only three were implemented: subjunctive mood, passive voice, and subordinate/conditional clauses.

(2) Background Questionnaire

The questionnaire collected participants' language learning background, acquisition order, frequency of use, and exposure to Portuguese-speaking environments.

2.4. Procedure

(1) Recruit participants and divide them into Macau and Mainland groups.

(2) Administer background questionnaires.

(3) Conduct three oral tasks with audio recording.

(4) Transcribe the recordings and code avoidance behaviors.

(5) Use descriptive statistics to summarize avoidance types and frequencies, and use chi-square tests to compare group differences.

The coding of avoidance behaviors was conducted by the researcher following explicit operational definitions. An instance was classified as avoidance when learners either omitted the target structure, substituted it with a simpler construction, or reduced its morphological or syntactic complexity. To reduce subjectivity, all transcripts were reviewed twice at different time intervals, and the coding decisions were cross-checked against the predefined criteria. While the absence of multiple independent coders is acknowledged as a limitation, the systematic application of coding rules ensures that the analysis retains internal consistency and provides a reliable account of the observed learner behaviors.

2.5. Ethics

All participants signed informed consent forms, and their data were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. The study received approval from the university's ethics committee.

3. Results and analysis

To examine learners' avoidance behaviors, all oral task data were transcribed and coded. Each instance where a target grammatical structure was expected was treated as an opportunity, and avoidance was recorded when learners either omitted the structure, substituted it with a simpler form, or reduced its morphological or syntactic complexity. Percentages were then calculated as the number of avoided instances divided by the total opportunities.

Overall results showed that avoidance was widespread but varied across structures. The subjunctive mood exhibited the highest rate of avoidance, with approximately 22/30 (73%) of learners refraining from using the structure when appropriate. Avoidance of the passive voice occurred in about 18/30 (60%) of cases, while subordinate or conditional clauses were avoided in 17/30 (57%) of cases. These findings suggest that learners found the subjunctive particularly challenging, followed by the passive voice, with subordinate clauses being somewhat less difficult yet still avoided by more than half of the participants.

When the two groups were compared, clear differences emerged. Among Macau learners ($n=16$), avoidance was consistently lower: 11/16 (68%) avoided the subjunctive, 9/16 (55%) avoided the passive voice, and 8/16 (50%) avoided subordinate clauses. By contrast, Mainland learners ($n=14$) showed higher avoidance across all structures: 11/14 (79%) for the subjunctive, 9/14 (64%) for the passive voice, and 9/14 (64%) for subordinate clauses. These results indicate that while both groups experienced difficulties, the Mainland group tended to adopt a more conservative communicative strategy, relying heavily on omission and substitution, whereas the Macau group attempted complex structures more frequently but produced a higher number of grammatical and morphological errors.

To assess whether these group differences were statistically meaningful, chi-square tests (χ^2) were conducted on the distribution of avoidance versus attempted use. For the subjunctive mood task, 11/16 Macau learners avoided the structure compared to 11/14 Mainland learners. Expected frequencies under the null hypothesis of no group difference were 11.73 and 10.27 for avoidance in each group, respectively. The resulting χ^2 value was 0.27 ($df=1$, $p\approx.60$), suggesting a trend toward greater avoidance among Mainland learners, though statistical significance was not reached due to small sample size.

A similar analysis was carried out for the passive voice task (Macau: 9/16 avoided vs. 7/16 attempted; Mainland: 9/14 avoided vs. 5/14 attempted). The chi-square result was $\chi^2=0.17$ ($df=1$, $p\approx.68$), again indicating a trend toward higher avoidance in Mainland learners, rather than a definitive difference.

For subordinate/conditional clauses, Macau learners showed a lower avoidance rate (8/16) compared to Mainland learners (9/14). The chi-square test yielded $\chi^2=0.55$ ($df=1$, $p\approx.46$), suggesting that although the trend favored greater avoidance among Mainland learners, statistical significance was limited due to sample size.

Taken together, these tests indicate that while the numerical trends consistently point to higher avoidance among Mainland learners, the relatively small sample size limited the statistical power to confirm significance. The results therefore need to be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive.

In summary, the results portray two contrasting learner profiles: Macau learners as “risk-takers,” willing to attempt complex forms despite inaccuracies, and Mainland learners as “accuracy-oriented,” minimizing errors by avoiding complex structures. This divergence may partly be explained by differences in linguistic environment. Macau learners, who are typically exposed to English at an earlier age due to the city’s multilingual context, are accustomed to navigating multiple languages. This experience may lower their affective barriers and foster a greater willingness to experiment with complex structures in Portuguese. In contrast, Mainland learners—who often encounter Portuguese as their first significant foreign language outside of English—tend to prioritize accuracy, leading to more conservative production strategies.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm H1: Chinese learners frequently avoid complex structures. H2 was partially supported, as distinct patterns emerged between Macau and Mainland learners.

These results align with earlier research on avoidance strategies [1,2], reinforcing the view that avoidance arises when learners face structures absent in their L1. Similar findings were reported by Laufer and Eliasson [5], who emphasized the combined effects of L1–L2 distance, similarity, and complexity on avoidance behaviors. Compared with studies on English and Spanish, this study highlights the unique challenges faced by Chinese learners of Portuguese, particularly with verb morphology and mood distinctions.

4.1. Pedagogical implications

1. Provide intensified input and modeling of subjunctive, passive voice, and complex subordination;
2. Reduce learner anxiety through low-stakes, error-tolerant tasks;
3. Incorporate cross-linguistic comparisons to heighten grammatical awareness;
4. Explicitly raise learners’ awareness of avoidance behaviors, enabling them to self-monitor and adjust tendencies, forming a mental “alertness” against avoidance.
5. In addition, task-based learning and role-play activities could be integrated into classroom practice. These communicative tasks place learners in situations where the use of complex grammatical structures is necessary to complete the interaction, thereby reducing the tendency to avoid such forms. By providing meaningful, context-driven opportunities to practice, teachers can gradually encourage learners to attempt more advanced constructions and reduce overreliance on simplification strategies.

4.2. Limitations

A key limitation of the present study lies in the relatively small sample size (16 Macau learners and 14 Mainland learners). Although numerical trends consistently pointed to higher avoidance rates among Mainland learners, the chi-square analyses did not reach statistical significance. This outcome is most likely attributable to the limited statistical power of a small dataset rather than the absence of genuine group differences. Consequently, the observed results should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. In particular, the contrasts between Macau learners—who attempted complex forms more often despite errors—and Mainland learners—who adopted more conservative strategies—should be regarded as guiding tendencies. Future research with larger and more diverse cohorts will be necessary to verify whether these patterns hold consistently across broader populations.

Another limitation concerns the data coding process, which was conducted by a single researcher. Although explicit criteria were applied to reduce subjectivity, the absence of multiple coders means that the possibility of individual bias cannot be fully excluded.

5. Conclusion

This study examined avoidance behaviors in the oral production of Chinese learners of Portuguese. Findings showed that subjunctive mood, passive voice, and subordinate/conditional clauses were the most frequently avoided structures. Group differences indicated that Macau learners were more likely to attempt complex structures but with frequent errors, whereas Mainland learners displayed higher avoidance and greater conservatism in expression.

The study contributes to the SLA literature by confirming the prevalence of grammatical avoidance in Portuguese L2 learning, revealing the role of linguistic background in shaping avoidance patterns, and offering pedagogical insights to mitigate avoidance in instruction. However, given its contextual and methodological limitations, further research with larger samples and broader linguistic scope is warranted.

References

- [1] Schachter, J. (1974). An error in error analysis. *Language Learning*, 24(2), 205–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1974.tb00502.x>
- [2] Tarone, E. (1983). Some thoughts on the notion of communication strategy. In C. Færch & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication* (pp. 61–74). London, England: Longman.
- [3] Kellerman, E. (1991). Compensatory strategies in second language research: A critique, a revision, and some (non-) implications for the classroom. In R. Phillipson, E. Kellerman, L. Selinker, M. Sharwood Smith, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Foreign/second language pedagogy research* (pp. 142–161). *Multilingual Matters*.
- [4] Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Laufer, B., & Eliasson, S. (1993). What causes avoidance in L2 learning? L1–L2 difference, L1–L2 similarity, or L2 complexity? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100011657>