International Journal of Language and Linguistics
2026, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 109–118
https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20261403.13

SciencePG
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Review Article

Advances and Gaps in Chinese Chunk Research: A Comprehensive Critical Synthesis (2001–2025)

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Chinese chunk research has evolved from a theory into a specialized discipline within the field of teaching Chinese as a second language. This paper systematically outlines the development of research on Chinese chunks from 2001 to 2025, objectively evaluates existing advances, and identifies critical research gaps that hinder further disciplinary advancement. Adopting a thematic analysis approach, this study provides an in-depth review of 78 publications, covering two primary themes: theoretical and empirical research of Chinese chunks and Chinese chunk-based instruction. The results indicate that the academic community has successfully established a localized "construction-chunk" analytical framework; meanwhile, psycholinguistic empirical studies have confirmed the processing advantage of chunks while revealing a persistent recognition-production gap among second language learners. Regarding instructional implementation, the chunk-based instruction has demonstrated significant efficacy in enhancing learners' oral fluency, writing accuracy, and grammatical mastery. However, empirical research in listening and reading remains scarce, and current textbooks exhibit systemic deficiencies in chunk sequencing and recycling mechanisms. Structural issues persist in the field, including the fragmentation of classification systems, the homogeneity of participant samples, and uneven development across subfields. The proposed future directions, such as developing multidimensional classification standards and expanding international participant coverage, offer significant guidance for optimizing curriculum systems, textbook compilation, and classroom instructional practices in International Chinese Language Education.

Keywords

Chinese Chunks, Second Language Acquisition, Chunk-based Instruction, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

1. Introduction

Chunks, also called formulaic sequences, are recurring multi-word units that are stored, processed, and retrieved as wholes in language use. Based on the psychological idea of “chunking” [1], the concept was later integrated into linguistic research. Nattinger and DeCarrico [2] organized chunk theory in English language teaching, bringing it to the forefront of applied linguistics. Building on this research, Lewis [3] promoted the Lexical Approach, suggesting that language is composed mainly of prefabricated chunks rather than of separate grammatical rules, thereby redefining the relationship between lexis and grammar and influencing subsequent research.

However, the relevance of these findings to Chinese as a

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Received: 27 March 2026; **Accepted:** 2 May 2026; **Published:** 18 May 2026

second language (CSL) remains insufficiently explored. Chinese has typological features such as character-based writing, topic prominence, and paratactic syntax, which complicate the direct application of frameworks created for Indo-European languages. Whether chunk-based theories and teaching methods are suitable for CSL contexts and how they might be applied remain open questions. As international Chinese language education continues to grow worldwide, the need to develop effective, evidence-based teaching strategies has become increasingly urgent.

Over the past two decades, research on Chinese chunks has grown to address this gap, covering theoretical classification, acquisition research, and classroom teaching. However, the field still lacks cohesion. Existing reviews are either time-limited [4] or narrowly focused on a single subfield [5], leaving no complete picture of how the field has developed overall, where its empirical strengths lie, and what critical gaps remain. Without this overview, researchers might duplicate efforts, and practitioners lack a unified evidence base to guide instruction.

This paper addresses that gap by systematically reviewing 78 studies published between 2001 and 2025, organized around two core themes: theoretical and empirical research of Chinese chunks, and Chinese chunks-based instruction. Instead of merely cataloging findings, this review explores three analytical questions:

(1) What theoretical and empirical advances have been made in understanding Chinese chunks, including their theoretical foundation, classification frameworks, and research on acquisition?

(2) How has chunk-based instruction been implemented across different skill areas in CSL?

(3) What are the gaps in current research and future perspectives?

2. Methodology

2.1. Search Strategy and Corpus Construction

This review analyses publications from 2001 to 2025. The search was conducted in the CNKI database, which indexes key Chinese-language journals in linguistics and language education, using three search terms: “汉语语块” (Chinese chunks), “词块” (lexical chunks), and “语块” (language chunks).

Retrieved records were screened in two stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to exclude studies where chunks appeared only peripherally. In the second stage, full texts were evaluated based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) the study addresses the theoretical foundation, acquisition, or teaching Chinese as a second language; (2) theoretical studies present a clearly defined analytical framework; (3) empirical studies report identifiable data sources, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures; (4) review studies use systematic retrieval methods and explicit classification criteria. Studies that focused solely on first-language development were excluded. A total of 78 papers met all inclusion criteria and made up the analytical corpus.

2.2. Classification and Analytical Framework

The 78 papers were divided into three primary thematic groups: Theoretical and Empirical Research of Chinese Chunks (n = 28); Chinese Chunk-based Instruction (n = 44); and an additional set of field-level review studies (n = 6), which is referenced throughout the article rather than being presented as a separate analytical section [4, 6-10]. Table 1 shows the full distribution of literature by research type and theme.

Table 1. *Distribution of Literature by Research Type and Theme (2001–2025).*

Theme	Theoretical	Empirical	Review	Total
A. Theoretical and Empirical Research of Chinese Chunks	20	8	0	28
B. Chinese Chunk-based Instruction	32	11	1	44
C. Field-level Reviews	0	1	5	6
Total	52	20	6	78

Regarding the distribution of research themes, the sample shows a strong thematic concentration. Chinese Chunk-based Instruction (Theme B) accounts for the largest share of the corpus, with 44 publications (56%). This dominance indicates a consistent focus within the field. In contrast, Theoretical and Empirical Research of Chinese Chunks (Theme A) accounts for 36% of the literature, while studies on Field-level Reviews (Theme C) are comparatively few.

3. Theoretical and Empirical Research of Chinese Chunks

This section reviews twenty-eight studies across three interrelated domains, addressing the theoretical foundation of Chinese chunks, the classification framework, and acquisition research. These studies not only establish a foundational understanding of Chinese chunks but also extend the discussion into the cognitive domain.

3.1. Theoretical Foundation

Theoretical foundation on Chinese chunks can be broadly divided into two main strands: (1) studies that establish the linguistic nature of Chinese chunks and argue for their localization through cross-linguistic comparison, and (2) studies that develop theoretical frameworks and extend them into practice.

The first strand focuses on Chinese chunks and justifying localized research. Based on Western theories of formulaic language, some scholars propose that a large number of "semi-fixed" linguistic units (chunks) in Chinese, between free combinations and fixed phrases [11], are consistent with relevant hypotheses in contemporary cognitive psychology and linguistics. Yang [12] further points out that chunks are not static linguistic units but dynamic units of speech formed by the frequent co-occurrence of multiple words, with tendencies toward formatting and idiomaticity, and belong to the dynamic dimension of language use. Chen [13] argues that chunks embody the formulaic nature of language and are of great value for first- and second-language acquisition, linguistic structure analysis, and information processing. Starting with chunk structure, Gan and Xie [14] argue that Chinese chunk structures can be regarded as natural extensions of character groups, and that centripetal and centrifugal structures are two fundamental ways of constructing chunks, reflecting the unique characteristics of the Chinese language. Cross-linguistic comparative studies provide further support for the above views. Contrastive studies between Chinese and English show systematic differences in chunk distribution and structure: English, as a hypotactic language, relies more heavily on prepositional and nominal chunks, whereas Chinese, characterized by parataxis, organizes chunks mainly around verbal structures [15-17]. These findings not only provide evidence for the distinctiveness of Chinese chunks but also indicate that teaching models derived from English cannot be applied directly to Chinese language teaching [12].

The second strand focuses on the construction of the theoretical framework of localization, most notably the "construction–chunk" theory. Lu [18] broke through the limits of Indo-European research and proposed the construction-chunk analysis method, providing a systematic explanation. This development is regarded as a significant enhancement to traditional syntactic analysis. Su [19] further reinforced the theoretical framework by developing a three-layer intermediary model of "construction-chunk-lexical item." They introduced three key perspectives: a construction-center theory, the idea that chunks share semantics, and the idea that chunks influence lexical item selection. Sun [20] focused on the core theory in detail, using the multiplicity of semantic relations as the basis, and explained the importance, practical application scenarios, cognitive commonalities, and individual traits of integrated research on constructions and chunks. Meanwhile, this theory has gradually expanded into the field of CSL. Li and Chen [21] designed teaching plans for associative structure chunks; Xie [22] created a specialized teaching plan for the word order of multiple attributives using the three-plane theory; Xie [23] systematically organized the core principles and teaching strategies of this analysis method, demonstrating its feasibility, practicality, and effectiveness.

3.2. Classification Framework

Systematically classifying Chinese chunks is the main focus in this field. Existing studies have proposed unique classification schemes from various perspectives. The classification scheme based on grammatical functions [24, 25] categorizes Chinese chunks into word-level units, phrasal frame chunks, and sentence-level units, with frame chunks receiving special emphasis due to their high productivity and flexibility. The corpus-based classification scheme [26] begins with the probabilistic characteristics of language use, uses frequency and mutual information as criteria for judgment, and categorizes chunks into idiomatic, collocational, and frame-structured chunks. It emphasizes the overall extractability of collocation chunks with high frequency and high mutual information values. Xue and Shi [27] systematically analyzed the fundamental properties of chunks. They outlined the hierarchical relationship within the Chinese chunk system, highlighting the integrative, pre-made, and holistic storage features of chunks. The classification scheme based on association types [28] divides Chinese chunks into three main categories (phrases, fixed sentences, and frames) and eleven subcategories, based on the modes of association between components, including holistic meaning association, pragmatic association, collocation association, and frequency association.

An emerging extension of classification research can be observed in Chinese for Specific Purposes (CSP) contexts, where chunk classification is adapted to domain-specific language needs. The most systematic work in this area is represented by Dai's studies on scientific Chinese [29-31]. Dai [30] constructed a corpus of Chinese scientific papers and used AntConc to extract 2–6-word chunks, analyzing their internal structures and functional patterns. The study distinguished between terminological and non-terminological chunks, identified seven structural and two functional categories, and proposed a chunk-focused instructional method specifically designed for scientific Chinese. Dai [31] further developed four teaching strategies based on this classification to help learners identify, remember, and use scientific chunks with proper register and accuracy.

In addition, research on Business Chinese chunks [32, 33] is less systematic and primarily focuses on reducing cognitive load in business correspondence writing through chunk-based instruction. Both studies are theoretical, relying on cognitive-linguistic arguments for the processing benefits of prefabricated units, without empirically testing these claims in CSP learner populations.

3.3. Acquisition Research

Empirical studies on chunk acquisition are the most methodologically rigorous within the corpus. Using techniques such as eye-tracking, online grammaticality judgment tasks, chunk decision tasks, and think-aloud protocols, these studies agree on a key finding: both native speakers and CSL learners consistently show an advantage in processing chunks, handling formulaic sequences faster and with fewer fixations than matched non-formulaic strings [34, 35]. This advantage holds for learners of all proficiency levels; Gao et al. [35] extended the research paradigm to Tibetan learners of Chinese as a second language and further confirmed that this conclusion also applies to learner groups beyond the predominantly Korean, Japanese, and European backgrounds represented in the literature. Two important moderating variables have also been identified: frequency and context. Frequency effects are more significant for second-language learners than for native speakers, and more prominent for intermediate learners than for advanced learners, indicating that individuals' sensitivity to frequency gradually decreases as chunk representations become increasingly automated [36]. Rich contexts can accelerate the processing of both chunks and non-chunks. The most important factor affecting the chunk-processing speed of L2 learners is the frequency of chunks in learners' own writing corpus. [37]. In contrast, semantic transparency has no significant effect on chunk processing for either native speakers or second-language learners. This result challenges the widespread assumption that formally and semantically transparent chunks are easier to acquire. However, these processing findings cover only one aspect of chunk acquisition. Zheng, Zhang, and Bowles [38] identify another gap: using a think-aloud design with two chunk decision tasks, they found that advanced L2 learners' understanding of idiomatic chunks lagged behind their ability to recognize them. Native speakers did not show this gap. This finding shifts the focus of chunk instruction: Teaching learners to notice or identify chunks isn't sufficient; instruction must also promote a deep, practical understanding.

In addition, three corpus-based studies examine how learners actually use chunks in production, thereby establishing a baseline for assessing the impact of instructional interventions. Jiang and Li [39] analyzed written compositions from intermediate and advanced learners with Thai, English, and Korean L1 backgrounds. Advanced learners used more chunks and a greater variety of chunk types than intermediate learners. Among L1 groups, Korean L1 learners produced the most chunks but had the lowest diversity of types, while Thai L1 learners showed the lowest quantity and accuracy. These patterns based on L1 indicate that chunk instruction needs to be adapted to learners' language backgrounds, which has important implications for curriculum development in multilingual teaching settings. Li, Zheng, and Chen [40] examined "V+X" chunk errors in an interlanguage corpus, finding that about 40% of target chunks appeared in learner output and that high-frequency items dominated usage. Yang and Zhu [41], studying Japanese elementary-level learners, found that fixed and frame chunks appeared more often in production than collocational chunks. That correct production was linked to formal simplicity and phonological or visual similarity to L1 items. Errors arose from chunk complexity, negative transfer from L1, knowledge transfer from L2, and inappropriate communication strategies.

Research on Chinese chunks has progressed from building localized theories to creating multidimensional classification systems. Evidence shows that acquiring chunks involves a recognition-production gap. L2 learners struggle with idiomatic expressions and are influenced by L1 interference and frequency effects during production.

4. Chinese Chunk-based Instruction

As the field has developed, the instruction of Chinese chunks has transitioned from a peripheral concept to a core instructional strategy. This shift is characterized by a move away from purely theoretical discussions toward evidence-based practices aimed at enhancing learners' communicative competence. The following subsections provide a comprehensive synthesis of how chunk-based approaches have been implemented across language skills and other Instruction-related research from 2001 to 2025.

4.1. Language Skills

In the field of listening instruction, Chinese chunks are regarded as central to improving the efficiency of speech stream segmentation. Fu [42] noted that although Chinese chunks enhance comprehension by reducing cognitive load during listening recognition, the volume of research in this area remains far smaller than that on productive skills, and there is a notable lack of systematic empirical evidence. Kong [4] also cautioned that how to guide learners toward automatic chunk recognition in listening teaching remains a blind spot in current research, reflecting a structural bias in pedagogical studies that favors output over input.

In terms of reading instruction, research focus has shifted toward exploring the mechanisms of chunk awareness and text processing. Wang [43] proposed a tiered model for teaching reading based on Chinese chunks, aiming to accelerate information decoding by increasing the recurrence rate of such sequences. A recent empirical study by Song and He [44] showed that textual enhancement techniques (e.g., visual salience) significantly facilitate beginner-to-intermediate learners'

formal recognition of verb-noun Chinese chunks, while audiovisual multimodal input demonstrates a clear advantage in deepening reading comprehension. These findings provide empirical support for the development of multimodal digital teaching materials.

Regarding writing instruction, the use of Chinese chunks has primarily focused on the normative use of written genres. Wu [45], using experimental methods, demonstrated that introducing classical poetic chunks, combined with simultaneous reading and writing training, significantly alleviated the monotony of sentence construction in international students' compositions. Jiang and Li [39], based in the field of oral proficiency instruction, have focused on addressing learners' problems of "flat expression" and "pragmatic failure." Zhu [46] and Jin [47] advocated for using frame-based Chinese chunks as instructional units in the speaking classroom to enhance communicative precision. Ding [48] specifically emphasized the role of oral idiomatic chunks in overcoming negative transfer from the native language. On the empirical front, Fang [49] confirmed that instruction in formulaic sequence awareness significantly improves fluency. However, Kong and Shi [50], using constrained tasks, found that even advanced learners' automaticity in chunk retrieval still lagged significantly behind that of native speakers. Wang [51] further revealed that high-proficiency learners exhibit egocentric tendencies and a lack of variety in their use of interactive chunks.

In a large-scale corpus analysis of written essays, researchers found that learners from different native language backgrounds exhibit significant differences in chunk usage, for instance, Thai-background learners show lower accuracy, while Korean-background learners show limited variety. This finding calls for a shift from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to a "targeted" model of writing instruction, in which pedagogical strategies are used to learners' nationality-specific linguistic backgrounds.

4.2. Other Instruction-related Research

The application of "construction-chunk" theory to grammatical instruction and textbook development has significantly enriched the pedagogical support system. In the realm of grammatical intervention, Su [52] demonstrated, through experiments, the superiority of the construction-chunk approach in teaching complex sentence patterns, such as pivotal sentences. Cao [53], Xie [22], and Li with Chen [40] proposed chunk-based instructional designs for the "被" construction, multiple attributives, and correlative structures, respectively. Ma [54], Wu [55], and Xu [56] each validated the effectiveness of the chunking approach in teaching prepositions, connectives, and parenthetical expressions. Xie [57] argued that the "construction-chunk" analytical method serves as a powerful supplement to traditional grammar instruction, offering strong practical value.

In terms of instruction resource development, textbook researchers have pointed to a gap between ideal theory and teaching realities. Sun [57], Li [58], and Wang [59] consistently found that existing textbooks exhibit notable shortcomings in criteria for formulaic sequence inclusion, sequencing, and mechanisms of repetition. Song [60] suggested that improving the current situation could begin with chunk-based glossing of new vocabulary items. In addition, Cai [61] revealed the central role of chunk-based collocation in the acquisition of two-place nouns, while Liu [62] validated the instructional efficacy of four-character chunks in cultural transmission. Overall, research on the instruction of Chinese chunks is shifting from a singular advocacy of approaches toward a multidimensional research model grounded in corpus evidence and cognitive mechanisms.

It is worth briefly noting the 12 general instruction discussion studies (C4) [63-74] that were not examined in detail. Published mainly between 2007 and 2020, these papers share a common characteristic: they argue for chunk-based instruction in CSL contexts primarily through theoretical reasoning rather than primary data. Their main claim that chunk instruction promotes fluency, reduces pragmatic errors, and supports vocabulary acquisition largely repeats points made in earlier foundational research. This is valuable because such studies played a key role in the field's early spread, helping more language teachers understand chunk theory and its potential applications.

In summary, studies from 2001 to 2025 have fully confirmed the positive role of formulaic sequence instruction across the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as in grammatical instruction and textbook construction. Nevertheless, overall progress remains uneven. Empirical research on classroom-based chunk instruction is still in its early stages, and there is a lack of systematic course outline differentiated by chunk type [75-79]. These difference suggest that future instruction research should delve deeper in directions that offer greater practical guidance for instruction.

5. Gaps and Future Perspectives of Chinese Chunks Research

These findings demonstrate significant progress in Chinese chunk research; they also highlight three fundamental gaps that influence the future perspectives of the field. Addressing these challenges is essential for the continued development of the discipline.

The first issue is the fragmentation of classification systems. As discussed in Section three, numerous frameworks are in place. However, they differ widely in their criteria, terminology, and scope, making cross-study comparisons difficult and hindering the development of a shared descriptive basis. Future research should therefore work towards establishing a consensual, multi-dimensional taxonomy through systematic

cross-framework comparison, explicitly mapping where existing schemes converge and diverge. The second research finding is that participants tend to be quite similar. Most empirical studies rely on convenience samples from Chinese universities, which don't reflect the full diversity of CSL learners worldwide. Future efforts should include more diverse international learners and treat L1 background and learning environment as key variables. The third issue lies in uneven empirical progress across subfields. Psycholinguistic investigations into chunk processing have advanced notably and aligned with international frontiers, whereas empirical research on chunk acquisition and classroom-based teaching remains slow and underdeveloped. Most acquisition and instructional studies are still in an initial phase, with limited cumulative findings that are insufficient to address key challenges in real-world acquisition and teaching practice. Future empirical work should explore the effective learning mechanisms underlying different chunk types and develop more practicable, chunk-centered course outline. Leveraging diverse research methods and cutting-edge techniques will enable Chinese chunk research to achieve more substantial and impactful progress.

Addressing these three limitations will unify Chinese chunk research into a more rigorous, cohesive field. Developing a consistent classification system, broadening participant diversity, and balancing progress across strands can yield more reliable and practical evidence. These advances will help create a more effective curriculum, develop high-quality textbooks, and enrich instruction in international Chinese-language education.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review of 78 representative studies from 2001 to 2025 demonstrates that Chinese chunk research has evolved from early foundational theory to a specialized field with distinct theoretical frameworks. By synthesizing two decades of scholarship, this paper clarifies the shift from introducing Western models to establishing localized, evidence-based practices that account for the unique typological features of the Chinese language.

Regarding the theoretical and empirical advances, the field has successfully established a localized "construction-chunk" framework. The classification systems remain diverse, and empirical research on acquisition has confirmed a universal processing advantage for chunks. However, a persistent "recognition-production gap" characterizes L2 acquisition, where learners' ability to utilize chunks is heavily moderated by frequency, L1 background, and structural complexity.

In response to the instruction, chunk-based instruction has proven effective in enhancing oral fluency, writing accuracy, and grammatical mastery. Interventions such as visual input enhancement and register-specific training significantly bolster learner performance. Nevertheless, the impact of these methods on promoting spontaneous linguistic complexity remains limited. Furthermore, current CSL textbooks exhibit systemic deficiencies in chunk sequencing and recycling, hindering the translation of theoretical advances into practice.

Finally, research remains constrained by fragmented categories, participant samples, and uneven empirical progress across subfields. Future research should prioritize developing a unified, multidimensional classification standard and expand the scope of empirical studies to include more diverse international learner groups. Moving forward, balancing progress across Chinese chunk instruction will be essential for creating a cohesive and effective chunk-centered curriculum.

Abbreviations

SLA	Second Language Acquisition
CSL	Chinese as a Second Language

Author Contributions

Yujie Wang: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Yachong Cui: Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

Funding

This study was funded by the "Double First-Class" Construction Funding Cultivation Project at the School of Chinese Studies and Cultural Exchange, Renmin University of China (Project: Collocational Awareness of Academic Lexical Chunks among CSL Learners).

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work have been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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