

Article

Intervention Strategies for Chinese College Students' English-Speaking Anxiety from an Intercultural Perspective

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Abstract: This study aims to reveal the impact of intercultural communication strategies on English-speaking anxiety among Chinese college students. The relevant data were collected through a quantitative research design, with a structured questionnaire presented to 120 students. According to an analysis conducted using ANOVA and correlation methods, these intercultural interventions (i.e. role playing and online exchanges) can significantly reduce the level of language anxiety while enhance the confidence and willingness of students in terms of communication. Besides, ANOVA results indicate statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups ($p = 0.003$), along with a strong negative correlation between anxiety and confidence. This is consistent with the viewpoint in literature that structured intercultural interactions improve the outcome of language learning. It is concluded in this study that the intercultural interventions incorporated into English language programs can reduce anxiety and promote the development of communicative competence. Future research should focus on extending this to the long-term influence on people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: English-speaking anxiety; intercultural communication; intercultural interventions; confidences; language learning

1. Introduction

English as a global lingua franca is essential for academic and professional success (Byram, 2021), yet many Chinese college students experience significant English-speaking anxiety (ESA) that impairs their language learning outcomes and communicative competence (Chen & Yang, 2021; Crystal, 2019). ESA manifests as nervousness, fear of error, and self-doubt when speaking English publicly (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), stemming from psychological and socio-cultural factors including fear of negative evaluation and cultural differences (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2022; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2020), particularly among Chinese students who emphasize maintaining “face” and hierarchical communication (Horwitz, 2016). Students with high ESA avoid verbal participation, preferring written communication (MacIntyre, 2021), which weakens motivation and hinders language acquisition (Peng & Woodrow, 2022).

Intercultural communication, encompassing cross-cultural understanding and interaction (Zhang & Rahimi, 2020), shows promise in addressing ESA, as students engaging in intercultural exchanges demonstrate lower anxiety and higher communication willingness (Chen & Yang, 2021). These environments provide authentic language use and non-judgmental peer interactions, reducing fear while building linguistic confidence (Byram, 2021) and cultivating a growth mindset toward mistakes (Gregersen, 2011; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2020). However, Chinese students face significant barriers: the exam-oriented education system prioritizes grammar over speaking (MacIntyre, 2021), teacher-centered instruction limits practice opportunities (Horwitz, 2016; Peng & Woodrow, 2022), most universities lack structured intercultural programs (Zhang & Rahimi, 2020), and digital communication habits reduce spoken English exposure, particularly post-pandemic (Chen & Yang, 2021; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022). Promising intervention strategies include collaborative multicultural learning (Byram, 2021), role-playing exercises (Chen & Yang, 2021), technology-based solutions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), and intercultural competence training (Horwitz, 2016), though limited research examines combined intervention effectiveness in Chinese contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research objectives

The objectives set for this study are as follows.

- i. To understand the major contributors to English anxiety among Chinese college students.
- ii. To demonstrate the role of intercultural communication in calming the anxiety induced by English language speaking.
- iii. To evaluate how effective different intercultural intervention strategies would be in reducing language anxiety.
- iv. To evaluate the difficulties encountered by Chinese college students in applying intercultural approaches for learning a foreign language.

2. Literature review

2.1. English Speaking Anxiety

ESA hinders English use through avoidance behaviors and physiological symptoms, significantly impacting EFL students' performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz, 2010). Individual, social, and cultural factors influence ESA levels (Dewaele, 2017). Exacerbated by the fear of being judged or making mistakes, this anxiety arises especially among the students from non-English speaking backgrounds (Young, 1991). In China where collectivist cultures are predominant, for example, students tend to dread being negatively evaluated due to the societal expectation of maintaining what is called 'face' (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Furthermore, there is a lack of confidence in oral communication as the examination-oriented education system in China guided education towards prioritizing grammar and writing over speaking (Cheng et al., 2013). In addition, this gap in speaking skills also increases the sense of anxiety induced by speaking since students are frequently asked to improvise and engage in English speaking (Zhang & Rahimi, 2020).

As another contributing factor, the classroom environment is characterized by a teacher-centered instruction rather than the student-centered approach. Most students are afraid to speak due to the perception that the teacher has more power than they do (Woodrow, 2006). Moreover, the opportunities of practicing spoken English in a



low-pressure environment are often missed (Liu, 2018). Furthermore, there is a lack of interactive learning activities, with no opportunities provided for such interactive speaking activities during peer collaboration. The fact also stressed in another research is that lasting effects can be created by the previous unpleasant experiences like being ridiculed for bad pronunciation, which serve to reinforce fear and avoidance behaviors (Dewaele and Al-Saraj 2015).

Speaking anxiety is closely associated with language proficiency and self-confidence. For the students with lower perceived competence in English, they are more likely to feel anxious about communication and unwilling to communicate with others (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Conversely, those in the higher proficiency group tend to feel more confident and less anxious. This emphasizes the necessity to improve the students' language skills and help them build confidence through targeted interventions (Peng & Woodrow, 2022).

2.2. Intercultural Communication and Language Learning

Intercultural communication involves exchanging ideas across cultures (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Byram (2021) made it clear that students' confidence and motivation improve when they are exposed to different cultures, making intercultural competence indispensable for global English communication (Byram, 2021).

According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence refers to the skill of effective interaction with persons of a different cultural background. Knowing how to do this allows a person to know the rules of each culture, be aware of personal biases, and learn the ability to switch sides when communicating. The research conducted by Kim (2012) asserts that engaging in intercultural exchange reduces language anxiety and increases motivation for English communication. It is due to the fact that students can do something in English, for example, use more exposure to a variety of cultural ideas on language learning with their previous definition (Zhang, 2017).

Research has shown that the implementation of such initiatives as language exchange programs, international study experiences, or cross-cultural workshops can help enhance language achievement and confidence in regards to language skills (Jackson, 2014). It helps learners to use spoken English in real-world contexts, overcomes fear of making mistakes, and gives them more opportunities for speaking. Pragmatic competence is likewise needed when communication takes place across



diverse cultures. Students will be able to increase vocabulary skills by practicing with native speakers or international peers, which is possible (Taguchi, 2015).

If intercultural ingredients are added, students are much more willing to communicate when learning a language. For O'Dowd (2019), taking part in an intercultural role-play activity and a virtual cultural exchange, or joining together with the assistance of an online discussion can improve fluency and confidence in English for English learners according to some research. Furthermore, with the skill-based learning method, adding a cultural theme to the training should help the students apply language appropriately within different social scenarios (Baker, 2016).

The challenges outlined in this guide still persist when trying to enact intercultural communication throughout the Chinese education system. In many universities, there is a lack of structured intercultural programs and no organized chance for students to communicate with native English speakers (Liu & Jackson, 2008). In addition to such factors, several sociocultural barriers as ethnocentrism and language anxiety can also get in the way of students interacting with other cultures (Peng & Woodrow, 2022). Overcoming these challenges necessitates not only institutional support and curricular change (Byram, 2021) to make learning interactional as possible, but also transnational cooperation. Some of the effective intervention strategies include collaborative learning, which reduces anxiety through mutual support (Dörnyei, 1997), role-play for practicing English in simulated contexts (Byram, 1997), and cultural exchange programs providing authentic communication situations. These interventions will create belief and help to remove some of the mental blocks.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Design and Participants

In this study, a quantitative quasi-experimental approach is utilized to investigate the effect of intercultural communication strategies on alleviating English-learning anxiety among Chinese college students. Using a pretest-posttest intervention design with control and intervention groups, the research employs a variant of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) that has been validated for multiple language learning contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2. Intervention and Procedures

The participants were 120 college students (aged 18-22) from three Chinese universities, selected according to a stratified random sampling method to represent different levels of proficiency (Bryman, 2016). The intervention group (n=60) participated in an 8-week extracurricular intercultural training program featuring weekly 90-minute role-play sessions, bi-weekly written exchanges with international partners, and joint English-language productions. The control group (n=60) followed the regular syllabus except for these intercultural elements. This design enabled systematic comparison of the teaching approaches' impact on anxiety change.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through online questionnaires at the beginning and end of the intervention, using standardized instruments to measure anxiety, courage, and willingness for communication (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Statistical procedures included descriptive statistics, t-tests for group comparison, and the analysis of variance (ANOVA) to consider demographic influences (Field, 2018). Ethical consent was obtained from institutions from which data were given out for analysis. The process was transparent, and data confidentiality was ensured throughout all stages of research.

4. Results

4.1. Introduction

Based on a close analysis of quantitatively collated responses to questionnaires from 120 Chinese subjects surveying anxiety in speaking English and the effect of intercultural intervention strategies, this chapter reports on the results of the study. Descriptive analysis, ANOVA, and correlation are used to determine the effectiveness of the interventions from the data.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations of key variables concerned with English speaking anxiety, confidence and intercultural interactions.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
English-speaking anxiety	3.52	1.04
Confidence in speaking	2.94	0.98
Willingness to communicate	3.88	1.12
Anxiety in intercultural settings	3.25	1.10
Role-playing effectiveness	4.01	1.05
Online exchange effectiveness	3.72	0.95

4.3. ANOVA Analysis

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to decide if there were any significant differences between the English-speaking anxiety of the control and experimental groups. The results of this analysis are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2

ANOVA Results for English-Speaking Anxiety

Sources	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p-value)
Between Groups	12.45	1	1.39	8.92	0.003**
Within Groups	163.40	118	-	-	-
total	175.85	119	-	-	-

Conclusion: The p value (0.003) is less than the significance level (0.05) and this result shows statistically significant difference between control and experimental group on reducing the English-speaking anxiety.

4.4. Correlation Analysis

To explore relationships of English-speaking anxiety, confidence and intercultural interaction, Pearson correlation analysis was used. The correlation coefficients between all key variables are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix

Variable	Speaking Anxiety	Confidence	Willingness to Communicate	Role-playing Effectiveness	Online Exchange Effectiveness
Speaking Anxiety	1.00	0.68**	-0.56**	-0.45**	-0.40**
Confidence	-0.68**	1.00	0.62**	0.55**	0.50**
Willingness to Communicate	-0.56**	0.62**	1.00	0.48**	0.41**
Role-playing Effectiveness	-0.45**	0.55**	0.48**	1.00	0.59**
Online Exchange Effectiveness	-0.40**	0.50**	0.41**	0.59**	1.00

Interpretation:

English-speaking anxiety has a -0.68 strong negative correlation with confidence so as anxiety drops, confidence rises.

There is a negative correlation with anxiety (-0.56) and confidence (0.62), which is correlated positively.

The correlations between role-playing and online exchanges with self-confidence and willingness to communicate showed their effectiveness.

4.5. Summary of Findings

The results indicate that:

(ANOVA, $p=0.003$) the intercultural interventions had a large effect in reducing English speaking anxiety in the experimental group.

Anxiety level decrease predicts increase of confidence and willingness to communicate (correlation analysis).

The role playing and online cultural exchanges was a successful way at boosting confidence and removing anxiety.



This finding is consistent with the proposition that English speaking anxiety can be alleviated by intercultural communication strategies among Chinese college students.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous literature that intercultural interventions are essential for reducing foreign language anxiety. As argued by Horwitz et al. (1986), English-speaking anxiety hinders language acquisition, while targeted interventions promote it. As revealed by the present study, role playing and online cultural exchange are conducive to creating an interactive environment that mitigates apprehension and boost confidence, as explained by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012).

The correlation between reduced anxiety and enhanced confidence supports Dörnyei's (2005) model, suggesting that structured intercultural experiences foster positive linguistic self-perception. ANOVA results confirm that cultural exposure effectively reduces language barriers (Krashen, 1982), supporting the integration of cultural content in curricula (Chen & Goh, 2011).

Overall, it is confirmed in this study that foreign language education can use intercultural interventions to successfully shift the focus away from English speaking anxiety and into a frame of culturally inclusive pedagogical strategies.

6. Conclusion

The finding of this study is that intercultural intervention strategies play a significant role in reducing the anxiety induced by English speech among Chinese college students. According to the results of statistical analysis, particularly the ANOVA results, those students engaged in the intercultural practice like role playing and online exchange perceived a significant relieving effect on their anxiety levels relative to the control group. By enhancing English communication skills under different linguistic and cultural contexts, the confidence in the topic can be built. Furthermore, the analysis indicates a significant negative correlation between speaking anxiety and confidence. That is to say, low anxiety levels lead to the high



level of self-confidence during communication. Also, it is discovered in this study that the students with more exposure to speaking interactive cultural learning were more willing to communicate in English, thus confirming the key role of anxiety reduction in developing communicative competence. These findings support existing research on anxiety's relationship with cultural barriers and self-perception (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), aligning with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis and Dörnyei's (2005) experiential learning framework.

However, despite these observable benefits, there are still some limitations on this study. Although the sample size is large enough for statistical analysis, it may not fully reflect the variety of Chinese college students learning English in various institutions. Furthermore, self-reported issues tend to be biased in terms of responses due to students possibly overestimating or underestimating the amount of anxiety and confidence they have. In future research, the longitudinal effects of intercultural interventions should be explored, such as the lasting effect of these interventions or the effect of some additional factors that might be useful to predict the effectiveness of these strategies (personality traits, pre-existing levels of experience, etc.).

Overall, it is empirically evidenced in this study that structured intercultural communication activities can significantly reduce the anxiety about English speaking for Chinese college students. This finding has some important implications for both educators and curriculum designers because the English language instruction with intercultural components can make student more confident and willing to communicate. For educators, they should support students in mastering English communication by creating an inclusive learning environment.

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