

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL CHINESE
STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN U.S. CLASSROOMS

By

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Abstract

China is one of the major sources of international students in the U.S.. From 2018 to 2019, China remained the largest source of international students in the U.S. with 369,548 students in undergraduate, graduate, non-degree, and optional practical training programs (Anderson, 2019). With barriers including cultural differences, language difficulties, inconsistencies in international academic studies, etc., it is very challenging for Chinese international students to fit into the U.S. culture and U.S. schools. In this paper, I will review 11 peer-reviewed articles to discuss the question of "What are some factors that influence Chinese undergraduate students' willingness to speak in U.S. classrooms". Among three different factors are: 1) Internal factors from students themselves, 2) External factors from teachers, and 3) External factors from class settings and classroom environments. Some suggestions for future studies and some limitations that I have found in these articles will also be addressed in this paper.

Keywords: Chinese international students, willingness to communicate, anxiety, face-saving, classroom environment, teacher involvement

Introduction:

Every year, tens of thousands of Chinese international students, mainly undergraduate and graduate, leave their families and come to the United States to pursue a higher education. According to *The Washington Post*, even though the number of Chinese international students has decreased in the 2018-2019 academic year, China remains as the largest supplier of international students, and "there were about 369,500 Chinese students in the United States in the last school year, counting those in undergraduate, graduate and non-degree program as well as in temporary employment related to their studies" (Anderson, 2019). Since the cultures and teaching styles are so different between the U.S. and China, it can be extremely difficult for these Chinese international students to fit their lives into the U.S. society and institutions and to utilize their full potentials in their academic endeavors.

One huge challenge that every single Chinese international student has to face and to adapt to when he/she has just arrived in U.S. classrooms is to communicate in class using English to demonstrate their participation and active thinking, which can be considered an aspect of Chinese international students' willingness to communicate in his or her new U.S. classroom. "L2 Willingness to communicate is defined as 'a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2'" (Zhang, Beckmann, & Beckmann, 2018, pg.227). In this case, "willingness to communicate" refers to Chinese international students willingness to communicate with their peers and/or the entire class in their U.S. classroom using English. However, Chinese international students' willingness to communicate in the classroom can be influenced by myriad different factors, both internal and external. Thus, it is important to find out what some of the major factors are that influence Chinese students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms, and to discover what teachers, peers, and international students

themselves do to help themselves feel comfortable and confident in their classrooms, which will lead to more active participation and communication in the classroom.

My motivation for doing this research is that I am a Chinese international student and have been through the stage where I was afraid to speak up in classroom communications. However, I never really understood some key factors, other than my English proficiency level, that stopped me from being willing to share my opinions with my classmates. Not until I was studying in an applied linguistic class which touched a little bit on this area, did I develop an interest in this fundamental topic. That's why, I wanted to do research focused on the relationship between Chinese international students, mainly focuses on undergraduate level students, and their willingness to communicate in the U.S. classroom. The research question for this paper is: "What are some factors that influence Chinese international undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms using English?"

Methods:

Since this paper is a literature review paper, I gathered and analyzed information from 11 peer-reviewed literary journal articles that related to my research question. I used websites like Google Scholar and the University of Arizona Library to help me find these 11 peer-reviewed literary journal articles. I also used keywords like Chinese international students, L2 communication in the classroom, willingness to communicate, U.S. classroom, etc. to help me locate peer-reviewed literary journal articles which closely related to my topic of interest. To further narrow down my research, I focused on peer-reviewed literary journal articles that were published within the last five years, except for three peer-reviewed literary journal articles that were published after 2000 but before 2010.

I specifically chose Chinese undergraduate students who study in the U.S. as the target participants for my research for three reasons: 1) The majority of international students are from China; I think by studying Chinese international students and using Chinese international students as a representation, I am able to get a sense of what are some of the factors that influence the willingness of communication in U.S. classrooms, not only for Chinese international students but also for the majority of international students whose first language is not English, and are studying in the U.S. right now. 2) Comparing Chinese undergraduates to Chinese graduate students who might have already received their undergraduate level education in the U.S. and have already adapted to the U.S. teaching style and classroom communication, Chinese undergraduate students have typically just come to the U.S. and are new to the U.S. teaching style and classroom communication. Thus, I can get a straightforward and comprehensive view of what and how Chinese international students' willingness to communicate in English is being influenced in the U.S. classrooms. 3) Relating to my background and experience, Chinese undergraduate students are the group of students that I am most interested in working with and researching.

Literature Review:

In this section, I am going to compare and contrast 11 peer-reviewed literary journal articles specifically focusing on three main factors that influence Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness of communication in U.S. classroom including 1) Internal factors from students themselves, 2) External factors from teachers, and 3) External factors from class settings and classroom environments.

- Internal factors from students themselves

The most profound influence on Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms is internal factors from the students themselves. Under the premise of not considering the personalities of different students and how their personalities can influence their behaviors, not only in class but also in their daily interactions, "anxiety" is something that can be commonly found and closely related to Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms. According to one study, Chinese undergraduate international students' "unwillingness to communicate and their foreign language anxiety was significantly correlated to their self-related English proficiency and access to English" (Liu & Jackson, 2008, pg.82). Because China is an English as a Foreign Language country, where most students only get to practice using English in an academic setting, these Chinese undergraduate international students who have just arrived in the U.S. tend to have low English oral proficiency as well as underestimating their English abilities. "Foreign language classroom anxiety was positively correlated with a decreased desire to communicate in English in class and negatively correlated with their self-rated English proficiency" (Girardelli, Patel, & Shannon, 2017, pg.120). This creates a vicious circle for these students where they feel anxious about speaking up in the classroom because they worry about their English skills, but with limited practice, it is very hard for them to improve their English oral proficiency. What's more, because of their unfamiliarity with English, Chinese international students tend to "need to spend several seconds to consider how to phrase their ideas before they could respond" (Heng, 2016, pg.26), thus while Chinese international students organize their speech, questions can already be answered by their classmates whose native language is English. When this kind of situation

occurs frequently, Chinese undergraduate international students can feel more anxious and discouraged, reluctant to speak up and participate in classroom conversations.

Besides the weakness in these students' English abilities, the cultural difference also plays an important role in Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms. Quite a few studies have touched upon this idea and one specific idea that is being introduced within these studies is the idea of "face/face-loss". In the western idea, "face" is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken up during a particular concept". However, the definition of "face" is very different in Chinese culture, where "face" is defined as "a mask for idealizing self-presentation in some situations while it may function as a moral guideline to regulate improper behaviors" (Zhu, Bresnahan, Mary, Levine, Timothy, & Li, 2013, pg.4). The "face" concept is not one of the top factors that influence Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms, but several studies show that the idea of "face" is highly associated with Chinese culture and Chinese undergraduate international students' performance in the U.S. classroom. Girardelli, Patel, and Shannon's study points out that "Chinese learners strategically employ silence and reticence in classrooms to prevent potentially threatening face-losing situations, such as making mistakes in speaking or admitting to not having properly understood the instructor" (Girardelli, Patel, & Shannon, 2017, pg.124). Zhu, Bresnahan, Mary, Levine, Timothy, & Li's study also leads to the outcome that "face plays an important role in Chinese international students' communication behaviors in the U.S. classroom..." (Zhu, Bresnahan, Mary, Levine, Timothy, & Li, 2013, pg.33). The fear of face losing is something that is deeply rooted in Chinese international students' beliefs and daily actions. With the concern of face loses, it is very challenging for Chinese international students

to be willing to step up and communicate in front of the entire classroom and try to correctly answer questions that instructors have asked.

Another enormous cultural difference is how the Chinese classroom is organized as compared to how the U.S. classroom is organized. "Discussion in their English classes in China were rare" (Heng, 2016, pg.26). As mentioned in several studies, Chinese classrooms tend to be more focused on note taking and lecturing, along with memorization and practice after class to show students' understandings toward course materials (Fu, Machado, & Weng, 2018). However, the U.S. classroom encourages students to speak up and do critical thinking to show their active listening and learning within the class. This huge difference leads to the issue that a lot of Chinese international undergraduate students are "unsure of the participation format, like appropriate ways to enter and exit discussions." (Heng, 2016, pg.26). This difficulty may appear not only in whole-class discussions, but also in forms of group discussion and/or classroom activities that involve communication with other students, because in China students tend to raise their hand and speak up one by one while in U.S. classrooms students have to learn the timing when they can appropriately jump in and out a conversation.

- External factors from teachers

Teachers' attitudes, involvement, and teaching styles can also bring a powerful influence in Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in the U.S. classroom. One important idea that is mentioned in the article by Zarrinabadi is the idea of "teacher's wait time". Most teachers tend to wait 0.9 seconds after the question is given to the class or the individual student, however, this wait time is not enough for Chinese undergraduate international students to properly organize their speech and answer the question correctly using

English. Research has found that "...longer periods of wait time will positively influence the length of utterances, the number of unsolicited but appropriate responses, confidence, the number of student questions, and a decrease in failure to respond" (Zarrinsbadi, 2013, pg.292). Besides the advantages in classroom participation and accuracy in students' responses, research also discovered that teachers who tend to have a longer wait time also tend to have a good impression in Chinese undergraduate international students' minds, thus are more willing to come to class, "being active and communicative" (Zarrinsbadi, 2013, pg.292). A similar idea has been introduced in another study where researchers find out that "... demonstrate patience during discussion, or to give adequate time for student responses" (Fassinger, 2000, pg.41) are teacher qualities that create more classroom interactions. According to these two pieces of research, "teacher's wait time" is something that can be important in terms of creating classroom atmosphere and Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms.

"Teacher confirmation" is another important idea that has been brought up in multiple journal articles. "Teacher confirmation" is defined as "the transactional processes by which teachers communicate to students that they are endorsed, recognized, and acknowledged as valuable, significant individuals" (Huang, Hsu, Chia-Fang, McCracken-Flesher, Caroline, & Price, 2012). Teacher confirmation can be seen in how the teacher interacts and responds to students' questions and comments, and teaching styles teachers might have. More positive feedback/comments, and a more interactive teaching style are things that can encourage Chinese undergraduate international students to be more willing to communicate in their U.S. classrooms. Ellis' study also shows the relationship between teacher confirmation and students' motivations, and how "most teacher confirmation behaviors focus on personalized interaction with individual

students" (Ellis, 2004, pg.16). In this case, some students might be left out and unequally treated in terms of commenting and/or questioning, and a lot of Chinese undergraduate international students are included in this group of students. However, a study has shown that it is more important for teachers to try to reflect teacher confirmation behaviors to aim at the class as a whole, which can help to build an interpersonal relationship between teachers and students in general.

Last but not least, "Error correction" is also an interesting concept that has been introduced in several studies. In Zarrinabadi's study, some Chinese undergraduate international students that the researcher has interviewed talked about that "teacher's immediate error correction enhanced their anxiety and made them feel insecure about making mistakes in future interactions and they feel "ashamed and stressful to continue their speeches" after teacher's immediate correction (Zarrinsbadi, 2013, pg.293). This can closely tie with students' emotions and how their anxiety level increases extremely after the teacher's immediate correction. This action by the teacher also makes Chinese undergraduate international students feel loss of face in front of their classmates, feel embarrassed, and participate in classrooms conversation even less in future classes. In contrast, "delayed error correction, was found to increase willingness to communicate in that it let the students keep the flow of their speaking and deliver the meaning" (Zarrinsbadi, 2013, pg.293). When the teacher focuses more on the idea and message that students trying to make/deliver within their speech rather than pronunciation and/or grammar, students can feel much more comfortable and confident to speak up and share their knowledge with their classmates and instructor.

- External factors from class setting and classroom environment

Besides Chinese undergraduate international students and teachers, class setting and classroom environment can also be crucial in terms of influencing Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms. The class task is one thing that shows the influence on Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in the U.S. classroom. According to research, Chinese undergraduate international students tend to prefer "game-like communicative activities most" as well as "dyadic activities" where Chinese undergraduate international students tend to feel less anxiety and have more opportunities for students to communicate with each other in a less formal setting to generate ideas (Zhang, Beckmann, & Beckmann, 2017). However, according to Valdez's study, tasks that are heavily cultural intensive are perceived as negative. Because a lot of cultural intensive tasks are heavily focused on the U.S. culture, Chinese undergraduate international students tend to lack knowledge in this area (Valdez, 2015). Thus, Chinese undergraduate international students might find this kind of task extremely unfamiliar and difficult to accomplish and to participate in the classroom conversation. Teachers should realize the cultural diversity within the classroom and try to design culturally related tasks that include cultural references among different ethnic groups to make everyone feel welcomed and included rather than focusing only on the U.S. culture.

Peers can also bring powerful influence in Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms. Besides teacher-to-student relationships, it is also really important to realize the classroom connectedness, which refers to "student-to-student perception of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom" (Hsu, Flesher, & Price, 2012, pg.5). When a student-to-student relationship seems more like friends and/or partners rather than competitors, the classroom environment is becoming less stressful as

well. Another study's outcome shows that "higher participation classes possess qualities of support and respect" and "higher participation classes are perceived as groups which get to know each other well" (Fassinger, 2000, pg.40). Both studies show the importance of a positive relationship between students. Only under this kind of environment and relationship with classmates, Chinese undergraduate international students can be more confident and be more willing to share their thoughts and ideas in classroom conversations.

Discussion and Conclusion:

After analyzing these 11 peer-reviewed literary journal articles, it is very clear that Chinese undergraduate international students' willingness to communicate in the U.S. classroom can be influenced by all three of the factors that I have analyzed in the previous section. Chinese undergraduate international students need to realize their shortcomings and challenge themselves by stepping out of their comfort zone and actively participating in classroom conversation. Teachers need to realize the cultural dynamic within the classroom, respecting every single student, being patient with Chinese undergraduate international students, and providing Chinese undergraduate international students more opportunities to speak up by using different forms of tasks. What's more, the classroom atmosphere should be positive and comfortable to make Chinese undergraduate international students feel less anxious, instead of feeling a sense of belonging.

However, after reading these 11 peer-reviewed literary journal articles, I would like to share some limitations that I have noticed among these studies and some possible suggestions for future studies. Firstly, every single study focused on Chinese undergraduate international students within one single school, this leads to the issue that the number of participants for these

studies tends to be fairly small and not sufficiently comprehensive or representative. If it is possible, maybe in future studies, researchers could partner with researchers from other U.S. universities to do joint research, which would include more participants and more comprehensive data. The second limitation that I have noticed is that almost all the studies within those articles that I have read are completed using tools like interviews and surveys. However, the answer that their participants give in interviews and surveys might be different from how they act in their classes. For future studies, I think it would be better and more accurate if researchers can incorporate classroom observation into their studies and maybe compare data from classroom observation with data from interviews and surveys to see the differences and/or similarities between how their participants thought and how their participants acted. Last but not least, a lot of studies are completed in a fairly short amount of time. This can be problematic because the data might not be the most accurate. Thus, I think for future studies, researchers could do long-term observations or have followed up research on their participants to see the differences and/or similarities in their willingness to communicate in U.S. classrooms from freshmen year to senior year.

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