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Барьеры на пути развития уверенности в говорении
на английском языке у китайских студентов российских вузов

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Аннотация. В данном исследовании изучаются основные трудности, препятствующие уверенному использованию английского языка китайскими студентами, обучающимися в России. Целью исследования является обоснование целесообразности учета комплекса трудностей, влияющих на уверенность китайских студентов при коммуникации на английском языке в условиях российских вузов. Научная новизна исследования заключается в доказательстве необходимости рассматривать трудности, с которыми сталкиваются китайские студенты, не как изолированные помехи, а как целостную систему взаимосвязанных проблем, формирование которой обусловлено спецификой лингвистического, социокультурного, этнопсихологического и дидактического опыта обучающихся. Данный системный подход реализован через разработку оригинального диагностического опросника, который позволяет провести количественную и качественную оценку как выраженности данных трудностей, так и характера их взаимодействия. Результаты исследования выявляют несоответствие традиционных подходов к обучению, доминирующих в Китае, актуальным потребностям студентов в формировании у них функциональной языковой личности, что обуславливает необходимость перехода от императивной модели, ориентированной на преподавателя и интенсивное механическое заучивание грамматики, к подходу, развивающему аналитическое мышление и коммуникативные умения студентов. В статье предлагаются некоторые рекомендации для преподавателей по преодолению трудностей, препятствующих уверенности в использовании английского языка, и созданию благоприятной и эффективной учебной среды.

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Barriers to English language speaking confidence
among Chinese students of Russian universities

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Abstract. The study investigates the major difficulties impeding confident usage of English in Chinese university students studying in Russia. The purpose of this study is to establish the need for a holistic approach to the difficulties that impede the English communication confidence of Chinese students in the Russian higher education context. The scientific novelty lies in substantiating the necessity to regard the difficulties experienced by Chinese students not as isolated problems but as systemic issues arising from linguistic, socio-cultural, ethno-psychological and educational specificity of Chinese students' background. This systemic perspective is performed through the development of an original diagnostic questionnaire, enabling the quantitative and qualitative assessment of both the severity of these confidence barriers and the nature of their interplay. The findings reveal a disconnect between the China's traditional teaching methods and the students' current requirements for shifting from a teacher-oriented grammar-transfer model to a student-centered approach that cultivates analytical thinking and communicative skills. Implications for educators are discussed in terms of pedagogical practices to address confidence barriers and foster supportive, effective learning environment.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the attention of scholars has turned towards the experiences of Chinese students, who form the largest cohort of international students worldwide. Despite years of formal English education, a substantial number of Chinese learners experience “a certain degree of insecurity and low confidence in using English” they learn; their communication skills thus develop slower and undermine their academic performance (Zhang, Zhou, 2021, p. 6).

The proper level of Chinese students' English proficiency is impeded by a complex of various barriers related to the socio-cultural, ethno-psychological specifics of Chinese students, as well as the peculiarities of the Chinese educational system that marginalizes oral skills and limits practice opportunities. Self-doubt may materialize in terms of communication apprehension, reluctance to engage in communicative activities and a persistent fear of negative evaluation, which is likely to hinder their adapting to academic context (Zhou, 2004). The relevance of the study lies in identifying the specific constraints on Chinese students' communicative confidence, which subsequently influences their capacity to integrate into international settings, and providing insights to transform language classrooms from sources of anxiety into facilitators of efficient communication.

The research is guided by the following research tasks:

- 1) to identify the factors that inhibit Chinese students' English-speaking confidence at Russian universities through a literature review, quantitative questionnaire data, qualitative insights from the interviews along with classroom observations;
- 2) to reveal the mismatch between the traditional pedagogical orientations in China and the contemporary educational need to cultivate a functional language capacity in students;
- 3) to provide some pedagogical recommendations to educators working with this cohort aimed at addressing English speaking confidence issues that Chinese students experience while studying in the Russian academic environment.

To identify the factors that influence Chinese students' confidence in using English in Russian academic context, a mixed approach was employed, combining quantitative data from a survey of 50 first-to-fourth-year students enrolled in English language programs at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, St. Petersburg State University, during the 2024 academic year; qualitative insights from interviews, classroom observations interpreted in light of the relevant literature.

The questionnaire was designed to gather information on all aspects of potential barriers including biographical information, language proficiency, socio-cultural and ethno-psychological factors, teaching methods, and barrier-overcoming strategies. A short demographic section recorded gender, year of study, length of residence in Russia, and prior English proficiency (self-rated CEFR level). For the qualitative analysis of the survey data, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in respondents' answers. Additionally, content analysis was applied for the systematic coding and frequency counting of key categories in open-ended responses, enabling a quantitative assessment of dominant motivations. Statistical analysis was used to quantify the data through descriptive statistics (standard deviations, and frequency distributions), generating thematic insights, socio-cultural and ethno-psychological matters, tutor behavior, and tactics aimed at conquering barriers.

The theoretical background draws upon the research on cultural factors influencing English language acquisition in East Asian contexts, including works by X. Qi (2017), K. Kim, J. Tan (2019), Q. Zhang, Q. Liu (2020), R. Pratiwi, D. Buana (2022), R. C. H. Chan, M. S. Lam (2023), R. Hu, M. J. Z. Abidin (2025); supplemented by the works of the Russian researchers S. Shevelyova (Шевелева, 2010), S. Prosekov (Просеков, 2020), A. Khisamova (Хисамова, 2020). Difficulties of Chinese EFL students are reflected upon by P. Yin, F. Zhang (2009), F. Han (2013), X. Zhang, M. Zhou (2021), P. Manorom, N. Hunsapun, W. Chansanam (2024), H. Li, E. Haddon (2025). Issues connected to English classroom anxiety among Chinese students are explored by A. Tsui (1996), N. Liu, W. Littlewood (1997), Y. Wang, M. A. Martin, S. H. Martin (2002), N. Zhou (2004), X. Zhang, M. Zhou (2021), Q. Yu, D. Xu, R. Huang (2023), Z. Chen (2024).

The study leads to practical results targeted for application by educators working with Chinese ESL students. The major output is a diagnostic tool, including an analytical framework based on the survey data, which allows teachers to understand each student's mix of challenges related to their language skills, psychological features, social and educational background. With this clear profile, teachers can tailor the support fitting each learner's specific needs.

Discussion and results

Factors that inhibit Chinese students' English-speaking confidence at Russian universities

Linguistic barriers

Typological differences between Chinese and English generate a critical source of potential errors that damage the confidence of any Chinese speaker when using English.

According to the survey results, students' greatest concerns when communicating in English include difficulties with pronunciation and listening comprehension (80%). Chinese (especially Mandarin) is a syllable-timed language, while English has a stress-timed rhythm; this metrical contrast presents a significant learning challenge for Chinese speakers, as they have to adjust to fundamentally different prosodic patterns. Chinese learners have difficulties in perceiving and processing major English prosodic information, such as phrasing, pitch accents, and intonational patterns; they are less accurate than native speakers while identifying prosodic focus or boundary tones and they produce specific prosodic patterns that are correlated with difficulties in fluent listening comprehension (Li, 2023).

Even skilled learners find it difficult to keep the morpho-syntactic agility when responding spontaneously, and this has implications for both comprehension and performance anxiety (Zhang, Zhou, 2021). Besides, the logographic nature of the native language interferes with English phonological decoding to such an extent that learners expect to pronounce something wrong before they utter it, which results in more negative outcomes than beneficial effects in terms of promoting confidence (Hu, Abidin, 2025).

Challenges on cultural nuances like humor and idiomatic expressions seem to be particularly severe for 38% of the surveyed learners. Incidents when students fail to understand such culture-bound language due to the lack of cultural and contextual knowledge can provoke foreign-language anxiety and drain students' confidence, as they feel unable to engage fully in social interaction.

A lack of language practice with native speakers was stated by 38% surveyed students as the factor inhibiting confidence. Without actual interaction with the real world, learners end up stuck in an "Expanding Circle" type of setting (as defined by Kachru's (1985) model) where English is simply treated as a subject to study and not a living code. This inhibits students' ability to acquire fluency and cultural sensitivity necessary to build confidence.

Psychological and ethno-cultural barriers

The psychological factors of learners' attitudes and emotions within a learner group are significant elements of the barrier to confidence. The fear of failing, which tends to be associated with ignorance and stupidity, is an incredibly powerful obstacle, particularly when one considers societies that regard public failure as the loss of face. It is so deep-seated, in fact, that students would prefer not to say anything at all than make themselves sound stupid to their classmates and teachers. Almost half of the respondents (48%) often compare their language skills to those of other students, which makes them feel insecure. 46% feel uncomfortable speaking in English in front of a group. 46% of students prefer to remain silent if they are unsure of the correct phrase. 40% of respondents noted that they avoid speaking English for fear of making a mistake, and 40% of students worry that native speakers will not understand their accent. When discussing psychological factors that interfere with their ability to use English confidently, students cited shyness, anxiety, panic, fear, which can have a physical impact, leading to manifestations such as a pounding heart, perspiration, trembling hands and a parched mouth. These factors can subsequently enhance that sense of losing control and intensify the apprehension of speaking out even further.

One of the main factors hindering students' ability to speak English is the fear of making a mistake and losing face – that is, losing the respect of others and being publicly criticized for actions that contradict accepted social norms (Просеков, 2020). The cultural orientation toward maintaining face (*mianzi*) and avoiding being embarrassed in public can further inhibit learners' willingness to speak (Liu, Littlewood, 1997). Social pressure in China is very high, which creates significant stress for students who are too afraid to appear incompetent and therefore may avoid practice and limit their language use (Цаликова, Пахотина, 2021). Chinese culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on collectivism, which instills in students a focus on success, respect for authority, and high academic achievement not only for personal gain but also for the benefit of their family or society. As a result of the country's "one-child" policy, all of the family's attention and resources are focused on one child, and expectations for their academic achievement become even higher (Хисамова, 2020).

Furthermore, an important factor is that Chinese students belong to the non-communicative (rational-logical) psychological type of foreign language acquisition. At the initial stage of learning, they are characterized by restraint in expressing emotions, difficulty overcoming psychological barriers in communication, and a slow pace of developing speech skills (especially speaking). At all stages of language learning, they experience the need to carefully understand the specific features of the language material (Шевелева, 2010, p. 116).

Another distinctive feature of Chinese national culture is that it belongs to the reactive ("listening") group of cultures, where the emphasis is on attentive listening and caution in expressing one's own opinions (Шевелева, 2010, p. 116). Following this cultural attitude, students prefer not to actively participate in discussions, especially in a foreign language, to avoid awkward situations, mistakes, and misunderstanding. This limits their oral communication practice, hinders the free expression of thoughts, and inhibits the development of confidence in the use of the language studied. It should be noted that the cultural attitude towards a passive stance in communication, the fear of losing face, and such ethno-psychological factors as restraint and the slow pace of development of speech skills are closely linked to the characteristics of the Chinese educational system, which is focused on completing standardized test assignments.

Prior educational experience as a barrier

Rote-learning-based instruction in the traditional Chinese education system and heavy examination pressure have been widely referred to as factors impeding Chinese learners' communicative English skills (Dong Yu, 2023). The survey results confirmed that mostly Chinese schools focus all their attention on preparing students for exams (for example, Gaokao) (70%), and in schools, students mostly worked with academic tests and completed written assignments (70%) and learned grammar rules (68%). As a result, after finishing Chinese schools, 52% of the students surveyed noted a lack of practice in communicating in a foreign language; they emphasized that they had well-developed written skills and weak conversational skills (68%); they are able to work with texts, but not with live speech (54%). Foreign language teaching in China takes place in large groups, which implies minimal interaction between a teacher and students, the dominance of the written form of instruction and the predominance of reproductive forms of work and a rational and logical method of mastering English as a foreign language (Хисамова, 2020). Chinese students did not see oral English as important because it was not tested in China.

Chinese teachers of English occupy most of the lesson time; they tend to give lectures or mechanical drill work, and students are used to being listeners. A rigid teacher-centered classroom culture, in which students' speaking opportunities are limited, is closely interrelated with test-driven curriculum. This type of test-driven teaching is not very motivating for students and gives them little spoken English input. Students frequently use mechanical repetition and bilingual dictionaries and infrequently use communicative or metacognitive strategies. Students

know grammar and vocabulary well in theory, but they feel tense and insecure when using English to create their own meaningful and coherent sentences without a visual support from their textbooks. This weak confidence is intensified in cross-border study situations.

A deep cultural and pedagogical disjunction between their former educational experiences and a teaching model encountered at Russian universities presents an additional obstacle to confidence in academic performance of Chinese learners. Students who have mainly been exposed to passive, exam-oriented and teacher-centered teaching methods might feel isolated and unprepared to deal with the teaching methods of English currently used at Russian universities, where learning involves expressing their own thoughts, spontaneity, creativity, as well as active participation in discussions and oral presentations. Changing from a passive observer role to an active participant can be disorienting and scary since confidence levels plummet. Chinese students are often shocked by academic atmospheres that foster forms of debate or dialogue they are not used to (Li, Haddon, 2025).

Accustomed to passive forms of language learning, students prefer to turn to technology as their main source of help, which results in their dependency on electronic translators and artificial intelligence (AI), undermining their confidence in their own knowledge. Assertive communication and self-promotion conflict with Chinese students' subconscious deeply-held values of modesty and scholarly humility, forcing Chinese students to navigate not merely a new language but an unusual educational philosophy and communication style.

Low willingness to communicate

Shyness with low willingness to communicate is a widespread confidence barrier for Chinese students in academic surrounding and intercultural communication. This is especially true for academic networking, which requires initiating conversation with strangers – foreign (Russian) professors and peers. Chinese students have a tendency to form their own social circles with compatriots. Although such communities definitely provide them with the necessary support, they can limit opportunities for genuine English practice. The consequence is that Chinese students are likely to be less involved in academic social events, spending the majority of their time with other Chinese students and missing opportunities for intellectual exchange and co-operation which such events are supposed to make possible (Manorom, Hunsapun, Chansanam, 2024).

Pedagogical recommendations aimed at addressing English speaking confidence issues that Chinese students experience while studying in the Russian academic environment

In our opinion, the confidence of Chinese students in the use of English can be significantly increased if educators apply approaches and methods taking into account ethno-psychological, socio-cultural factors and the peculiarities of Chinese educational traditions which Chinese students are accustomed to.

To do this, it is necessary, first, to create a safe and supportive environment where mistakes are seen as a natural part of the learning process and teachers praise students not only for their results, but also for their efforts. In addition, it is recommended to use the soft correction method: instead of directly pointing out the error, the teacher repeats the student's phrase in the correct form, without focusing on the error. When working with Chinese students, it is extremely important to take into account the high importance of saving face in Chinese culture and avoid public criticism and instead offer individual consultations to work on mistakes; in addition, it is advisable to introduce the practice of group assignments more often, where responsibility for the result is distributed among participants, which reduces individual fear of failure. Speaking about what changes in learning students from China consider necessary, the overwhelming majority of respondents (76%) advocated more hours of conversational practice; 54% of respondents stated the need to focus on listening and perception of spoken language. It should be noted that students are concerned about their pronunciation and fear of speaking because of this, so 38% of respondents suggested introducing an individual approach to the phonetic difficulties of students. 36% of students supported the creation of more interactive and practice-oriented classes. An interesting fact is that 28% of students (98% of them are fourth-year students) noted the need to introduce courses on developing confidence in communicating in a foreign language into the curriculum.

Students' habit of actively using technology in the educational process can be turned into an advantage to overcome their lack of confidence in the use of English. Through technology, we can make low pressure environments in which students can practice their English and not be embarrassed or publicly humiliated. Online tools, such as discussion boards or blogs, can offer students a chance to express their ideas in writing and for other students and the teacher to provide feedback in non-intimidating environments compared with live class discussions. AI technology can also be utilized to offer Chinese students personalized feedback on their pronunciation and fluency, enabling them to practice and improve at their rate of learning. It can mitigate stress associated with the human factor and create a safe environment for practicing a foreign language without fear of making mistakes and being judged and misunderstood.

The role of the Russian university environment

The Russian higher education context represented by institutions like St. Petersburg State University does not fit a simplistic East-West dichotomy. Rather, it occupies an intermediate position, borrowing aspects from each pedagogical tradition. This fact implies that for Chinese students the Russian academic setting is neither entirely familiar nor completely foreign, but represents a unique space with specific features, which can either aggravate or mitigate the problems faced by Chinese students. On the one hand, this learning environment is saturated with theoretical aspects and demonstrates lecturer's authority, which can give students from culture of Confucian origin a psychologically relieving sense of familiarity and may reduce the degree of initial sociocultural shock. On the other

hand, Russian high education is gradually influenced by the Western trend of student-centered approaches fostering critical thinking and personal expression (Belyaeva, Freese, Petrova, 2024). So Russian pedagogical setting can play a deliberate role in helping learners reinforce their speaking confidence by gradually shifting them from passivity to active oral production. Besides, as communication in English is performed in non-native environment, there is less pressure for Chinese learners to express themselves flawlessly, which can reduce their speaking-related anxiety. However, the absence of regular high-quality authentic input outside academic setting could aggravate difficulties in perceiving natural prosody and idiomatic aspects of language. Finally, Chinese learners studying English in a Russian-speaking environment face a trilingual challenge (Kumar, Kakepoto, 2025). On the plus side, this constant code-switching fosters cognitive flexibility. On the negative side, it imposes linguistic fatigue and a cognitive load that distract focus. Thus, the Russian pedagogical environment does not simply host but uniquely reshapes Chinese learners' barriers to speaking confidence.

Conclusion

In accordance with the theoretical and empirical analysis performed, the following principal conclusions can be drawn. The results of the study confirm a clear paradox: despite an amount of prior teaching, Chinese students fail to communicate in English effectively, which is associated with their lack of confidence. In fulfillment of the initial research task, the study identifies linguistic, sociocultural, ethno-psychological and didactic barriers to Chinese students' English-speaking confidence. The survey data corroborate the assumption that these barriers constitute an interconnected system. The analysis goes beyond framing these challenges as individual linguistic issues and reveals links between linguistic confidence, cultural attitudes (for example, fear of mistakes due to Confucian values), the specificity of the Chinese language in comparison with English, limitations of the Chinese education system (emphasis on exams and memorization), and current conditions in Russia (lack of communication with native speakers). Lastly, recommendations for educators include providing low-pressure environment and using culturally sensitive techniques that gradually involve students in active communication, including the use of modern technologies.

Future directions of research might include testing confidence-building teaching methods over time and in experiments and applying neuroscientific or digital methodologies for greater theoretical and practical insights.

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