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Examining Sino-Foreign Joint School Students' Speaking Performance in the EFL Learning Environment: A case study

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine Sino-Foreign Joint School (SFJS) students' speaking performance in the EFL learning environment and explore the relationship among anxiety, motivation, willingness to communicate (WTC) and English language performance of EFL students. The study adopted an explanatory sequential research design with a mixed method approach wherein data were collected via a survey and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that EFL students in SFJS were rather anxious when it came to speaking in English and but they possessed higher integrated motivation. The structural equation modelling analysis revealed SPCC (Self-Perceived Communication Competence) mediated WTC to their language achievement.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL); anxiety; motivation; willingness to speak

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1.0 Introduction

A quality learning environment is often viewed as a significant factor in student satisfaction with the learning experience. Today, English is fast growing as an international language for communication. It is the most widely used language in the world in international trade, diplomacy, mass entertainment, international telecommunications and scientific publications, as well as publishing newspapers and other books (Rao, 2019).

Thus, most countries, including China, have embraced English as a Foreign language (EFL) of choice that is taught in most schools and tertiary institutions. Studies on Chinese Non-English major undergraduates' willingness to communicate in a classroom context (Yang, 2013) and college students' oral English anxiety based on the FIF training system (Liu, 2020) have revealed that in most Chinese EFL classrooms, students often shy away from speaking as it is often viewed as a difficult skill to master. Hence, speaking is often said to be the 'black sheep' of the EFL classroom, as it is often neglected by exam-oriented instructors in most EFL learning environments.

In the past few decades, China has implemented the policy of opening wider to the outside world, standardising schooling, administering schools in accordance with law and promoting development in Sino-Foreign Joint Schools (SFJS) by introducing high-quality foreign educational resources resulting in SFJS achieving an unprecedented development in terms of schooling in China.

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Today's 21st century has witnessed an increase in student mobility. More students in China want to study abroad to broaden their horizons and enjoy the dual-campus initiative to obtain dual bachelor's degrees within four years. Henceforth, EFL students in SFJS are required to achieve higher English language performance as a majority aim to study in cooperative universities abroad. They understand that expectations are high, putting pressure on students and teachers alike. However, both parties tend to pay more attention to the written paper focusing on reading and writing skills with little emphasis on the spoken component. Consequently, many students often fail to reach the required standard for speaking. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to examine SFJS students' speaking performance (level of anxiety, motivation and willingness to speak) in the EFL learning environment, to stress on English language oral communication and how to enhance students' speaking performance to create a quality learning environment.

2.0 Literature Review

Learning a language is often viewed as a complex process because it requires the learner to not only understand the grammar and vocabulary but also develop the required communication skills and awareness of another culture (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). This situation becomes even more demanding when EFL students in China have to learn and speak English whilst living in a homogeneous Chinese-speaking environment. The following section briefly reviews the literature on factors such as anxiety, motivation and willingness to communicate in English affecting speaking the EFL classrooms and the relationship between these three factors.

2.1 Importance of English Speaking in Foreign Language Learning Environment

According to Mei (2021), how to cultivate students' English speaking ability in intercultural communication has become the key to Sino-foreign Joint schools, it plays an important role in college English teaching, which aims to cultivate students with an international perspective, good command of English communication ability and clear critical thinking ability in English. Besides that, Tianming and Volodymyr (2020) found that EFL students' language proficiency were quite poor in SFJS due to the reduction of enrollment requirement.

2.2 Factors Affecting English Speaking in Foreign Language Learning Environment

Among the several factors affecting speaking performance, this study focused on anxiety, motivation and willingness to communicate in English. Anxiety is a much-discussed affective factor in language learning. It refers to a feeling of fear, worry and uneasiness when one has to learn a new language. According to Horwitz, Horwitz et al. (1986), research has indicated that anxiety is a factor that can affect a learner's ability to acquire a second/foreign language. Motivation is another internal affective factor that has been much explored in the field of second and foreign language learning. It is one of the factors that influence success or failure in learning a language, particularly a second language or a foreign language, as studies have shown that there is a strong positive correlation between motivation and speaking performance (Gardner, 2006). According to Sudirman, Junaid et al. (2022), students' English learning motivation is mostly integrative, and students study English based on their initiative and desire to grasp and learn more about English culture. In the 1990s, MacIntyre introduced the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) for the first time to the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). He defined second language WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using an L2" (MacIntyre, Clément et al. 1998) and noted that L2 WTC is also an ultimate goal of the second language teaching. To achieve a better understanding of L2 WTC, MacIntyre and Wang (2021) proposed the heuristic Pyramid Model of L2 WTC and developed the Scale of L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom, which laid a solid foundation for more empirical studies on this variable.

2.3 Relationship among Related Factors in English Speaking in Foreign Language Learning Environment

Researchers such as Khasinah (2014), Al Amrani (2019) and Hua (2019) have conducted studies to investigate the relationships among second language-related factors and learning outcomes; the focus of these studies has shifted from the static factors, which are stable, for instance, gender, age, aptitude to those situational with a dynamic nature, anxiety, motivation and willingness to speak.

According to Qian (2022), researchers have studied a variety of emotional factors that affect learners, such as motivation, attitude, self-confidence, and anxiety, which can fall into two categories in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Anxiety, inhibition, motivation, and character are examples of personal emotional characteristics. The second category is social-emotional variables, which also include aspects pertaining to students, students and instructors, and students and their surroundings.

Researchers such as Young (1990) examined anxiety related to in-class activities and instructors' behaviour. Results suggested that activities which require students speak in front of the class on the spot produced the most anxiety among the students, and a non-harsh attitude toward mistake correction and a positive, friendly and relaxed general attitude can reduce students' anxiety.

According to Khamkhien (2010), some investigations have been done to study the relationship between three variables (gender, motivation, experience) and language learning strategy used by Thai and Vietnamese university students using Oxford's 80-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The analysis revealed that, amongst these three factors, motivation is the most significant factor affecting the choice of strategies, followed by experience in studying English and gender, respectively.

According to Feng, Wang et al. (2023), willingness to communicate (WTC) plays a key role in foreign language learning. However, little research has been devoted to the role of achievement goals and achievement emotions in understanding WTC. The study aimed to examine the relationship between achievement goals (i.e., mastery goals, performance approach, and performance-avoidance goals) and WTC via achievement emotions, specifically enjoyment and anxiety. Results indicated that mastery and performance-approach goals were positively associated with WTC via higher levels of enjoyment. However, anxiety was not significantly associated with WTC.

Albooni and Ishag's (2020)'s study revealed that WTC in the English language and SPCC are positively correlated among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students, and SPCC was a good indicator of WTC than actual language achievement. Conversely, Balouchi and Samad (2021) who investigated the mediating effects of second language (L2) motivation, WTC, and international posture on the relationship between L2 SPCC and L2 frequency of communication (L2 FC) in online informal English learning contexts among tertiary students in Malaysia, findings revealed that higher level of SPCC would lead to more frequent L2 use in an online context and mediating roles of WTC and international posture on SPCC and language achievement were significant.

Based on the discussion above, it can be seen that the current research gap lies in the scant empirical evidence been devoted to the role of achievement goals and achievement emotions in understanding WTC. Likewise, the need for more emphasis and research in speaking in SFJS in current research also needs to be addressed.

Though this study explored a wider scope on the relationship among anxiety, motivation, willingness to speak and English Language speaking performance, this paper will, however, only present the findings to the following research questions in the context of EFL students in Sino-Foreign Joint Schools (SFJS) in China:

- RQ1: What is the English Proficiency Level of EFL Students in SFJS?
- RQ2: What is the Level of Anxiety, Motivation and Willingness to Speak of EFL students in SFJS?
- RQ3: Is Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) a Mediator on the Relationship between in/out Class Willingness to Speak and Language Achievement?

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted an explanatory sequential research design with a mixed method approach to investigate the relationship among anxiety, motivation, willingness to speak and English language performance of EFL students at the Sino-Foreign Joint School in Chongqing, China. It involved 318 EFL students in one randomly selected Sino-Foreign Joint School. Majority of them are sophomores and freshmen in university who are attending English classes and familiar with EFL learning and teaching. Data were collected via a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), the mixed methods sequential explanatory design implies two consecutive phases wherein quantitative data were collected and analysed first, and qualitative data was collected and analysed in the second stage.

Students' anxiety level was measured by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and the result of confirmatory factor analysis indicated high construct validity (CMIN/DF=1.071<3.0, RMSEA=0.015<0.08, CFI=0.995>0.9, TLI=0.994>0.9, NFI=0.925>0.9) with Cronbach's alpha score of 0.951. Motivation level was measured by Motivation Test Battery, which was adapted from Gardener's Attitude/ Motivation Test battery which also recorded a high Cronbach's alpha score of 0.844 (CMIN/DF=1.073<3.0, RMSEA=0.015<0.08, CFI=0.995>0.9, TLI=0.995>0.9, NFI=0.935>0.9). Willingness to speak was measured by the WTC scale, indicating high construct validity (CMIN/DF=1.150<3.0, RMSEA=0.022<0.08, CFI=0.992>0.9, TLI=0.992>0.9, NFI=0.945>0.9) with Cronbach's alpha score of 0.935. The three Cronbach's alpha score indicated the high reliability of the questionnaire in this study. All the items in the three questionnaires adopted a five-point Likert scale. Students' English language proficiency was measured by College English Test Band 4.

The qualitative data in this study were collected to triangulate the quantitative results. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 students who were coded S1 to S29. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0, whilst qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo 12.0.

The procedure of this study, in terms of data collection, lasted for a duration of approximately one year. Before conducting the study, researchers sought permission from the SFJS identified in the study. All respondents have been briefed on the aim of the study before they signed the consent form to be volunteer participants of the study. Confidentiality and data protection measures have been taken to ensure that all data is kept private and confidential.

4.0 Findings

The following section will provide the demographic profile of the respondents, followed by the main findings of this study.

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The population sample comprised 318 students from one selected SFJS, wherein 69.18% were females, whilst the remaining 30.82% were males. From this group of 318, a sub-sample of 29 students volunteered to respond to the semi-structured interview. All these respondents are sophomores and freshmen.

4.2 EFL Learning Quality of Life: English Proficiency of EFL Students in SFJS

Research Question One examined the English proficiency of EFL students in SFJS, and the results are shown in Table 1. Findings revealed that, on the whole, the EFL students in these selected schools possessed rather good English Language skills, with a majority (86.5%) possessing intermediate language proficiency.

Table 1 EFL Students' Proficiency Level in SFJS(CET-4 Score) (n=318)

Proficiency Level	CET-4 Score	n	Percentage
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This finding was also	Advanced	Above 549	39	12.26%
	Intermediate	Between 425 and 549	275	86.48%
	Limited	Below 425	4	1.26%
	Total		318	100.00%

Scale:>549 advanced;<425-549 intermediate;<425 limited

corroborated by a few students during the interview sessions. Most of them highlighted that they are interested in learning English and can communicate with foreign teachers or friends smoothly to negotiate learning opinions and seek some advice. For instance, Respondent 3 highlighted that he was confident in speaking English and experienced little problem speaking in English. He further stressed that: *“I like learning English. On the one hand, I like language and am interested in learning it. On the other hand, I think it's cool to master English. I can communicate with some foreign friends and watch English movies without watching subtitles. It's great.”*

A similar stance was also echoed by Respondent 5, who stated that, *“ I think my oral English is good. I can communicate with foreigners smoothly most of the time and express my ideas. Although sometimes I don't know a certain word, I can describe it and make my points clear with the words I have.”*

On the other hand, a few other respondents felt they did not have much confidence speaking in English due to some limitations. This was well articulated by Respondent 6 in the interview, who stressed that though her oral English was *“neither too good nor too bad”*, she faced challenges in fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. She highlighted that she lacked accurate vocabulary and often found it difficult to find a good way to organise a sentence. She said, *“My vocabulary extraction is not fast enough. I cannot find a suitable combination of second language words for what I want to say in my mind... Second, I can't combine vocabulary to produce a meaningful sentence... my pronunciation skills are not good enough. Sometimes even if the sentence is already on the tip of the tongue, a word cannot be spelled accurately, and the rhythm is not well mastered.”*

The above discussion reveals that the quantitative findings have shown that the EFL students in Sino-Foreign Joint School possessed good language ability. Nonetheless, a mixed response was seen in the interview sessions with 11 respondents. Though they got comparatively high scores in English proficiency tests, they still cannot communicate in English in the true sense of barrier-free.

4.3 EFL Learning Quality of Life: Level of Anxiety, Motivation and Willingness to Speak

Research Question Two investigated the level of anxiety, motivation and willingness to speak. The results were displayed in Tables 2,3, 4 and 5, respectively:

Table 2 EFL Students' Anxiety Level (n=318)

Constructs	Mean	SD
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.61	1.214
Communication Apprehension	3.25	1.34
Test Anxiety	2.98	1.301
Overall	3.28	1.285

Scale:1=Strongly Disagree (SD), 2=Disagree(D), 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree (NA/D), 4=Agree(A) and 5=Strongly agree (SA)

The findings displayed in Table 2 reveal that the overall anxiety level was a little bit higher than average (Mean=3.28, SD=1.285). As a whole, respondents displayed the highest level for Fear of Negative Evaluation (Mean=3.61, SD=1.214), followed by Communication Apprehension (Mean=3.25, SD=1.340), whilst displayed the lowest mean for Test Anxiety (Mean=2.98, SD=1.301). The result indicates that respondents in this study possess comparatively higher anxiety levels, especially regarding the negative evaluation of the outside.

Table 3 Constructs in Motivation Level (n=318)

Constructs	Means	Standard Deviation
Integrated	4.038	0.871
Parental Encouragement	3.520	0.975
Instrument	3.466	0.992
Attitudes	3.353	0.965
English teaching and course Evaluation	3.320	0.939
Interests and Desire	3.133	1.032
Overall	3.471	0.962

Scale:1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Almost Agree 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree

According to Biyun Huang and Khe Foon Hew(2016), motivation levels can be divided into four levels, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4 Range of Motivation Level

Motivation Level	Scores (Means)	Amounts of Items	Percentage
High Level	4.00~5.00	6	23.08%
Upper Medium Level	3.50~3.99	8	30.77%
Medium Level	3.00~3.49	5	19.23%
Low Level	<3.00	7	26.92%

Scale:1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Almost Agree 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree

As can be seen from Table 3, the overall motivation level of EFL students in SFJS is 3.471, which indicates that respondents' motivation is among the upper medium level. Among the different constructs, integrative orientation with the highest score (Mean=4.038, SD= 0.871), which indicated EFL students in Sino-Foreign Joint School possessed a strong motivation to assimilate into foreign culture and life. Willingness to communicate is operationally defined as the sum of the points that the student achieved based on this WTC scale (Yang Hua, 2013). Therefore, all scores can be summed up by using the items in Part I of the WTC Scale. The results were presented by the following Table 5:

Table 5 EFL Students' Willingness to Communicate Level

WTC	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
WTC	87.47	16.378	39	140

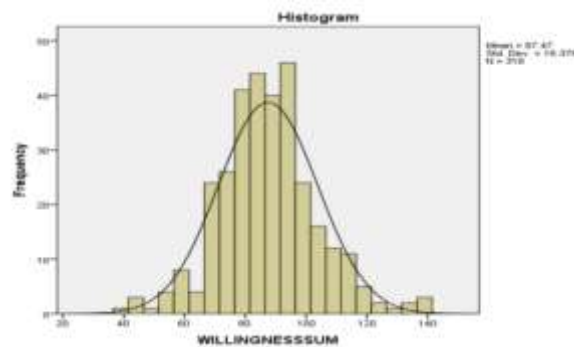


Figure1 Histogram of WTC

The results showed that the Mean of the respondents' willingness to speak is 87.47, the standard deviation is 16.378, the minimum is 39, and the maximum is 140, which indicates the level of EFL students in SFJS is positive. As can be seen from Figure 1, the histogram presents a roughly normal distribution.

4.4 EFL Learning Quality of Life: Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) Mediation Effect on the Relationship between in /out Class WTC and Language Achievement

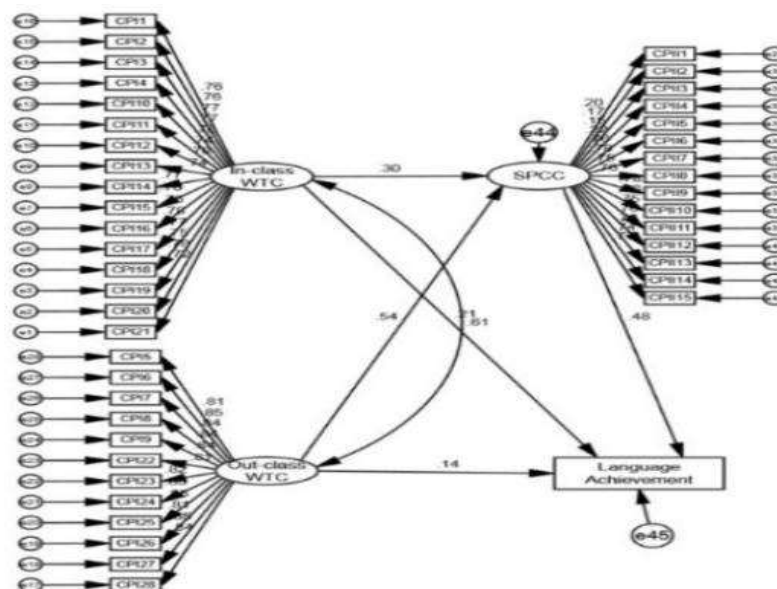


Figure 2 Structural Equation Model of SPCC on WTC and Language Achievement (Note: All paths were significant at p<0.05 level)

Research Question Three examined the mediation effect of Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) on the relation between in-class and out-class willingness to communicate and English language achievement. SPCC level was obtained via WTC scale, the findings revealed that the overall level of SPCC of EFL students in Sino-Foreign Joint school was positive (Mean=45.17, SD=9.928). A structural equation model was employed, and Amos software was used. Figure 2 displays the standardised estimates for the structural model, which yielded a good model fit (GFI/DF = 1.849 < 3.0, RMSEA = 0.052 < 0.08, CFI = 0.926 > 0.9, TLI = 0.922 > 0.9).

The result in Figure 2 indicated that In-class WTC ($\beta = 0.212$, $p < 0.001$), Out-class WTC ($\beta = 0.141$, $p = 0.022$) and SPCC ($\beta = 0.481$, $P = 0.001$) had a positively significant direct effect on Language Achievement respectively. In-class WTC ($\beta = 0.303$, $p = 0.003$) and Out-class WTC ($\beta = 0.544$, $p < 0.001$) positively affected SPCC, indicating that SPCC played a mediating role on the effect of in-class WTC and out-class WTC to Language Achievement.

5.0 Discussion

The overall results indicate a positive EFL learning quality of life in SFJS. This was reflected by students' high English proficiency. Based on the standardized College English Test (CET) scores obtained by the students in this selected SFJS, the findings revealed that these students possess high English Language proficiency, while some other researchers concluded the opposite findings (Tianming & Volodymyr 2020).

Secondly, a positive EFL learning quality of life is also reflected by a high integrated motivation level. A majority of EFL students in SFJS will study overseas to get their dual bachelor's degree and enjoy a dual-campus environment; hence they are highly motivated and possess a strong desire to learn about the foreign culture. Similar findings were found by Sudirman, Junaid et al. (2022).

Third, SEM analysis reflected SPCC had mediating effect on In-class/Out-class WTC to language achievement. Similar findings were found in Albooni and Ishag (2020)'s study. Conversely, Balouchi and Samad (2021) revealed that mediating roles of WTC and international posture on SPCC and language achievement were significant.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study revealed that EFL students in the selected Sino-Foreign Joint School possessed high English proficiency. They are highly motivated yet rather anxious when speaking in English. It is perhaps timely for language instructors to view anxiety in line with positive psychology as high anxiety in speaking may be catalyst for students to prepare more and thus perform better. Nonetheless, some students may be anxious due to fear of negative evaluation and making mistakes. Thus, teachers should create relaxed, quality EFL learning environments so that students feel comfortable making and learning from mistakes and be more willing to speak in English. Likewise, students also take the initiative and seize the opportunities given to practice speaking in English.

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. The small sample size of respondents from only one selected school in China limits the generalisation of the findings. Hence future studies involve a larger sample from all parts of China. Nonetheless, the findings have shed light on importance of seeking to lower students' affective filter by delivering more praise and motivation alongside integrating positive psychology into their speaking classrooms. Language instructors also need to provide a quality learning environment where students can view speaking as an enjoyable and meaningful learning activity.

Acknowledgement

None

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper provides both theoretical and practical implications for integrating motivation in language learning to create quality EFL classroom environments.

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