

Confucianism, Collectivism, and Communication: Cultural Barriers and Enablers of English Proficiency in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of Chinese cultural circumstances on the English-speaking proficiency of college students in Nanchang, China. It explores how key cultural values such as Confucianism, collectivism, indirect communication, and the Chinese writing system impact students' ability and motivation to communicate effectively in English. The research adopts a quantitative approach, utilizing an online survey to collect data from 250 students enrolled in English-related courses at Nanchang University. These students were selected using a probability sampling method, ensuring that the sample was representative of those actively engaged in English language learning. The structured questionnaire measured variables including cultural perceptions, group learning behaviors, communication styles, and English-speaking progress. The findings indicate that while Chinese cultural values encourage academic excellence, they also pose challenges to English-speaking development by reinforcing passive learning, indirect communication, and a reluctance to speak publicly. Students reported hesitation in using English due to fear of making mistakes, a strong preference for group-based learning, and difficulties transitioning from a character-based writing system to English phonetics. However, cultural emphasis on education and self-improvement served as a motivating factor for language acquisition. The study concludes that pedagogical strategies should integrate cultural sensitivity while encouraging active participation in English-speaking activities. Educators should implement interactive learning methods, peer discussions, and exposure to English-speaking environments to boost confidence. This research contributes to improving English language education in China by highlighting the cultural barriers and facilitators that shape students' linguistic development.

Keywords: Chinese Culture, English-Speaking Proficiency, Confucianism, Collectivism, Language Acquisition

Introduction

In settings where cultural values profoundly impact social interaction and pedagogical methods, the impact of cultural contexts on language acquisition is an issue of great importance. Confucianism, collectivism, and indirect communication are traditional Chinese beliefs that have a significant impact on social dynamics and how Chinese people approach learning foreign languages like English. The need for fluent English speakers has skyrocketed, especially among college students getting ready to join a more globalized workforce, due to China's growing global engagement (Chen, 2024). Higher education institutions like Nanchang University in Jiangxi Province have implemented a number of changes and measures to help students become more proficient in English, especially in speaking the language. However, pupils' attitudes and learning practices are impacted by deep-rooted cultural factors, which often oppose their efforts.

An essential part of Chinese culture, Confucianism stresses the value of community cohesion, obedience to authority, and following established rules. Students may be shy about speaking out or participating in crucial classroom discussions, especially when speaking a language they don't know, because these ideals are so ingrained in the educational system. Students are encouraged to passively take in material from their teachers rather than actively participate in class discussions due to the teacher-centered nature of Confucianism's hierarchical structure (Zhao, 2020). For ESL students, this can be a major setback because improving one's speaking abilities calls for engaged class time and plenty of practice. This problem is exacerbated by the collectivist structure of Chinese society, which means that students may be afraid to speak out in English for fear of ridicule or making a fool of themselves because they value group cohesion more than individual expression.

Another obstacle to learning English is the Chinese communication style, which is generally seen as indirect (Zhang & Zhou, 2021). The combination of Confucian principles and collectivist ideas gave rise to indirect communication, which promotes complexity and ambiguity in discourse. Conversely, clarity and directness are highly prized in English, especially in Western situations. Students from China may find it difficult to overcome their cultural differences and speak English more directly because of this difference (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Because of the deeply ingrained cultural tendency for indirectness, students may shy away from public speaking altogether, which will severely restrict their chances to practice and enhance their English speaking abilities.

The writing system based on Chinese characters is another cultural element that influences English language instruction in China. Unlike alphabetic systems like English's, which represent phonetic sounds, the logographic writing system in China uses each character to represent a word or meaningful unit. Chinese students studying English may face cognitive obstacles, especially with pronunciation and fluency, due to this basic mismatch in the visual and phonetic representations of the two languages (Peixin, 2022). This problem is made worse by the fact that reading and writing are given more importance in Chinese schools than speaking and listening. Consequently, despite having great command of the English language

in terms of reading and writing, many Chinese students find that they are severely underprepared when it comes to speaking and listening.

This study aims to investigate the impact of Chinese cultural values and communication styles on the English proficiency of college students in Nanchang, China, taking these cultural contexts into consideration. The study will look into how students' desire and capacity to participate in English-speaking activities are affected by traditional values like Confucianism, collectivism, and indirect communication, as well as by the specific features of the Chinese writing system (Wongsa & Son, 2022). Within the framework of Chinese higher education, we want to determine which cultural factors impede the acquisition of English proficiency and then provide solutions to these problems.

An important part of this study will focus on how relationships between teachers and students in English language classes play a role. Limited opportunities for interactive language practice may result from the traditional Confucian approach to education in China, which positions teachers as authoritative figures and pupils as passive participants (Han, 2022). The development of students' speaking abilities depends on their ability to ask questions, voice ideas, and participate in conversations in English; nevertheless, this hierarchical relationship may discourage these activities. The purpose of the research is to identify possible instructional approaches that can motivate students to be more engaged in class and to determine how these dynamics influence their engagement in English-language activities.

Examining how group dynamics and peer pressure affect students' propensity to speak English is another crucial aspect to think about. Chinese students may be hesitant to speak out in English for fear of upsetting their classmates in a collectivist culture that places a premium on group unity (Wang et al., 2022). Another common reason people are hesitant is because they are afraid of looking foolish or feeling ashamed if they make a mistake. The purpose of the research is to determine if and how different classroom settings and pedagogical approaches influence students' motivation to practice English language skills in light of these societal pressures.

Cognitive difficulties for Chinese students learning English as a second language will also be examined in the study, with a focus on the discrepancies between the two writing systems (Xu et al., 2022). When compared to alphabetic systems like English, the logographic nature of the Chinese writing system necessitates a different cognitive approach to language learning, which in turn impacts pupils' capacity to acquire fluency in speaking. The effects of these cognitive differences on pupils' English pronunciation, fluency, and general competence will be investigated in the study.

This study aims to do two things: first, find the cultural obstacles to English competency; and second, find ways to overcome these obstacles. Introducing more communicative and participatory pedagogical practices into English language classes is one possible strategy (Li & Flowerdew, 2020). Reforms in Chinese education in recent decades have placed an emphasis on student-centered methods that promote active engagement and involvement, in contrast to the old emphasis on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. This research will look at the efficacy of various instructional approaches in enhancing students' English proficiency and how they might be modified to fit the cultural setting of China.

Using technology to help people learn a new language is another possible option. There are more chances than ever before for students to practice speaking English outside of class because to the proliferation of mobile apps and online language learning platforms (Alzatma & Khader, 2020). In order to determine if these technological tools can assist overcome cultural obstacles to English proficiency, the study will look at how they can be incorporated into language learning.

This study aims to improve language education in the context of Chinese college students in Nanchang by shedding light on the cultural elements that impact their English speaking skills. This research aims to make a practical contribution to the field of language education by identifying the specific cultural challenges that Chinese students face when developing their speaking skills. It will also provide educators and policymakers in China with recommendations for improving English language instruction (Cheng & Wei, 2021).

The following research objectives would help the research project to be accomplished. The research purpose has been summarised through the objectives below:

1. To examine the influence of Confucianism on the English speaking proficiency of college students in Nanchang, China.
2. To investigate the role of collectivism and group harmony in shaping students' English speaking abilities in Nanchang, China.
3. To assess the impact of indirect communication styles on the improvement of English speaking skills among college students in Nanchang, China.
4. To explore the effects of the Chinese character-based writing system on the development of English speaking skills in Nanchang college students.
5. To evaluate the overall influence of Chinese cultural circumstances on the improvement of English speaking proficiency among students in Nanchang, China.

Literature Review

Over the course of its long and illustrious history, which spans more than three millennia, the Chinese writing system has been subjected to a number of significant alterations. Those occurrences are responsible for bringing about these alterations. In the beginning, it consisted of simple pictographs, but it has since developed into the more complicated characters that are used in every region of the world today. Research that was conducted not too long ago investigated this history and found that, in contrast to the general trend of simplifying letters all around the world, Chinese characters have become more intricate over the course of time. In contrast to the pattern of simplifying scripts that is usually acknowledged, this has the opposite effect. Researchers analyzed about seven hundred and fifty thousand characters across five different historical stages, which indicates that there was a tendency toward rising complexity (Phys.org, 2022). This might be seen as an indication of the tendency toward increasing complexity.

It is believed that the inscriptions that were found on the bones of oracles that were discovered during the Shang dynasty are among the oldest examples of written Chinese. It is possible to trace the origins of Chinese characters back to these inscriptions, which will be studied in greater detail within the following paragraphs. These inscriptions served as the basis for the development of the script, which ultimately eventually resulted in the production of standardized forms that were developed after the dynasties that came after them. A detailed study on the evolution of the Chinese language and writing (Zhang et al., 2024)

illustrates the shift from these previous scripts to the current standardized characters that are employed in the language. This transition was brought to light by the study. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the relevance of the role that historical events played in the formation of the writing system itself, which is a significant contribution.

The logographic structure of the Chinese writing system provides a number of obstacles that are exclusive to the field of modern linguistics. These challenges are what make the Chinese writing system so difficult to study. It is the Chinese writing system that is responsible for these difficulties. Because each character in the Chinese alphabet represents a morpheme, which frequently corresponds to a single syllable that has its own meaning, the Chinese alphabet is distinct from other alphabetic systems. This is something that distinguishes the Chinese alphabet from other alphabetic systems. Not only does this complexity have an effect on the way language is processed, but it also has an effect on the educational system. This is because students are needed to master hundreds of different characters. Sage Journals (2023) asserts that the Journal of Chinese Writing Systems has played a vital role in the publication of research that has been subjected to peer review and investigates the semantic complexity and cognitive implications of these linguistic challenges. This research has been published in the Journal of Chinese Writing Systems. Journal of Chinese Writing Systems is the publication that has been made available to view this research.

There have also been alterations made to the Chinese writing system as a result of technological improvements. These modifications have been made. The incorporation of Chinese characters into digital systems required the development of particular encoding techniques in order to accommodate Chinese characters. This was done in order to fulfil the objective of accommodating Chinese characters. An example of this would be the fact that Unicode has set aside a significant chunk of its storage capacity in order to accommodate the massive number of Chinese characters. It is done in this manner in order to ensure that the characters are portrayed in an appropriate manner across all digital platforms. According to Modern Chinese Characters (2023), this translation shows the script's durability and its power to make a seamless transition into the time of digital technology through its ability to make use of digital technology.

Recent study has focused on the cognitive components of reading and writing in Chinese, with a particular emphasis on the cognitive aspects of these activities. Reading and writing in Chinese have been the subject of this research. There have been a number of studies that have shown that the logographic nature of Chinese characters may have a different impact on cognitive processing when compared to alphabetic languages. This difference has been suggested by the findings of these studies. Consider the profound orthography of Chinese, in which the characters do not have a direct phonetic link with one another. This is an example of how the Chinese alphabet is so extensive. It is possible that this will have an impact on the amount of mental effort that is necessary, as well as the process of learning to read. According to Reddit (2024), it is essential to implement a variety of instructional strategies in order to facilitate effective learning. An explanation for this can be found in the complexity of the scenario.

As a consequence of the changes that have been brought about by evolution, the teaching of Chinese characters in educational settings has progressed to incorporate ideas from the field

of cognitive science. One method that can be utilized to facilitate the process of learning is to acquire an understanding of the internal structure of characters. This structure encompasses both the semantic and phonetic components of the characters in question. Because of this comprehension, it is possible to make the process of learning more accessible. In *Chinese Character Internal Structures* (2024), the author contends that contemporary instructional strategies place an emphasis on the deconstruction of characters into their constituent radicals and components. It is said that this is the situation. Through the utilization of this method, students are able to appreciate the factors that contribute to the development of their character, which in turn enhances their ability to memorize the characters.

Furthermore, there have been substantial breakthroughs made in the manner in which digital representations of specific Chinese characters have been implemented. Several models have been developed by researchers that are capable of producing Chinese characters in a variety of artistic styles. The employment of deep neural networks was the method that was utilized to generate these models. For instance, by employing the W-Net architecture, it is possible to generate Chinese characters with a style that is entirely arbitrary based on a single example. This will allow for the generation of Chinese characters. This demonstrates that artificial intelligence has the potential to both conserve and develop within the artistic traditions of the script, as stated by Jiang et al. (2024). Furthermore, this example demonstrates that this potential exists.

A major influence is being exerted on the development of the Chinese writing system as a result of the efforts that are currently being made to standardize the writing system. The publishing of the "Stroke Orders of the Commonly Used Standard Chinese Characters" in the year 2020 serves as an example of ongoing efforts to standardize writing systems. This attempt is highlighted by the fact that it was released in the year 2020. By the year 2023, the stroke ordering of the basic Chinese characters that are typically utilized will have been established. Due to the fact that this standard offers recommendations for the right stroke sequences for 8,105 characters, it is significantly less difficult to maintain uniformity in handwriting and training across a wide variety of locales.

Utilizing empirical research, an examination into the relationship between the ability to read and write Chinese characters and the level of reading competency has been carried out. This inquiry was carried out in order to determine the extent of the association. An investigation on the reading abilities of individuals who were studying Chinese as a second language was carried out through the use of a study that analyzed data from the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK). An investigation into the ways in which elements such as the practice of handwriting, the background of language, and the cultural milieu all contribute to the development of reading ability was carried out by the research. According to *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021), the findings indicate that engaged participation in the process of character writing can lead to an enhancement in individual reading ability. Within the context of the process of language acquisition, this is done with the purpose of illustrating the connection that exists between reading and writing.

The field of computational linguistics has made enormous strides in recent years, which has allowed us to make major advancements in our understanding of the structures of Chinese characters. Unique frameworks that make use of library learning and program synthesis have

been developed in order to determine the combinatorial principles that lie beneath Chinese characters. These frameworks have been constructed in order to accomplish this goal. In an effort to recognize the Chinese characters, this has been carried out today. According to Jiang et al. (2024), they shed light on the process by which characters are generated from a collection of key components, providing insights into the effectiveness and development of the composition. In addition, they provide information about the composition's evolution. Through the use of these computer models, the process is illuminated.

In the course of history, the modernization of the Chinese writing system has also been investigated through the employment of historical tales. This examination has taken place numerous times. The work "Kingdom of Characters" by Jing Tsu is an example of a piece of literature that chronicles the efforts that were made to modify Chinese character in order to accommodate the requirements of contemporary culture. Among these accomplishments is the introduction of Chinese characters onto digital platforms and typewriters. Some of these contributions are also included. According to Kingdom of Characters (2023), these narratives provide a comprehensive perspective on the challenges and successes that were encountered during the process of transitioning an ancient script into the modern world.

Theoretical Framework

Social Acceptance Theory

In this context, English has become one of the most popular international languages in today's world. As the young generation is considered the future of social development in Chinese society as well, English speaking skills among college students are highly significant. As social acceptance theory is all about the use of different aspects, skill development among college students while learning English speaking fluently can help in the future development of Chinese society on the international level. As stated by Xiuwen & Razali (2021), participation of skills in terms of social development of Chinese society is highly dependent on English speaking skills while overcoming the influence of cultural aspects and native language.

Roger's Theory of Humanistic Theory of personality development

In this context, it can be stated that college students in China should also reach their full and unique potential while actualising their own selves. In order to enhance self-worth, the students must understand the importance of skill development in English speaking while overcoming the cultural barrier of the native language of China (Gong et al., 2021). This can help them to enhance their self-image while enriching the ideal self of each student. In the higher studies sector of Nanchang province of China, enhancing students' potential is also a responsibility of college teachers while helping to find the platform for developing their English speaking skills. This can also help in avoiding negative self-perception of students while encouraging them to realize self-actualisation.

Ethnocentrism Theory

In the case of the current study, the application of enthusiasm is adopted in order to increase the skills development of English speaking among college students in Nanchang, China. Therefore, order to embrace English speaking skills in a fluent manner while rising commitment and retention of cultural aspects in Chinese society is possible when the young generation can understand that both of these aspects are important to living in today's world.

The college students of Nanchang are not suggested to avoid cultural aspects and values of the native language. As per the statement of Lim, Towndrow & Min Tan (2021), the students only have to understand that skill development in English speaking is only helpful for enriching literacy practices and societal aspects while representing China in the world. English language speaking can also help college students to represent the cultural significance of China throughout the world based on the English language as it is the most popular and common international language at this time.

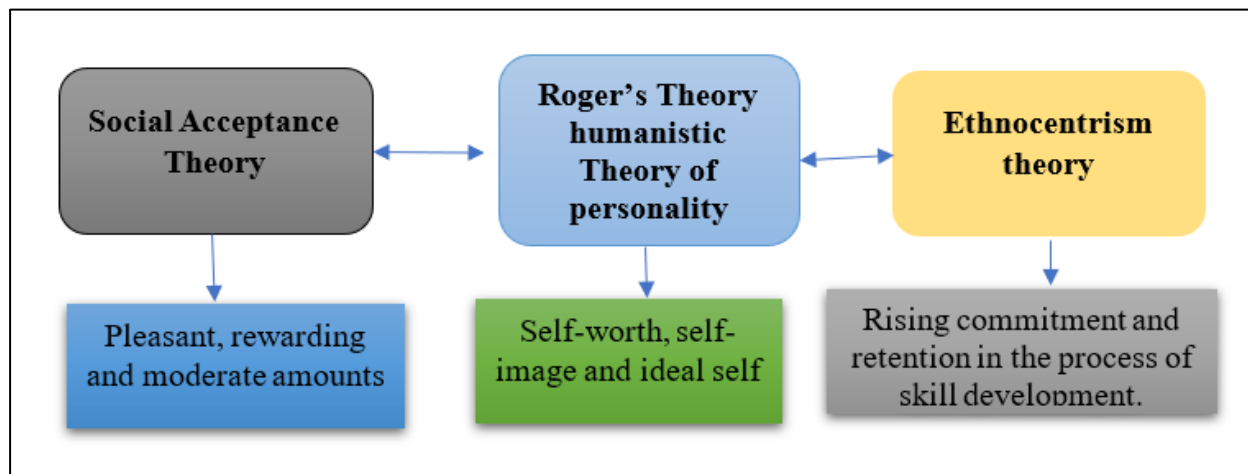


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework
(Source: Created by Self)

Conceptual Framework

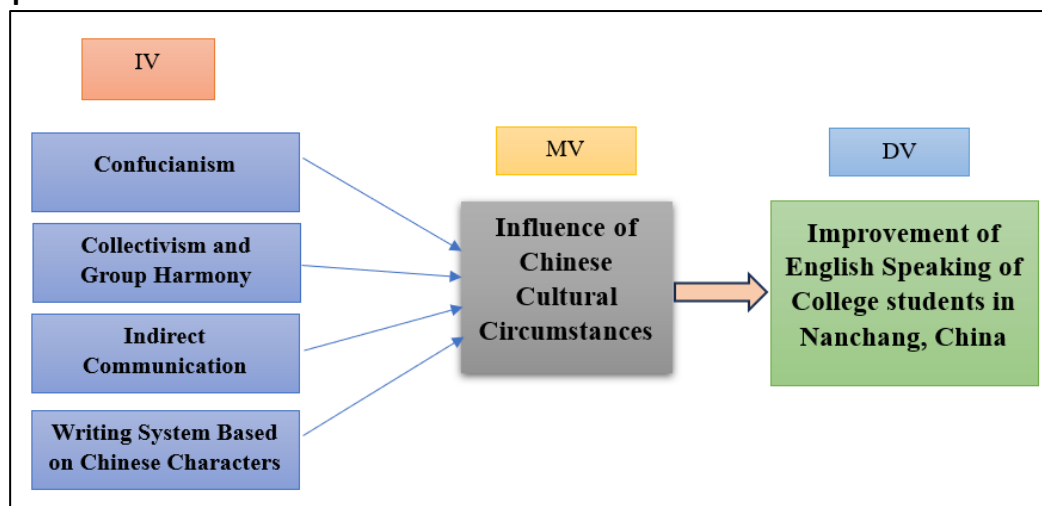


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework
(Source: Created by Self)

Research Methodology

For this study, an explanatory quantitative research design was chosen over descriptive and exploratory research designs. The primary reason for selecting an explanatory approach was to examine and quantify the impact of Chinese cultural circumstances on English-speaking abilities among college students in Nanchang, China. Through a structured quantitative methodology, this study systematically analyzed the relationships between

cultural variables (e.g., social norms, communication styles, language exposure) and English language proficiency.

For this study, a primary quantitative data collection method was employed to gather firsthand information from college students in Nanchang, China regarding the influence of Chinese cultural circumstances on their English-speaking abilities. The data was collected using structured online surveys, which provided a systematic and efficient means of gathering responses from a large number of participants. This method was chosen due to its ability to generate real-time, quantifiable insights that align with the research objectives. Conducting the survey online also ensured that students could participate conveniently, increasing response rates while maintaining accuracy and consistency in data collection.

The study was conducted at Nanchang University, a well-established institution in Nanchang, China, known for its diverse student population and strong emphasis on English language education. With a student population of approximately 15,000, the university provides an ideal setting for investigating how Chinese cultural circumstances influence English-speaking abilities among college students. The institution offers various language-related courses, making it a suitable environment to explore the integration of English learning within a Chinese cultural context.

A total of 250 students participated in the survey, selected from an initial target population of 500 students and teachers who were actively engaged in English language learning and instruction. This sample size was determined to ensure statistical validity, with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ and a confidence level of 95%. By selecting a representative group of students, the study aimed to provide insights into the challenges, motivations, and cultural influences shaping their English-speaking abilities.

The collected data was analyzed using quantitative statistical techniques to examine the relationship between Chinese cultural circumstances and English-speaking abilities among college students in Nanchang, China. Inferential statistics were employed to generalize findings from the sample to the larger population, allowing the researcher to make predictions and identify key factors influencing English proficiency. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data processing, ensuring accuracy and efficiency in handling large datasets. This software facilitated data cleaning, coding, and statistical analysis, allowing for a systematic evaluation of student responses.

Results and Discussion

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	10.212	1.766		5.783	.000
	Confucianism	.055	.056	.060	.969	.033
	Collectivism and Group Harmony	.448	.104	.455	4.314	.000
	Indirect Communication	.301	.069	.369	4.369	.000
	Writing System Based on Chinese Characters	-.088	.061	-.111	-1.446	.149
	Influence of Chinese Cultural Circumstances	-.128	.106	-.146	-1.217	.225

a. Dependent Variable: Improvement of English Speaking

With the help of the outcomes of the regression analysis, you will be able to discover how different aspects of Chinese culture influence the growth of English competence. Given that cultural factors are taken into account, the constant term exhibits a statistically significant coefficient ($B = 10.212$, $p < .001$), which indicates that there is a baseline amount of improvement in English proficiency. Among the cultural components, Confucianism is one that demonstrates a marginally favorable effect that is yet significant ($B = .055$, $p = .033$). It would appear from this that the ideals of Confucianism contribute to the enhancement of English language skills, possibly through the approach of rigorous study that is promoted by these beliefs.

Given its high standardized coefficient ($Beta = .455$) and large positive effect ($B = .448$, $p < .001$), Collectivism and Group Harmony stands out as the most powerful cultural component in our model. Taking into consideration this conclusion, it appears that environments that place an emphasis on group help and collaborative learning have a major impact on the improvement of English-speaking abilities. Students may be able to improve their speaking talents through the usage of group work since it provides them with the opportunity to practice English in an atmosphere that is less stressful and more encouraging.

Both the moderate Beta value (.369) and the significant positive influence ($B = .301$, $p < .001$) are also observed in the context of indirect communication. This gives additional evidence that the indirect mode of communication that is widespread in Chinese culture can assist students in improving their English language skills. This is because it enables students to modify their conversational methods in order to rely more on subtle or non-verbal hints.

With regard to the Writing System Based on Chinese Characters and the Influence of Chinese Cultural Circumstances, on the other hand, there are no significant effects that have been detected ($p = .149$ and $.225$, respectively). According to this lack of relevance, relying on the Chinese character system does not immediately aid or hurt spoken English improvement, nor does the overall impact of broader cultural circumstances. Neither of these factors is relevant. When taken as a whole, the findings highlight the significance of group cohesion and indirect

communication in improving English proficiency, while at the same time downplaying the value of other cultural factors.

While examining for advances in English-speaking ability, it was concluded that the overall impact of Chinese cultural circumstances was statistically negligible ($p = .225$). This indicates that the overall impact was not significant. According to the findings of studies such as Wang and Li (2020), cultural values have a considerable influence on the manner in which individuals acquire a language and the way in which they feel about its acquisition. Additionally, the outcomes of language proficiency examinations are impacted as a consequence of these beliefs. It's possible that the gap can be explained by the fact that "cultural circumstances" is a catch-all term that could contain a number of different factors, some of which might have a more significant involvement in language acquisition than others. For example, cultural practices that are not related to language might not have any impact at all, or they might even have the opposite effect of what is anticipated, depending on factors such as the attitudes of families toward education and the opinions of society regarding English. The findings of Wang and Li (2020) indicate that cultural attitudes in general do not have as significant of an impact as more specific cultural aspects such as collectivism, which are related with social dynamics. It was shown that Confucianism, a cultural influence that is firmly embedded in Chinese society, confers a small but beneficial effect on the improvement of English-speaking skills ($B = .055$, $p = .033$). This was revealed through the use of statistical analysis by the Chinese government. Students' attitudes toward language acquisition can be greatly influenced by Confucian ideals including as discipline, respect for teachers, and an emphasis on hard effort, according to research conducted by Sun and Zhao at the year 2017. It is possible that this observation is consistent with their findings. When students adhere to the Confucian principle of a structured approach to instruction, it may be simpler for them to maintain regular language practice routines without experiencing any difficulties. Even if the principles of Confucianism are helpful in the process of language acquisition, the fact that their Beta value is so low (.060) indicates that they are not nearly as influential as other social factors, such as the cohesiveness of the group members. Although the strict study habits that are encouraged by Confucian traditions can be beneficial to the process of learning, Sun and Zhao (2017) suggest that these practices might not be the most effective method for enhancing one's ability to communicate verbally. Practice in communication and interaction with one's contemporaries are two factors that contribute more directly to this kind of progress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the findings of the study, the Chinese character-based writing system and cultural influences in general did not have a significant impact on the level of English competence shown by the participants. Because of this, the notion that broad cultural attitudes or literacy rates are the factors that determine language competence is called into question. Rather, it suggests that the complexity of the writing system and broad cultural perspectives may have less of an impact on language acquisition, particularly when it comes to speaking, and that real-time communication and social contact may play a more major role. This is especially true when it comes to speaking. In programs that emphasize spoken language, this information may cause teachers to place a higher priority on communicative and practical language abilities than they do on written language skills.

The researchers came to the conclusion that specific cultural elements, particularly those that pertain to social and communicative behaviors, are more essential than broad cultural norms and literacy practices when it comes to developing one's English skills. By placing an emphasis on group-based, interactive learning and appreciating the complexities of indirect communication tactics, language programs in Chinese and other cultural contexts that are similar can be modified to better suit the cultural preferences of students. There is opportunity for improvement in the methods of teaching languages that are culturally sensitive, and future research should study the interaction between educational approaches and other culturally specific characteristics. According to the findings that were gathered here, educational strategies that take into account cultural factors have the potential to lead to the most successful language learning outcomes. The aforementioned statement is particularly true in situations where adaptive communication and social support are highly valued from a cultural perspective.

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