

Beyond Tones and Characters: Public Speaking Anxiety in Chinese as a Foreign Language among Malaysian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

China's rapid economic growth has increased interest in learning Chinese, including among Malaysian students, yet Chinese is often perceived as one of the most difficult foreign languages for learners from alphabetic language backgrounds, contributing to heightened anxiety, particularly in public speaking. This cross-sectional survey study investigated the psychological and physiological indicators underlying students' anxiety, as well as the strategies they employ to manage it during public speaking tasks in Chinese as a foreign language. Participants were 122 students enrolled in Chinese language courses at a public university on the east coast of Malaysia, and data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. The findings indicate that key psychological indicators include feelings of tension, anxiety, and fear of forgetting the script, while major physiological indicators involve rapid heartbeat and discomfort prior to speaking. Overall, students reported a moderate level of anxiety, supported by various coping strategies such as repeated practice, careful selection of familiar vocabulary, and thorough preparation of speech content. The study recommends that educators reinforce these existing strategies and develop new pedagogical approaches to further enhance students' confidence and public speaking competence in Chinese, with important implications for producing competitive graduates in an era of globalization.

Keywords: Chinese as a foreign language; public speaking anxiety; psychological indicators; physiological indicators; student strategies

INTRODUCTION

China's rapid economic development over recent decades has propelled it to become the world's second-largest economic power, spurring global interest in mastering the Chinese language. Chinese has the largest number of speakers worldwide, used as a lingua franca, heritage language, and first or second language across and beyond Chinese-speaking regions. It has over one billion native speakers (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2015) and tens of millions of non-native speakers globally (Duff & Li, 2013). According to official data from the People's Republic of China government, 550 Confucius Institutes and 1,172 Confucius Classrooms covering primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions had been established in 162 countries by 2019 to promote Chinese language and culture internationally, alongside active research efforts for global cultural promotion.

China's economic boom has not only reshaped global economic structures but also regional trade relationships. Malaysia, as the first ASEAN country to establish diplomatic ties with China in 1974, has seen China as its largest trading partner for the past 14 years, along with strategic cooperation in geopolitics, infrastructure development, and cultural and educational exchange. Therefore, Chinese language proficiency among Malaysians is significant not only for fostering national integration but also for enhancing personal capabilities to learn a new language beyond the national and English languages, thereby broadening employment opportunities and income through additional language skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety towards Chinese as a Foreign Language

Chinese is widely recognized as one of the most challenging languages to learn, especially for learners from alphabetic language backgrounds (Hu, 2010; Halliday, 2014; Wang & Ruan, 2016). Its tonal-system, character-based writing, and extensive homophony place heavy demands on learners and intensify their sense of difficulty (Sung & Wu, 2011). The Foreign Service Institute of the United States classifies Chinese as one of the hardest languages for native English speakers and estimates that it requires about three times more learning time than many other foreign languages (Sung & Li, 2019), and this high perceived difficulty has been linked to relatively high dropout rates in tertiary-level Chinese courses (Luo, 2013).

Anxiety and worry are major affective challenges in learning Chinese and can strongly influence students' achievement and persistence (Ling, Qi, Chee, & Sunarti, 2023). Previous studies have reported a positive relationship between foreign language anxiety and dropout or low performance in language courses (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2003; Gardner, Moorcroft, & MacIntyre, 1987). For learners whose first language uses the Latin alphabet, Chinese may be particularly anxiety-provoking because there is no straightforward link between characters and pronunciation, the number of characters is large, and homophones are very common (Sung & Wu, 2011). Luo (2014) also points out that the tonal nature of Chinese requires constant attention to pitch, which makes speaking more demanding and more anxiety-inducing than listening, reading, or writing.

Within this broader field, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been conceptualized as a complex construct involving learners' self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors specifically related to language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In their model, FLA includes communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, all of which can occur in classroom interaction and assessment (Horwitz et al., 1986). Young (1990) similarly described FLA as anxiety associated with learning a language other than one's mother tongue and emphasized learners' nervousness, tension, worry, and fear in speaking situations. Communication apprehension, understood as fear of social interaction or speaking in groups or in front of an audience, is closely linked to how learners experience the foreign language classroom (Amat Suparia, Abdullah, Mhd Rusdi, Ghazuddin, & Mohammed Raffi, 2022). This body of work suggests that affective factors are central to understanding why some students struggle or withdraw from Chinese as a foreign language, especially when they must perform orally in front of others.

Anxiety in Public Speaking

Although learners may experience anxiety across different language skills, speaking is often reported as the most anxiety-provoking aspect of foreign language use (Price, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986; Luo, 2013). In classroom settings, activities that require oral performance in front of peers, such as speeches and presentations, tend to generate higher anxiety than more controlled or receptive tasks (Price, 1991). In the context of Chinese language learning, communicative activities such as public speaking are widely used to build oral competence and encourage students to confront and manage their anxiety (Sung & Li, 2019). Public speaking has been described as an art of using language effectively in different formats, including debates, lectures, speeches, and interactive communication (Mohd Effendi, 2010; O'Hair & Wiemann, 2012). At university level, strong public speaking skills are regarded as important for employability, career development, reduced communication apprehension, and increased confidence and leadership (Docan-Morgan & Nelson, 2015).

Despite these benefits, many students continue to feel anxious and nervous about speaking in public. This appears particularly evident among Generation Z, who often prefer online or virtual communication; survey evidence shows that a considerable proportion of young adults aged 18–24 are afraid of public speaking (Daily Mail, 2023), and anxiety levels are often higher among female university students (Sugiyati & Indriani, 2021). In foreign language contexts, however, most empirical work on public speaking anxiety has focused on English, while much less attention has been given to other target languages such as Chinese.

Existing studies on Chinese language anxiety have tended to explore general learning anxiety, classroom factors, the links between anxiety, motivation, and achievement, or anxiety in Chinese communication skills more

broadly, rather than public speaking specifically (Basith, Musyafak, Ichwanto, & Syahputra, 2019; Sung & Ko-Yin, 2019; Luo, 2013; Wang & Du, 2020; Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013; Ling et al., 2023). As a result, there is a clear gap in the literature on public speaking anxiety in Chinese as a foreign language, particularly among non-native learners in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia. Tanveer (2007) argues that understanding learners' anxiety reactions is essential if teachers wish to support them in achieving their desired performance and identifying the psychological and physiological indicators that underlie anxiety in Chinese public speaking, together with the strategies students use to cope with it, can therefore provide valuable guidance for designing more responsive and effective pedagogical interventions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, Chinese public speaking anxiety is conceptualized within the broader foreign language anxiety (FLA) framework, which views anxiety as a situation-specific response that emerges when learners must use the target language in meaningful communication, especially in front of others (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Luo, 2013). The sections on psychological and physiological indicators were designed to capture key dimensions of FLA identified in previous research, such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and associated somatic reactions during spoken performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Luo, 2013). At the same time, the strategy sections draw on work on coping and self-regulation in public speaking and foreign language learning, which highlights the role of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies such as rehearsal, positive self-talk, and anxiety-management techniques in helping learners regulate their emotional responses and sustain performance (Tanveer, 2007; Basith et al., 2019; Sung & Li, 2019). These components guide how anxiety is measured in this study and how the results are interpreted.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to identify the indicators underlying students' anxiety in Chinese public speaking and the strategies they used to cope with it. The study population comprised undergraduates enrolled in a Chinese as a foreign language course at a public university on the east coast of Malaysia, and data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via a Google Form link. A total of 122 non-native Chinese learners participated in the study. The instrument consisted of three sections: (a) respondents' background information, (b) psychological and physiological indicators of anxiety, and (c) strategies used to manage anxiety before and during Chinese public speaking. The items on indicators and strategies were adapted from an instrument developed by Hayaramae (2016) and were reviewed for suitability to the Chinese as a foreign language context. In line with previous research on foreign language anxiety and coping in public speaking and language learning, the sections on psychological and physiological indicators and on strategies were developed to reflect key dimensions of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and self-regulatory behaviors (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Luo, 2013; Tanveer, 2007; Basith et al., 2019; Sung & Li, 2019). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and descriptive statistics were used to summarize the levels of anxiety and the frequency of strategy use. All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was voluntary, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Background

A total of 122 non-native speakers of Chinese participated in the study, comprising 114 female students (93.4%) and 8 male students (6.6%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 25 years, with the majority representing Generation Z: 2 students (1.6%) aged 20, 40 students (32.8%) aged 21, 45 students (36.9%) aged 22, 22 students (18.0%) aged 23, 8 students (6.6%) aged 24, and 5 students (4.1%) aged 25. In terms of proficiency level, 62 students (50.8%) were taking Chinese as a foreign language Level I, while 38 students (31.1%) and 22 students (18.1%) were enrolled in Levels II and III, respectively.

Psychological Indicators of Students' Anxiety in Chinese Public Speaking

Students reported that anxiety was most salient during preparation and in anticipation of public speaking tasks rather than in a sense of general helplessness. The highest mean scores were observed for feeling tense and nervous while preparing the speech, worrying about forgetting the script, feeling anxious about possible questions on unfamiliar aspects of the topic, and becoming so nervous that planned content was forgotten during delivery (see Table 1.1). In contrast, items reflecting a more global sense of helplessness and expecting failure, confusion about the topic while speaking, and difficulty regaining focus after making mistakes recorded relatively lower means, indicating that such reactions were less central to students' experience. Taken together, these psychological indicators point to a moderate level of anxiety that is closely tied to evaluative concerns and preparation demands rather than to pervasive feelings of incapacity.

Table 1.1. Psychological Indicators of Students 'Anxiety in Chinese Public Speaking

| ITEM | MEAN |
|--|------|
| 1. When preparing to deliver a speech, I feel tense and nervous. | 3.92 |
| 2. I feel tense when I see the words "public" and "speaking" in the course outline during lessons. | 3.42 |
| 3. My mind becomes confused when I speak in front of an audience. | 3.25 |
| 4. When speaking in front of an audience, I become so nervous that I forget what I am supposed to say. | 3.49 |
| 5. When the lecturer announces a public speaking assignment in class, I feel increasingly tense. | 3.39 |
| 6. I am always afraid that I will forget my script when speaking in front of an audience. | 3.57 |
| 7. I feel anxious if the lecturer asks something about my topic that I do not know. | 3.72 |
| 8. My thoughts about the topic become jumbled when I speak in front of an audience. | 2.87 |
| 9. When I make a mistake while speaking, I find it difficult to focus on the next part of my speech. | 3.17 |
| 10. When speaking in front of an audience, I feel helpless and can only anticipate failure. | 2.74 |

This pattern is consistent with conceptualizations of foreign language anxiety as a context-specific construct involving communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation in performance situations (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Young, 1990). Learners' heightened concern about forgetting their script or answering unanticipated questions reflects the prominence of audience judgment and task stakes in shaping their emotional responses during public speaking (Price, 1991; Ling et al., 2023). The finding that students do not generally anticipate failure yet still experience notable tension and worry suggests that their anxiety is debilitating in specific moments but not overwhelming, leaving room for targeted pedagogical support to enhance their sense of control during Chinese public speaking.

Physiological Indicators of Students' Anxiety in Chinese Public Speaking

Physiological indicators mirrored the psychological profile, with the most prominent reactions being rapid heartbeat when starting to speak and discomfort both while waiting to present and in the hour prior to delivering a speech (see Table 1.2). Other symptoms such as trembling hands, sweating, faster breathing, and difficulty controlling tension were present at moderate levels, indicating that students experience noticeable but not extreme physiological arousal in public speaking situations. Overall, the physiological data corroborates the interpretation that anxiety is moderate and situational, intensifying around the moment of performance and during the waiting period rather than manifesting as persistent somatic distress.

Table 1.2. Physiological Indicators of Students' Anxiety in Chinese Public Speaking

| ITEM | MEAN |
|--|------|
| 1. My hands tremble during public speaking sessions. | 3.22 |
| 2. I start to sweat just before speaking in front of an audience. | 3.11 |
| 3. My heart beats rapidly as soon as I start speaking in front of an audience. | 3.65 |

| | |
|--|------|
| 4. I feel uncomfortable while sitting and waiting for my turn to speak. | 3.48 |
| 5. When speaking in front of an audience, I do not know how to control my tension or stress. | 3.05 |
| 6. I breathe faster before starting a public speech. | 3.14 |
| 7. I feel uncomfortable within an hour before delivering a speech to an audience. | 3.48 |

These findings resonate with previous work showing that oral performance in a foreign language is often accompanied by heightened autonomic arousal, particularly in high-stakes tasks such as speeches and presentations (Luo, 2013; Wang & Du, 2020). The concentration of physiological reactions around the start of speaking suggests that anticipatory anxiety and the transition from preparation to performance are critical phases when learners may benefit most from structured support, including relaxation techniques and explicit guidance on managing bodily responses.

Students' Strategies for Managing Anxiety Before Chinese Public Speaking

Before delivering speeches in Chinese, students reported frequent use of preparation-oriented and cognitively focused strategies. The highest mean scores were recorded for rehearsing the speech multiple times, selecting vocabulary in which they felt proficient, carefully preparing content, attending to linguistic accuracy, and organizing the speech structure systematically (see Table 1.3). Learners also commonly rewrote their drafts, motivated themselves by anticipating positive audience reactions, and engaged in background reading or research on the assigned topic, whereas watching peers' videos to imitate their speaking style was the least used strategy. These patterns indicate that students rely heavily on thorough preparation, content refinement, and self-motivation to manage their anxiety before speaking in front of an audience.

Table 1.3. Students' Strategies for Managing Anxiety Before Chinese Public Speaking

| ITEM | MEAN |
|---|------|
| 1. I choose vocabulary that I am proficient in for the content of my speech. | 4.18 |
| 2. I always prepare the content carefully for the assigned topic. | 4.17 |
| 3. I practice a lot or rehearse many times before the public speaking session. | 4.24 |
| 4. I analyze and get to know my audience before speaking in front of them. | 3.51 |
| 5. I motivate myself by anticipating positive reactions when speaking in public. | 3.90 |
| 6. I plan or organize the structure of my speech content systematically and appropriately. | 4.06 |
| 7. I carefully consider language aspects in my speech, such as grammar, vocabulary and expressions used. | 4.09 |
| 8. I usually watch videos of other students' assignments to imitate their speaking style before speaking in public. | 3.20 |
| 9. I always read or research extensively based on the topic given by the lecturer for public speaking. | 3.83 |
| 10. I rewrite my speech draft until I obtain the best possible content. | 3.93 |

Such strategy aligns with prior research emphasizing the role of cognitive and metacognitive preparation in buffering the impact of foreign language anxiety on oral performance (Hu, 2010; Halliday, 2014; Sung & Li, 2019). By rehearsing extensively, simplifying lexical demands, and structuring their ideas clearly, learners appear to reduce uncertainty and perceived task difficulty, which may in turn keep their anxiety at a moderate rather than debilitating level (Wang & Ruan, 2016; Zhao & Whitchurch, 2011). The relatively lower use of modelling strategies, such as observing peers' performances, suggests a potential area for pedagogical development, as guided exposure to successful examples could further strengthen students' confidence and performance expectations.

Students' Strategies for Managing Anxiety During Chinese Public Speaking

During the act of public speaking, the most frequently employed strategies were challenging negative thoughts by maintaining positive thinking and using deep breathing at the start or during brief pauses (see Table 1.4).

Students also reported managing their time effectively, sustaining confidence through inspiring self-talk, and projecting confidence through body movements, while speaking comfortably and using eye contact and friendly facial expressions were practiced to a moderate extent. In contrast, speaking without fear of making mistakes was the least endorsed item, suggesting that error-related concerns remain a persistent source of anxiety despite the use of various coping strategies.

Table 1.4. Students' Strategies for Managing Anxiety During Chinese Public Speaking

| ITEM | MEAN |
|---|------|
| 1. I manage my time effectively during public speaking sessions. | 3.73 |
| 2. I speak comfortably and appropriately in front of the class. | 3.50 |
| 3. While delivering a speech, I challenge negative thoughts by maintaining positive thinking. | 3.76 |
| 4. I continually make myself feel confident by having inspiring thoughts when speaking in public. | 3.66 |
| 5. I speak without fear of making mistakes. | 2.84 |
| 6. I consistently capture the audience's attention by using eye contact and showing a friendly facial expression during public speaking sessions. | 3.42 |
| 7. My movements, such as walking, standing, or moving, reflect my confidence when speaking in public. | 3.54 |
| 8. I take deep breaths before starting or when pausing briefly in the middle of my speech. | 3.76 |

These findings indicate that, in real-time performance, learners draw primarily on cognitive restructuring, relaxation techniques, and performance-management behaviors rather than on a complete reframing of errors as acceptable (Tanveer, 2007; Amat Suparia et al., 2022). The continued fear of making mistakes underscores the enduring influence of evaluative pressure in Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) public speaking, even among students who actively engage in positive thinking and behavioral regulation (Basith et al., 2019; Wang & Du, 2020). This pattern suggests that classroom interventions should not only teach techniques such as deep breathing and positive self-talk but also explicitly address beliefs about mistakes and perfection, for example by fostering more supportive error climates and incorporating low-stakes speaking opportunities.

Integrating Students' Anxiety Indicators and Coping Strategies in Chinese Public Speaking

Overall, the convergence of psychological, physiological, and strategy-use data suggests that respondents are not severely impaired by anxiety during Chinese public speaking; instead, they experience moderate levels of tension and arousal that appear to be partially managed through a repertoire of preparation and in-task coping strategies. The prominence of rehearsal, careful content preparation, and deliberate language selection is consistent with earlier work showing that appropriate strategy use can mitigate the negative impact of foreign language anxiety, even when the target language is perceived as highly demanding (Hu, 2010; Halliday, 2014; Sung & Wu, 2011; Wang & Ruan, 2016). At the same time, persistent anticipatory tension, physiological arousal, and fear of unscripted questions highlight the need for more systematic, pedagogy-driven interventions that integrate strategy training, scaffolding of public speaking tasks, and explicit normalization of anxiety within the CFL curriculum (Tanveer, 2007; Basith et al., 2019; Wang & Du, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Learning a foreign language, particularly Chinese as a foreign language, is inherently anxiety-provoking because its writing system and pronunciation differ substantially from those of languages that use the Latin alphabet. At the same time, China's rapid economic growth has increased the strategic value of Chinese proficiency, with oral communicative competence often regarded as more critical than other language skills in academic and professional contexts. Despite the integration of communicative activities into Chinese language teaching and learning, anxiety remains prevalent among non-native learners, especially when they are required to speak in front of an audience, where public speaking can seriously affect both performance and confidence if it is not managed effectively.

This study contributes to addressing these challenges by focusing specifically on public speaking anxiety in Chinese among non-native undergraduates in a multilingual Malaysian university context, an area that has received limited attention compared with research on English or general Chinese language anxiety. By examining psychological and physiological indicators alongside the strategies students use before and during Chinese public speaking, the study offers a holistic picture of how anxiety manifests in high-stakes oral tasks and how learners actively attempt to regulate it. The findings indicate that, although students display clear signs of tension and physiological arousal, their overall anxiety levels are moderate, suggesting that coping strategies such as repeated practice, careful content preparation, and deliberate language selection help to buffer the impact of anxiety on public speaking performance.

Educators should therefore systematically consider the psychological and physiological indicators that trigger students' anxiety in Chinese public speaking and design pedagogical interventions that equip learners with concrete, research-informed strategies to strengthen their confidence when addressing an audience. Continuous refinement of students' anxiety-management strategies is needed to enhance their public speaking competence, including self-confidence, voice projection, tone and intonation, fluency, and linguistic aspects such as content development, grammatical accuracy, and coherence. Such efforts are essential for producing competitive graduates with strong soft skills and for supporting national efforts to sustain diplomatic relations and strategic cooperation with the world's second-largest economy through enhanced Chinese language proficiency.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study also has several limitations. The data were collected from a single public university on the East Coast of Malaysia, and the sample consisted mainly of female Generation Z undergraduates, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or learner groups. In addition, the use of a self-report Likert-scale questionnaire and descriptive analysis captures students' perceptions at one point in time but does not establish causal relationships or track changes in anxiety and strategy use across different courses or proficiency levels. Future research could address these limitations by involving multiple institutions and more diverse samples, combining quantitative surveys with interviews or classroom observations, and using longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how specific teaching interventions influence anxiety and public speaking performance in Chinese over time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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