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A Study on Language Anxiety in Cross-cultural Adaptation—A Case Study of Chinese Exchange Students at the University of Alcalá

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Abstract

This study used a mixed method (N=50 Chinese exchange students +5 Spanish teachers) to explore the mechanism of language anxiety and cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in the Spanish classroom. With the increase in the number of foreign students going to the West, language anxiety has become the core obstacle to adaptation. Grammatical differences (such as verb conjugation) and cultural conflicts (such as the contradiction between "face culture" and direct feedback mode) between Chinese and Spanish aggravate communicative avoidance. Quantitative data showed that the high anxiety scenarios were class participation (72%), group discussion (65%), and instant error correction (58%), and the level of anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with DELE scores ($r=-0.43$, $p<0.01$). Qualitative analysis showed that the dynamics of anxiety were consistent with the U-shaped curve theory. In the initial stage (1-2 months), anxiety in the crisis stage was triggered by cultural unfamiliarity, in the middle stage (3-4 months), peer intervention reduced anxiety by 32%, and in the later stage (5-6 months), anxiety fluctuated due to exam pressure. Based on the "dual path model of culture-language anxiety", anxiety is driven by both cultural paths (such as face threats) and language paths (such as grammatical errors). It is recommended that Spanish universities adopt a feedback strategy of "content first, error correction second" and establish intercultural language partners; Chinese students were required to incorporate metacognitive training (such as anxiety journal) and cross-cultural simulation (such as classroom debate role play) before the trip. This study provides a theoretical and practical framework for LOTEs learners, and emphasizes the synergistic integration of psychological support and language training to optimize the effectiveness of cross-cultural education.

Keywords

Language anxiety; Cross-cultural adaptation; Spanish language teaching; Psychological support; Mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the acceleration of globalization, the scale of international student mobility continues to expand. According to statistics, the number of Chinese students studying in Spain in 2023 nearly tripled compared to a decade ago (Ministerio de Universidades, 2023). However, language anxiety, as a core obstacle in cross-cultural adaptation, severely

restricts international students' academic engagement and psychological well-being. Learners of Spanish as a second language face unique challenges: on one hand, linguistic distance (e.g., morphological differences between Chinese and Spanish) leads to difficulties in grammar acquisition; on the other hand, cultural differences (e.g., the clash between Chinese "face-saving culture" and the direct feedback model in Spanish classrooms) exacerbate communication avoidance behaviors (Dewaele, 2022).

The author participated in a six-month exchange program at the University of Alcalá in Madrid, Spain, in September 2024, organized by the College of Foreign Languages at Fujian Normal University. During this period, the author keenly observed the language anxiety experienced by Chinese exchange students in cross-cultural adaptation. The uniqueness of this group lies in two aspects: first, the short-term exchange (1-6 months) concentrates adaptation pressure during the peak period of language anxiety; second, Spanish, as a less commonly taught language (LOTEs), often traps learners in a "high-input, low-output" frustration cycle (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Existing research predominantly focuses on anxiety in English-speaking contexts, leaving a gap in the empirical exploration of Chinese students' psychological dynamics in Spanish classrooms.

1.2 Research Significance

This study holds both theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, by integrating cross-cultural adaptation theories (e.g., the U-curve model) with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), it constructs a dual-dimensional analytical framework that bridges the cultural and linguistic factors often treated in isolation, thereby offering a systematic perspective for LOTEs learners' anxiety research. Practically, the findings provide empirical evidence for Spanish universities to optimize international student support systems (e.g., adding language psychology counseling modules and designing cultural adaptation workshops). They also guide pre-departure training programs for Chinese students (e.g., cross-cultural conflict simulations and metacognitive strategy development), enhancing short-term exchange students' psychological adaptation and language learning outcomes.

1.3 Research Questions

This study investigates three interconnected dimensions of language anxiety in cross-cultural contexts. First, it analyzes the manifestation patterns of anxiety among Chinese exchange students in Spanish classrooms, particularly contrasting intensity levels between oral tasks (e.g., impromptu speeches) and listening comprehension to reveal context-specific impacts. Second, it traces the dynamic interplay between cultural adaptation stages (honeymoon, crisis, adjustment) and anxiety fluctuations, identifying stress triggers such as academic setbacks or cross-cultural conflicts through the U-curve model. Finally, it evaluates interventions like adaptive error-correction strategies and peer support systems to propose a collaborative model integrating curriculum design, community support, and institutional safeguards, fostering equilibrium between psychological adaptation and language development in cross-cultural learning environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Core Concepts

Language anxiety is defined as a psychological tension experienced by learners in target language use, stemming from self-evaluation, communicative pressure, or negative anticipation (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) proposed by Horwitz and colleagues operationalizes this construct into three dimensions: *communication apprehension* (e.g., "mental blankness" during class participation), *test anxiety* (e.g., palpitations before oral exams), and *fear of negative evaluation* (e.g., shame during teacher corrections). This theoretical framework underpins the analysis of Chinese students' anxiety manifestations in Spanish classroom contexts.

In terms of cross-cultural adaptation models, the U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955) divides adaptation into four phases—honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment—with the crisis phase marked by cultural conflicts often coinciding with peak language anxiety levels. Cultural shock theory (Oberg, 1960) further identifies *cognitive dissonance* (e.g., clashes between egalitarian teacher-student interactions in Spanish classrooms and Chinese hierarchical educational norms) as a core trigger for anxiety. The integration of these theories provides a theoretical lens for examining the dynamic evolution of language anxiety in this study.

2.2 Related Research Progress

Extensive studies confirm the negative impact of language anxiety on second language acquisition. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) demonstrated that high-anxiety learners tend to reduce classroom interaction (e.g., Chinese students avoiding complex sentence structures due to grammatical insecurity) and experience declining self-efficacy (Woodrow, 2006). However, these conclusions primarily derive from English learners, with limited research on LOTEs like Spanish.

In cross-cultural classrooms, cultural differences profoundly influence anxiety triggers. King (2013) found that the clash between Chinese "face culture" and Spanish teachers' direct correction methods may lead to anxiety from "losing face." Dewaele (2022) further noted that Spain's spontaneous debate-style teaching contrasts with China's teacher-centered "lecture-reception" model, heightening students' communication pressure. However, existing studies predominantly focus on long-term international students, neglecting the "compressed adaptation" characteristics of short-term exchange students (1-6 months) and lacking empirical data from Spanish classrooms.

Existing research exhibits three primary limitations. First, approximately 90% of studies focus on English-language contexts, overlooking the unique anxiety-inducing effects of linguistic distance in inflectional languages like Spanish, particularly its morphological complexity (e.g., verb conjugation systems). Second, predominant reliance on long-term international student samples fails to capture the dynamic anxiety patterns of short-term exchange students. Third, intervention strategies lack cross-cultural adaptability, exemplified by findings such as Chinese learners' preference for structured feedback over open-ended discussions (Lieberman & Amaya-Jackson, 2005), which may not generalize to other educational contexts.

While the universality of language anxiety is well-documented, its cultural specificity in Spanish classroom environments remains underexplored. For instance, conclusions about structured feedback derived from English-language learners (Lieberman & Amaya-Jackson, 2005) require empirical validation in Spanish pedagogical settings. This theoretical gap establishes the rationale for the present study: employing a mixed-methods approach to unravel the anxiety mechanisms among short-term exchange students and to develop a culturally adaptive intervention framework tailored to Spanish-Chinese cross-cultural dynamics.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to comprehensively examine Chinese exchange students' language anxiety and cultural adaptation mechanisms. The quantitative component measures anxiety distribution and key influencing factors, while the qualitative component explores individual experiences. Participants include 50 Chinese exchange students (average age: 21.3 years; Spanish learning duration: 2-4 years) and 5 Spanish instructors (teaching experience ≥5 years) at the University of Alcalá during the 2024-2025 academic year. Convenience and stratified sampling ensured gender and disciplinary balance (Etikan et al., 2016).

3.2 Data Collection Tools

Quantitative data were collected using a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Based on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) original framework, this scale incorporated two new dimensions tailored to Spanish classroom contexts: "fear of correction" and "cross-cultural communication pressure" (Dewaele, 2022). The scale consisted of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Its reliability was confirmed through a pilot test (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), meeting psychometric standards (Field, 2018).

Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interview guidelines covering four themes: cultural conflict events (e.g., "feelings about public correction by teachers"), coping strategies (e.g., "frequency of seeking peer assistance"), psychological adjustment processes (e.g., "self-reflection during peak anxiety periods"), and expectations regarding instructional feedback (e.g., "preference for delayed vs. immediate correction"). Interviews averaged 45 minutes in length, with all sessions audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods data analysis strategy integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure comprehensive and in-depth findings. For quantitative data processing, SPSS 26.0 was utilized to conduct

statistical analyses. Initial descriptive statistics (e.g., mean values, standard deviations) were calculated to map the overall distribution of language anxiety and identify concentration trends in high-anxiety scenarios. Subsequent Pearson correlation analyses examined the relationship between language anxiety levels and DELE (Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera) test scores, with a focus on dynamic interactions between oral proficiency sub-scores and anxiety indices. Outliers were systematically screened and adjusted during data processing to enhance the robustness of statistical outcomes.

Qualitative data analysis was performed using NVivo 12.0. Interview transcripts underwent line-by-line coding following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, with open coding progressively refined into core themes. For instance, students' classroom silence was coded as *"silence as self-protective strategy"*, while proactive peer-support-seeking behaviors were categorized as *"active help-seeking behavior"*. To ensure coding reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of texts, achieving a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.81, indicating strong inter-coder agreement. The qualitative analysis not only uncovered micro-level manifestations of cultural conflicts but also revealed individualized coping strategies for anxiety, thereby providing nuanced contextual explanations for the quantitative findings.

4. Research Findings

4.1 General Characteristics of Language Anxiety

Quantitative data indicated significant scenario-based anxiety disparities. High-anxiety scenarios included class participation (72%), group discussions (65%), and immediate teacher corrections (58%). Spanish's grammatical complexity (e.g., verb conjugation errors) exacerbated anxiety, with 58% of interviewees reporting "avoiding participation due to conjugation mistakes"—a phenomenon less common among English learners (Dewaele, 2022). Anxiety levels negatively correlated with DELE scores ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$), particularly in the oral subtest ($r = -0.51$), validating MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012) "anxiety-performance vicious cycle" theory.

4.2 Dynamic Changes in Cross-cultural Adaptation

The phased dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation critically influence language anxiety trajectories. In the initial phase (1-2 months), cultural unfamiliarity dominated anxiety triggers, with 86% of participants reporting classroom barriers due to Spanish colloquialism misinterpretation (e.g., mistaking greeting phrases like "Qué tal" for quiz questions). This aligns with Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve crisis phase. During the intermediate phase (3-4 months), peer-instructor interventions reduced anxiety by 32%, with cross-cultural language partners increasing discussion participation by 2.4× ($p < .05$). By the late phase (5-6 months), despite 40% self-rated fluency gains, 57% exhibited cyclical anxiety from DELE exam pressures, revealing persistent assessment-driven stressors (Woodrow, 2006). This nonlinear progression underscores institutional factors' enduring role in anxiety modulation.

4.3 Key Factors in Anxiety Alleviation

The qualitative analysis uncovered two core intervention pathways. First, optimizing instructors' positive feedback strategies significantly reduced anxiety intensity. 78% of students reported that *delayed error correction*—a technique prioritizing content affirmation before grammatical correction (Lieberman & Amaya-Jackson, 2005)—mitigated face-saving conflicts, as exemplified by one participant's reflection: *"When the teacher said, 'Your idea is interesting, but the verb needs conjugation,' I no longer felt embarrassed."* Second, establishing cross-cultural peer support groups alleviated anxiety through enhanced belongingness. The term *"sense of belonging"* appeared 43 times in interview transcripts (NVivo frequency analysis), with students highlighting partners' guidance in decoding cultural tacit rules (e.g., interpreting Spanish classmates' *"non-offensive"* speech interruptions). Additionally, metacognitive strategies like anxiety journaling demonstrated efficacy in improving self-regulation, resonating with Woodrow's (2006) findings on reflective practice as a coping mechanism.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study validates the applicability of the U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955) in analyzing language anxiety dynamics. Quantitative data reveal that Chinese exchange students' anxiety levels surged during the initial phase (1-2 months)

due to cultural unfamiliarity, aligning with the crisis phase predictions, then declined significantly in the intermediate phase (3-4 months) through cross-cultural peer interventions, corroborating the recovery phase's adaptive mechanisms. However, diverging from the classical U-curve, anxiety exhibited fluctuating patterns during the adjustment phase (5-6 months onward), driven by exam pressures and career-related uncertainties. This finding extends cross-cultural adaptation theory by demonstrating that language anxiety evolution is not unilinear but co-modulated by academic evaluation systems and external societal stressors.

Building on these insights, the study proposes a dual-pathway model of culture-language anxiety. This framework categorizes anxiety triggers into two pathways: cultural (e.g., face-threatening interactions) and linguistic (e.g., self-doubt from morphological errors). Addressing the cultural dimension gap in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS theory, the model offers novel perspectives for Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) research. For instance, qualitative data highlight that Spanish instructors' direct error corrections amplified anxiety predominantly through the cultural pathway ("loss of face") rather than linguistic complexity (Dewaele, 2022), challenging assumptions about grammar-induced stress dominance in prior frameworks.

5.2 Practical Implications

For Spanish universities, this study recommends implementing cross-cultural adaptation workshops, prioritizing instructor feedback optimization. Drawing on structured feedback protocols (Lieberman & Amaya-Jackson, 2005), teachers could adopt a *content-first, grammar-delayed* approach—verbally affirming idea validity before providing written grammatical corrections—to mitigate face-saving conflict-induced anxiety. Concurrently, establishing cross-cultural peer alliances (e.g., Sino-Spanish language partner programs) would enhance students' sense of belonging, as evidenced by interview accounts (e.g., *"My language partner demystified Spanish humor"*).

For Chinese students, pre-departure targeted training proves critical. Cultivating metacognitive strategies like Woodrow's (2006) anxiety journaling helps identify triggers and develop coping plans. Practical measures include pre-departure simulations of Spanish classroom debates using role-play to mitigate impromptu speaking anxiety. Universities should also provide cross-cultural conflict case studies (e.g., *"Responding to public error correction"*) to foster adaptive cognitive frameworks, equipping students with anticipatory navigation skills for academic-cultural dissonance.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has two primary limitations. First, the sample was confined to 50 exchange students from a single university using convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016), necessitating caution when generalizing findings to other Spanish institutions or long-term international student populations. Second, the six-month data collection period did not track post-return anxiety residue, highlighting the need for longitudinal mixed-methods designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to elucidate long-term linguistic anxiety impacts.

Future research should expand in three directions: 1) recruiting multi-institutional samples to compare moderating effects of pedagogical styles (e.g., Universidad Autónoma de Madrid vs. Universitat de Barcelona) on anxiety mechanisms; 2) integrating physiological indicators like cortisol levels (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012) to enhance anxiety measurement objectivity; 3) developing culturally adaptive intervention toolkits, such as dynamic assessment scales based on the dual-pathway model.

While the U-curve theory provided a foundational framework, its explanatory power for non-academic stressors requires further validation. For instance, MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012) Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions might explain why some students maintained low anxiety during crisis phases. These theoretical intersections underscore the need for integrated psychocultural frameworks that reconcile emotional resilience with cultural adaptation dynamics.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically reveals the core manifestations and dynamic mechanisms of language anxiety among Chinese exchange students in Spanish classrooms. Quantitative data highlight anxiety symptoms centered on oral avoidance, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, aligning with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS framework. However, Spanish's grammatical complexity amplifies self-doubt from errors, expanding traditional anxiety models (Dewaele, 2022). Qualitative findings show that anxiety evolution is not linear but shaped by cultural adaptation stages and

external pressures (e.g., academic evaluations).

To enhance cross-cultural education, this study advocates dual-track strategies balancing psychological support and language training. Spanish instructors should adopt structured feedback to reduce face-related anxiety, while universities should design cultural simulations to ease social fears. Chinese students benefit from pre-departure grammar drills and metacognitive strategies. Integrating psychological interventions into language pedagogy fosters synergy between cultural adaptation and linguistic competence, offering sustainable solutions for globalized education.

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