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From Silence to Voice: Chinese University Students' Classroom Participation when Studying Abroad at a U.S. University

Liam P. Duffy

Wenzhou-Kean University, China
<http://orcid.org/0009-0008-6468-9501>

Zhang Shihan

University of Pennsylvania, USA
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0417-6080>

Shi Yuxin

University of Queensland, Australia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1418-5543>

Xue Yu

Columbia University, USA
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0682-9262>

ABSTRACT: *This qualitative study investigates reticence among Chinese university students in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms during study abroad at a U.S. university, exploring factors influencing participation and student-generated engagement strategies. Using semi-structured interviews with 21 Chinese students and reflexive thematic analysis, the study identifies six influences on reticence: cultural norms rooted in Confucian values, language anxiety, classroom environment, psychological pressures, longitudinal adaptation, and pedagogical incentives. Findings reveal participation bonuses as the dominant motivator, a clear preference for small-group discussions, and progressive increases in participation from freshman to senior year. Students proposed contextually attuned interventions: graded bonuses, gentle questioning, small-group ladders, and anonymous digital tools. The study contributes to international education by framing reticence as a malleable response rather than a fixed cultural trait, offering culturally responsive strategies tailored to Chinese students abroad. Implications include engineering classrooms that balance Western interactive norms with Eastern values of harmony and face preservation. Limitations include a single-institution sample, self-report data, and the need for*

experimental validation; future research should pursue multi-site longitudinal tracking.

Keywords: EMI, classroom participation, Chinese students, language anxiety, culturally responsive pedagogy, joint-venture university, study abroad

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Chinese university students frequently exhibit reticence in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms, a phenomenon well documented in the literature and attributed to the interplay of cultural, linguistic, and psychological factors (King, 2013; Noman & Xu, 2023; Shao & Gao, 2016). Confucian values: emphasizing respect for authority, group harmony, and avoidance of "standing out," shape student behavior by discouraging active participation that might disrupt class flow or result in "losing face" (Ho, 2020; Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023; Prutskikh & Merkulova, 2022; Wan, 2021; Xu et al., 2022). Compounding this, language anxiety, characterized by fears of vocabulary gaps, mental translation delays, and negative evaluation from peers or instructors, further inhibits participation in EMI contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986; D. Li et al., 2025; M. Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Significant differences between Eastern lecture-focused classroom norms and Western dialogic, student-centered pedagogies create discomfort and fragmented learning experiences for Chinese students in transnational and offshore campus settings (D. Liu et al., 2023). In U.S. contexts specifically, international students from high-power-distance cultures frequently report pressure to perform in discussion-based settings, alongside perceptions that curricula remain overly U.S.-centric, which complicates their academic adaptation (Kamran & Awan, 2024). While Chinese students often pursue study abroad or transnational education (TNHE) to improve English proficiency, gain cultural exposure, and enhance academic preparation, factors such as cost and family influence frequently favor TNHE or short-term programs over full-degree mobility (X. Liu et al., 2024). However, existing research often overlooks the unique context of "fully abroad" study, where students are immersed entirely in Western classroom environments, leaving a critical gap in understanding how reticence manifests and evolves in these settings (Nuralieva et al., 2024; Shao & Gao, 2016).

Current literature highlights a need for more context-specific research, longitudinal insights into student adaptation, and in-depth exploration of practical, student-generated interventions to mitigate reticence (Cui et al., 2024; Nuralieva et al., 2024; Okumura, 2024; Wan, 2021). While general factors influencing reticence (e.g., foreign language anxiety, low willingness to communicate, cross-cultural fear of "showing off") have been identified (D. Li et al., 2025; Qiao, 2025), there remains a scarcity of studies examining how these factors interact in

fully abroad settings and how student-suggested strategies, such as technology-assisted tools or collaborative learning formats, might address them (Sun & Zhang, 2024). While recent JIS scholarship has examined Chinese students' engagement through the lens of intersecting capitals in Canadian postgraduate EMI contexts (Chi & Xiang, 2026), the distinct challenges of U.S. undergraduate "fully abroad" settings, and particularly students' own proposed participation strategies, remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by making four distinct contributions. First, it examines a "fully abroad" U.S. context (Nuralieva et al., 2024; Shao & Gao, 2016), distinguishing it from transnational or offshore settings in which host-country immersion is incomplete. Second, it offers a longitudinal lens, tracing how participation evolves from freshman to senior year rather than capturing a single snapshot. Third, it foregrounds student-generated interventions, positioning students not as passive subjects of cultural deficit but as active agents in co-constructing pedagogical solutions. Fourth, and most critically, it challenges cultural essentialist interpretations of reticence by presenting participation as a malleable, context-dependent response rather than a fixed Confucian trait, thereby reframing silence as a strategic adaptation amenable to institutional intervention. By prioritizing student-generated solutions, the study moves beyond diagnosing reticence to offering actionable, contextually attuned strategies for educators in international EMI settings.

Research Questions

To address the identified gaps, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to Chinese students' reticence in EMI classrooms when studying abroad at a U.S. university?
2. How does participation evolve over students' time abroad?
3. What student-suggested strategies could enhance participation for Chinese students in international EMI settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesizes scholarship on Chinese student reticence across four intersecting domains: Confucian heritage culture, foreign language anxiety, transnational pedagogical clash, and longitudinal adaptation, guided by two interpretive lenses: Norton's (2013) investment theory (participation as identity negotiation) and King's (2013) complex systems perspective (silence as a dynamic "attractor state" rather than a fixed trait). The review distinguishes what is established, what remains contested, and how the present study addresses underexplored gaps.

Confucian Heritage Culture: Established Paradigm and Contestation

Foreign Classroom silence among East Asian students is frequently attributed to a monolithic Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). What is established is that Confucian values: respect for authority, group harmony, and avoiding "standing out," discourage active participation (Ho, 2020; Langen & Stamov Roßnagel, 2023; Wan, 2021). Hierarchical dynamics reinforce this, particularly for students with lower cultural capital (Huang et al., 2023). Pre-tertiary socialization entrenches reticence: Lin and Liu (2025) note that Chinese students carry a "passive acceptance" role from high school, fostering "social-oriented achievement motivation" (Ho, 2020, p. 141) that conflicts with Western constructivist pedagogies that value individual voice (Davis et al., 2020).

What is less settled, however, is whether CHC operates deterministically. Yu and Eng Wong (2025) found weak links between Confucian identity and unwillingness to communicate. Qiao (2025) shows that "fear of showing off" is cross-cultural, not uniquely East Asian. Recent JIS scholarship extends this critique: Cai et al. (2024) found Chinese graduate students distinguished between what they thought they should do and what they would actually do in U.S. classrooms, revealing a gap between internalized norms and enactment. Chi and Xiang (2026) demonstrated that Chinese engagement in Canadian EMI settings is shaped by intersecting linguistic, cultural, social, and economic capital, framing reticence as structurally mediated rather than culturally fixed. King's (2013) systems perspective, silence as an "attractor state" sustained by interacting factors (anxiety, norms, evaluation), offers a productive lens for reconciling these contested findings.

Foreign Language Anxiety and the Silence Cycle

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), tension associated with second-language use (Horwitz et al., 1986), is an established barrier, often leading to avoidance behaviors. Classroom environments trigger FLA through fear of spontaneous speech and negative judgment (Jugo, 2020; Maher & King, 2023). For Chinese EFL learners, Liu and Jackson (2008) identified a triad: fear of negative evaluation, low self-rated proficiency, and communication apprehension, creating a reticence cycle persisting in immersive settings. Xue (2026) similarly examined psychological well-being among Chinese international students in Southeast Asian EMI contexts, identifying English communication anxiety and heavy academic workloads as recurring stressors, while social support, resilience, and self-efficacy emerged as protective factors.

The causal direction, however, remains debated. Sparks and Alamer (2024) argue that anxiety is a symptom of L2 proficiency gaps, not a cause of underperformance. Kartasheva et al. (2021) link FLA coping to reflection and emotional intelligence. Cai et al. (2024) further show that even highly proficient Chinese students report discomfort with U.S. classroom roles, suggesting that FLA operates within culturally situated expectations rather than solely as a

linguistic deficit. The present study examines how FLA interacts with classroom environment, incentives, and longitudinal adaptation.

Transnational Higher Education and Pedagogical Clash

Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) contexts are well-established as intensifying cultural dissonance. Liu et al. (2023) found UK-style student-centered pedagogy clashes with teacher-centered norms, creating "fragmented" learning. Branch campuses often prioritize economics over cultural integration (Girdzijauskaitė, 2020; Lanford & Tierney, 2016). Student motivations: cost, preparation, family influence (D. Liu et al., 2023), set expectations for structured environments, and priming cultural mismatch.

The question remains whether these mismatches are inherent or redesignable. Bai and Wang (2022) use Norton's (2013) investment model to show Chinese students avoid whole-class participation to protect academic identity; speaking imperfect English threatens prior success, leading to private, face-saving post-class communication. Li et al. (2025) show teacher support boosts enjoyment, while Yang et al. (2022) link pre-tertiary norms to learner autonomy, creating barriers in interactive classrooms. Kamran and Awan (2024) extend this to U.S. settings, documenting that international students perceive curricula as U.S.-centric and struggle with pressure to participate in discussion-based activities, directly paralleling our context, while their survey design did not capture student-generated solutions.

Psychological Factors and Longitudinal Adaptation

Transnational Psychological factors extend beyond FLA. Wang et al. (2021) found extraversion predicts lower acculturative stress; neuroticism heightens it. Qiao (2025) reinforces fear of social transgression as universal, culture amplifying specific threat dimensions.

What is established: adaptation is non-linear. Cemalcilar and Falbo (2008) identified U.S. trajectories: initial decline followed by gradual host-culture identification. Social connections play paradoxical roles (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). University support mediates adaptation (X. Li et al., 2024), as evidenced by our participants' responses to participation bonuses—Okumura (2024) documented similar non-linear growth among Japanese exchange students.

Less clear is the mechanism driving this adaptation. McLean et al. (2026) offer "collective navigation": students transform individual challenges into shared community knowledge, suggesting that adaptation is socially mediated rather than merely individual. However, their UK-based online discourse analysis leaves underexplored whether collective navigation operates through U.S. classroom peer networks and how it intersects with pedagogical interventions, a dimension the present study examines.

Recent systematic evidence reinforces this non-linear adaptation trajectory. Aqsa (2026) further examined resilience and social support among international students, finding that both significantly predicted academic adjustment, while

length of stay positively predicted academic achievement. Zhao (2026) synthesized 16 qualitative studies on Chinese international students' acculturation experiences, identifying five interconnected stress domains: linguistic-communication stress, academic-competency stress, social stress, financial stress, and daily-environmental stress. Critically, they propose an Ecological-Relational Model of Acculturative Stress, arguing that acculturative stress stems largely from structural mismatches between students' cultural-educational backgrounds and host-university systems.

Research Gap and Study Rationale

Synthesizing the above, four gaps emerge: (1) insufficient focus on "fully abroad" U.S. contexts (Nuralieva et al., 2024; Shao & Gao, 2016); (2) lingering cultural essentialism; (3) underexplored student-generated interventions; and (4) limited qualitative depth on longitudinal adaptation. The present study addresses these by examining Chinese undergraduates during U.S. study abroad, a fully abroad context, using King's (2013) systems lens and Norton's (2013) investment framework to interpret reticence as dynamic and context-dependent. By centering student-proposed interventions and tracing change from freshman to senior year, the study extends recent *JIS* scholarship (Cai et al., 2024; Chi & Xiang, 2026; Kamran & Awan, 2024; McLean et al., 2026) through its U.S. undergraduate focus and participant-informed pedagogical strategies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive design, utilizing semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore the lived experiences of Chinese students in classroom participation during their year abroad at the home campus. This approach was chosen for its theoretical flexibility and recognition of researcher subjectivity as a key resource for generating nuanced, context-rich understanding, aligning with the complex, socially constructed nature of classroom reticence.

Participants and Recruitment

Twenty-one Chinese nationals (all native Mandarin speakers) were recruited via purposive convenience sampling. This sampling strategy was appropriate for obtaining in-depth insights from a specific, information-rich population central to the research question (Patton, 2014). Recruitment announcements were circulated through student WeChat groups and personal networks of the student co-researchers; no course credit or incentive was offered to ensure voluntary participation free from coercion. The sample consisted of 13 seniors and 8 juniors, representing a range of majors: English (8), Finance (3), Communication (2), Mathematics (3), Economics (1), Product Design (1), Graphic Design (1),

Business Analysis (1), and Computer Science (1) (see Appendix B for demographics).

The inclusion of both juniors and seniors was intentional. This range permitted preliminary longitudinal comparison, as seniors had accumulated three years of experience with Western-style pedagogies at the joint-venture campus prior to their U.S. study abroad, while juniors had only two. This variation in prior exposure to EMI and interactive teaching norms allowed us to capture different points along the adaptation trajectory, a key dimension of Research Question 2. However, the sample is drawn from a single Sino-American joint-venture university cohort, which shapes the findings in two important ways. First, participants had already experienced Western-style teaching and EMI instruction at their home campus in China, potentially reducing the initial cultural shock compared to students arriving directly from traditional Chinese universities. Second, their U.S. study abroad took place as a structured cohort experience rather than as individual migration, which may have provided built-in peer support networks that mitigated isolation. These institutional specificities limit broader transferability to non-joint-venture or non-cohort-based study abroad contexts, a limitation we acknowledge in the Discussion. This diversity across disciplines strengthens the potential transferability of findings to the broader population of Chinese students in EMI contexts.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, lasting 15–35 minutes, were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the three Chinese student co-researchers. This strategy deliberately minimized social desirability bias and language barriers, thereby fostering a more comfortable environment for participants to share their sensitive experiences. The interview guide (See Appendix A) covered key domains, including participation frequency, perceived barriers (e.g., language, culture, personality), facilitators (e.g., instructor style, peer support), and participant-generated suggestions for improving classroom dynamics. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim in Chinese to preserve the linguistic nuance. Transcripts were translated into English by the bilingual team and back-checked by the first author for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis:

- Familiarization: The first author and student co-researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the Chinese transcripts multiple times.

- Coding: The team then generated initial codes from the transcripts, focusing on segments relevant to the research question. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being forced into a pre-existing framework. Examples of initial codes included: "fear of losing face,"

“bonus points as primary motivator,” “mental translation delay,” and “preference for small groups.”

- Generating Initial Themes: The researchers collaboratively grouped related codes into potential themes and subthemes, creating thematic maps to visualize their relationships.

- Reviewing and Developing Themes: This phase involved a recursive process of checking the candidate themes against the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. Such practices led to the refinement and consolidation of the six major themes reported in the findings.

- Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes: The essence of each theme was clearly defined, and succinct, descriptive names were chosen (e.g., "The Double-Edged Sword of 'Face' and Social Harmony").

- Writing the Report: The final analysis was woven into a narrative, supported by vivid, translated data extracts.

Data saturation was reached after the 18th interview, as determined by team consensus during the theme-review and theme-development phase: the final three interviews yielded no new codes or thematic patterns, and the research team agreed that additional data would not meaningfully refine the existing six themes. This determination was made collaboratively by the first author and student co-researchers during debriefing meetings following each interview block.

Student Co-Researcher Training and Role Boundaries

The three Chinese student co-researchers were integral to the research process, occupying an "insider" positionality that facilitated trust and authentic disclosure. To ensure consistency and methodological rigor, they underwent a two-hour training session with the first author covering semi-structured interview techniques, ethical protocols (e.g., avoiding leading questions, maintaining neutrality), and the study's conceptual framework. Role boundaries were clearly delineated: student co-researchers conducted interviews, transcribed data in Mandarin, and participated in collaborative coding and thematic development. However, the first author, an American faculty member with fourteen years of experience teaching Chinese students, led the overall analysis, arbitrated interpretive disagreements, and bore final responsibility for theme refinement. Consistency in coding was maintained through regular weekly team meetings, where coders compared emerging codes against a shared codebook and resolved discrepancies through discussion until consensus was reached. This collaborative, cross-cultural analytical team enabled insider and outsider perspectives to be continually brought into dialogue, enriching interpretation while maintaining analytical rigor.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which a summary of the preliminary findings was shared with five participants, who confirmed the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations, leading to minor clarifications. A clear, auditable decision trail of the analytical process supported dependability. Transferability is facilitated by a thick description of the context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to assess its applicability to other settings. Peer debriefing among the research team further supported confirmability.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

The study received exemption from the relevant University Institutional Review Board. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with emphasis on anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

A key strength of this study's design is its thoughtful approach to reflexivity. The first author is an American faculty member with thirteen years of experience teaching Chinese students, a positionality that inherently shapes the research interests and interpretive lens. To counterbalance this and enrich the cultural interpretation, Chinese national student co-researchers, who share a cultural and educational background with the participants, conducted the interviews and participated in the coding and thematic development. This collaborative, cross-cultural analytical team enabled a more nuanced, critically examined interpretation of the data, in which insider and outsider perspectives were continually brought into dialogue.

RESULTS

Six major themes emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis, presented below with representative quotations from participants (all names are pseudonyms). Each theme includes logically grouped subthemes capturing related participant experiences. While the patterns described below were prevalent across the sample, we also note instances where participants' experiences diverged from the dominant trends.

Cultural Influences on Reticence

Most students (19 of 21) described silence as a deeply ingrained cultural strategy for preserving respect, harmony, and face, rooted in Confucian values and social norms. Two participants, E.L. (Global Business) and S.T. (Math), however, expressed less concern about cultural constraints, attributing their silence primarily to language proficiency rather than face concerns.

Respect for Authority and Fear of Disruption

Fourteen participants described interrupting a teacher as fundamentally disrespectful and a waste of collective time.

P.P. (senior, Communication): “Not interrupting the teacher is a sign of respect. Even if I don’t understand, I wait until after class.”

J.W. (junior, Finance): “If you speak when the teacher is talking, you waste everyone’s time. That’s rude.”

Losing face and the Fear of “Standing Out”

Eleven students invoked the proverb “the shot hits the bird that sticks its head out” to explain their reluctance.

O.L. (senior, English): “The shot hits the bird that sticks its head out. If you speak too much or incorrectly, everyone notices and judges you.”

J.X. (senior, Graphic Design): “Better to stay quiet than be the bird that gets shot.”

Language Anxiety as a Barrier

Language barriers were the most frequently cited reason for silence, mentioned explicitly by 19 of 21 participants. Two students, both English majors with high self-rated proficiency, reported minimal language-related anxiety.

Mental Translation Delays and Vocabulary Loss

Students repeatedly described ideas vanishing during the time required to translate them into English.

X. (senior, English): “I need to think it through in my mind in Chinese first... by the time I’m ready, someone else has already answered.”

L.W. (junior, Economics): “Suddenly forget the English words. The idea is gone. Blank.”

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fourteen students linked silence directly to fear of peer or teacher judgment.

S.Z. (senior, English): “If my English is not perfect, classmates will think I’m stupid.”

F.W. (senior, Finance): “Better no answer than wrong answer and lose face.”

Classroom Norms and Environment

All participants contrasted Chinese lecture-style norms with Western interactive expectations and identified specific environmental features that either inhibited or enabled participation.

Bonus Points as the Dominant Motivator

The majority of participants (19 of 21) cited participation bonuses as the strongest driver of speaking. Notably, two students, O.L. (senior, English) and K.J. (senior, Math), reported that they would participate regardless of bonuses, citing intrinsic motivation and personal growth.

F.W. (senior, Finance): "Bonus is everything. Without a bonus, almost no one speaks."

O.L. (senior, English): "If there is a bonus, I force myself to say something, even if scared."

Preference for Small Groups and Gentle Instructors

Thirteen students expressed a clear preference for small-group work and non-threatening questioning styles.

P.P. (senior, Communication): "Small groups, people can hear me easily, it's more interactive, and I feel less stressed."

K.J. (senior, English): "Gentle instructors make me feel more open to talk to them."

Psychological and Personality Factors

Introversion, peer pressure, and perfectionism emerged as robust silencers (mentioned by 12 students).

Peer Pressure and Fear of Embarrassment

C.K. (senior, Product Design): "Peer pressure... lose face in front of classmates if answer is wrong."

J.X. (senior, Graphic Design): "Everyone is watching. One mistake and you're the joke."

The Role of Friends and Perfectionist Self-Pressure

Nine students noted that having friends in class dramatically increased willingness, while perfectionism inhibited it.

S.Z. (senior, English): "I need to be fully prepared. If not 100% sure, I stay quiet."

V.Z. (senior, Communication): "With friends, I feel more relaxed and dare to speak."

A minority of participants (3 students: E.L., S.T., and X.C.) reported that peer presence had minimal effect on their participation, describing their silence as internally driven by personality rather than socially influenced.

Longitudinal Adaptation

Eleven participants explicitly described a clear trajectory of increasing participation over time. However, 4 students, L.W. (junior, Economics), X.Z. (junior, Economics), X.C. (junior, Finance) and J.Y. (junior, English) reported that their participation had not yet increased substantially, citing persistent language anxiety and limited prior exposure to interactive teaching.

From First Year Reticence to Senior Confidence

O.L. (senior, English): “First year fewest... increased year by year. Now I express my opinions in every class.”

K.J. (senior, English): “Freshman year, I never spoke. In my senior year, I spoke in every class. Big change.”

Small-Class Exposure as a Catalyst

Eight students directly credited the host campus’s small-class model (and its continuation abroad) for building early confidence.

Lina (senior, English): “The host campus's small-class teaching gave me practice. Now even in bigger U.S. classes I'm not afraid.”

Student-Suggested Intervention Strategies

Participants were remarkably consistent in proposing solutions (19 of 21 offered at least one suggestion). Two students, E.L. (Global Business) and S.T. (Math), offered no specific strategies, stating they preferred to adapt individually rather than change classroom structures.

Graded Bonuses and Gentle Questioning (15/21 students)

Fifteen students proposed structured small-group formats; twelve suggested anonymous digital tools.

Y.C. (senior, Finance): “Bonus points to students who answer questions. Only then will people speak.”

P.P. (senior, Communication): “First ask some relatively simple questions, then we gain confidence.”

Small-Group Ladders and Digital Anonymity (15/21 and 12/21 students)

Eleven students proposed structured small-group formats; nine suggested anonymous digital tools.

V.Z. (senior, Communication): “Divide into small groups, then representatives. Everyone gets a chance without full-class pressure.”

S.Z. (senior, English): “Anonymous app to write questions. No face problem.”

Personal Coping Strategies

Several mentioned self-regulation:

K.J. (senior, English): "Set goals... answer at least once per class" and "take a deep breath" before speaking.

Divergent Cases: Resistance and Persistent Silence

While the patterns above represent dominant trends, several participants diverged. Two students: O.L. (senior, English) and K.J. (senior, Math) —both with zero completed semesters at the home campus prior to study abroad- reported that participation bonuses were not their primary driver. O.L. stated: "If there is a bonus, I force myself to say something, even if scared," suggesting extrinsic motivation still operated, but both described intrinsic factors (curiosity, personal challenge) as equally significant. Conversely, three students—L.W. (junior, Economics), X.Z. (junior, Economics), and X.C. (junior, Finance)—all with 1-2 completed semesters at the home campus —described persistent silence even as upperclassmen, attributing it to unshakable language anxiety and perfectionism. L.W. noted: "Suddenly forget the English words. The idea is gone. Blank," while X.C. added: "Even after two years, I still freeze when called on." This variation underscores that reticence is not a uniform experience but a context-dependent response shaped by individual differences in language proficiency, personality, and prior exposure.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that Chinese student reticence in Western EMI classrooms is not a static cultural trait but a dynamic response situated at the intersection of cultural scripts, language anxiety, and pedagogical environment. While confirming well-documented factors like "face" and FLA, our findings from a fully U.S. abroad setting indicate that these barriers may be permeable when strategic, face-saving, and rewarded interventions are in place.

Cultural Scripts and the Persistence of Silence

Our findings align with Wan (2021) and the Confucian heritage literature, in which silence serves as a strategy for preserving face, demonstrating respect, and maintaining group harmony (Ho, 2020; Noman & Xu, 2023; Prutskikh & Merkulova, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Students' reluctance to interrupt mirrors Huang et al.'s (2023) observation of hierarchical dynamics and Lin and Liu's (2025) description of passive acceptance from compulsory education. In TNHE contexts, these values clash with student-centered pedagogies, creating fragmented experiences (D. Liu et al., 2023). This persistence aligns with Chi and Xiang's (2026) finding that Chinese engagement in Canadian EMI settings is shaped by intersecting forms of capital rather than cultural determinism alone.

However, recent scholarship complicates the stereotype that Confucian values predetermine silence. Yu and Eng Wong (2025) found that Confucian identity correlates positively with L2 willingness to communicate, while Qiao (2025) shows that "fear of showing off" is cross-cultural. King (2013) conceptualizes silence as a dynamic "attractor state" sustained by multiple factors. Cai et al. (2024) similarly found Chinese graduate students distinguished between

what they thought they should do and what they would actually do in U.S. classrooms. L. Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) demonstrate that when instructors create safe spaces, students reconcile criticality with harmony, paralleling our participants' face-saving solutions.

Navigating Cultural Scripts and Psychological Realities

Our findings suggest reticence is a negotiation between cultural dispositions and psychological stress. Language anxiety (FLA) often presents as the most direct barrier. Participants' reports of "mental translation delays" and "sudden vocabulary loss" are classic symptoms of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLA, creating a vicious cycle: face concerns amplify fear of mistakes, triggering FLA, leading to silence that reinforces perceived incompetence.

Our data complicate a deterministic view. Persistence of these behaviors demonstrates durability, while students' adaptation suggests malleability. Kamran and Awan (2024) document that international students from high-power-distance cultures perceive curricula as U.S.-centric and struggle with discussion-based pressure, echoing our participants' experiences and highlighting the need for institutional solutions. Culture appears to amplify universal anxieties rather than serve as the sole cause. The task is not to erase culture but to design pedagogies that manage this interaction.

The Pedagogical Ecosystem: Classroom as an Intervention Hub

Our participants' preference for low-risk interventions provides a practical blueprint. Student-generated solutions are supported by existing evidence, though experimental validation remains necessary.

The endorsement of small-group work is supported by H. H. Li and Zhang (2021) and Guo and Guo (2017), who found that structured small-group discussions produce gains in content generation and organization. This format may reduce face-threat (Chan & Smith, 2024), lower FLA (Russell, 2020), and align with task-oriented norms (Yang et al., 2022).

Bonus points, sometimes dismissed as utilitarianism (Lin & Liu, 2025), may function as a pragmatic mechanism that sanctions participation, redefines speaking as a rewarded academic skill, and makes implicit expectations explicit.

As Bai and Wang (2022) observed, when given low-threshold, familiar channels, Chinese students readily engage. This validates participants' suggestions for anonymous digital back-channels, bridging the gap between contribution and public performance anxiety.

Collectively, these strategies operationalize culturally responsive pedagogies (L. Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012; D. Liu et al., 2023) by engineering psychologically safe, academically rigorous classrooms. Bi (2025) similarly found that CRP enhanced international students' belonging and engagement in U.S. higher education, suggesting that student voices and CRP principles converge on similar strategies.

The Longitudinal Trajectory: From Reticence to Facilitated Adaptation

The journey from silence to participation appears neither automatic nor linear but facilitated. Increased willingness from freshman to senior year embodies non-linear growth trajectories documented elsewhere (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008; Okumura, 2024). The initial "dip" in participation mirrors the psychological decline observed by Cemalcilar and Falbo (2008); interventions may need to lower the affective filter (D. Li et al., 2025; Russell, 2020). As students acclimatize, focus can shift from comfort to capability-building.

This progression involves shifting coping strategies. Deep breathing and goal-setting align with Kartasheva et al.'s (2021) findings on self-regulation. The dual role of social networks, support, and potential inhibitor of integration (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022), underscores adaptation as socially negotiated. McLean et al. (2026) offer "collective navigation"—in which students transform individual challenges into shared knowledge. Our findings suggest this may operate through classroom peer networks as well as online platforms.

Contributions and a Practical Blueprint

This study offers preliminary insights through contextual specificity and student voice. By focusing on a fully abroad U.S. cohort, we address the gap identified by Nuralieva et al. (2024) and Shao and Gao (2016). A key theoretical implication is shifting from reticence as a cultural deficit to a dynamic, rational response to perceived threat, a response that pedagogical environments may help reshape.

While cultural and anxiety influences are profound, they may not be impervious to change. Educators can leverage student insights to create classrooms that are academically demanding, psychologically astute, and culturally responsive.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample (N=21) from a single Sino-American joint-venture institution limits generalizability. Participants had prior EMI exposure at their home campus, potentially reducing initial cultural shock. Data rely on self-reports and are subject to social desirability or recall bias. Experimental testing of suggested interventions is needed to establish efficacy.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has moved beyond diagnosing reticence to illuminating potential pedagogical change. While confirming cultural, linguistic, and psychological interplay, our findings indicate silence may be a malleable response rather than a fixed trait. Student-generated interventions: graded bonuses, small-group ladders, and anonymous tools are grounded in lived experience and supported by existing evidence, though experimental validation remains necessary.

Future research should experimentally test these strategies across diverse contexts. Multi-site longitudinal studies would strengthen generalizability. By doing so, we can shift from understanding silence to cultivating voice, fulfilling the promise of internationalized education: equitable intercultural dialogue in which every student can contribute.

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Author bios

LIAM DUFFY, EdD, is a Lecturer in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction (MATESOL), College of Education, at Wenzhou-Kean University, China. His research interests include recruitment and retention of international faculty in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) universities, job satisfaction, organizational support, and language learning strategies for Chinese learners of English and expatriate academics studying Mandarin. Email: liampaulduffy@gmail.com

ZHANG SHIHAN received her B.A. in English from the College of Liberal Arts, Wenzhou-Kean University, China. She is an incoming graduate student in the Language, Globalization, and Intercultural Studies (LGIS) program at the University of Pennsylvania, United States. Email: shihanz@upenn.edu

SHI YUXIN Shi Yuxin holds a Bachelor's degree in English from the College of Liberal Arts, Wenzhou Kean University. Currently, he is pursuing a postgraduate major in Applied Linguistics (TESOL concentration) within the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) at the University of Queensland, Australia. Email: yuxin.shi3@student.uq.edu.au

XUE YU holds a Bachelor's degree in English from the College of Liberal Arts, Wenzhou Kean University. Currently, she is pursuing a postgraduate major in Technology, Media, and Learning (TML) within in the Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Teachers College, Columbia University, United States. Email: xy2742@tc.columbia.edu

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about your major and year of study?
2. How often do you participate in class discussions?
3. What motivates you to speak up in class?
4. Are there certain classes (e.g., Chinese-taught or foreign-taught) where you feel more comfortable when participating? Why?
5. Does the language of instruction (Chinese vs. English) affect your willingness or ability to participate?
6. Have you faced any difficulties expressing your ideas in English during class? (culture differences or language barrier.)
7. Does the professor's teaching style (gentle or strict) influence your willingness to speak?
8. How do foreign instructors' expectations about participation differ from Chinese instructors?
9. Do you feel pressure (from peers, teachers, or yourself) when it comes to speaking in class? (Is it because of being an introverted person that you are afraid to speak in front of many people, or do you worry about giving an incorrect answer and getting embarrassed?)
10. How do your classmates or friends influence your participation in class? (Would you want to speak because a close classmate or friend raised a question? Or perhaps you were going to speak, but then you gave up the idea because you thought you would be regarded as someone too boastful and thus be criticized by others?)
11. Do you feel more comfortable participating in small group discussions or large lecture settings? Why?
12. Are there any strategies you or your classmates use to overcome shyness or hesitation?
13. Do you think participating in class helps improve your learning or language skills?
14. How has your participation changed over time after entering Wenzhou-Kean university?
15. Do you have any suggestions for improving class participation among Chinese students in joint university settings?

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

Number	Name	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Major	Completed semesters at home campus
Interviewee 1	P.P.	Female	21	China	COMM	2
Interviewee 2	F.W.	Male	22	China	FIN	0
Interviewee 3	O.L.	Male	21	China	ENG	0
Interviewee 4	J.X.	Female	21	China	ENG	1
Interviewee 5	E.L.	Male	23	China	Global Business	0
Interviewee 6	J.W.	Male	21	China	FIN	1
Interviewee 7	L.W.	Female	21	China	ECON	1
Interviewee 8	A.Z.	Female	21	China	ENG	1
Interviewee 9	C.K.	Female	21	China	IDD	0
Interviewee 10	J.X.	Female	22	China	Graphic Design	0
Interviewee 11	V.Z.	Female	24	China	COMM	0
Interviewee 12	S.Z.	Female	23	China	ENG	0
Interviewee 13	X.Z.	Female	21	China	ECON	1
Interviewee 14	S.J.	Female	21	China	ENG	1
Interviewee 15	K.J.	Female	21	China	Math	2
Interviewee 16	J.Y.	Female	21	China	ENG	1
Interviewee 17	L.Z.	Female	21	China	Math	2
Interviewee 18	X.C.	Male	20	China	FIN	2
Interviewee 19	C.Z.	Female	20	China	Business	2
Interviewee 20	Y.X.	Male	20	China	CPS	1

Interviewee 21	S.T.	Male	21	China	Math	3
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