

Exploring Intercultural Communication Dynamics: A Case Study of International Student Language Partnerships in Southwest China

Xiaoyi Wang^{1, *}

¹International College, Southwest University, China

* Corresponding author. Xiaoyi Wang (XYWang971@outlook.com)

Abstract: Engaging in language partnership is one of the common strategies employed by international students studying Chinese in China. This type of communication, which relies primarily on third-party introductions, occurs with lower frequency and involves simpler topics, significantly contributes to improving Chinese listening and speaking abilities of international students. The main challenge faced by international students in participating in language partnership is the fewer opportunities to meet language partners. Schools and teachers could strengthen the Chinese learning environment for international students by organizing activities, adjusting courses, and arranging accommodations, thereby enhancing opportunities for international students to acquire Chinese through language partners.

Keywords: International student, Language partner, Language study.

1. Introduction

Research indicates that one of the most frequently utilized strategies by international students in learning Chinese is social strategy (Belz, 2005). Apart from formal classroom instruction, international students living in China also engage in informal learning through natural social interactions, which serves as an important avenue. Interacting with language partners is one of the most common social strategies employed by international students. Through this approach, they can naturally integrate into the linguistic environment of Chinese speakers and enhance their proficiency in Chinese (Smolcic and Arends, 2020).

Language exchange partners, as someone who learn a language alongside a language learner, serves as both a practice partner for the learner and a learner of the language itself. Broadly speaking, language exchange partners can be categorized into “target language partners” and “non-target language partners (Belz, 2007).” For language learners, target language partners are typically native speakers of the target language with whom the learner establishes a partnership to mutually learn each other’s language. Non-target language partners, on the other hand, are usually non-native speakers of the target language who are learning the same language as the language learner, and they establish a partnership to learn the target language together (Munezane, 2021). The cross-cultural interaction between language partners can be referred to as “language exchange,” and the motivation for international students to participate in language exchange may be complex but should include the motivation to practice the target language (Hua, 2020). This study examines the dynamics of language exchange between international students from diverse backgrounds and their Chinese language exchange partners, taking a university in Southwest China as a case study.

Through interview, we discovered that the Chinese language learning of international students on campus is primarily confined to classroom teaching, with limited opportunities for social interaction outside of class (Lenkaitis

et al., 2019). Their social circles after class are extremely limited, and they do not frequently engage with Chinese students. Through teaching practice and interview, it was found that international students generally express a strong desire to find Chinese students as language partners, but they lack corresponding platforms and avenues (Kiryakova-Dineva and Chankova, 2021). The limited opportunities to communicate with Chinese people hinders their ability to practice Chinese and proficiency in Chinese. According to that we raise the following questions:

1. International students need what kind of language exchange in China and how are their relationships established?
2. What are the features of language exchange among international students in China?
3. What role does language exchange play in international students’ learning of Chinese language and culture?
4. What are the main reasons why international students in China lack language exchange partners?
5. What kind of language exchange partners do international students in China hope for?

2. Methodology

To address these questions, we conducted a survey involving over 100 international students studying in China. A total of 150 questionnaires are distributed, with 103 returned. Among them, 3 are invalid due to errors, and 2 are contradictory, resulting in 98 valid responses. The participants of this study mainly consist of international students studying in China or individuals studying in China before. The majority of the respondents attain at least an intermediate level in Chinese, with 91.63% having taken the HSK exam, indicating that their Chinese proficiency generally reaches HSK 4 or above. All respondents are adults, with the majority falling between the ages of 18 and 25 (76.6%), comprising 36 males and 62 females.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Partnership Demand and Relationship Establishment

International students come to China from afar to study Chinese, and one of the main reasons is that “China provides

a better environment for learning Chinese” and they can “communicate face-to-face with Chinese men in Chinese.” Survey results also confirm this: Over 95% of international students in China express the need for language partners at different stages of their studies, with fewer than 5% believing that they can study Chinese without a language partner indefinitely.

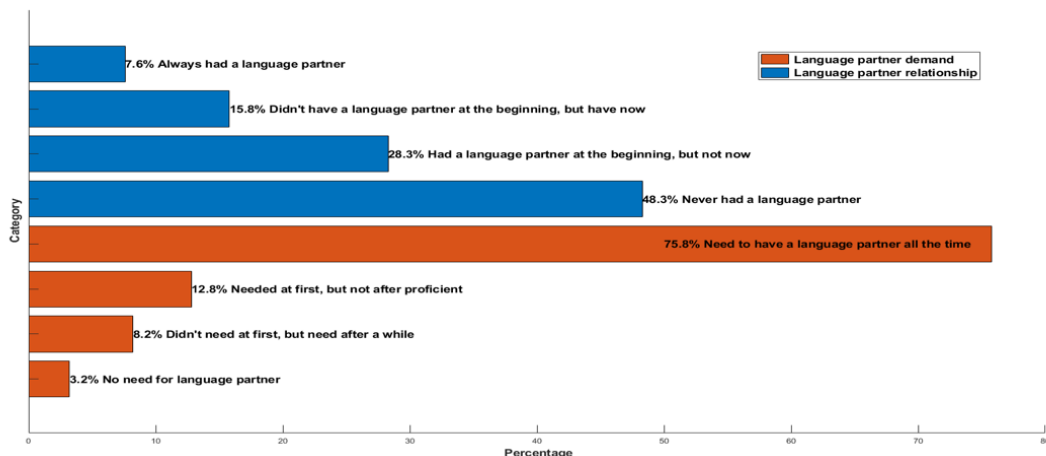


Table 1. Partnership demand and relationship establishment

However, among the surveyed international students, only 51.7% have experienced language exchange partnerships. Excluding those who currently do not have or have never had language partners, only 23.4% of students continue to engage in language exchange. This indicates that the situation of international students in China lacking language partners is more common, highlighting that their demand for language partners remains largely unmet.

3.2. Characteristics of Language Partner

Characteristics of Language Exchange Partnerships differ from interactions between native speakers. The interactions between international students and their language exchange partners have distinct patterns and features. Through questionnaire analysis, we have gained insights into various aspects of language exchange partnerships among international students, including how they meet their language partners, the frequency of their interactions, the modes of communication, the languages used, the topics of conversation, and the identities of their language partners.

3.2.1. Third-party Organizations or Introductions

The majority of international students meet their language exchange partners with the assistance of third-party organizations or introductions. According to the survey, 61.40% of international students meet their language partners through activities organized by their schools or workplaces. Additionally, 41.23% of students find their language partners among classmates or colleagues, while 37.72% have their language partners through friends or recommended by teachers. Schools and workplaces, as relatively stable language environments, provide conducive conditions for international students to meet language partners. The aforementioned language partners are mainly met through third-party introductions, with a relatively small proportion of students autonomously finding language partners: only 20.18% of students meet language partners through social networks, and just 16.67% meet language partners while traveling or sightseeing. This is partly due to cultural differences and

communication barriers, as well as the communication style of Chinese people, who are often reserved with strangers.

3.2.2. Regular Language Partners

Most international students have regular language exchange partners, but the frequency of communication is at a low frequency. Having a language partner doesn't necessarily mean that students engage in regular communication with them. Many international students fail to fully utilize their language partner resources. Language partners who can engage in long-term and frequent communication can be referred to as “regular language partners” or “long-term language partners,” while those who are temporarily assigned for specific communication activities can be called “temporary language partners.” Determining whether a language partner is fixed largely depends on the learner's subjective identification. To avoid relying solely on the subjective feelings of international students, we defined “regular language partners” in the survey as those with whom students can meet every week, and surveyed 62 students who have had or currently have language partners. We found that among the group of students who have language partners, over 70% have had or currently have at least one regular language partner.

Table 2. Survey of regular language partners of international students

No regular language partner	1 regular partner	2-3 partners	More than 4 partners
28.3%	23.8%	25.7%	22.2%
No regular partners/28.3%		Regular partners/71.7%	

Although most international students who engage in language exchange partnerships have regular language partners, this does not necessarily mean that these students have the opportunity to fully communicate with Chinese native speakers at least once a week. Through our survey, we

found that only 58.77% of international students with language partners could ensure communication with them at least once a week (for at least 30 minutes each time), while 41.23% of international students with language partners can only communicate with them once a month (for at least 30 minutes each time). Such low frequency of language exchange is quite significant, with 8.77% of the so-called students with language partners never communicating with them. These language partners are merely nominal, failing to fulfill their intended role. Based on this data, when considering international students without language partners, only 33.67% of international students in China can maintain communication with language partners for at least half an hour each week. In other words, nearly seventy percent of international students have low-frequency communication with their language partners (less than half an hour per week), or even no communication at all.

3.2.3. Communication Primarily in Chinese

International students in China generally communicate in Chinese when interacting with their Chinese language partners, with some students using their native language or English as auxiliary means. 98.25% of international students communicate in Chinese when interacting with their language partners, while 31.49% of international students use their native language or English during communication. Language partners also primarily use Chinese when communicating with international students: 93.86% of language partners communicate in Chinese with international students, while 31.49% of language partners use the international student's native language or English during communication.

3.2.4. Topics Centered on Daily Life

We conducted interviews with 5 international students in China and categorized the topics they commonly discussed with their language partners into 6 categories: personal life, hobbies and interests, cross-cultural experiences, work-related matters, academic knowledge, and Chinese language proficiency. Then, we asked international students with language partners to select the topics they often discussed with their language partners. The survey results showed that 74.77% of international students discussed topics related to personal life with their language partners, while 71.17% discussed hobbies and interests. Additionally, 66.67% of the topics were related to Chinese language proficiency, and 61.26% involved cross-cultural experiences. Only 30.63% of the topics covered professional knowledge, while work-related matters accounted for 22.52%. International students tend to choose topics that are closely related to daily life and relatively simple, with fewer discussions on complex topics such as professional or work-related matters.

3.2.5. Combination of Online and Offline

The communication between international students in China and their language partners predominantly occurs offline, with 84.21% of students preferring face-to-face interaction. While online communication is widely accepted among contemporary Chinese, it is also favored by international students, with 60.53% engaging in text-based communication with their language partners online, 32.46% opting for voice calls, and 22.81% engaging in video calls with their language partners.

3.2.6. Simple Social Relationships

The survey indicates that the language partners of international students in China are mostly regular friends or classmates. 62.28% of students have language partners who

are regular friends, while 50% have language partners who are classmates. Fewer students have language partners who are colleagues, romantic partners, or in a teacher-student relationship, accounting for 11.4%, 14.04%, and 15.79%, respectively. Overall, the social relationships between most international students and their language partners are relatively straightforward.

3.2.7. Female Partners are More Common

We find that females are more likely to become language partners for international students: only 11.4% of students have male language partners, while 42.11% have female language partners, and the remaining 46.49% have both male and female language partners. Data analysis suggests that there is no significant correlation between the gender of language partners and the gender of international students. However, during interviews, many male international students expressed a preference for female language partners, and some female international students wished for male language partners. This indicates that while Chinese females may appear to be more approachable, the objective conditions of the language environment may not fully meet the desires of international students to choose ideal language partners. Moreover, Chinese females seem more inclined than males to engage in cross-cultural communication, which aligns with the gender distribution observed among professionals in the field of international Chinese education.

3.3. Impact of Language Partners on International Students

This study investigates the influence of language partnerships on international students from the perspective of the students themselves. Among international students who have had language exchange experiences, 64.04% consider language exchange to be "very helpful" for their Chinese language learning, while 29.82% believe it is "somewhat helpful." Only 5.26% of students who have engaged in language exchange feel that it is "not very helpful," and none of them perceive it as entirely unhelpful. Cross-analysis of whether students have had language exchange experiences and their evaluations of the effectiveness of language exchange reveals that the more stable the language exchange, the more students perceive its significant role in their Chinese language learning. Students who have had language exchange experiences are more likely to acknowledge the effectiveness of language exchange compared to those who have not.

3.3.1. The Promoting Effect of Language Partners

The majority of international students believe that language exchange significantly enhances their Chinese language proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills. Among students who have engaged in language exchange, 81.58% acknowledge its contribution to improving their Chinese listening skills, while 86.84% report an enhancement in their speaking abilities through language exchange. However, only 20.18% of students perceive language exchange as beneficial for their reading and writing skills.

Language exchange also contributes to international students' adaptation to and understanding of Chinese culture. 57.89% of students believe that through language exchange, they gain a better understanding of Chinese perspectives and thoughts. Additionally, 41.23% report a deeper insight into Chinese history and culture during language exchange interactions. Moreover, 50.88% of students feel that language exchange helps them better integrate into the daily life of

Chinese people. This highlights that language exchange serves not only as a linguistic activity but also as a process through which international students build cross-cultural identity from the perspectives of culture, ethnicity, and values.

3.3.2. Assistance from Language Partners for International Students

During language exchange, international students receive various forms of assistance from their language partners, although guidance is often incomplete and insufficient. Based on a survey of 46 international students with language exchange experiences, we found that language partners offer the most help to students in language learning by correcting vocabulary errors and explaining word meanings. 57.02% of language partners correct students' vocabulary errors, while 56.14% explain word meanings to students.

In addition to vocabulary, 50.88% of language partners also correct students' grammar errors, and 49.12% explain cultural aspects of language to students. However, regarding pronunciation, language partners do not frequently provide guidance: only 34.21% correct students' phonetic errors, and 43.86% correct students' tone errors. Thus, it is evident that Chinese language partners exhibit a higher tolerance for students' pronunciation errors and provide limited assistance in this regard. Improvement in students' pronunciation mainly relies on formal classroom learning.

3.4. Why International Students in China Lack Language Partners

As mentioned earlier, over 40% of international students have never had language partners, and nearly 28.3% are currently without language partners. We surveyed 47 students who had never had language partners, and the results showed that only 9.41% felt that language partners are not helpful, and 15.29% believed they could do without language partners in their learning process. This indicates that the majority of students consider language partners to be beneficial and express a desire to find one. So, why haven't these students found suitable language partners?

Through our investigation, we discovered that the primary reason international students lack language partners is "limited opportunities to meet potential partners." More than half (76.6%) of the students without language partners cited

limited opportunities to meet them. While many international students desire language partners, cultural differences and language barriers often prevent them from actively seeking out partners. Instead, they rely more on third-party organizations to facilitate language exchange activities or to introduce them to potential partners. Consequently, many students attribute their inability to find language partners to reasons such as "the university does not organize language exchange activities" or "the school does not arrange language partners for students."

In addition, most international students (18.39%) feel they have no time to engage with language partners, while 10.34% express their inability to participate in language exchange due to the absence of native Chinese speakers around them. Only 4.6% of students believe that they could learn Chinese better without a language partner, while only two cases attribute their lack of language partner to personality issues, such as introversion.

Notably, 12.64% of students believe that "there are no native Chinese speakers willing to be their language partners," and some perceive that "Chinese classmates prefer to partner with students from Europe, America, Japan, or South Korea" or "their English proficiency is insufficient, so Chinese people are not willing to be their language partners." These perceptions reflect the reciprocity principle inherent in language exchange. Both parties in a language exchange may have varying degrees of self-interest, which could either facilitate or hinder the language exchange process.

3.5. What Kind of Language Partners Do International Students in China Hope For?

To understand the common characteristics international students in China look for in language partners, we asked all surveyed students to use brief language (one or two keywords or sentences) to describe their expectations for an "ideal language partner." We simplified similar descriptions and categorized them into traits such as personality qualities, skills, personal conditions, and interaction styles. We conducted a frequency analysis for each trait category to compile a frequency table of ideal language partner traits as perceived by international students in China.

Table 3. Word frequency table of ideal language partner

Main aspects	Fre. /%	Specific features	Word fre.
Personality trait	50%/100	Outgoing, cheerful, lively, optimistic, talkative, active,	40
		Gregarious, humorous, kind, funny, selfless	40
		Creative, smart, understanding, be available often	15
		Gentle, casual, emotional	5
Quality	17%/34	verbal guidance/ correct mistakes/ explain doubts	18
		Standard mandarin	8
		Well-rounded and well-educated	3
		cross-cultural communication/no ethnic prejudice and discrimination	3
		Be respectful and polite	2
Individual condition	17%/34	Good looks	9
		common interests	7
		interest in one's own language/culture	6
		Gender	5
		Age	2
		Same major	2
Interactive model	16%/32	Keep in touch and communicate often	7
		establish a friendship	12
		establish a romantic relationship	3
Total	100%/200		200

Half of the international students in China prioritize the personality traits of language partners when making their selection. Referring to the ‘Big Five’ personality structure model proposed by Western scholars, we categorized and analyzed the descriptions of ideal language partner personality traits provided by the students. We found that most students who focus on the personality qualities of language partners prefer partners with extraversion and agreeableness, a tendency that is universal and also evident in interactions among native speakers.

Regarding skill qualities, more students prioritize the language guidance ability of language partners. In terms of personal conditions, the appearance of the language partner is mentioned most frequently. In terms of interaction styles, most students emphasize that the ideal language partner should ensure frequent communication.

Considering the top-ranked ideal traits across these four aspects, it appears that the majority of international students consider the ideal language partner to have extraverted or agreeable personality traits, possess some level of Chinese tutoring ability, engage in frequent communication, and also have an appealing appearance.

4. Discussion

In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, it is essential to adhere to the principle of “strengthening the Chinese language learning environment, increasing Chinese language input, and combining conscious learning with natural acquisition”(Senyshyn and Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2009). Currently, the demand for language partners among international students in Chinese universities remains largely unmet. Schools and teachers, as educators of international students, can make efforts in the following areas to strengthen the Chinese language learning environment for international students and enhance their opportunities to acquire Chinese through language exchange (Hülbauer et al., 2008).

Schools should organize diverse and engaging language exchange activities to increase the opportunities for international students to participate in language partner interactions. Language exchange activities have both theoretical and practical significance in improving the communication abilities of both parties involved and fostering cross-cultural awareness and communication skills (Kuehl, 2022). Language exchange activities should involve organizing class meetings or other collective events to communicate with students and understand each other’s thoughts. This approach helps students feel the care and support of their teachers, making teaching more empathetic and student-centered.

Adjust the curriculum for international students in China to enhance the quality of language exchange. Schools can introduce elective courses that bring together Chinese and international students, providing opportunities for them to interact in the same classroom. These courses should ideally focus on intercultural communication, allowing students from different backgrounds to engage in group discussions and collaborative activities, thereby facilitating the establishment of language exchange partnerships (Lenkaitis et al., 2019). Elective courses with a specialized focus can increase the complexity of topics discussed during language exchange between international students and their language partners. Additionally, scheduling these courses on a weekly basis can enhance the frequency of interaction between international

students and their language partners, making it easier for them to form lasting language partnership.

When assigning dormitories for international students in China, schools can consider mixing students from different countries, or even mixing international students with Chinese students. Some foreign students expressed that Chinese schools tend to place students from the same country in the same dormitory (Ou and Gu, 2020). While this may avoid potential conflicts arising from cultural differences, it also reduces the time international students spend using Chinese outside of the classroom and diminishes their opportunities to connect with Chinese language partners. Therefore, schools could, while ensuring the safety of both Chinese and international students, consider assigning students from different countries to the same dormitory (Munezane, 2021). Alternatively, schools can organize joint programs for Chinese and international students to live together for a period of time. This approach can greatly enhance international students’ opportunities to interact with Chinese peers, facilitating language exchange and cultural understanding. Additionally, schools can foster a sense of community among students by organizing group activities or other collective events, facilitating communication and understanding among students and making teaching more student-centered.

5. Conclusion

The profession of teaching not only tests one’s patience but also requires a spirit of dedication, as exemplified by the saying “a silkworm will die for silk, and a candle will burn itself out for light.” While teachers reflect on how to become truly qualified educators, society should also show respect for this profession. President Xi Jinping passionately called upon the entire Party and society to foster a culture of respecting teachers and valuing education during the National Education Conference. Respecting teachers and valuing education is an excellent traditional virtue in our country, and “respecting the dignity of teachers” is a concentrated reflection of the importance attached to education and teachers. Of course, the development of education relies on economic foundations, the collective efforts of teachers, as well as the participation and importance attached by all members of society. With the active participation of everyone, I believe our education system will have a broader prospect for development.

References

- [1] Belz, J. A. (2005). Intercultural Questioning, Discovery and Tension in Internet-mediated Language Learning Partnerships. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 5(1), 3–39. pp. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470508668881>
- [2] Belz, J. A. (2007). Chapter 7. The Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Telecollaborative Partnerships. In R. O’Dowd (Ed.), *Online Intercultural Exchange* (127–166. pp.). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847690104-009>
- [3] Hua, Z. (2020). Making a stance: Social action for language and intercultural communication research. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 20(2), 206–212. pp. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1730393>
- [4] Hülbauer, C., Böhringer, H. and Seidlhofer, B. (2008). Introducing English as a lingua franca (ELF): Precursor and partner in intercultural communication.

- [5] Kiryakova-Dineva, T. and Chankova, Y. (2021). Intercultural Dialogue as a Tool for Maintaining Sustainable Partnerships in Tourism: In F. Brandão, Z. Breda, R. Costa and C. Costa (Eds.), *Advances in Hospitality, Tourism, and the Services Industry* (282–299. pp.). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-5691-7.ch017>
- [6] Kuehl, R. (2022). Case Study: Partnering Intercultural Communication Students with Campus Co-Cultural Student Groups to Develop Intercultural Competence, Allyship, and Curiosity. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 21(4). <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v21i4.32673>
- [7] Lenkaitis, C. A., Calo, S. and Venegas Escobar, S. (2019). Exploring the intersection of language and culture via telecollaboration: Utilizing videoconferencing for intercultural competence development. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 13(2), 102–115. pp. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2019.1570772>
- [8] Munezane, Y. (2021). A new model of intercultural communicative competence: Bridging language classrooms and intercultural communicative contexts. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8), 1664–1681. pp. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1698537>
- [9] Ou, W. A. and Gu, M. M. (2020). Negotiating language use and norms in intercultural communication: Multilingual university students' scaling practices in translocal space. *Linguistics and Education*, 57(C). https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=0Vs2Vppj5wFz7oC_DnJQGI6hf8q5ywmMXyDKbAuliFjCktFuOMINDtnnS8tykadhqJAKcv_ilyXBkl25r1SaLyEO3FrjiI4jvIO6WrmP-gYjyLp0BY5XRtY2sdqQwwLSZSbcjXpSR46lkWLSHnKQ=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=gb
- [10] Senyshyn, R. and Chamberlin-Quinlisk, C. (2009). Assessing Effective Partnerships in Intercultural Education: Transformative Learning as a Tool for Evaluation. *Communication Teacher*, 23(4), 167–178. pp. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404620903232529>
- [11] Smolcic, E. and Arends, J. (n.d.). *Building Teacher Interculturality*.