

## *Original Paper*

# A Quantitative Study on Undergraduate Students' Confidence Levels in English Speaking in China: Investigating Influential Factors

Yueqian Liu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology & Music, SEGi University, Selangor, 47810, Malaysia

\* Yueqian1414@163.com

Received: July 29, 2024

Accepted: August 27, 2024

Online Published: September 23, 2024

doi:10.22158/eltls.v6n5p100

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n5p100>

### ***Abstract***

*This study employed quantitative research to investigate the English-speaking confidence of 129 Chinese undergraduate students and analyzed factors that affect their confidence. Using a Likert five-point scale of Self-confidence in English Speaking Performance Questionnaire (SCESPQ) developed by Griffiee (1997), the findings revealed that most students have low confidence, with willing engagement identified as the key factor influencing oral proficiency. Despite possessing language skills, students struggle with confidence and motivation, reflecting psychological barriers like fear of making mistakes and anxiety. The study also found that oral confidence is unrelated to gender but is significantly linked to students' grade level, with fourth-year students exhibiting the lowest confidence. The results suggest that enhancing confidence and creating more opportunities for real-life communication are crucial. Implications for educators include fostering supportive environments and encouraging active participation to improve oral language skills.*

### ***Keywords***

*English-speaking confidence, university undergraduates, influencing factors*

## **1. Introduction**

Acquiring the ability to communicate accurately and effectively in English is one of the primary goals of both teaching and learning the language (Davies & Pearse, 2000). For university students, speaking English fluently is not only important but also a challenging task (Palpanadan, Ahmad, Ahmad Zuki, E., Kadir, & Bin, 2020). Those who are proficient in English tend to achieve higher academic success, secure better job opportunities, and advance more rapidly in their careers (Palpanadan, Ahmad, Ahmad

Zuki, E., Kadir, & Bin, 2020). Numerous studies have shown that self-confidence plays a critical role in language learners' achievement, particularly in shaping their speaking behavior (Doqaruni, 2014; Loan, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to offer practical insights for future English-speaking teaching strategies by examining the oral confidence and its influencing factors among Chinese undergraduate students. Additionally, it seeks to equip English teachers with valuable recommendations for enhancing their approach to oral instruction.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *English-Speaking Confidence*

Within a wide context, self-confidence is a person's subjective feeling of their own ability and belief in their ability to complete tasks (Ghafar, 2023). According to Pierce and Gardner (Pierce & Gardner, 2004), confidence is the degree to which a person feels capable, significant, and valuable about himself or herself. Coopersmith (Coopersmith, 1959) described self-confidence as an individual's subjective assessment of their own worth as shown in their attitudes toward oneself. These definitions provide an overview of self-confidence, which is defined as having faith in one's ability to follow the path of action that will ultimately lead to a positive outcome (Muqorrobin, Bindarti, & Sundari, 2022). Every individual has a distinct level of confidence in themselves, and this level is determined by the sum of their experiences both with themselves and with the outside world (Muqorrobin, Bindarti, & Sundari, 2022).

Heyde (1983) demonstrated with the definition as a guide, how low self-confidence can have a negative effect on second language (L2) performance when L2 learners view themselves as weak and inadequate L2 users, whereas high levels of self-confidence can have a positive correlation with oral performance (Saito & Heo, 2021). This phenomena can be explained by the fact that students who are confident in themselves are more likely to take risks, participate actively in class discussions, and use the English language more frequently in daily activities (Ghafar, 2023). While students that lack confidence are frequently perceived as being timid and shy, hesitant to give remarks in front of the class and participant in activity using the target language (Loan, 2019).

### 2.2 *Factors Affecting oral English Confidence*

Language research has shown that self-confidence plays a crucial role in language input and output among variables of affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence (Loan, 2019). Language researchers worldwide have therefore grown interested in the impact of this emotional component variable on L2 during the last few decades (Loan, 2019). Most students exhibited a strong desire to communicate, but many lacked confidence while speaking in English (Doqaruni, 2014). Furthermore, Doqaruni (2014) found that students ascribed their failure to speak English with confidence to a lack of speaking experience and opportunity to engage in L2 conversation within the classroom. Some students were stuck in an unending cycle where they needed to communicate more in the target language to build confidence but couldn't start conversations because they weren't confident

enough (Doqaruni, 2014).

Palpanadan et al. (2020) used a mixed method to investigate the views of engineering undergraduate students at a university on their confidence level in speaking English. The results showed that there are three aspects that are important for building students' oral confidence, namely manual skills, vocabulary, and grammar. In addition, many other academic studies have also shown similar results. Muqorrobin et al. (2022) investigated the factors that contribute to Indonesian learners' lack of confidence in speaking English. The research results showed that most learners have a moderate level of confidence, and ability is the main factor causing most learners to lack confidence. Similarly, Gürler (2015) investigated the self-confidence of 77 preparatory students in Turkey. The results indicate a significant correlation between self-confidence and oral proficiency.

Although multiple studies have explored learners' confidence in speaking English, few have investigated the self-confidence of Chinese undergraduate students in speaking English, and only a few studies have explored the factors that affect their confidence in speaking English. Therefore, this study fills this gap through quantitative research. Based on the above reasons, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What is the confidence level of Chinese undergraduate students in speaking English?
- 2) What are the factors that affect college students' oral confidence?

### 3. Method

The current study used a quantitative descriptive design. Descriptive research, according to Johnson and Christensen (2024), is study that attempts to give a precise description or image of the state or features of a situation or phenomena. Consequently, by utilizing the numerical data, its conclusions will offer insights into the existing problem—their confidence level and the factors causing the learners' lack of confidence (Muqorrobin, Bindarti, & Sundari, 2022).

A total of 129 Chinese undergraduate students from different majors (education, history, science, chemistry, etc.) are involved in this study as samples, including 75 females and 54 males. Random sampling was used to send questionnaires through social media platforms such as email and WeChat.

#### 3.1 Research Instrument

The instrument used in this quantitative study is a Self-confidence in English Speaking Performance Questionnaire (SCESPQ) created by Griffiee (1997). It is one of the earliest published questionnaires dedicated to L2 confidence by Griffiee (1997) as part of a study aimed at developing a test of Confidence in Speaking English as a Foreign Language (CSEFL). He provides evidence of the satisfactory validity and reliability of his questionnaire. Griffiee (1997) proposed the following three components to explain speaking confidence in English: ability, assurance, and willing engagement. He characterized ability as being able to speak grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, assurance as the feeling of security and comfort in speaking the language, and willing engagement as an action that is delighted to speak English with native speakers of the language (Griffiee, 1997). Based on these three

dimensions of confidence, this questionnaire is a good fit for this research issue since it examines at confidence in a useful way (Doqaruni, 2014).

The questionnaire has been utilized in some studies investigating English speaking confidence (e.g., Doqaruni, 2014; Palpanadan et al., 2020). There are 12 statement-based questions on this five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A (background information) and Section B (confidence level). The participants' gender, major, and year in college were asked in Section A. Section B comprised questions with three components to determine the participants' confidence level in terms of ability, assurance, and willing engagement. Since every item is a positive statement, high scores suggest a strong degree of self-confidence, while low scores suggest the opposite (Muqorrobin, Bindarti, & Sundari, 2022). The data obtained from the questionnaire were then analyzed through SPSS version 27.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 Overall Confidence Level of Students

The questionnaire's Cronbach alpha in the current study was 0.959, which is higher than 0.9 and indicates good internal consistency. Since this study employed a five-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), a score of 3 indicates neutrality, while higher scores reflect greater confidence. Therefore, mean value greater than 4 may indicate a high level of confidence in their speaking ability, while mean value less than 3 is considered a lower score, indicating a lack of confidence. The results (see Table 1) indicated that only 10 students (7.75%) had a mean score above 4, demonstrating a high level of confidence in their English-speaking ability. 14 undergraduate students (10.85%) had mean scores between 3 and 4, reflecting a moderate level of confidence. Meanwhile, 105 students (81.40%) had mean scores below 3, indicating a low level of confidence. These findings suggest that the overall English-speaking confidence among Chinese students is relatively low.

**Table 1. Distribution of Oral English Confidence Level**

Mean value range	Participant(N=129)	Percentage (%)	Confidence level
$\geq 4.00$	10	7.75	High
$4.00 > M \geq 3.00$	14	10.85	Moderate
$< 3.00$	105	81.40	Low
Total	129	100	

##### 4.2 Factors that Affect Confidence Level

This section explored the potential factors that might affect the confidence level, including genders, grades, linguistic factor (ability), affective factor (assurance) and psychological factor (willing

engagement).

#### 4.2.1 Gender and Oral Confidence

Table 2 shows that there are 43 male and 62 female participants. The mean confidence score for males is 2.1027, slightly higher than the mean score of 2.0430 for females. The standard deviations are 0.513 for males and 0.543 for females, indicating a similar spread of confidence scores around their respective means. However, the p-value of 0.573 is greater than the common significance threshold of 0.05, indicating that the difference in confidence levels between male and female participants is not statistically significant. Despite the small difference in mean scores, this result suggests that gender does not have a significant impact on confidence levels in this sample.

**Table 2. Gender and Oral Confidence Level**

	Gender	N	M	SD	T	P
Confidence	Male	43	2.1027	0.513	0.566	0.573
	Female	62	2.0430	0.543		

#### 4.2.2 Grades and Oral Confidence

From Table 3, Grade 2 shows the highest mean oral confidence score (2.1974) among all the grades, while Grade 4 has the lowest mean (1.4352). The mean scores for Grade 1 (2.0812) and Grade 3 (2.0789) are very similar. With an F-value of 5.738 and a p-value of 0.001 (below the 0.05 threshold), the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that there is a significant difference in confidence levels among students across different grades.

**Table 3. Mean Oral Confidence Scores Across Different Grades and ANOVA Results**

Grade	N	M	SD	MD	P
Grade 1	39	2.0812	0.580		
Grade 2	38	2.1974	0.453		
Grade 3	19	2.0789	0.429		
Grade 4	9	1.4352	0.393		
ANOVA F				F=5.738	0.001

From Table 4, the mean difference (MD) of -0.646 ( $p = 0.001$  less than 0.05) indicates that Grade 4 students have significantly lower oral confidence compared to Grade 1. Similarly, the MD of -0.762 ( $p = 0.001$  less than 0.05) shows that Grade 4 students have significantly lower confidence than Grade 2. Additionally, the MD of 0.646 ( $p = 0.002$  less than 0.05) confirms that Grade 4 students have significantly lower confidence than Grade 3. These findings show that, in every comparison, Grade 4 pupils consistently show the lowest oral confidence.

No statistically significant differences are observed between Grade 1 and Grade 2 ( $p = 0.307$ ), Grade 1 and Grade 3 ( $p = 0.987$ ), or Grade 2 and Grade 3 ( $p = 0.398$ ), indicating that confidence levels in these grades are comparable. However, there is a notable drop in confidence for Grade 4 students, who show significantly lower oral confidence compared to the other grades. This suggests that while confidence remains relatively stable among Grades 1, 2, and 3, it sharply declines in the final year. This finding implies that there may be a decrease in confidence as students approach their last year of undergraduate studies, possibly due to increased academic pressure or fewer opportunities for language practice.

**Table 4. Comparisons of Oral Confidence Level between Two Grades**

Comparison	MD	SE	P
Grade 1 vs Grade 2	-0.116	0.113	0.307
Grade 1 vs Grade 3	0.002	0.139	0.987
Grade 1 vs Grade 4	-0.646	0.183	0.001
Grade 2 vs Grade 3	0.118	0.139	0.398
Grade 2 vs Grade 4	-0.762	0.184	0.001
Grade 3 vs Grade 4	0.646	0.201	0.002

#### 4.2.2 Ability, Assurance, and Willing Engagement

There are 12 items in the questionnaire. These items are separated into three subscales: ability, assurance, and willing engagement, with four items in each subscale (see Table 5). Griffiee (1997) proposed the following three factors to explain speaking confidence in English: ability, assurance, and willing engagement. According to his saying, ability refers to the mastery of a language. Items 1, 4, 7, and 9 are categorized as components of ability because they represent concrete examples of using spoken English in various contexts. For instance, activities such as interviews, daily communication, tour guide presentations, and discussions all demonstrate language abilities. Therefore, these four items are classified as components of ability.

Assurance refers to the feeling of safety and comfort when speaking English. Items 3, 6, 11, and 12 are categorized under assurance because they reflect aspects of emotional confidence and ease in language use. For example, the word “like” in item 3 indicates a positive attitude toward speaking English, while “easily” in item 6 suggests confidence and comfort. Item 11, with “speaking in front of many people”, highlights the speaker's assurance in using English in potentially stressful situations. Similarly, “feel relaxed” in item 12 reflects a sense of ease when speaking. Therefore, these items are classified as components of assurance.

Willing engagement refers to the speaker's readiness and desire to seek opportunities to communicate with native English speakers, indicating both a tendency and preference for using the language. For instance, item 2, “learning in an English-speaking country”, reflects an active pursuit of opportunities

to speak English. The word “cheerful” in item 5 expresses a positive emotional attitude toward speaking English. Similarly, item 8, “use English every day”, and item 10, “find opportunities”, both emphasize seeking chances to practice speaking English. Therefore, these items are classified under willing engagement.

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Ability, Assurance, and Willing Engagement**

Component	Item	Statement(N=129)	M	SD	Mean of component
Ability	Item1	I can interview in English.	2.48	1.069	2.3934
	Item4	I can discuss in English with native speakers.	2.33	0.978	
	Item7	I can be an English guide and show foreigners around.	2.37	1.039	
	Item9	I can give opinions in English.	2.40	0.995	
Assurance	Item3	I like speaking English.	2.38	0.970	2.3837
	Item6	I can speak English easily.	2.40	1.012	
	Item11	I can speak English in front of many people.	2.42	0.933	
	Item12	I feel relaxed when speaking English.	2.33	0.979	
Willing engagement	Item2	I prefer studying in English speaking countries.	2.33	1.054	2.3508
	Item5	I feel cheerful when speaking English.	2.34	1.027	
	Item8	I would use English every day.	2.33	0.970	
	Item10	I find chances to speak English.	2.41	1.094	

Table 5 shows that the mean values of all items are below 3, indicating a generally low level of confidence. Notably, items 2, 4, 8, and 12 share the lowest mean score of 2.33. This suggests that students, due to their perceived poor oral skills, do not feel relaxed when speaking English (item 12), hesitate to communicate with native speakers (item 4), and are unwilling to study in English-speaking countries (item 2). This creates a vicious cycle in which their reluctance to engage in English communication leads to a lack of daily English use (item 8), further contributing to the low mean scores of these items. This result aligns with Doqaruni’s findings (Doqaruni, 2014), which suggest that some students are trapped in a cycle where they need to communicate more in the target language to build confidence but are unable to initiate conversations due to a lack of confidence.

Item 1 has the highest mean value at 2.48, followed by item 11 at 2.42 and item 10 at 2.41. This may be because these items refer to situations where speaking English is essential, such as interviews (item 1) or speaking English in front of others (item 11). To achieve specific goals, like finding a job or passing exams, students may feel compelled to actively practice speaking (item 10) or force themselves to appear more confident, which likely explains the relatively higher mean values for these items.

In terms of the three factors, the mean value shows that ability is the highest at 2.3934, followed by assurance with a mean of 2.3837. Willing engagement has the lowest mean at 2.3508. This result suggests that students generally perceive themselves as having a certain level of mastery in language abilities such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. It indicates that they are more confident in their English language skills, likely due to the foundational knowledge they have gained through classroom learning or exams. As a result, their self-awareness is relatively high.

The moderate mean value for assurance (2.3837) may be due to the fact that, although students possess certain language abilities, their sense of security and comfort when using English remains relatively low. This suggests that while students believe they have language knowledge, they still experience tension or unease during actual oral communication, especially when interacting with others, such as native English speakers. This lack of confidence may stem from limited practical experience in real-life English use or a fear of making mistakes.

The lowest mean for willing engagement (2.3508) suggests that students have the least self-awareness when it comes to actively seeking opportunities to communicate with native English speakers. This may reflect a lack of motivation or drive to use English regularly, or a shortage of opportunities to do so. Their lack of initiative could stem from low self-confidence, making them hesitant to engage in daily practice or communicate more with others. It may also indicate that students do not fully recognize the importance of actively participating in language communication to improve their oral proficiency, or they may face psychological barriers such as anxiety and tension when interacting with native speakers.

This finding differs from previous studies on oral confidence in other countries, where Muqorrobin et al. (2022) found that ability was the primary factor influencing learners in Indonesia. Although these Chinese students have a high level of self-awareness regarding their language proficiency, a lack of confidence and motivation is the main obstacle preventing them from improving their oral proficiency in real-world situations. It reflects the common phenomenon of knowing but not daring to speak in China, where students, despite having a foundational knowledge of the language, struggle to use spoken English proficiently in practical contexts due to a lack of confidence and motivation for actual communication.

The findings of Wen and Clément (2003) might provide an explanation for this. They looked at Willingness to Communicate (WTC)'s local implementation in China. They contended that the main influences on Chinese students' attitudes and learning practices in the classroom were their admiration



for the virtues of moderation and humility, their dread of making mistakes, and their adherence to submissive learning styles derived from Confucian tradition.

Therefore, future teaching strategies should focus on boosting students' confidence by providing a safe environment where making mistakes is normalized and seen as part of the learning process. This may reduce their affective factors such as anxiety and fear of making errors (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Teachers can design more interactive activities like group discussions and role plays, in which peer support can make them feel more at ease. Rather than emphasizing mistakes, teachers should concentrate on positive feedback that emphasizes improvement and provide detailed recommendations on how to improve speaking abilities without damaging the self-confidence of students.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employed quantitative research to investigate the English-speaking confidence levels of 129 Chinese undergraduate students and analyze the factors contributing to their lack of confidence. The findings revealed that most students exhibit relatively low confidence in speaking English. Additionally,

This study found that students' oral confidence is not influenced by gender but is significantly related to their grade level. Fourth-year students exhibited the lowest oral confidence, which may be due to increased academic and job pressure, as well as fewer opportunities for oral practice. The results also identified willing engagement as a key factor influencing oral confidence in many learners instead of ability and assurance. While students are aware of their language skills, the researcher concludes that the primary barrier preventing them from improving their oral proficiency in real-life settings is a lack of confidence and motivation. It may also indicate that students are not aware of how essential it is to actively engage in language conversation to enhance their oral competence, or it may suggest that they are experiencing psychological difficulties like tension and anxiety while speaking with native speakers.

Future teaching tactics should be centered on helping students become more confident by creating a secure space where making errors is accepted and viewed as an essential part of the learning process. Instructors can provide more engaging activities, such as role-playing games and group debates, where students might feel more comfortable with the assistance of their peers. Besides, teachers could focus on providing constructive feedback on how students may enhance their speaking skills without damaging their self-confidence.

## 6. Limitations

The results of the present quantitative study aim to provide more insights on investigating the issue of learners' confidence when speaking English in China and analyzing the factors behind it. However, there are still some limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 129 undergraduate students, while providing valuable insights, may not be large enough to fully represent the confidence levels of all Chinese

undergraduates in English speaking. A larger and more diverse sample would improve the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the self-reported questionnaire data used in this study may not adequately represent the variety of factors affecting students' oral confidence. Further research on this topic might make use of other techniques like observations and interviews. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design of this study indicated that changes in students' confidence levels over time were not tracked. To understand how confidence develops, future studies can take a longitudinal approach.

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