# The Effectiveness of Intercultural Contact in Foreign Language Learning Anxiety of Students Majoring in Less-commonly Taught Languages in China

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**Abstract**

To figure out the confusion remained in the survey conducted previously, a review on the relationship between intercultural contact and foreign language learning anxiety had been done. Conclusion can be drawn like that qualitative study of what types of intercultural contact students have and how they view the role of contact situation influencing their foreign language learning anxiety is appropriately prior to the quantitative study of to what extent the language contact can affect students' foreign language learning anxiety and how it affects. Furthermore, the design of research should be based on multidimensional perspectives like quantitative, qualitative and inter-group aspects of intercultural contact and direct type or indirect type of intercultural contact.

**Keywords:** intercultural contact, foreign language learning anxiety, less commonly taught languages

## 1. Introduction

Majority of university students majoring in less commonly taught languages like Thai, Vietnamese, or Burmese in Yunnan Province were born and brought up in Yunnan, indicating that part of these students are bi/multilingual speakers or have great opportunities to contact with native-speakers of Thai, Vietnamese or Burmese owing to the special geographical features of 4060 kilometers' borderline being contiguous to Vietnam, Lao, Burma. As Ortega (2020, p. 16) pointed that " adults who grew up with this bi/multilingual experience may feel a special ethnocultural bond with the home languages yet often end up functioning with greater confidence in the social languages", bi/multilingual speakers may have advantages in language learning. Supportive opinion from Cenoz's (2013) review from laboratory studies and large-scale cross-sectional research regarding whether bi/multilingual speakers outperform monolinguals at learning foreign language prove that it does. Additionally, intercultural contact is an pivotal issue in second language acquisition (SLA). Other than the reason that learning a second or foreign language is competent to communicate with native speakers, the interaction with native-speakers of target languages provides opportunities for improving second or foreign language learners' language competence (Swain, 1985). Furthermore, there is evidence from Clément and Kruidenier's (1983) research revealing that frequent and pleasing contact experience leads to an incremental linguistic self-confidence, and that intercultural contact negatively related to the anxiety of using English, and having an English class (Clément et al, 1994). In the course survey the researcher has conducted in June, 2020, however, students being bi/multilingual speakers or having opportunities to contact inter-culturally with native-speakers represent higher degree of anxiety than students who are not bi/multilingual or do not have chances to have a contact with native-speakers. After self-reflection, superficial design of the questionnaire may lead to the conflicting results. With the purpose of investigate intercultural contact in foreign language learning anxiety deeply, a review of the effectiveness of Intercultural contact in foreign language learning anxiety will be conducive to my further research of exploring what types of intercultural contact university students majoring in less commonly taught languages have, and how the intercultural contact related to students' foreign language learning anxiety.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Having been discussed in Alpert and Haber's (1960) research with regard to anxiety in academic achievement situations, foreign language learning anxiety have become a heated issue until now.  Most research on foreign language anxiety before the 1980s employed the anxiety transfer approach (Scovel, 1978), in which language anxiety is viewed as a transfer of trait or state anxiety leading to interfering consequences. Additionally, Gardner and

associates (1976) did a series of research concerning attitude and motivation in foreign language learning, among which Gardner et al. (1976) used the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to investigate over 1,000 Anglophone students who were learning French in Canada, results indicating that anxiety in class mostly indicated learners' language proficiency, especially students who had better performance. With the further research going on, there were 3 distinct correlations between anxiety and performance being concluded, that is, anxiety may facilitate or debilitate performance, or exert no influence on the performance (Gardner et al., 1979; Gardner, Smythe, & Lalonde, 1984). Horwitz et al (1986) pointed that the conflicting results that higher degree foreign language learning anxiety resulted in poor academic performance and that higher degree foreign language learning anxiety promoted the academic performance, were caused by the vaguely defined 'language learning anxiety' and lack of foreign language learning anxiety scales with high validity and reliability. Redefining foreign language learning anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (1986, p.128), Horwitz et al (1986) designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale with great reliability and validity to investigate foreign language learning anxiety from three dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety and afraid of negative evaluation. With the development and increased research of foreign language learning anxiety, research attention were paid from foreign language learning anxiety itself to the sources of foreign language learning anxiety since Yan and Horwitz (2008) believed that anxiety would not work in isolation. Previous examination of the relationship between FLA and outcomes revealed that there were many other facets working together with FLA to influence students' learning outcomes. Research on the sources of FLA can be concluded from previous research as: personal and inter-personal anxieties (Bailey, 1983), learners' beliefs about language learning (Truitt, 1995), instructors' beliefs about language teaching ( Levine, 2003), interactions between learners and instructors (Liu & Jackson, 2008), language learning classroom procedures (Aydin, 1999), language testing anxiety (Chang, 2008), motivation (Brantmeier, 2005), culture factors (Cetinkaya, 2005), frequency of language use (Baker & Macintyre, 2000), context of language acquisition ( Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). However, research concerning foreign language learning anxiety mainly focused on commonly taught languages like English, French or German, seldom on less-commonly taught languages as Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese.

*2.2 Inter-cultural Contact in Second Language Acquisition*

First proposed by Allport (1954) in his *The Nature of Prejudice*, the Contact Hypothesis came into being as a theoretical background to find methods to reduce interracial prejudice, in which equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support were defined by Allport as the necessary factors for inter-group contact which can lead to favorable changes within individuals. Since then, many research (Amir, 1969; Desforges et al., 1997; Stangor et al., 1996) have been conducted to unravel how circumstances impacted on the outcome of inter-group contact, majority of which were successfully proving that favorable circumstances might indeed have positive influence on inter-ethnic attitudes. A filed study of minority (Hindu) and majority (Muslim) religious groups in Bangladesh was conducted by Islam and Hewstone (1993) to test an integrated model of how dimensions of contact (quantitative, qualitative, and inter-group) are related to inter-group anxiety, perceived out-group variability, and out group attitude, results revealing that dimensions of inter-group contact were significant predictors of all three variables. Quantitative aspects of contact, in this article, was assessed through five questions about "amount of contact with" the outgroup in college, as neighbor, as friend, frequency of informal talks and frequency of family visit with outgroup. Questions like whether contact was "perceived as equal, involuntary or voluntary, superficial or intimate, experienced as pleasant, and competitive or cooperative"(Islam & Hewstone, 1993, p:702) were employed to assess the qualitative aspects of contact. For inter-group aspects of contact, two questions were raised like "whether you came into contact with 'members of the outgroup', you felt you met as individuals or as members representing your respective religious groups", and "whether you usually saw the 'out-group members' with whom you had contact as typical 'outgroup members'"(Islam & Hewstone, 1993, p:702). Not merely are researchers interested in knowing whether phenomenon like preference for ingroup members, or prejudice and discrimination against outgroup members founded in a variety of cultures (Hewstone, 2010), but they extended their interest to the relations between groups occurring in different or even unique cultural contexts. A study was conducted to test the effects of inter-group contact on the attitudes of citizens of the two nations, Israel and Egypt, which are greatly distinct in, to some extent opposite to, their culture, history, religion, and political background, and had experienced 30-year state war, ending with the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 which offered the citizens of the two nations an opportunity for contact (Amir & Ben-Ari, 1985). Total 483 Jewish-Israeli tourists visiting Egypt were randomly divided into two groups, one as an experimental group with 23 tours and 325 tourists, the other, a control group of 8 tours and 131 tourists. Both pre-tour questionnaire and post-tour questionnaire including semantic-differential and attitude scales were respectively administered during the bus ride from Israel to the Egyptian border and after the

completion of journey, a booklet portraying Egypt in a favorable fashion as an intervention in this study. Findings of this study indicated that the inter-group contact by tourism did not warrant a positive attitude transfer, but showed a negative change in the intellectual dimension, a positive change in the social dimension and no change in the political dimension, which implied that inter-group contact as a tool to promote inter-group relations was highly affected by individual and situational factors.

Initially emerged in Clément's (1980) hypothetical model, intercultural contact was defined as a key constituent of motivation. It is in Clément's model that intercultural contact was studied in the realm of SLA, not merely limited in the field of social psychology. Three years later, Clément and Kruidenier (1983) carried out a study to test the hypothetical model, results proving that frequent and pleasing contact experience resulted in an incremental linguistic self-confidence in second language learners, in turn affecting language learning motivation in a positive way. In the study conducted in a bicultural milieu by Labrie and Clément (1986), intercultural contact if frequent enough had positive impact on self-confidence, probably due to the fact that "experience in aversive contacts develops the individual's expectations regarding the capacity to face successfully second language usage in such situations"(p. 279). Also, in monolingual context, the relationship between contact and self-confidence was verified to be important. A study carried out in monolingual Hungarian context (Clément et al., 1994) revealed that all aspects of intercultural contact negatively correlated with English use anxiety, English class anxiety, and positively with self-evaluation of proficiency and self-confidence. An interview study of intercultural contact and its role in language learning in monolingual Hungarian context was carried out by Kormos and Csizer (2007) to deeply investigate "what kinds of intercultural contact Hungarian schoolchildren have, what kind of language-related attitudes they can explain and how they view the role of contact situations in affecting their attitudinal and motivational dispositions towards the L2, the L2 speaking communities and the process of L2 learning" (p.244). After the analysis of interviews conducted with 40 Hungarian schoolchildren learning either English or German, results indicated that direct contact like tourism in monolingual Hungarian context does not produce many contact chances for the majority of students, if does, brief and superficial. Whereas, indirect contact via various products is the most frequent ways of obtaining information about target language speakers and their culture. Participants in this study reported that intercultural contact promote the development of their communicative competence and are conducive to the increase of their motivation and the decrease of language use anxiety. In the study carried out by Rivers and Ross (2018), 22 Japanese university students and 20 native-speaker English teachers were involved in to explore the efficacy of direct contact encounters through student self-reported measures of pre-contact and post-contact anxiety, students appraisals of teacher desirability, and perceptions of distance between student and teacher in the English as Foreign Language context. Students participating in the research were asked to experience and record at least six contact encounters in 15 weeks within the university practice center which was a part of their international communication program, with informing them that their contact encounters should be taken with one of these 20 native-speaker English teachers (16 males and 4 females) and that on each contact environment a different teacher might be chosen from the list offered. A total of 132 individual contact encounters data had been collected after 15 weeks, data analysis revealing that the contact encounters significantly succeeded in reducing anxiety, increasing positive appraisals and decreasing perceptions of the distance between students and teachers.

As can be concluded in the review above, intercultural contact consists of three dimensions: quantitative (amount of contact with outgroup in college, as neighbor, as friend, frequency of informal talks and frequency of family visit with outgroup) , qualitative (e.g., equal-status, voluntary, intimate, and cooperative contact) and intergroup meaning that when contacting with out-group members, one must be aware whether he/she meets as individual or as a member representing his/her respective cultural groups (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Two types of intercultural contact are included direct contact defined as the frequency of meeting members from different social or ethnic groups (Pettigrew, 1998), and indirect contact through the exposure to various L2-specific cultural products and artefacts, such as films, videos, books, magazines and music (Kormos & Csizer, 2007).

## 3. Implications

With the review of the relationship between intercultural contact and foreign language learning anxiety, majority of research mainly focused on the commonly taught languages like English, German or French, less attention has been paid on these less commonly taught languages like Thai, Burmese, or Vietnamese. Furthermore, to what extent the intercultural contact can contribute to the degree of foreign language learning anxiety has not been clearly stated yet. As mentioned above, because of the brief and superficial design of questionnaire, the researcher's last research concerning the relationship between intercultural contact and foreign language learning anxiety revealed a result conflicting with previous research indicating that students being bi/multilingual speakers or having opportunities to contact interculturally with native-speakers represent higher degree of anxiety than students who are not

bi/multilingual or do not have opportunities to contact with native-speakers. Aiming to have an in-depth investigation of the relationship between intercultural language contact and FLLA, a further research will be conducted with firstly exploring what types of intercultural contact students have and how they see the role of contact situation affecting their foreign language learning anxiety. As college students on campus, students majoring in these less commonly taught languages may have opportunities to contact with foreign students from target language countries. Then, whether students learning Thai, Burmese and Vietnamese have contact with foreign students from these countries in their daily life, if yes, how they contact with foreign students, since foreign students are the direct contact they can encounter easily compared with the direct contact taking place during study abroad or during vacation.

## 4. Conclusion

Through the review of previous research, a self-reflection of the former survey conducted months ago improved the researcher's understanding of how to well design a questionnaire concerning the intercultural contact and foreign language learning anxiety from multidimensional perspectives like quantitative, qualitative and inter-group aspects of intercultural contact and direct type or indirect type of intercultural contact. To deeply investigate to what extent the intercultural contact can have effect on foreign language learning anxiety, it is inappropriate to only ask students whether they have opportunities to contact with native-speakers or not, in that such superficial question may lead the research result to remain confused.

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