I'm Not Just Shy." Intercultural Communication Challenges in Italian Higher Education: A Case Study of Chinese Students

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Abstract: This study investigates the interplay between intercultural communication dynamics and educational outcomes, focusing on the experiences of Chinese students at the University of Turin. Through a qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews, it explores the cultural and linguistic challenges that shape these students' academic experiences. The findings reveal that cultural values such as face-saving, moderation, and distinct learning styles often contribute to misunderstandings, hindering effective communication and knowledge exchange. To address these barriers, the study advocates for culturally responsive teaching practices that foster inclusivity and bridge cultural gaps. By highlighting these challenges and proposing actionable strategies, the research contributes to the broader discourse on international education, offering valuable insights for improving the academic experiences of international students and addressing intercultural communication barriers in diverse educational settings globally.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Higher education, Cultural awareness, Chinese students

Introduction

Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy in 1970, the two countries have cultivated close ties across various fields, including education and research. Italy was among the first Western nations to sign a bilateral agreement with China on scientific and technological collaboration in 1978, setting the stage for significant academic exchanges (Marinelli & Andornino, 2014). Over time, these exchanges have expanded, with Italian universities increasingly welcoming Chinese students, particularly through initiatives like the Marco Polo and Turandot programs

. These programs aim to strengthen collaboration and provide opportunities for Chinese students in Italy's academic institutions. According to the Italian Ministry of University, Education and Research (MIUR), the number of Chinese students in Italy has risen significantly, underscoring their growing presence in Italian higher education (Casarini, 2021).

The increasing presence of Chinese students in Italian universities enriches classroom diversity but also highlights significant intercultural communication challenges. Despite the growing internationalization of higher education, research on these issues remains limited, particularly in the Italian context. Understanding the barriers faced by Chinese students, who often struggle to adapt to different cultural and academic norms, is essential to fostering inclusivity and improving educational quality. Building on existing research on the experiences of Chinese students studying abroad, as outlined below, these challenges serve as the foundation of this study, aiming to deepen the understanding of the academic challenges faced by Chinese students in the Italian context.

For instance, one major challenge lies in differences in communication styles. Chinese students, coming from a high-context communication culture, tend to rely on non-verbal cues, silence, and contextual understanding to convey meaning (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). In a low-context academic environment, where explicitness and clarity are prioritized, this approach can lead to misunderstandings. For instance, feedback that Chinese students may perceive as overly direct or critical can cause discomfort or a sense of inadequacy, discouraging them from active participation. Similarly, their reliance on indirect communication may be misinterpreted as disengagement or a lack of confidence (Chen & Starosta, 2020).

Another key barrier is rooted in cultural values. Chinese students, shaped by collectivist traditions, often prioritize group harmony, respect for authority, and social cohesion over individual expression (Hofstede, 2001). These values can discourage them from openly challenging ideas or participating in discussions, as they may fear disrupting harmony or appearing disrespectful. Such behavior, while culturally appropriate in their context, can hinder

their academic engagement and lead to perceptions of passivity or a lack of critical thinking in a more individualistic academic setting (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2017).

In addition to cultural factors, linguistic barriers compound these cultural challenges, where Italian and English are the primary teaching languages. For many Chinese students, mastering a foreign academic language and navigating culturally specific conversational norms represent significant obstacles (Andrade, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). When students feel unable to effectively communicate, their sense of competence is undermined, which can lead to frustration, withdrawal, and disengagement from academic activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These linguistic barriers often compound cultural challenges, creating a complex interplay of factors that can further undermine students' confidence and academic engagement.

Such intercultural communication barriers significantly influence the academic experiences of Chinese students, often resulting in challenges that hinder their educational engagement and performance. These barriers can undermine students' sense of competence, a core psychological need identified in Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which drives motivation and academic engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Struggling to interpret unfamiliar communication norms and adapt to new academic expectations may leave students feeling inadequate, discouraging them from seeking clarification, participating in discussions, or fully engaging in learning activities. Over time, this erosion of confidence can negatively impact their academic outcomes (Zhang & M. H. W., 2014).

The perpetuation of such barriers raises critical concerns about educational equity. True equity requires that all students, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, have equal opportunities to succeed. However, when communication challenges hinder students from expressing their ideas, seeking help, or engaging fully in the academic environment, their educational experience becomes inequitable. These barriers not only contribute to disparities in academic outcomes but also prevent institutions from fully harnessing the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in enriching the learning environment (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007).

Building on this background, this study examines the intercultural communication barriers encountered by Chinese students in Italian higher education, guided by the research question: "How do intercultural communication barriers, shaped by cultural and linguistic differences, impact the academic experiences and perceptions of educational equity among Chinese students in Italian higher education?" By focusing on the perspectives of Chinese students, the research addresses a critical gap in the literature, offering nuanced insights into how cultural and linguistic barriers shape their academic engagement and communication. This targeted approach ensures

an in-depth exploration of the students' lived experiences while maintaining clarity and specificity, avoiding extraneous variables that could dilute the study's scope.

By narrowing its focus to Chinese students' experiences, the study provides a foundational understanding of their unique challenges. Although incorporating perspectives from educators and institutional practices could enrich the analysis, such an expansion would risk compromising the depth of this investigation. Instead, the findings aim to establish a strong basis for future research that could integrate these broader perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural dynamics in higher education.

Through the analysis of communication challenges, this study investigates the impact of cultural and linguistic differences on academic interactions and proposes strategies to address these challenges effectively. The findings underscore the significance of culturally responsive teaching practices in enhancing both instructional quality and educational equity. By cultivating cultural awareness and employing adaptable communication strategies, educators can foster inclusive learning environments, enrich educational experiences, and ensure fairness in academic evaluation. Such initiatives enable universities to advance equitable opportunities for student success within an increasingly interconnected global educational framework.

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

The study centered on Chinese students at the University of Turin (UniTo) during the period of investigation, where the primary languages of instruction are Italian and English, contrasting with the students' native Mandarin. In collaboration with the Chinese Scholar and Student Association at UniTo, telephonic interviews were conducted with 30 students in September 2022. These initial interviews aimed to examine the students' communication challenges with Italian faculty and to identify key themes and questions to guide subsequent group interviews, thereby enriching the research's depth and scope.

A cohort of 12 Chinese students was purposefully selected for this study following an initial examination of phone interview data. The participants were chosen to represent diverse academic disciplines, including Economics, Humanities, and Social Sciences, and comprised seven undergraduates and five graduate students. This selection aimed to capture a range of perspectives and experiences relevant to communication challenges. Participants were specifically chosen for their ability to articulate and reflect on the com-

munication issues they encountered in their academic pursuits, providing nuanced insights into these challenges.

The sample size in this study is theoretically justified by the findings of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), which suggest that data saturation in qualitative research often occurs within the first 12 interviews, particularly when the population being studied is relatively homogeneous. The participants in this study exhibit homogeneity in several critical dimensions: they were all enrolled at the University of Turin, were native Mandarin speakers studying in a foreign language, and belonged to a similar age cohort (1995–2005). This age group experienced formative influences from China's rapid economic growth, digital transformation, and educational reforms, providing a rich context for understanding their communication styles, academic expectations, and experiences in navigating cross-cultural interactions.

Despite this homogeneity, individual variations in socioeconomic background, regional differences, and international exposure enhance the richness and depth of the dataset. Patton (2002) further advocates for smaller sample sizes in intercultural communication studies, emphasizing their effectiveness in exploring complex social interactions and contextual dynamics. This carefully selected and theoretically supported sample ensures the methodological rigor and relevance of the investigation, facilitating a focused and detailed analysis of the intercultural communication barriers faced by Chinese students.

Between October and December 2022, a series of three focus group interviews were conducted, each comprising four students selected from this meticulously curated cohort. These interviews were conducted solely in Mandarin, the native language of the participants, to ensure that linguistic barriers did not inhibit their ability to fully express their perspectives and experiences. This strategic choice of language was crucial in mitigating potential linguistic impediments, thus ensuring a clear and thorough understanding of their responses to the inquiries posed.

The interview process began with a brief presentation of the study's objectives and a request for participants' informed consent to record the session. Participants introduced themselves, providing demographic and educational details to establish rapport and gather contextual information.

The first part of the interview focused on communication barriers faced by Chinese students in interactions with Italian faculty. Open-ended questions, such as "What are your primary concerns in communicating with Italian professors?" and "What underlies these apprehensions?" encouraged diverse responses and facilitated a nuanced exploration of their experiences.

Participants were also invited to share strategies they had used to address these challenges, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their approaches. The interview concluded with a discussion on advice for future Chinese

students pursuing academic opportunities in Europe, emphasizing recommendations for improving communication with international faculty.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study is grounded in established theoretical frameworks to ensure a robust and systematic exploration of intercultural communication challenges. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a foundational lens for understanding the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which underpin students' communication behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the interplay of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors, highlighting how social learning and contextual influences shape communication strategies (Bandura, 2001). These frameworks are integrated into the analysis, offering a comprehensive understanding of the origins and attributions of communication concerns expressed by Chinese students in Italian higher education.

Also drawing upon prior research on student-teacher communication in higher education settings (e.g., Chory-Assad, 2002; Cakmak, 2008; Wang et al., 2010; Dannels, 2015), the statements made by Chinese students were classified into two primary categories: the origins and attributions of their communication concerns. This structured approach enabled the identification of key themes and patterns in the data, ensuring a detailed and theoretically grounded analysis of the communication challenges faced by these students (Englehart, 2009).

Origins of Communication Concerns

All unambiguous statements were categorized into three origins of communication concerns: SELF, TASK, and IMPACT, informed by frameworks exploring identity, task engagement, and social interactions.

The SELF category encompasses personal communication apprehensions, including concerns about linguistic proficiency and self-efficacy. These align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights competence as a key driver of motivation and engagement. Chinese students often face uncertainties about their communication abilities and aspire to improve them, illustrating the intricate interplay between identity, anxiety, and the desire for growth in their educational experiences (Huang & Jansen, 2020). Nishida (2018) further emphasizes the pivotal role of self-efficacy in intercultural communication, complementing Huang and Jansen's (2020) exploration of how these factors shape students' academic and personal development in cross-cultural settings.

The TASK category addresses concerns about the execution of communicative tasks, such as clarifying instructions and effectively conveying information. Within the framework of SDT, task engagement satisfies students' need for autonomy, motivating active participation. This aligns with Zhang and Zuo's (2016) findings on the importance of effective communication for successful academic task completion, noting that students may worry about the clarity of instructions and their ability to convey information effectively. Additionally, Hattie (2009) highlights how task-related communication enhances student engagement and learning outcomes, reinforcing the need for clear and effective communication in educational settings.

The IMPACT category reflects concerns about how students' communication affects others, emphasizing social awareness and the implications of their interactions. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory underlines the importance of observational learning and social environment in shaping behavior. Gonzalez et al. (2020) further demonstrate how awareness of communication impact influences engagement, aligning with SDT's concept of relatedness in fostering positive relationships.

Attributions of Communication Concerns

Each statement was further sub-categorized into three attributions of communication concerns: CULTURE, KNOWLEDGE, and LANGUAGE-related barriers. This additional classification enabled a more nuanced understanding of the communication challenges experienced by Chinese students, highlighting the specific areas in which they encountered difficulties in communication.

The CULTURE-related barriers reflect differences in cultural values and communication styles, which often lead to misunderstandings in academic settings. Drawing on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001), these barriers can be understood as the result of social learning and contextual influences that shape communication strategies. Chen and Starosta (2020) emphasize the importance of intercultural sensitivity in bridging such gaps, while Ting-Toomey et al. (2017) highlight how cultural dimensions like individualism and collectivism influence the effectiveness and perception of communication strategies. These differences underscore the importance of fostering intercultural awareness and adaptability in educational settings.

The KNOWLEDGE-related barriers stem from disparities in academic backgrounds and disciplinary norms, influencing students' integration and success in new educational environments. According to Bandura (2001), these barriers are shaped by prior experiences and the social contexts in which students have internalized disciplinary norms and expectations. SDT reinforces this by highlighting that students' need for competence and autonomy may be undermined when they encounter unfamiliar academ-

ic practices or unaddressed gaps in their prior knowledge. Therefore, the students' knowledge background is a critical factor that warrants thorough examination.

Finally, the LANGUAGE-related barriers involve challenges with linguistic proficiency and conversational norms, significantly affecting academic communication. Bandura (2001) explains how language behaviors are shaped through observation and interaction within specific social and cultural contexts. Students acquire language skills by modeling behaviors they observe in their environments, which may not align with the expectations of an academic setting. Simultaneously, SDT emphasizes the importance of competence in language use as a key motivator for students' engagement and success. Challenges in understanding academic language or expressing complex ideas can undermine students' sense of competence, leading to frustration and disengagement—critical issues that must not be overlooked.

The data categorization of this study are illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Criteria for Categorizing Valid Interview Data
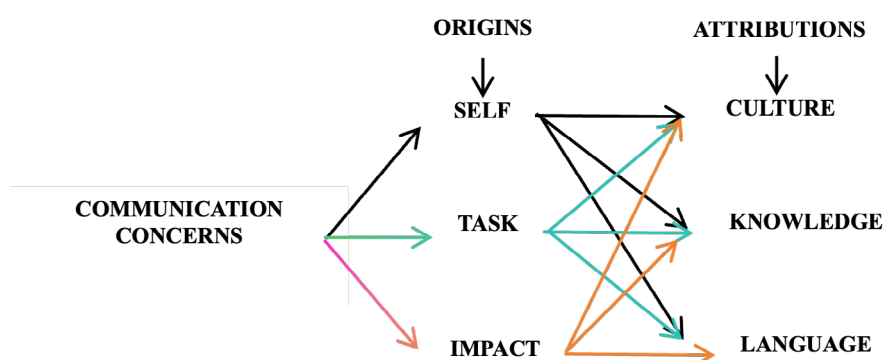
The frequency of statements in each communication concern category was tabulated, and the primary concerns and underlying reasons were analyzed. The selection and classification process adhered to rigorous criteria to ensure that the categories were comprehensive, logically distinct, and mutually exclusive, based on a unified classification system (Riff et al., 2019). Any responses that did not fit within the existing categories were either used to create new categories or considered as explanations for communication barriers.

The development of an appropriate data analysis method for this study necessitates careful deliberation of various factors and the balancing of competing considerations. As the following methodological challenges are out-

lined, a thorough explanation is necessary to justify the selected approaches and ensure they are aligned with the study's objectives and research purpose.

Methodological Challenges Encountered

Purposeful Sampling for Rich Data Collection: This study uses purposeful sampling to explore the lived experiences of Chinese students facing intercultural communication challenges in Italian higher education. Participants were recruited through the Chinese Scholars and Students Association (CSSA), fostering trust and rapport crucial for discussing sensitive topics. While this method may exclude less involved students, it enabled the collection of rich, meaningful data. The potential biases are acknowledged, but the benefits of accessing an informed participant pool ensure the study's methodological rigor and relevance.

Addressing Methodological Challenges in Cross-Cultural Research: Researching intercultural communication within an academic setting presented several methodological challenges, consistent with cross-cultural research complexities (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Creswell, 2013). Ensuring the authenticity of participants' responses was essential and was addressed by conducting interviews in Mandarin to reduce cognitive load and anxiety (Temple & Young, 2004). Although this approach minimized language-related barriers, it introduced risks of translation bias. To maintain the integrity of participants' perspectives, meticulous cross-checking of translations was conducted, with native speakers helping to preserve cultural nuances (Birbili, 2000).

Sampling Diversity and Managing Group Dynamics: As outlined in "Participants and Data Collection", purposeful sampling was used to select participants from diverse academic disciplines, enhancing the breadth of insights despite the small sample size, as recommended by Patton (2002) for intercultural communication studies. This approach, often applied in qualitative research with relatively homogeneous populations, supports the collection of in-depth, context-specific data critical for exploratory studies. Focus groups presented challenges, particularly with dominant participants, a common dynamic in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 2001). To address this, structured turn-taking was implemented to ensure balanced participation, aligning with intercultural communication principles (Gudykunst, 2005).

Structured Categorization of Communication Barriers: Categorizing communication barriers required a structured approach. Guided by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001), the data were organized into categories addressing SELF, TASK, and IMPACT barriers, along with CULTURE-, KNOWLEDGE-, and

LANGUAGE-related challenges, which enabled a detailed analysis of communication dynamics in the academic context (Miles et al., 2014). This categorization, along with a balance of open-ended and targeted interview questions, allowed for a nuanced exploration of intercultural communication barriers, linking specific cultural differences to broader impacts on teaching and learning (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The methods ensured the preservation of cultural nuances, providing valuable insights into enhancing intercultural communication in higher education.

Focused Scope on Chinese Students' Experiences: This study focuses exclusively on the communication challenges faced by Chinese students, deliberately excluding the perspectives of Italian professors. Given the small proportion of Chinese students in their multicultural classrooms, professors often prioritize broader dynamics over the specific needs of this group. Including professors' viewpoints, while valuable, would shift the study's focus and dilute its depth. Additionally, analyzing both groups would require a different research design and resources to maintain methodological rigor. By centering on Chinese students, this research provides a focused and detailed exploration, laying the groundwork for future studies that may incorporate professors' perspectives.

To conclude, this systematic approach to data analysis helped identify the most significant communication issues experienced by Chinese students and highlighted potential areas for intervention and improvement. Despite the challenges encountered, the methodological rigor applied throughout the study ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, contributing valuable insights into the broader field of international educational research.

Findings and Discussion

Distribution of Origin and Attribution of Communication Concerns

Based on qualitative interviews with 12 Chinese students, a comprehensive datasets of 248 valid entries was amassed. By systematically categorizing these entries, the students' expressions can be distilled into two primary domains: the genesis and attribution of their communication challenges. Table 1 encapsulates the outcomes of this data analysis.

Table 1: Classification and Distribution of Valid Interview Data

ORIGIN ATTRIBUTION	41%	21%	38%
	Self	**Task**	**Impact**
Culture	52%	30%	27%
Academic knowledge	9%	11%	12%
Language	39%	59%	61%

Self-Related Concerns

As delineated in Table 1, communication concerns originating from the Self category account for 41% of the total data. Within this origin, Culture (52%) emerges as the predominant attribution, indicating that students' internalized cultural norms and values significantly influence their communication difficulties. For example, Chinese students often report challenges in reconciling indirect, high-context communication styles with the more explicit, low-context norms prevalent in Italian academic settings. These cultural differences lead to feelings of self-doubt and apprehension, particularly in situations requiring direct communication or public speaking, where Chinese students may feel ill-equipped to meet the expectations of their academic environment.

Language also accounts for a significant portion (39%) of self-related concerns. Students frequently express insecurities about their linguistic proficiency, particularly in articulating complex ideas and understanding nuanced academic language. These difficulties often undermine their sense of competence, a key driver of motivation and engagement as outlined in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When students feel unable to meet academic communication standards, their confidence erodes, leading to disengagement and withdrawal from classroom activities.

Impact-Related Concerns

Concerns about the Impact of communication represent 38% of the total entries, reflecting students' heightened awareness of how their communication behaviors affect interactions with peers and professors. Within this origin, Language is the dominant attribution (61%), emphasizing the critical role of linguistic challenges. Many students worry about whether their language skills are sufficient to convey their ideas clearly and effectively, fearing that miscommunication may lead to misunderstandings or negative perceptions.

Culture accounts for 27% of impact-related concerns, with students expressing anxiety about how their culturally ingrained communication styles are perceived in an Italian academic context. For instance, the tendency to prioritize harmony and avoid confrontation—hallmarks of collectivist cultures—may be misinterpreted as passivity or disengagement, which cause concerns of Chinese students. These perceptions can hinder students' relationships with professors and peers, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Task-Related Concerns

Task-related concerns, which account for 21% of the data, highlight specific challenges associated with academic tasks and responsibilities. Language is again the most significant attribution in this category, comprising

59% of task-related concerns. Students frequently report difficulties in understanding instructions, participating in discussions, and completing group assignments due to linguistic limitations. These challenges often impair their ability to fully engage with academic tasks and demonstrate their capabilities.

Cultural barriers contribute to 30% of task-related concerns, as differences in communication expectations and norms make it difficult for students to integrate into group work or collaborative settings. For instance, the preference for indirect communication and deference to authority in Chinese culture may conflict with the more direct and egalitarian norms typical in Italian classrooms (Hofstede, 2001). Additionally, 11% of task-related concerns are attributed to gaps in academic knowledge, which, while less significant than cultural and linguistic barriers, still play a role in shaping students' experiences.

Key Challenges: Cultural and Linguistic Barriers with Examples

The data underscore the centrality of cultural and linguistic barriers in shaping Chinese students' communication challenges. Culture-related barriers dominate self-related concerns (52%) and contribute significantly to both task-related (30%) and impact-related (27%) challenges. These findings highlight the difficulties students face in navigating cultural expectations and adapting to new communication norms, particularly when these norms conflict with their own.

Language emerges as a critical factor across all categories, representing 39% of self-related concerns, 59% of task-related concerns, and 61% of impact-related concerns. The prominence of language barriers reflects students' struggles with linguistic proficiency, particularly in academic contexts requiring precision and nuance. These challenges not only impede students' ability to participate effectively but also exacerbate cultural misunderstandings, compounding their overall communication difficulties.

The analysis highlights cultural and linguistic barriers as the most significant factors shaping the communication experiences of Chinese students. These challenges merit a deeper exploration, supported by specific examples, to provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact. To address these critical points effectively, the discussion focuses on four key issues that emerged from the data, each offering valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of intercultural communication. These issues are outlined as follows:

> *Being Not the Best and Not the Last: "Modesty is a virtue." (Interview, YU, M08, 10/2022)*

Chinese students often face communication challenges in university settings, shaped by cultural values emphasizing humility and modesty. These values influence their reluctance to interrupt, take initiative, or share opin-

ions openly, which impacts their ability to engage effectively in academic discussions. Many students reported a preference for maintaining a low profile in class, avoiding attention or behaviors that might be perceived as competitive. Instead, they wait for professors to explicitly invite their input, viewing this as a respectful and modest approach. Two students explained:

> "I don't like answering questions, even when I know the answers, unless the teacher specifically asks me. I want to avoid being seen as competitive by my peers." (Interview, ZHG, M05, 10/2022)

> "Sometimes I have better ideas than my classmates, but I rarely share them. Since childhood, I was taught that modesty is a virtue." (Interview, YU, M08, 10/2022)

Students noted that Italian professors often misinterpreted this behavior as shyness or a lack of language proficiency. However, they clarified that their reluctance stemmed from the Confucian principle of the "doctrine of the mean", which emphasizes balance and avoiding extremes. For instance, some students expressed discomfort when placed in the spotlight, preferring less prominent roles to avoid appearing ambitious, competitive, or arrogant. They viewed humility as a core value and a better way to present themselves, even if it meant downplaying their abilities.

The comments from Chinese students reveal the profound influence of "The Doctrine of the Mean" on their interaction styles. Also known as "the way of Zhong-yong" (中庸之道, zhōng yōng zhīdào), this concept is a central tenet of Confucianism and significantly impacts Chinese communication habits. Confucius posited a hierarchical social order and prescribed behaviors rooted in this principle. He emphasized centrality and universality (中庸, zhōng yōng) to promote balance and harmony in all relationships (Gunaratne et al., 2015, p.133; Piller, 2011). Essentially, "Zhong-yong" underscores the importance of individuals acting moderately and maintaining harmony in various contexts. The ideal means to achieve this balance is through adhering to a desirable middle path between two extremes at all times (Sun & Chen, 2016).

By valuing harmony over confrontation, Chinese students often navigate social interactions with a preference for indirect communication styles, which align with the principles of "Zhong-yong" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.20). This tendency reflects a broader cultural orientation that prioritizes group cohesion and interpersonal relationships, as emphasized by Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 2001, p.29). As such, understanding the role of "The Doctrine of the Mean" provides valuable insight into the communication patterns and relational dynamics of Chinese students in intercultural settings.

In Chinese culture, "The Doctrine of Mean" has had a profound and lasting influence, leading to the high regard for values such as self-control, restraint and courtesy. This philosophy emphasizes maintaining balance and harmony in all situations by adhering to a moderate course of action. From a young age, Chinese children are taught the importance of being humble and modest to avoid falling behind. This cultural emphasis on modesty and humility results in passive and ego-weak behavior in social situations and when interacting with authority figures, as described by Liang (1998, p.102-125). Ultimately, being modest is seen as the best way to present oneself and to foster harmonious relationships with others.

In contrast to the Chinese culture's emphasis on modesty, academic settings in Western countries, such as Italy, often prioritize individuality, innovation, and freedom of expression (Corbett & Gordon, 2018). This cultural difference can create challenges for Chinese students, as their reserved communication style may not align with the more outspoken and assertive norms encouraged in these environments. As a result, Chinese students may experience increased pressure during interactions, potentially leading to communication difficulties and misunderstandings.

Saving Face: "Will others laugh at me?" (Interview, ZHO, F04, 11/2022)

In Chinese culture, the concept of "face" (miànzi, 面子) is multifaceted and often challenging for Westerners to fully grasp. It refers to the respect, dignity, and social prestige associated with an individual. "Saving face" involves preserving one's dignity and avoiding situations that could cause embarrassment or loss of reputation, especially in social or hierarchical contexts (Hwang, 2006).

This research highlights that the concern for "saving face" plays a significant role in shaping the communication behaviors of Chinese students in academic interactions. The findings consistently emphasize the importance of maintaining dignity and avoiding potential embarrassment in these settings. The following examples illustrate how the concept of "face" influences their communication strategies.

> "I have always worries when talking with Italian professors. Will my questions sound 'silly'? Will others laugh at me because of my poor language or silly questions? Such worries often make me anxious and stop me from presenting myself. It is about saving-face. But maybe others just think that I am shy." (Interview, ZHO, F04, 11/2022)

> "I tend to avoid expressing ideas or answering the professors' questions. I fear making mistakes and being ridiculed by others." (Interview, LIU, F09, 11/2022)

As shown in the examples, Chinese students often face challenges interacting with foreign professors and peers, particularly in public settings, due to concerns about losing face. This anxiety stems from a fear of making mistakes or being ridiculed, reflecting the Chinese cultural emphasis on maintaining dignity and social standing. Unlike the Western perspective, which prioritizes self-esteem and individual confidence, the Chinese notion of "face" (miànzi) focuses on how one is perceived by others and is deeply rooted in relationships and social hierarchies (Oetzel et al., 2002; Chang, 2008).

In Chinese culture, "face" operates as a form of impression management, situationally dependent and relational. It is especially important in interactions with authority figures or in unfamiliar environments, where losing face can result in diminished status, credibility, or influence (Heringer, 2004). Conversely, individuals may feel less pressure to save face in familiar or peer-centered settings.

Research findings indicate that Chinese students' face-related anxieties in Italian universities stem from three main factors: the unfamiliar learning environment, interactions with Italian professors, and communication with Italian and international peers. The new cultural and linguistic context of Italian academia creates significant pressure for Chinese students, who fear underperforming in an unfamiliar system. Professors, as authority figures, heighten these concerns, as students are particularly cautious about losing face in their presence. Furthermore, interactions with Italian and international peers, perceived as more skilled in language and cultural knowledge, amplify their sense of inadequacy, contrasting with their interactions with Chinese peers, whom they view as equals.

These challenges motivate Chinese students to avoid negative impressions and the risk of being belittled for their performance. Consequently, their strong desire to save face can hinder open communication with professors and peers, limiting their ability to seek help or actively participate. This underscores the critical role of cultural differences—such as distinct values, cognitive behaviors, and politeness norms—in shaping the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication.

> Confused in the Differences of Learning Approaches: "I became accustomed to working diligently but silently." (Interview, ZHO, D06, 11/2022)

Another concern frequently expressed by Chinese students is their difficulty in navigating the differences between Chinese and Italian learning and communication styles. The contrasting educational systems create challenges for Chinese students in reconciling their deeply rooted academic values with the expectations of Italian academic environments. Behaviors that are

considered "admissible" or appropriate within the Chinese context often fail to align with the norms and practices in Italian universities, leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

According to student accounts, many Chinese students tend to adopt a reserved and hesitant communication style, often "remaining silent and avoiding answering questions" (Interview, LU, D03, 10/2022). This silence is sometimes interpreted negatively, with some students noting that it is perceived as being "disinterested in the lectures" (Interview, ZHO, D05, 10/2022) or even as a sign of being "lacking in ability and talent" (Interview, ZHG, D07, 11/2022). One student elaborated:

> "Modesty is highly valued in Chinese culture, including in the school environment, where students are taught not to challenge their teachers or flaunt their skills. However, this humble behavior and deference to teachers have been misinterpreted here (in Italian universities) as a lack of ability and talent." (Interview, ZHG, D07, 11/2022)

This observation reflects the stark differences between Chinese and Italian academic traditions. In China, educational practices are deeply influenced by Confucian principles, which prioritize respect for authority, modesty, and maintaining harmony (Rimon-Or et al., 2023). Students are taught to remain silent during lectures and speak only when explicitly invited by their teacher, reflecting a hierarchical classroom dynamic rooted in deference to instructors (Sun, 2019). This reserved approach is viewed as a mark of respect and self-discipline within Chinese academic culture.

In contrast, Italian academic settings encourage a more participatory and interactive learning environment, where students are expected to actively engage in discussions and pose questions (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2013). Questioning and debating ideas are regarded as essential to developing critical thinking and analytical skills, and such behaviors are often interpreted as evidence of intellectual curiosity and engagement (Wang & Wiseman, 2011). Conversely, silence and passivity are sometimes perceived as indicative of disinterest or a lack of preparedness, creating challenges for Chinese students whose communication styles align more closely with their cultural norms.

These divergent expectations around learning behaviors contribute to the communication difficulties faced by Chinese students in Italian universities. For many, behaviors considered "appropriate" and respectful within the context of their cultural upbringing may be misinterpreted in the Italian academic environment, leading to frustration and misunderstandings. This cultural mismatch highlights the need for greater awareness and intercultural sensitivity in fostering inclusivity and bridging communication gaps in Italian higher education.

The Subtle Yet Profound Impact of Language on Communication: "My concerns are more or less related to my language ability." (Interview, ZHAO, L03, 11/2022)

Language barriers emerged as a significant challenge for Chinese students in Italian higher education, profoundly impacting their ability to communicate effectively in academic contexts. While language proficiency is a well-documented issue in research on Chinese international students, this study reveals the multifaceted ways in which language difficulties intersect with cultural and psychological factors to hinder communication. Despite meeting formal language proficiency requirements, such as achieving a C1 level in Italian or passing English proficiency tests, students often found their skills inadequate for navigating real-world academic interactions (Andrade, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017).

Many Chinese students identified language proficiency as a key factor aggravating their communication challenges. Although cultural differences, such as shyness and modesty, influenced their interactions, students consistently noted that stronger language skills would alleviate their concerns. As one participant explained, "For me, the main problem is always the language. It is true that I have some psychological barriers because of cultural differences, but I think I would have much fewer concerns than now if my Italian was better" (Interview, YU, L05, 10/2022). This underscores how linguistic competence is closely tied to their sense of confidence and ability to engage effectively in academic settings, aligning with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes competence as a key factor in motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A recurring theme in the findings was the difficulty students faced in expressing their thoughts clearly to professors. Limited vocabulary and insufficient command of the language often forced students to rely on overly simplified sentences, which reduced the depth and accuracy of their intended meaning. One student noted, "Sometimes I cannot express exactly the meaning that I had in mind in Italian or in English. I can only use simple sentences to describe what I thought. But my original meaning was greatly reduced" (Interview, ZHG, L13, 11/2022). Such limitations not only hindered students' ability to convey complex ideas but also contributed to feelings of frustration and inadequacy, further compounding their communication concerns.

Language barriers also significantly impacted students' ability to understand lectures and participate in discussions. Several students struggled to keep up with the pace of lectures, with one noting, "At the beginning, I almost understood nothing in lectures. I just saw the lips of my lecturer moving, but I could only grasp a few words" (Interview, ZHG, L10, 11/2022). This lack of comprehension further restricted their participation and height-

ened their psychological burden, creating a sense of isolation in the academic environment. To cope, students often relied on peers, translation tools, or visual aids to bridge communication gaps, showcasing their resilience and adaptability in addressing these challenges.

Interestingly, Chinese students in English-speaking programs reported fewer communication concerns compared to those in Italian-taught programs. For these students, English functioned as a "shared foreign language", leveling the playing field between Chinese students, Italian professors, and their international peers. One student noted, "English is a foreign language for all of us, which makes me feel fair and relieved in communication" (Interview, QIAN, L19, 11/2022). This shared linguistic context reduced the pressure on Chinese students to conform to native-speaker standards, providing a more equitable communication environment.

Nevertheless, the challenges of mastering academic language extend beyond vocabulary and grammar. Chinese students emphasized the difficulty of adapting to the cultural norms embedded within the language. As one student noted, "Language serves as both a tool of communication and a carrier of culture, conveying implicit cultural meanings that extend beyond words" (Interview, YU, L05, 10/2022). This cultural dimension of language posed additional challenges, particularly in adapting to Italian academic communication styles, where directness and assertiveness are often valued (Baraldi, 2006). These difficulties highlight the interplay between linguistic and cultural barriers, illustrating that language proficiency is not merely a technical skill but also a gateway to understanding and navigating cultural expectations.

In summary, language barriers profoundly shaped the communication experiences of Chinese students, influencing their ability to express themselves, comprehend academic content, and integrate into the academic environment. Effective communication requires more than linguistic proficiency; it necessitates cultural adaptation, creating a multifaceted set of challenges. Addressing these issues calls for strategies that acknowledge the dual role of language as both a tool of communication and a carrier of culture, supporting both linguistic development and intercultural understanding.

Analytical Synthesis and Inspirations

Building upon the results presented above, this study examines the intercultural communication challenges faced by Chinese students in Italian higher education, uncovering key barriers that affect teaching quality and equity. By highlighting critical gaps and centering students' experiences, this discussion seeks to proposes actionable strategies to improve academic

engagement and inclusivity. The following key points outline areas for reflection and targeted intervention:

Teaching Quality and the Necessity of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Addressing the communication barriers faced by Chinese students in Italian higher education requires a shift toward culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach emphasizes adapting teaching practices to accommodate students' diverse cultural and linguistic needs, fostering more inclusive and effective learning environments. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes the critical role of social and cultural contexts in shaping learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). By creating teaching strategies that are sensitive to students' cultural preferences, such as encouraging alternative forms of participation like written reflections or small-group discussions, educators can promote greater engagement and inclusivity (Gay, 2018).

Incorporating Hammond's (2015) framework of culturally responsive brain-based learning further supports this effort by aligning teaching methods with students' cognitive processing styles. Strategies such as providing clear, structured instructions, scaffolding assignments, and moderating the pace of verbal communication can help reduce the cognitive load on students adapting to new academic norms. These adjustments not only address linguistic challenges but also foster an environment where students feel confident to participate and express themselves effectively.

Italian higher education has taken steps to foster intercultural competencies through training programs initiated by the Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR). Examples include workshops on cultural awareness, modules on recognizing and addressing unconscious bias, and simulations that immerse educators in diverse cultural scenarios (MIUR, 2014). Additionally, seminars focused on effective communication strategies for multilingual classrooms and the development of inclusive curricula have provided valuable tools for navigating cultural and linguistic diversity. However, findings from this study suggest these programs could benefit from increased specificity to address the unique challenges faced by Chinese students.

Ladson-Billings (2009) offers valuable insights into developing effective teaching strategies. By addressing students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, educators can foster a supportive environment that enhances motivation and engagement, aligning closely with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For instance, recognizing and validating the reflective learning styles of Chinese students, as well as offering tailored linguistic support, can boost their confidence and

sense of belonging (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Providing opportunities for collaboration in diverse groups can also encourage peer learning and reduce the isolation often experienced by students facing linguistic or cultural barriers.

Educational Equity and the Imperative of Intercultural Sensitivity

Achieving educational equity for Chinese students in Italian higher education requires a targeted approach to address the cultural and linguistic barriers identified in this study. These challenges often lead to misinterpretations of student behavior, impacting their engagement, confidence, and performance. While initiatives like intercultural education training programs by the Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR, 2014) provide a strong foundation by enhancing educators' cultural awareness and promoting inclusive teaching practices, further refinement is needed. The findings from this study highlight the importance of tailoring these initiatives to address the nuanced experiences of special student groups, with the aim to help universities foster inclusivity, reduce systemic inequities, and create a more equitable academic environment.

One critical area for improvement involves enhancing training programs for educators to include targeted interventions based on real-world student experiences. For example, incorporating simulations or role-playing activities that reflect the communication dynamics faced by Chinese students can help educators understand and adapt to cultural and linguistic nuances. These insights align with the broader goal of fostering equity through tailored support mechanisms and are grounded in Gay's (2018) framework for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Furthermore, fostering structured opportunities for student feedback and dialogue is essential. This could include the establishment of intercultural advisory committees or forums where students can share their challenges and propose solutions collaboratively with faculty. Such initiatives not only help bridge gaps in understanding but also ensure that institutional policies and teaching practices evolve to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

Addressing the psychological needs of international students is a crucial complement to institutional strategies, as demonstrated by initiatives like the PASSI@Unito[1] and Mentorship[2] projects at the University of Turin. These programs underscore the importance of creating a supportive environment

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[1] PASSI@Unito is a psychological counseling and intercultural support program offered by the University of Turin since 2019. It aims to assist international students in overcoming cultural, linguistic, and academic challenges, promoting their mental well-being and successful integration into the academic community. Webpage: https://en.unito.it/services/health-support-and-assistance/passiunito-counseling-international-students

[2] Project Mentorship is a project of the University of Turin addressed to the international students enrolled in the University of Turin and in particular to students who are leaving their home country and/or holding international protection. Webpage: https://en.unito.it/services/health-support-and-assistance/mentorship-project

for diverse student populations. Tailored language support initiatives, such as academic writing workshops and conversational practice sessions, empower students to overcome linguistic barriers while building confidence in their communication skills. Additionally, peer mentorship programs that connect international students with peers from similar cultural backgrounds foster a stronger sense of belonging, mitigate feelings of isolation, and promote meaningful social integration within the academic community. These efforts collectively enhance students' overall academic and social experiences, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Practical Strategies for Overcoming Communication Barriers

To address these considerations, several practical strategies grounded in contemporary educational theories are recommended. These strategies aim to foster supportive and inclusive academic environments, enabling Chinese students to effectively navigate communication barriers and enhance their overall educational experience.

- *Task-Oriented Communication*: Focusing on task-centric communication helps students engage without needing to conform to unfamiliar communication norms. This recommendation aligns with Biggs and Tang's constructive alignment theory, which posits that effective learning occurs when teaching methods align with targeted learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Research suggests that task-oriented communication can reduce anxiety and foster engagement by shifting the focus to academic content rather than communication style, which is particularly helpful for international students unfamiliar with Western classroom expectations (Archbell & Coplan, 2022).

- *Note-Taking*: Encouraging note-taking reduces the cognitive load for students processing information in a non-native language. Contemporary theories of cognitive load (Sweller et al., 2019) and distributed cognition (Hollan et al., 2000) support this approach, suggesting that structured note-taking can help students organize and retain information more effectively. This recommendation also aligns with research by Hattie (2009) on effective instructional practices, which shows that note-taking can improve comprehension and engagement.

- *External Motivation*: To address communication challenges effectively, it is crucial to incorporate culturally affirming practices that integrate students' cultural perspectives into classroom activities. This approach enhances autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are fundamental to fostering motivation, as outlined in the self-determination framework (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, Hammond (2015) highlights the significance of culturally responsive questioning and engagement strategies

in promoting inclusivity and encouraging active participation, creating a more supportive and equitable learning environment.

Practical strategies include inviting students to share examples or viewpoints from their cultural backgrounds during discussions and using group work to encourage collaboration across diverse perspectives. Designing assignments that allow students to explore topics through a culturally informed lens can further validate their unique experiences. Additionally, providing clear, structured instructions and offering opportunities for feedback in a supportive environment can help mitigate linguistic and cultural barriers, fostering greater confidence and engagement. By integrating these approaches, educators can create a more inclusive and motivating academic experience for international students.

- *Inclusive Learning Environment*: Creating an inclusive classroom is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and respect, which are foundational for higher-order cognitive engagement (Steele, 2010). This study highlights the importance of acknowledging and valuing diverse communication styles to reduce feelings of alienation and increase academic involvement among Chinese students. By addressing cultural and linguistic barriers, educators can cultivate an environment that actively supports self-expression and encourages meaningful participation (Deardorff, 2006, 2011).

Contemporary frameworks of inclusive pedagogy emphasize adapting teaching methods to integrate students' cultural backgrounds as a core element of high-quality education (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Banks & Banks, 2019). Practical strategies include offering multiple participation formats, such as written reflections or small group discussions, which align with diverse cultural communication preferences, and implementing peer-supported learning to foster collaboration and mutual understanding among students. Tailored language support, such as pre-class glossaries or bilingual resources, can further assist students in navigating academic content with confidence. Additionally, regular feedback mechanisms, such as anonymous surveys or open forums, empower students to voice their needs and help shape a more inclusive learning environment. By combining these approaches, educators can create classrooms that respect cultural diversity, enhance student engagement, and promote academic success.

Leveraging School Autonomy and Formative Evaluation in Addressing Communication Challenges

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of school autonomy in addressing the communication challenges faced by Chinese students in Italian higher education. Autonomy enables institutions to design and implement culturally responsive curricula and communication strategies

tailored to the diverse needs of their student populations, providing flexibility to adapt teaching practices to specific cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, universities could develop workshops on cultural sensitivity or specialized language support programs that address the unique challenges identified in this research, such as students' struggles with indirect communication styles and academic language barriers. This aligns with research suggesting that autonomy in educational institutions fosters innovation and responsiveness to local needs (Hanushek et al., 2013).

However, school autonomy must be complemented by centralized support to ensure equity across institutions. Centralized guidelines, funding, and professional development programs can provide the foundational resources necessary for institutions to implement effective strategies. A balanced approach that combines institutional autonomy with centralized oversight allows for both customization at the local level and the maintenance of national standards for educational quality and equity. For instance, centralized policies could mandate training on intercultural communication while allowing institutions to adapt the content to their specific student demographics.

In addition, continuous formative evaluation of communication strategies is essential for improving teaching practices and addressing student needs. Institutions can use formative evaluation tools, such as anonymous student feedback surveys or structured reflection sessions, to identify areas where educators and students experience communication barriers. These evaluations should also include peer assessments and collaborative feedback sessions to encourage mutual understanding and continuous improvement (Hattie, 2009).

For instance, the findings of this study revealed that task-related communication concerns were less significant (21%) compared to self-related (41%) and impact-related (38%) concerns. This suggests that while Chinese students may be less anxious about task-related issues, they face heightened challenges in expressing themselves and navigating the perceived impact of their communication on others. Therefore, task-oriented communication could be leveraged as a means of addressing self- and impact-related anxieties. Educators could place greater emphasis on structured tasks that involve clear instructions and collaborative activities, which provide students with opportunities to practice communication in a low-pressure, supportive environment. Research also shows that task-based learning fosters confidence and engagement by reducing ambiguity and creating a sense of accomplishment (Ellis, 2003).

Ultimately, this study recommends a multi-faceted policy approach that integrates school autonomy, centralized support, and continuous formative evaluation. This framework provides the flexibility to meet the specific needs

of Chinese students while ensuring that all institutions maintain high standards for equity and inclusivity. Such an approach not only addresses existing communication challenges but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement, benefiting both international students and the broader academic community. By adopting these strategies, Italian higher education can move toward a more inclusive and equitable model, providing all students with the tools they need to succeed in a globalized academic environment.

Conclusion

This study highlights the intercultural communication challenges faced by Chinese students in Italian higher education, revealing how cultural and linguistic barriers shape their academic experiences and underscore systemic inequities. The findings advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy, integrating students' cultural contexts into teaching, enhancing educator training, and fostering inclusive environments. By reframing cultural diversity as an asset, this research calls for actionable strategies to bridge linguistic and cultural divides, setting a foundation for equity and meaningful engagement in global academic settings. Such efforts are essential for transforming diversity into a catalyst for academic and social success in an increasingly interconnected world.

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