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The Effects of Emotional Intelligence on Students' Foreign Language Speaking: A Narrative Exploration in China's Universities

Chenyang Zhang
University of Melbourne, czzhang4@student.unimelb.edu.au

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Abstract

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Keywords

narrative inquiry, emotional intelligence, speaking English as a foreign language, China's universities

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The Effects of Emotional Intelligence on Students' Foreign Language Speaking: A Narrative Exploration in China's Universities

Chenyang Zhang
University of Melbourne, Australia

In countries where people see English as a foreign language (EFL), English is merely used in public communication and EFL learners usually experience emotional issues like speaking anxiety and reflect a lower level of emotional intelligence (EI). Although previous studies have found a positive correlation between EI and EFL speaking, few studies explain how EI affects learners' EFL speaking in terms of their contextual influence. This study aims to explore the effects of EI on English speaking in the context of China's universities. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two participants and was analysed through thematic narrative analysis. Findings suggest that the English-speaking environments in China's universities are less than supportive. In this situation, when EFL learners are situated in a low-stress learning environment, they are more inclined to embrace happiness and optimism by developing specific interests to enhance their spoken English skills. However, with the stress of the test looming, they often show negative emotions such as uneasiness before exams and fear during exams. Findings highlight that EI, especially adaptability and interpersonal capability can help EFL students cope with their emotional issues, regulate their behaviours, and participate in and profit from non-interactive and (partially) interactive English-speaking practices.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, emotional intelligence, speaking English as a foreign language, China's universities

Introduction

For many years, education has strived to enhance students' cognitive abilities, such as understanding the input knowledge, recalling the learned information, and employing that information to make sense of the world or to reason and tackle a problem, which are measured by an intelligence test that renders an intelligence quotient (IQ) score (Bar-On, 2007). However, despite the significance of IQ in students' academic life, it is only one factor in educational success (Taheri et al., 2019). For example, when high IQ students lose motivation and self-control during their learning journeys, they find it difficult to improve their academic achievement (Esmaeeli et al., 2018).

In this regard, it is necessary to introduce the other determining factor in education – emotional intelligence (EI), which refers to individuals' non-cognitive skills of perceiving and expressing their emotions, assimilating emotions in thoughts, understanding and reasoning with emotions, and managing one's own and/or others' emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Goleman (1996) argued that EI significantly contributes to students' educational performance. This is because students with a higher level of EI tend to motivate themselves and persist when facing learning challenges, control their impulsive behaviours, and manage their moods. Additionally, they are more likely to construct and maintain cooperative relationships with

their peers, which can help them overcome learning obstacles through mutual assistance (Bar-On, 2007).

Given the importance of EI, in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), increasing attention has been paid to the relationship between EI and students' learning achievements in four main EFL learning tasks – speaking, reading, writing, and listening (e.g., Afshar & Rahimi, 2014; Shao et al., 2013a, 2013b). English speaking is usually regarded as a more challenging issue than the other three language learning tasks, because, when language learners live in countries where people see English as a foreign language, English may be used merely as a tool in public communication (e.g., education and administration; Baker & Wright, 2017). In this inadequately supportive English-speaking environment, numerous researchers have found a positive correlation between EI and EFL speaking (e.g., Afshar & Rahimi, 2014; Genç et al., 2016; Zarezadeh, 2013). However, fewer studies consider how EI affects students' foreign language speaking in terms of contextual influence. Therefore, this qualitative study seeks to explore the effects of EI on English speaking in the EFL learning communities in China's universities.

Problem in Context

With China's rapid socioeconomic development in the globalising world, English as a lingua franca – “referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339) – has attracted more attention from educators and policymakers (Chang, 2006; Pan & Block, 2011). In the early 2000s, English became a compulsory course for students from grade three of primary school (Ministry of Education, 2001), and is listed as one main subject in the college entrance examination (Ministry of Education, 2003). Thus, a student's English language ability is associated with the assessment of academic success, which will affect their chances of future employment (Chang, 2006; Haidar & Fang, 2019).

However, although Chinese university students with more than a nine-year English learning journey could pass formal English tests (Peng, 2014), a considerable number of learners experience English speaking difficulties in their academic lives (e.g., group discussion in class; Liu, 2007) and social lives (Gan, 2013). Such a situation is described as “mute English,” indicating that even after long-term English learning, most Chinese students find it difficult to speak English and understand spoken English (Peng, 2014). This situation is partly attributed to China's EFL education, which puts little emphasis on speaking, instead highlighting reading, writing, and listening. Without enough opportunities to speak English in class, the ability to use English as a communication tool in China is limited (Gan, 2013).

In my previous experience as an undergraduate student at a university in China, the best possibility for me to communicate with others in English was in my two-hour English class every week. Unfortunately, under the teacher-centred pedagogy, my English teacher dominated the class and used most of the time to transfer the pre-designed learning materials. Thus, I had almost no chance to practise my spoken English with other classmates. I was afraid and nervous to speak English when my teacher asked students to respond to the proposed questions. As argued by He (2013, 2017), without a comfortable and supportive English-speaking environment, Chinese students are more likely to feel challenged and stressed about improving their spoken English. In this situation, negative emotions about language learning such as anxiety (He, 2017), fear (Liu, 2007, 2018), and apprehension (Guo & Wang, 2013) that demotivate and dispirit students from performing more language learning practices, compromise their optimal learning state and impede their learning process, reflect students' a lower level of EI (Shao et al., 2013a). However, few studies have investigated the effects of EI

on EFL students' English speaking in the context of China's universities. This literature gap is addressed in this study.

Literature Review

The conception of EI began to attract scholars' interest in the late 20th century when they realised the essential role of EI in humans' academic and social lives (see Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schutte et al., 1998). More studies on the meaning of EI (e.g., Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2008) were published. It was amid such active investigation that EI has been conceptualised in numerous ways, and there is a degree of complexity regarding how EI is understood, evaluated, and utilised in research.

Bar-On (2010) related how EI can be viewed as a group of interconnected emotional and social abilities that decide how humans comprehend and express their emotions, understand others' feelings, build social relationships, and deal with daily needs, stresses and challenges. Bar-On (2006) explained that EI is founded, first and foremost, on humans' intrapersonal capability to be self-aware, to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to express their emotions and opinions. Then, on the interpersonal level, it refers to the competence to comprehend others' thoughts and to construct and maintain a collaborative and comfortable relationship. EI also includes the capability to deal with personal, social, and environmental changes and problems rationally and flexibly.

The social and emotional skills mentioned above constitute Bar-On's EI theory, which comprises five meta-components; each includes a set of closely related skills (Bar-On, 1997):

- (1) Intrapersonal capability comprises self-regard (understanding and accepting oneself), self-awareness (being aware of one's emotions), assertiveness (expressing one's thoughts and feelings), self-actualisation (realising one's potential abilities), and independence (being self-directed, self-controlled, and free of emotional dependency);
- (2) Interpersonal capacity consists of empathy (considering others' feelings), interpersonal relationship (establishing intimate relationships with others), and social responsibility (realising oneself as a constructive member of one's social group);
- (3) Adaptability is made up of problem-solving (addressing problems by considering the practical responses), flexibility (adapting and adjusting one's emotions and thoughts to new situations), and reality testing (grasping the correspondence between one's subjective experience and objective facts);
- (4) Stress management contains stress tolerance (dealing with stress actively and positively) and impulse control (resisting an impulse and controlling one's emotions);
- (5) General mood includes happiness (feeling content with one's life) and optimism (maintaining a positive attitude).

On this basis, Bar-On (1997) proposed the emotional quotient inventory (the EQ-i) that contains 133 items. This has been widely applied in social studies (e.g., Esmaeeli et al., 2018; Genç et al., 2016) as self-report measures of socially and emotionally intelligent actions and feelings in the service of estimating EI.

In the EFL learning context, numerous studies (e.g., Ebrahimi et al., 2018; Genç et al., 2016; Pishghadam, 2009; Zarezadeh, 2013) have analysed the connection between EI and

foreign language speaking by applying the Bar-On EQ-i model, given its comprehensive structure and moderate to high predictive validity related to an assortment of human behaviours (Bar-On, 2010). For example, Genç et al. (2016), administering the EQ-i questionnaire to 150 Turkish university students, found that EFL learners with a higher level of EI can show higher productive language skills (writing and speaking). Esmaeeli et al. (2018) and Zarezadeh (2013), implementing a correlational research design, identified the close relationship between EI and Iranian EFL students' English speaking. Taheri et al. (2019), applying a descriptive research design, pointed out that three sub-domains of EI (interpersonal relationship, problem-solving, and optimism) can dramatically contribute to EFL students' English speaking. Differently, Pishghadam (2009), employing a correlational research design, argued that three sub-dimensions of EI (interpersonal capability, intrapersonal competence, and general mood) play a vital role in EFL students' spoken language. The conflicts of the research results between Taheri et al. (2019) and Pishghadam (2009) might be due to the studies being conducted in different contexts with distinct research approaches.

The above studies all used quantitative research methodologies to highlight the importance of EI in EFL speaking. However, according to a review of current literature, fewer studies have analysed how and why EI can affect language speaking in a foreign language context. Addressing this research gap can help foreign language learners understand how to enhance their language speaking through EI, and improve other stakeholders', such as policymakers' and teachers', awareness of how foreign language environments influence students' EI and why EI enhancement should be considered in the educational design. Thus, this qualitative study aims to explore the functions and implications of EI on EFL students' English speaking in the context of China's universities by investigating three research questions:

- (1) How do Chinese students evaluate the English-speaking environments in their universities?
- (2) What kinds of emotions do Chinese students experience when speaking English in their university environments?
- (3) How does EI cope with the emotions and affect Chinese university students' English-speaking behaviours?

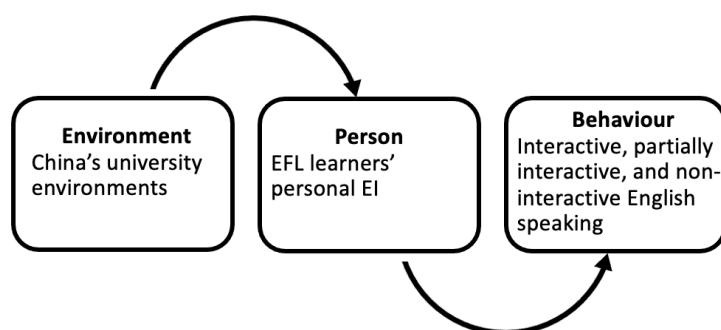
Methods

Bandura's (1977) triadic reciprocal determinism (TRD) model can contribute to the understanding of the relationship between EFL learning context, EI, and EFL-speaking behaviour, which can be useful to build a conceptual framework for this study. The TRD model shows that individuals' behaviours can both influence and be influenced by their internal characteristics and external environmental factors (Bandura, 1978, 1989). In the TRD model, there is a triadic reciprocal causation, referring to the mutual effects between three determinisms – behaviour, person, and environment. More specifically, personal determinism reflects humans' internal character traits, comprising beliefs, emotions, and cognitive competence; behaviour determinism refers to individuals' choices, motor actions, and verbal statements; and environmental determinism indicates external context factors such as physical settings, social resources, and cultural influences (Bandura, 1977, 1978).

The three interconnected determinisms (environment, person, and behaviour), constituting Bandura's TRD model, can be employed to establish the triadic and reciprocal relationship between the three research components in this study. Environment refers to English-speaking environments in China's universities, including curriculum design, pedagogical approaches and opportunities for English oral practice. Person indicates EFL

students' personal EI. Behaviour means English-speaking behaviours, which usually happen in three English-speaking situations – interactive, partially interactive, and non-interactive (Rao, 2019). Interactive speaking, like group discussions, implies that each communicator can have sufficient opportunities to require the dialogue partner to clarify and reiterate the information for achieving mutual understanding. Partial interactive speaking (e.g., delivering a speech to a live audience) provides little chance to enable the audience to interrupt the speaker. Non-interactive speaking, like recorded speech, indicates that when a person is speaking, there is no listener or any interaction with a listener.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



EFL students' English speaking can both affect and be affected by their personal EI and learning environments in school. Nevertheless, this research is unable to deal with the complex bi-directional relationships between the three components. Hence, connected with my study aim, I created the conceptual framework, as represented in Figure 1. This conceptual framework can be used to respond to the three research questions by investigating EFL-speaking environments in China's universities, the effects of the environments on EFL students' EI, and the influences of students' personal EI in their English-speaking actions.

Methodology

In relation to the study's purpose of understanding EI's effects on Chinese university students' English speaking, narrative inquiry is selected as a suitable methodology in this study. Narrative inquiry, a branch of qualitative research, has been applied to analyse humans' experiences through the construction and reconstruction of their stories (Elliott, 2012; Wells, 2011), positing that individuals can make sense of their lives through narrative (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The term, narrative, is defined as storytelling, indicating that individuals' stories are organised and told by themselves (Elliott, 2012; Kim, 2015). Bell (2002) emphasised that narrative inquiry is more than a simple compilation of the participants' narratives regarding the research foci. It seeks to investigate and explain the narrative content that occurs in a specific time, situation, and social milieu, which may serve as a window for social researchers to gain insights into the participants' subjectivities and then respond to research questions (Xu & Connelly, 2009).

Dewey (1986) stated that life should be viewed as an educational journey, recognising the essential role of humans' lived experience in their education. This implies that the analysis of personal education should be bound up with an investigation of their life stories. This argument promotes the application of narrative inquiry in educational research due to its ability to collect and interpret complex personal experiences, thereby contributing insights and reflections to the research field (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

Thus, narrative inquiry has been utilised to explore a wide range of domains in education, such as teacher education (Xu & Connelly, 2009), medical education (Bleakley, 2005), and language education (Barkhuizen et al., 2019).

Focused on language education, numerous scholars have applied narrative inquiry in the study of EFL educational issues to understand the perspectives of those who do the teaching or learning (e.g., Ai & Wang, 2017; Xu & Connelly, 2009; Xu & Liu, 2009). Golombek and Johnson (2004) stated that narrative inquiry is a way of picturing a language learning environment in which researchers can acquire information about what participants know and how they do with what they know. Thus, narrative inquiry is applied in this study to explore the Chinese students' stories about their English-speaking processes in their universities, focusing on their narratives about the learning environments, the descriptions of their EI, and their speaking performance. This aim is to represent and recount my participants' experiences in complex and rich detail in order to understand and generate unique insights about the effects of EI on English speaking in the EFL learning community.

Participants

The purposive sampling strategy has been commonly applied in qualitative research to select information-rich cases regarding the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002; Robinson, 2014). This sampling technique is employed in my study to focus on Chinese students who provide in-depth information, such as their feelings and experiences when participating in English oral practice in their universities. I sent an email to briefly introduce the research project to my three friends. Harry and Vicky (their pseudonyms) contacted me via telephone to express their interest. After that, they received the email including the explanatory statement and the consent form. With their consent, Harry and Vicky were invited to participate in my research project. Harry and Vicky were Chinese university students, majoring in Metal Materials Engineering and Educational Technology respectively. They had learned English for more than nine years. Even though they could acquire satisfactory results in formal English exams, they often showed weakness and experienced emotional issues like struggling to cope with anxiety when speaking English in their social and academic lives. When the research aim was explained to them, they both were willing to share their stories regarding the study foci.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. This interview strategy has been employed by numerous scholars in narrative inquiry to provide a platform for the participants to voice their stories regarding the research foci (e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Lengeling et al., 2017; Zhao, 2016). When conducting a semi-structured interview, researchers prepare the general question guide to identify inquiry topics in a consistent and systemic manner (Patton, 2002). The predetermined interview guide can benefit an in-depth and effective conversation (Qu & Dumay, 2011) since this guide serves as a checklist to use the interview time efficiently to cover the research-related topics (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the listed inquiry areas enable researchers to have some degree of flexibility for exploring, probing, and developing a question, as well as deciding which information to pursue in greater depth (Brenner, 2006; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Thus, the application of semi-structured interviews to gather data is beneficial to explore and interpret the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, when seeking answers to my research questions.

When applying the semi-structured interviews, I developed a list of questions to gather information based on the three aspects (English-speaking environments in China's universities, EFL students' personal EI, and English-speaking behaviours) derived from the conceptual

framework, as shown in Figure 1. Then, a one-on-one interview was conducted for about 50 minutes with each participant via Zoom. Before the interviews, I established rapport with each participant, which enabled me to gather in-depth information related to the research interest. During the interviews, I rarely interrupted and only provided prompts and questions, when necessary, in an effort to encourage the participants to continue narrating their experiences and sharing as much as possible about what they felt was relevant to the interview questions. After the interviews, I shared the initial data analysis with my participants to check my interpretation of their stories and acquired further information for helping to correctly understand their narratives. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded. Then, I transcribed the recordings in Chinese, and the important materials that were coded during data analysis were translated into English.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis was chosen as the method to deal with the dataset since the primary attention of this study is on what the two participants revealed when responding to my interview questions. Thematic narrative analysis, the most common method in narrative inquiry, investigates of the content of participants' stories (Riessman, 2008), rather than examining how the narratives are structured and put together to convey meaning (Wells, 2011). Employing thematic narrative analysis in this study not only helped me search for the main themes to theorise across cases and minimally describe data in rich detail, but also extended this process by explaining the meaning and reasoning behind the presence of those created themes (Riessman, 2008). Numerous scholars (e.g., Burns & Bell, 2010; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Weurlander et al., 2018) have applied this method in the educational field to analyse their participants' teaching or learning experiences because of its suitability for analysing various kinds of qualitative data from archival documents to interview segments and life experiences (Riessman, 2008). Thematic narrative analysis was used in this study by following the seven steps in line with the theory of Braun and Clarke (2006):

- (1) Familiarising with data by repeatedly listening to the audio recording, transcribing it in Chinese, reading the full text, translating the important materials into English, and taking initial notes;
- (2) Generating initial codes by reading through every interview transcript to identify the interesting features of data (e.g., using a phrase to describe semantic or latent content);
- (3) Using the generated codes to group data to obtain a condensed version of the main points in interview transcripts;
- (4) Building the initial themes by sorting different codes;
- (5) Reviewing the created themes to check whether they relate to the extracted codes and the whole dataset so as to develop an appropriate thematic map to describe and analyse data for responding to my research questions;
- (6) Naming the created themes;
- (7) Reporting the research findings by interpreting the meaning and reasoning behind the themes.

Ethical Considerations

For data collection through human interactions, the ethical treatment of participants considers three aspects according to the ethical standards of Diener and Crandall (1978). The basic guideline is to avoid any harm such as stress and humiliation for participants. In response

to this, role-playing and pilot subjects were used before the commencement of interviews to understand how to reduce the potential harm. Second, informed consent is the procedure whereby participants choose whether to join a research project when informed of the research aim and process. Thus, in this study, an explanatory statement was sent to the participants to inform them of: (a) the research aim, (b) the reasons for choosing the participants, (c) the research and interview procedures, (d) the possible benefits and risks to the participants, and (e) the rights to withdraw at any time. When the participants agreed to join this project, they were required to sign the consent form. Their informed consent has been kept in my secured OneDrive, which is password-protected and only accessible to me. Third, privacy is considered to protect the freedom of each participant's thoughts and behaviours, and the boundaries of intimate relationships between researchers and participants (Diener & Crandall, 1978). This study balanced each participant's right to privacy with the obligation to uncover the truth, through (a) before the interviews, avoiding the questions that might result in incursions into the participants' private areas; (b) during the interviews, allowing the participants to choose not to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable; (c) after the interviews, using pseudonyms in interview transcripts and findings report.

Reconsidering Validity and Reliability in Narrative Research

Narrative inquiry aims to explore and elaborate individual perspectives and interpretations of complicated and human-centred events (Wells, 2011). It is more focused on individual truth rather than the identification of a generalisable and repeatable event (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this regard, the way of defining reliability and validity widely accepted in quantitative research requires reconsideration and redefinition in narrative inquiry. Polkinghorne (1988) claimed that the validity in narrative research is more significantly related to meaningful analysis than to final results, highlighting the accessibility and trustworthiness of data, and the strength and depth of data analysis. The reliability in narrative inquiry generally describes the dependability of data, underlining the trustworthiness of transcripts instead of measurement stability (Polkinghorne, 1988). Thus, this study utilised the narrative-orientated framework of validity and reliability proposed by Huberman (1995) and Polkinghorne (1988), comprising transferability, economy, familiarity, authenticity, access, and honesty; detailed explanations of how each criterion is responded to are given in Appendix A.

Findings

The thematic narrative analysis identified five themes based on the two participants' narratives related to the research foci. These themes – (a) generating English-speaking interests, (b) facing an inadequately supportive EFL speaking environment, (c) struggling in self-preparation, (d) engaging in cooperative learning, and (e) experiencing final examinations – combine to describe the two participants' stories about their English-speaking processes during one semester in their universities.

Theme 1: Generating English-speaking Interests

This theme relates to the participants' expression of their way of practising English speaking by combining their interests at the beginning of one semester in university when they were informed that their oral English would be tested as part of the final English exams. At that time, they had no idea about test content and grading criteria. This meant that the participants found it impossible to make a detailed plan for their English-speaking practice. Meanwhile, as there was still a long time before the final English exams, they felt no tension or pressure to

learn English and might only spend time on non-interactive English speaking when finding interesting learning activities. Harry stated:

I was a big fan of Taylor Swift. [...] I liked listening to her music, remembering the lyrics, and then singing that song that made me proud. [...] This way helped me a lot, like learning lots of vocabularies and pronunciation skills. [...] Still, lots of time to prepare the test [...], not an urgent matter.

This quote illustrates Harry's enjoyment during English oral practice. This happened under the situation in which he felt it unnecessary to worry about his daily learning achievement towards acquiring a satisfactory result in the final oral English test. Without the stress of the test looming, and with a focus on exploring their learning interests, their feelings of happiness and optimism encouraged the participants to pay more attention to the bright side of English speaking. For example, Harry thought that singing an English song was a matter of pride, and Vicky commented, "I was so proud and happy when I could appropriately apply the (English) expressions and idioms learned from the television series into a real-life situation." These comments suggest that when EFL learners are situated in a low-stress learning environment, they are more likely to develop specific interests during the language-learning process. They can embrace general mood (happiness and optimism) to enjoy the non-interactive speaking progress and increase their motivation to utilise learning strategies to enhance their spoken English skills.

Theme 2: Facing an Inadequately Supportive EFL Speaking Environment

This theme emerged from data that recorded participants' appraisal of their EFL speaking environments as not supporting their confidence in preparing for the final English-speaking test after they were told of the test content and scoring criteria. Harry would perform situational dialogues with his partner, and Vicky would speak English to respond to her teacher's questions. Given their previous EFL learning journeys with fewer formal English-speaking tests, they developed a powerful shared sense of uncertainty about how to prepare for the final exams and achieve a desirable grade. In their universities, it was not easy to find a suitable environment in which they could have more English-speaking activities and experiences. For example, Vicky remarked:

(For) nearly one semester, I never spoke English in class. [...] There was no opportunity, when more than 50 students with different majors were in the same English class. [...] The class was dominated by the teacher [...] to deliver teaching content to us. [...] If there was available time, the teacher asked us to do reading and writing practice.

Vicky's narrative describes a teaching method guided by the deep-rooted teacher-centred pedagogy. Even though Vicky felt that this pedagogical approach could enable her teacher to effectively transfer pre-designed curriculum content for achieving the schooling goals, it did not seem to offer an acceptable way of enhancing her spoken English ability. She observed that when teachers used most of their time to interpret learning materials, there was less time for her to apply the language knowledge she learned in practice. Further, Vicky felt that the English curriculum had been over-emphasising reading and writing skills, with insufficient attention to speaking.

Besides a less than supportive English-speaking atmosphere in class, Harry complained that it was becoming more difficult to find an English-speaking place after class. He stated:

I nearly never used English in social communication. Fewer English-speaking activities were available after class. [...] Also, I felt shy and [...] awkward about speaking English with my friends and others. [...] English was only seen as the language tool for us to achieve good academic grades.

This quote illustrates Harry's barriers to applying English in interactive communication after class. This might be because in China, an EFL context, English is not seen as a communicative tool in society. This situation made Harry uncomfortable and embarrassed to use English to chat with his friends in school. In summary, based on the information provided by the participants in this theme, the English-speaking environments in China's universities, either in class or after class, were not sufficiently supportive for them to learn to use spoken English in their academic and social lives.

Theme 3: Struggling in Self-Preparation

This theme relates to the participants' frustrating experiences when they began through non-interactive English speaking practice to cope with the final test when they realised that there were fewer opportunities to speak English in the learning environment described in Theme 2. They found it difficult to access sufficient learning resources and to demonstrate the high level of speaking proficiency they hoped for through self-designed learning tasks. Together with the pressure of the final English tests, this situation triggered their negative emotions – self-doubt and uneasiness. For example, Vicky said:

I spent two hours preparing the speaking topics every day. [...] I listed what questions the teacher might ask in class. Then, I wrote down the answers and read them again and again, like rote memory. [...] However, it was unrealistic to be familiar with all the topics mentioned in the textbook within one month. [...] I was filled with apprehension. Under the torment of the pressure from the final test, I lost confidence to achieve my goal.

Vicky's narrative describes a situation where she was struggling to deal with the emergence of learning pressure. This stress awakened her apprehension about being able to prepare for the final English-speaking test. Although she realised that this emotion could not benefit her English learning, she did not find a way to cope with it. This reaction indicated that she might lack the skills of flexibility (adjusting her emotions to new situations) and problem-solving (addressing problems by considering practical solutions). The uneasy and nervous feelings, along with the growth of exam stress, triggered other negative emotions – self-doubt and depression around English speaking. These feelings generated Vicky's impulse to withdraw from the English-speaking practice.

Compared with Vicky, while Harry was under stress due to the final English exam, his narratives revealed a different response to learning pressure. Harry stated:

I became a little nervous given the limited time. [...] I could effectively devote myself to English learning in the first three days. However, when it was closer to the exam, I was in a very nervy state. I began to doubt my speaking ability [...]. When I felt very depressed, I did some physical activities like running. It helped to reduce the bad emotions.

Harry's narrative describes his emotional fluctuation when preparing for the oral English test. At first, the stress of the final assessment motivated him to invest more energy in English oral practice. Even though he felt slightly nervous, his adaptability helped him to control this feeling and stick to his language learning. However, when the examination was imminent, he became highly anxious and uneasy, losing the confidence to give a successful speaking demonstration. Fortunately, when he realised these negative emotions, he could use some strategies like running to reduce temporary tension and manage his emotions. Harry's experience suggests that EFL students could effectively tackle stressful issues by considering reasonable responses to manage changes, so as to deal with negative emotions and regulate their behaviours towards achieving their learning goals, instead of avoiding challenges and difficulties.

Theme 4: Engaging in Cooperative Learning

In this theme, the participants experienced interactive English-speaking practices with the purpose of responding to the final assessment in a more successful manner. Harry and Vicky described that the purpose of their speaking assessments was to examine their abilities to apply language knowledge in relevant contexts and effectively use oral English in interpersonal communication. Thus, after preparing the speaking materials, Harry began to practise situational dialogue with his partner. When engaging in cooperative learning, Harry reported:

In the group work, we usually had different opinions about how each role should play. [...] I didn't know how to express my feelings and thoughts in a way that she could understand to achieve my aim. [...] She was so stubborn that I didn't want to cooperate with her.

Harry's quote shows his dissatisfaction and discontent when he joined the cooperative work. This uncomfortable relationship with the partner made him distrust the interactive oral English practice. Harry's narrative might indicate that he had low interpersonal intelligence since he could not stand in the other's shoes to consider the problem, which led to a refusal to try to understand the other's thoughts and emotions. This made it impossible for Harry to maintain rapport with his dialogue partner. This unstable or uncomfortable relationship was why Harry tended to refuse more group work. When facing an arduous English-speaking task, he lost confidence in cooperating with his partner to overcome that challenge.

Vicky's experience of group work was quite different. She stated:

When generating different opinions, we spent time discussing that issue and trying to understand the other's thoughts in order to achieve a mutually satisfactory result. [...] Sometimes, when I found that my partner was stressed about the exam, I would make a joke with her to help her relax. Meanwhile, she encouraged me a lot to finish a challenging task.

Vicky's narrative illustrates that she could show a higher interpersonal intelligence. Although it was common to have different opinions in cooperative work, Vicky tried to understand others' feelings and thoughts. This helped to solve a question in dispute and maintain an interpersonal relationship. Vicky saw herself as a constructive member of her learning group by contributing to the group's English-speaking performance; for example, she helped her partner release stress by telling jokes in the face of the upcoming oral English test. This sense of social responsibility guided her to invest more energy and time in English oral practice with her partner. Overall, these results indicate that when EFL students have a higher

interpersonal capability, they are more inclined to feel enthusiasm about joining a series of interactive English-speaking activities.

Theme 5: Experiencing Final Examinations

This theme was characterised by the growth of tension and apprehension when the participants were experiencing the final English-speaking exams in front of the class and their speaking performance was being assessed directly by their teachers. In this situation, Vicky nearly lost the ability to manage her emotions, showing a strong sense of hopelessness. She said:

My teacher asked me to answer the question about what my favourite book was and why I liked it. I tried to recall the information that I had prepared before. However, I was too nervous to remember the details. Meanwhile, I could not speak (English) as fluently as usual. [...] I could not control my trembling legs and negative feelings.

This quote illustrates that Vicky had difficulties in managing her emotions. She felt too nervous during the formal English test to answer the teacher's questions, despite having prepared for them. At this stage, even though she recognised the nervous signals (e.g., trembling legs), which could show the ability of emotional awareness, she had no idea about how to cope with that issue, displaying a failure of emotional adjustment. Under this emotional state, despite her preparatory practice, she could not stay calm enough to recall the knowledge she had acquired. This had adverse effects on her behaviour – her lack of fluency and accuracy in oral expression.

Harry also experienced feelings of apprehension and anxiety in his final English-speaking test. He stated:

I always made mistakes like grammar and a poor choice of words. [...] When I realised that my emotions were out of control, I tried to take a deep breath and then only focused on what my partner was saying and how I would respond. This helped me a lot.

After recognising the emotional signals (e.g., grammatical mistakes given test pressure), Harry knew in what ways he could manage his emotions; for example, he tried to breathe deeply. With this problem-solving method, he could relieve his tension and anxiety dramatically. These results suggest that personal emotional intelligence such as being aware of self-emotions, adapting emotions to situations and dealing with stress could help EFL students regulate their feelings and thoughts so they can direct and manage their behaviours to cope with the final stressful testing situation.

Discussion

In this study, five themes are identified in the two participants' stories during one semester of English learning at their universities. After each participant shared scenes from their experiences, the insights gained into their narratives and the meanings drawn from their stories show the interactions between the three components – China's university environments, personal EI, and English-speaking behaviours. These connected insights inform answers to the three research questions.

The first question investigates how Chinese students evaluate the EFL speaking environments in their universities, focusing on participants' appraisal and description of the first component (China's university environments). According to the research findings, the participants felt that the learning environments in their schools were not sufficiently supportive of their English speaking. Even though they had English class every week, the teaching materials were usually focused on the textbook, and the teachers paid insufficient attention to the development of their speaking skills. Meanwhile, the teachers usually dominated the class, and thus the participants had little chance of speaking English in class. Additionally, each English class in their universities had more than 50 students with different majors. This made it more difficult for teachers to tailor their methods to satisfy students' different EFL speaking needs. Besides the EFL speaking environment in class, the participants also reflected that after class, there were fewer opportunities to continue to use English in interactive and partially interactive communication, except to prepare for the oral English test.

The second question addressed the interaction between China's university environments and students' personal emotions, exploring what kinds of emotions the EFL students experienced when speaking English in their university environments. In English oral practice, in a less stressful learning environment but one without sufficient learning resources and activities, the students were inclined to find an interesting activity when they wanted to do English-speaking practice. They enjoyed this informal learning atmosphere, and thus, they saw the positive side of English speaking, such as singing a song in English and applying language knowledge learned from television drama in real life. This finding accords with the observations of Taheri et al. (2019), who stated that when optimism is stimulated in the process of language learning, EFL learners are more likely to enjoy the learning progress and show higher motivation to explore learning strategies to enhance their English skills. Besides this, the study found that English-speaking exams could trigger students' negative emotions. For example, when the participants were informed that the final test was imminent, their early confidence in English speaking was reduced. The lack of a supportive learning environment made them feel confused about how to prepare for exams and improve their learning skills. Then, this confusion might cause them to lose confidence in their ability to achieve desirable results in English speaking. In general, it seems that the learning pressure and struggle could undermine students' confidence and increase their self-doubt, frustration, and apprehension during English oral practice.

The negative emotions triggered by test stress in an inadequately supportive EFL speaking environment can be coped with through students' personal EI to regulate and guide their further English speaking behaviours. The third question explores how EI copes with emotions and affects Chinese university students' English-speaking behaviours. The current study found that during non-interactive oral English practice, the participants experienced learning pressure from the English-speaking examinations. However, compared with Vicky, Harry could utilise some strategies like physical exercise (running) to reduce his pressure, depression, and anxiety. In the formal English oral tests, the participants developed great fear and uneasiness. Fortunately, through some deep breathing exercises, Harry could adjust his negative emotions and complete his pre-arranged oral English tasks. Both situations suggest that the skill of adaptability, with its sub-dimensions of flexibility – the ability to adjust emotions to adapt to a changed situation, and problem-solving – the ability to address problems by considering the practical responses rather than staying away from them (Bar-On, 1997) can minimise the harmful effects of negative emotions on English-speaking performance and help EFL students regulate their behaviours to attain their learning goals.

With respect to the third research question, another interesting finding was that the ability to understand others' feelings and thoughts affected the participants' (partially) interactive English speaking. As shown in Harry's experience in group work, when he only

focused on his own thoughts and ignored others' attitudes, it was difficult for him to build rapport with his dialogue partner. Such a situation made him distrustful of group work and unable to use it as a learning opportunity. Unlike Harry, in a not sufficiently supportive learning environment, Vicky was able to stand in the others' shoes, comprehend their opinions and feelings and cooperate with and encourage her friend to overcome English-speaking challenges. She showed the skills of empathy (considering others' feelings), interpersonal relationship (establishing intimate relationships with others) and social responsibility (seeing herself as a constructive member of the group) – three sub-dimensions included in interpersonal intelligence (Bar-On, 1997). These results suggest that EFL students with strong interpersonal skills are more likely to participate in and profit from (partially) interactive English-speaking activities to improve their oral English.

Implications

There are several implications in this study. The present study provided a platform for the EFL students to give voice to their experiences, feelings, and thoughts about speaking English in their university environments. Based on the analysis of the two participants' narratives, this research can help EFL students understand the importance and functions of EI in their English speaking. Meanwhile, this study can improve educators' and teachers' awareness of how China's university environments influence students' EI and why EI enhancement should be considered in the pedagogical design to improve students' English-speaking performance and to enhance their emotional well-being in foreign language learning. Additionally, my study can help policymakers recognise the inadequately supportive English-speaking environment typical of China's universities, which is not consistent with the policy intention. This study also has an implication for the literature in the EFL field. Although previous studies, through quantitative research approaches, have identified the positive relationship between EI and EFL learning, almost no qualitative research explores how EI plays a role in EFL students' English speaking, especially in the Chinese context. Thus, this study addresses this literature gap.

Further Research

Further research, particularly addressing the limitations of this study, is needed. First, this study employed narrative inquiry as the methodology to explore the EFL speaking experiences of two Chinese students in their universities. Considering that both universities are in southern China, further research may construct the same research field but investigate more EFL students in various universities situated in different provinces across China. Meanwhile, given the nature of the research approach – narrative inquiry, this study lacks generalisable conclusions. Thus, future research can be designed by applying mixed methods to enrich the dataset and thus improve the generalisability of results.

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Appendix A

Rethinking validity and reliability	
Criteria	Notes – How I did to target the criteria
Transferability	Transferability in narrative research is synonymous with external validity. It indicates that the researcher can provide a solid foundation to enable a person to contemplate the application of the research findings in another situation to make the needed comparisons of similarities. In this regard, I provided the readers with rich evidence that the study's findings might be applicable to another setting.
Economy	In narrative inquiry, the researchers often face a large quantity of narrative data. In this way, they might categorise the collected data endlessly and find it difficult to determine the endpoint. Thus, I focused on the important and interesting narratives instead of the integrity of the data, as well as identified and used the critical events to analyse.
Familiarity	Familiarity implies that the researcher conceives of collected information as routines. In this way, they might cease a further analysis and see the familiar information as senseless and unserviceable. In order to control and sanitise the effects of familiarity, I avoided the taken-for-granted, explored my assumptions, sought clarity about the participants' narratives and kept a distance from each participant during the interview.
Authenticity	I provided detailed information through sufficient narrative coherence to present the participants' stories seriously and honestly for the readers.
Access	Access was addressed in two ways in this study. First, I provided readers with access to the research context, the information about the participants, and the process of knowledge construction. Second, I offered readers access to the research data since the important interview transcripts were provided as evidence in findings.
Honesty	Honesty could be reflected in two aspects- credibility and neutrality. According to credibility, I shared my initial thematic narrative analysis with my participants to check my interpretation of their stories. Moreover, I sent the research findings to my participants to confirm that I had correctly understood their narratives. Then, in line with neutrality, I adhered to regular self-reflective practice to reduce the effects of my personal values on the interviews and data analysis.

Author Note

Ms Chenyang Zhang is a Ph.D. student at the School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne. Her research interests include language testing, language policy, and language education. Please direct correspondence to czzhang4@student.unimelb.edu.au.

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