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Mapping Research on Oral Communication Willingness in China: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Oral communication willingness is a key variable in second language acquisition research, directly influencing learners' willingness to engage in spoken interaction. To clarify the current status, hotspots, and frontiers of research in China, this study selects literature from CNKI and Wanfang databases between 2006 and 2026, and conducts knowledge mapping analysis using the visualization tool CiteSpace. The results show that publication output in this field has generally increased with fluctuations; Research hotspots center on learners' psychological and emotional factors, classroom teaching environments, and different learner groups across educational stages. Emerging topics in recent years include foreign language enjoyment, second language grit, academic emotions, and mediating effects. Current research still faces challenges such as methodological uniformity and weak development of indigenous theories. Future studies should strengthen academic collaboration, enrich research methodologies, expand digital teaching contexts, and advance the construction of localized theoretical frameworks.

Keyword: Oral Communication Willingness, Citespace, Knowledge Map, Willingness to Communication

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of curriculum reform in foreign language education in China's basic education system, oral proficiency in English has been recognized as a key component of students' core linguistic competence. The "English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)" also incorporates the cultivation of oral communication willingness into the essential elements of English subject literacy (Zhang, 2026) ^[1]. However, for a long time, Chinese foreign language classes have commonly faced issues such as weak student communicative motivation, insufficient oral participation, and classroom silence, which hinder the effectiveness of oral instruction. As a core variable predicting learners' second language output behavior, oral communication willingness holds significant value in explaining learners' avoidance of spoken communication.

Research on this topic in China began in the early 21st century, Wu (2008) conducted one of the earliest localized empirical studies, finding that English major students generally exhibited low levels of oral communication willingness, with their willingness to communicate in classroom settings even lower than their self-assessed communicative competence, and that feelings of security and excitement were important psychological antecedents. Since then, research subjects have gradually expanded from English majors (Cao, 2011) ^[3] to undergraduate non-English majors and primary and secondary school students (Jia, 2009) ^[4], while analyses of influencing factors have shifted from external conditions such as classroom environment, teacher feedback, and teacher support (Fu, 2025) ^[5] to learners' emotional and psychological traits (Fan & Li, 2024) ^[6], and researchers have begun using mediation models and meta-

analyses to examine and integrate the mechanisms among variables (Lou, Li & Zhao, 2024) [7]. Nevertheless, despite growing richness in existing research, challenges remain, including relatively limited methodological diversity, weak development of indigenous theoretical frameworks, and fragmented research efforts. Moreover, most quantitative analyses have focused primarily on adjacent areas such as second language speaking proficiency (Fan & Hu, 2025) [8], leaving a gap in systematic synthesis of research on oral communication willingness in China. To address this, this paper uses literature from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang databases as samples, applying CiteSpace data visualization tools to map research outputs on oral communication willingness in China from 2006 to 2026. This analysis aims to identify trends in annual publication patterns, research hotspots, and the evolution of frontiers, providing insights for future studies.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Tools

This study employs CiteSpace, a visualization and bibliometric software, as its core research tool. The software enables data mining, statistical analysis, and visual mapping of literature, providing intuitive insights into publication trends, keyword clustering structures, and the evolution of research frontiers, thereby offering researchers objective and

systematic analytical results.

2.2 Data Sources

The literature data for this study were collected from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang Databases. An advanced search mode was used with search terms set to “Oral Communication Willingness” and “Willingness to communicate in a second language”, covering the period from 2006 to 2026. Since “Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language” encompasses various communication contexts including both spoken and written modes, the retrieved results underwent further manual screening to exclude studies focusing on written composition or macro-level cross-cultural communication that are not primarily oral. After retrieval, newspaper articles, conference announcements, book reviews, and irrelevant publications were manually removed, and duplicate records were eliminated, resulting in a final dataset of 233 valid papers. The selected literature was then exported in RefWorks format and imported into CiteSpace for visualization and bibliometric analysis.

3.1 Annual Publication Volume

The annual number of publications can clearly reflect the historical changes in research intensity within a specific academic field, revealing its phased characteristics.

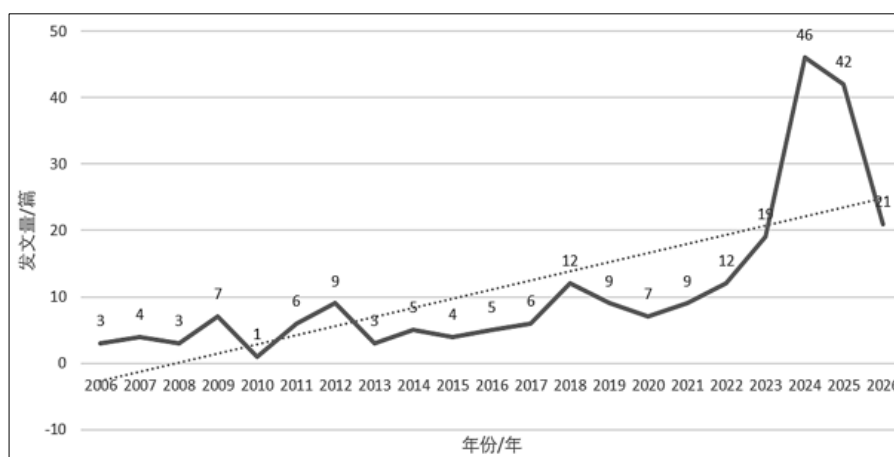


Fig 1: Annual Publication Trend (2006-2026)

Through a statistical analysis of the volume of publications on oral communication willingness in China from 2006 to 2026, it can be found that the overall publication trend in this field can be divided into three stages: Slow beginning, steady development, and rapid growth.

3.1.1 Embryonic Stage (2006-2012)

From 2006 to 2012, research on oral communication willingness in China was in its embryonic stage, with only 1 to 9 publications per year and limited overall output. The theory of L2 WTC was introduced from abroad, and most of the achievements were theoretical introductions and conceptual clarifications. Wu (2008) [2] conducted an early localized empirical investigation of Chinese learners' oral communication willingness. At this stage, the research perspective was unitary and a stable research community had not yet formed.

3.1.2 Steady Development Stage (2013-2022)

Between 2013 and 2022, annual publications increased to 3-19, showing an overall upward trend with fluctuations. Peng and Xie (2014) [9] noted that Chinese studies largely followed

existing frameworks, with insufficient innovation in theory or methodology, and interest began to grow significantly only after 2014. Subsequently, WTC theory entered classroom settings, leading to a surge in empirical studies. Research subjects expanded from English major students to general university foreign language learners, vocational college students, and secondary school students. Increasing attention was paid to the influence of classroom environments and teacher behaviors.

3.1.3 Rapid Growth Stage (2023-2026)

From 2023 to 2026, publication output reached its peak during the entire research period. In the post-pandemic era, online foreign language instruction has become increasingly normalized, transforming the context of spoken practice and opening new avenues for research. Wei and Chen (2022) [10] proposed that language thinking patterns, learning emotions, and self-efficacy jointly influence second language communication willingness, advocating the use of multiple mediation models to analyze complex pathways among variables. This approach moved beyond earlier single-variable

correlation analyses and has gradually emerged as a cutting-edge topic in the field.

3.2 Keyword co-occurrence map analysis

Keywords are highly condensed representations of the core content of academic literature and can effectively reflect the

central research themes and focal points within a specific field. Through co-occurrence map analysis of keywords, we can intuitively reveal the distribution of key terms, thematic associations, and research trends in studies on Chinese oral communication willingness.

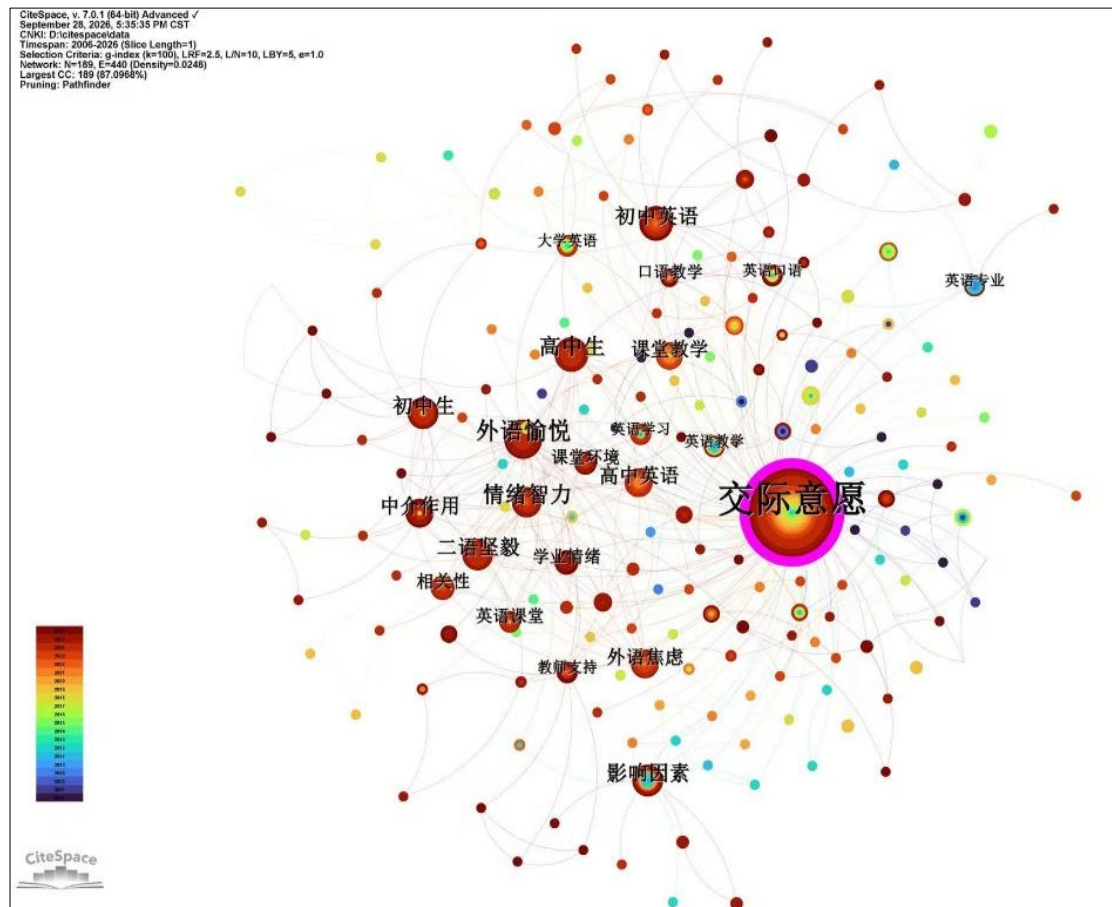


Fig 2: Keyword co-occurrence knowledge map

Figure 2 is a keyword co-occurrence map generated using CiteSpace. The network parameters indicate 189 nodes, 440 links, and a network density of 0.0248. Overall, the map displays a radial structure. “Willingness to Communication” occupies the central position with the largest node size, serving as the core keyword in this research domain. Numerous connections radiate outward from it, making it the central hub linking various research topics. This indicates that communication willingness is the primary focus of the field, around which all other issues revolve. Centered on this core node, the research hotspots in this area can be analyzed from three dimensions: Research subjects, research emphases, and research directions.

• First, the research subjects

Nodes such as junior high school students, senior high school students, college English, and English majors stand out prominently in the map, indicating that the research has covered the entire educational spectrum from basic to higher education, with learners at the junior and senior high school levels and university-level English learners constituting the primary focus. This distribution is supported by recent empirical studies: During the basic education stage, Meng (2022) [11] conducted a survey using rural junior high school students from ethnic minority regions in Guizhou, examining the current status and influencing factors of their willingness to

communicate in English classrooms. Qi and Ma (2023) [12] selected 192 adolescents aged between 10 and 15, comparing the relationships among language mindset, oral communication, and oral communication willingness across different age groups. Xu and Zhang (2025) [18] compared the effects of emotional factors on oral communication willingness among learners with different language backgrounds, further reflecting the expanding scope of research participants. The broad distribution of sample populations across educational stages brings into focus differences in communicative competence among learners of various ages, highlighting the field’s growing attention to teaching practices across all educational levels.

• Second, research emphases

Prominent nodes such as foreign language enjoyment, foreign language anxiety, and emotional intelligence are densely connected to core nodes in the map, indicating that learners’ internal emotions and psychological traits remain central to this field. This trend is corroborated by recent empirical research. Yin, Zhang and Ji (2024) [14], based on a survey of 881 university students, found that external factors such as teacher support indirectly influence learners’ willingness to engage in spoken communication through growth-oriented language thinking patterns and academic emotions, with enjoyment

showing a positive correlation with oral communication willingness, underscoring the significant role of emotional factors. Chen (2019) ^[15], using a sample of 294 non-English major students and structural equation modeling, discovered that language anxiety significantly negatively predicts motivation for classroom oral participation, while ideal self-image exerts the strongest positive predictive effect on such behavior.

• **Third, research directions**

The emergence of nodes such as correlation, mediating effects, and influencing factors reflects a shift in research from simple single-variable analyses toward exploring interaction mechanisms among variables. In recent years, beyond applying mediation models to examine emotional influences, researchers have begun integrating existing findings through meta-analysis. Lou, Li and Zhao (2024)

^[7] employed a meta-analytic approach to synthesize 50 independent studies, confirming a moderate negative correlation between oral communication willingness and second-language anxiety, with this relationship moderated by country, target language, and type of anxiety. At the level of research integration, Liu and Shi (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 57 empirical studies, finding that perceived communicative competence had the largest effect size on communication willingness.

3.3 Keyword emergence graph analysis

The keyword emergence graph can identify research terms that have experienced an increase in popularity within a specific period, dynamically track the emergence and changes of research hotspots, and thereby discover the cutting-edge research directions in this field.

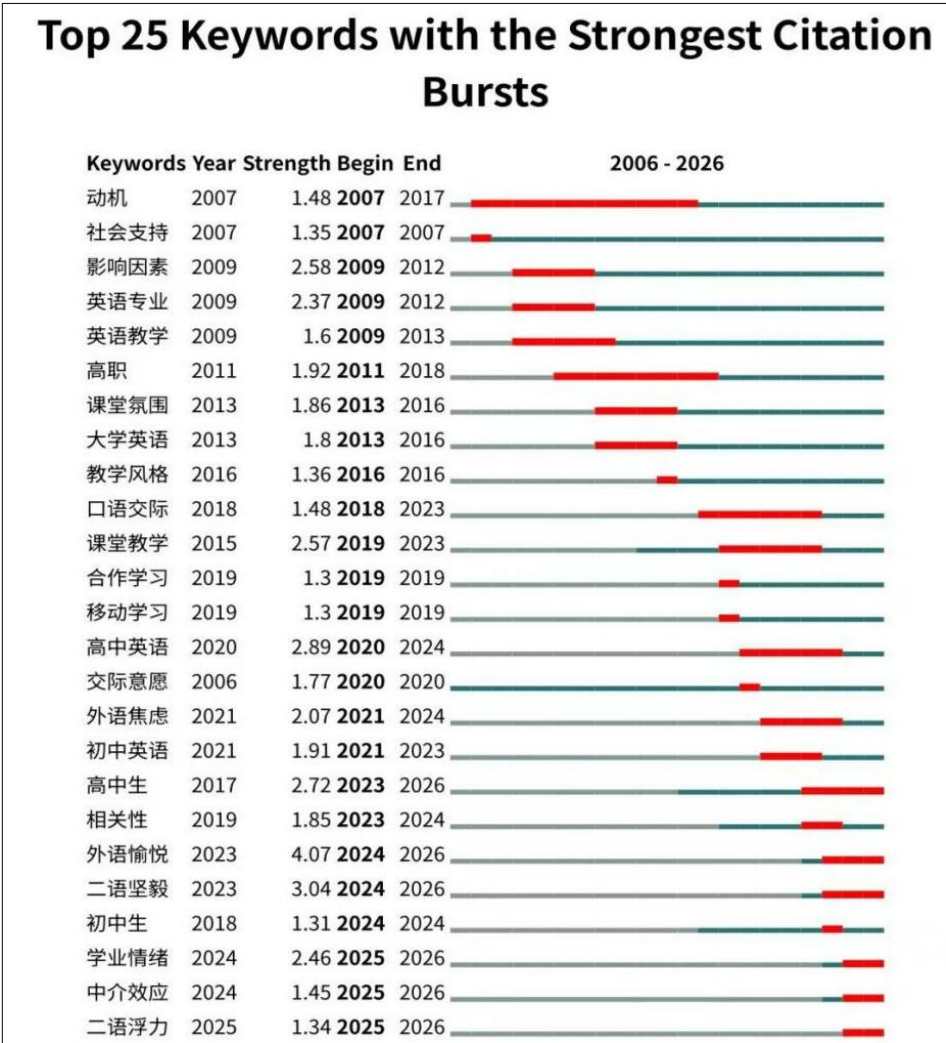


Fig 3: Keyword emergence knowledge graph

Figure 3 shows the top 25 keywords that emerged strongly in the research on Chinese oral communication willingness. “Strength” represents the emergence intensity, and the red bars indicate the duration of the emergence of each keyword. The keyword emergence graph identifies 25 keywords with high emergence intensity. From the analysis of the alternation and continuation of emergent words, it can be seen that the research hotspots in the field of oral communication willingness studies in China are not fixed but have a clear migration trajectory. In the early stage, the emergent words mainly focused on external

conditions and macro teaching factors such as motivation, social support, influencing factors, and English major. The research focused on exploring the factors that affect oral communication willingness; subsequently, classroom atmosphere, college English, teaching style, classroom teaching, oral communication were successively emergent, reflecting that the research perspective gradually focused on the interactive methods and teaching conditions in real classroom scenarios. From the perspective of emergence intensity and duration, the current most representative frontier has clearly shifted to the

internal psychological and emotional level of learners. “Foreign language Enjoyment” has the highest emergence intensity of 4.07, followed by “Second Language grit” with a strength of 3.04, both emerged and continued from 2024 to 2026. During this period, Wang (2023)^[17] conducted a survey of 103 English major students and found that perseverance in second language learning and interest both indirectly affected communication willingness through parallel mediating factors of foreign language enjoyment and anxiety, and enjoyment was significantly positively correlated with communication willingness, while anxiety was significantly negatively correlated. During the same period, keywords such as academic emotion, second language buoyancy, and mediating effect also began to continuously emerge. This indicates that the research focus has shifted from external teaching environment factors to learners’ positive emotions and psychological traits, and has begun to explore the mechanism of variable interaction through path analysis methods such as mediating effect.

At the same time, the distribution of emergent words by educational stage is also quietly expanding. The English major, college English, and vocational education stage keywords that emerged earlier focused on the higher education stage, while high school English, junior high school students, and senior high school students, etc., were successively included in the emergent list, and the emergence intensity was considerable. Xu (2025)^[13] conducted a specific study on the correlation between teacher feedback language and students’ oral communication willingness in high school English classrooms, finding that positive teacher feedback had a significant positive effect on students’ willingness to speak in class. This further shifted the research perspective from the college student group to the teacher discourse dimension in high school classrooms. This empirical study also indicates that the research objects are extending from college English classrooms to primary and secondary school stages, and the research on differences in educational stages and scenarios continues to be of concern.

Overall, the research hotspots in the field of Chinese oral communication willingness studies have achieved a shift from external teaching factors to learners’ internal psychological factors, and the research objects have continuously expanded, gradually covering from higher education to primary and secondary education stages. These belong to the current active research frontiers, indicating that future research will focus on positive psychological variables and continue to deepen in the primary and secondary school groups.

4. Conclusion

This study focused on the relevant literature on oral communication willingness retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang Database. Using the CiteSpace visualization tool, it systematically examined the hot topics and emerging trends in the research on oral communication willingness in China. From the perspective of annual publication volume, the research on oral communication willingness in China has shown an overall growth trend, with the research interest gradually increasing. The keyword co-occurrence analysis results indicate that the research topics are mainly centered on Chinese English learners, and the research focus is on the internal and external factors influencing oral communication willingness. The related research has shifted from simple variable analysis to exploring various mechanisms. The keyword emergence map shows that the research hotspots in this field are continuously

updated, and various variables of positive psychology have become the forefront of research in recent years.

This study still has certain limitations. The research only selected the literature from CNKI and Wanfang Database, and the data source is relatively single; the analysis focuses on the external characteristics of the research literature, and it is difficult to deeply explore the specific teaching practice methods within the literature. Future research can expand the database range and further explore the ways to enhance oral communication willingness in classroom teaching scenarios, providing references for English teaching practice.

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