

English as a Mediating Language in Chinese Language Learning: Insights from Learners

اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة وسيطة في تعلم اللغة الصينية: منظور المتعلمين

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الملخص:

تسعى هذه الدراسة لاستقصاء مدى فائدة اللغة الإنجليزية في تعلم اللغة الصينية حسب تصورات متعلمي اللغة الصينية كلغة أجنبية السعوديين. كما تبحث في الطرق التي تسهل بها الإنجليزية عملية التعلم، وتستكشف مزيداً من معتقداتهم حول اللغة. وقد استخدم البحث تصميمًا قائمًا على منهج مختلط متزامن من خلال استبيان مدمج، وشارك فيه تسع وأربعون طالبة جامعية من متعلمي اللغة الصينية كلغة أجنبية. وأظهرت النتائج مواقف إيجابية عمومًا تجاه دور الإنجليزية في اكتساب اللغة. ورغم أن المشاركات كنّ منفتحات لاستخدام الإنجليزية، إلا أنهن لم يعتبرنها ضرورية لتحقيق الكفاءة في اللغة الصينية. وبدلاً من ذلك، رأينها أداة وسيطة تعزز جوانب متعددة من التعلم، مثل الترجمة بين العربية والصينية، والوصول إلى الموارد التعليمية، والتواصل مع أعضاء هيئة التدريس، ودعم الوعي اللغوي وتعلم البينين. وبينما أقر المتعلمون بأهمية الإنجليزية كوسيلة مساعدة عند محدودية الموارد المتاحة باللغة الصينية، شددوا في الوقت نفسه على أن التفاعل المباشر باللغة الصينية يظل أساسياً. كما أبدوا مواقف إيجابية تجاه إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية في البعدين العملي والاجتماعي، مع اعتقاد راسخ بأن المهارات القوية في الإنجليزية توسع الآفاق الأكاديمية وفرص العمل. ويمكن لهذه النتائج أن تفيد معلمي اللغة وصانعي السياسات التعليمية من خلال توضيح كيفية دعم الإنجليزية لمتعلمي اللغة الصينية، وتوجيه القرارات التعليمية المبنية على الأدلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الصينية كلغة أجنبية، الوساطة بالإنجليزية، المتعلمون السعوديون، المعتقدات، الكفاءة التعددية اللغوية

Abstract:

This study investigates the usefulness of English in learning Chinese based on Saudi CFL learners' perceptions. It also examines the specific ways in which English facilitates their learning and further explores their beliefs about the language. Employing a concurrent embedded mixed-methods survey design, the research involved forty-nine female university CFL learners. The results revealed generally positive attitudes toward English's role in their language acquisition. Although participants were open to using English, they did not consider it essential for achieving Chinese proficiency. Instead, they viewed English as a mediational tool that enhances various aspects of learning such as translating between Arabic and Chinese, accessing educational resources, communicating with faculty members, and supporting metalinguistic awareness and Pinyin acquisition. While learners acknowledged English as a valuable aid when Chinese-language resources were limited, they maintained that direct engagement with Chinese remains fundamental. They demonstrated positive attitudes toward English proficiency in both instrumental and social dimensions, strongly believing that strong English skills broaden academic and career opportunities. These findings can inform language teachers and policy makers by clarifying how English supports CFL learners and guiding evidence-based decisions in language education.

Keywords: Chinese as a Foreign Language, English mediation, Saudi learners, beliefs, plurilingual competence

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and growing cultural exchange, mastering foreign languages has become a crucial requirement for individuals wishing to increase their communication and professional skills. Among these languages, Chinese is one of the most widely spoken and economically significant world-wide (Odinye, 2015). However, learning Chinese is a substantial challenge for many due to its linguistic structure and cultural depth, especially for Arabic-speaking learners. In this light, English serves as a fundamental supporting tool that can accelerate third language acquisition. English is a broadly spoken language and commonly used as a medium of instruction (Crystal, 2003). This study investigates the role of English in learning Chinese based on the perceptions and experiences of Saudi Chinese language learners. It is momentous as it highlights the multilingual learning process in context where Arabic is the native language, English is the second language, and Chinese is the third language.

Literature review:

Chinese (Mandarin) has emerged as a global language, owing to China's economic influence and active cultural outreach. It has been integrated into the education systems of over 70 countries, with an estimated 20 to 30 million learners currently enrolled and 100 to 200 million having already studied it (Hamid & Alkhalaf, 2021). Goh (2014) argues that the rapid increase of Chinese foreign language learners world-wide, alongside China's growing economic power, supports Crystal's (2003) argument that economic and political factors determine a language's popularity and the number of its second-language speakers (p. 8). Indeed, China's soft-power strategy is evident in the expansion of Confucius Institutes, which grew from their 2004 inception to 440 institutes across 120 countries by 2013 (Goh, 2014).

In Saudi Arabia, interest in the Chinese language grew as result of economic, strategic and diplomatic partnerships with China. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has introduced Chinese as a foreign language in secondary schools. Several Saudi universities such as Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University and King Saud University have also launched bachelor's degree programs in Chinese language. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and the Confucius Institute Headquarters have collaborated to train and develop Chinese-language teachers for Saudi schools (Chen, 2019). With this rapid expansion come both opportunities and challenges. Liu et al. (2023) emphasize that foreign language anxiety is one such challenge, particularly when a learner's native language differs greatly from the target language, among other difficulties. Interestingly, Aatif (2022) found that Arab students hold a positive attitude towards the Chinese language.

Plurilingual competence and mediation

The Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages (CEFR 2020) Companion Volume pre-sents comprehensive insights into fundamental concepts in language learning: plurilingual competence and mediation competence. It distinguishes between the existence of different languages (multilingualism) and the dynamic linguistic repertoire of an individual (plurilingualism). Rather than a collection of isolated systems, this repertoire functions as a cohesive whole, enabling learners to draw on all their linguistic and cultural resources.

Plurilingual competence is inherently variable, so proficiency levels may differ across languages and contexts. Nonetheless, plurilingual individuals operate within a unified system, flexibly deploying strategies such as code-switching, multi-language comprehension, cross-language interpretation, distinguishing frequently-used words in new forms, and mediating between individuals who do not share a common language. It also involves using all linguistic resources such as experimenting with different expressions, and making use of paralinguistic tools like gestures. Plurilingual competence supports linguistic and cultural diversity, enhances metalinguistic awareness, and fosters both learning and interaction (CEFR, 2020).

Mediation competence is an essential addition in the CEFR 2020 Companion Volume. It is presented as one of four communication means: reception, production, interaction, and mediation. It goes beyond literal translation to facilitate understanding and collaboration among individuals facing linguistic, cultural, or cognitive barriers. Mediation integrates comprehension, reformation, and collaborative negotiation co-construct meaning and knowledge. This includes both cross-linguistic mediation and intra-language support, such as: re-phrasing or amplifying difficult texts. Other strategies include connecting to previous knowledge, co-operating, adapting language to meet speakers' needs, and deconstructing complicated information. They apply to both input and output texts whether spoken or written, in a first or additional language which emphasize mediation's flexibility. Ultimately, mediation's chief aim is to facilitate communication and mutual understanding through dynamic "languageing" (CEFR, 2020).

The CEFR Companion Volume (2020) highlights the interconnection between plurilingual competence and mediation Competence. Mediation becomes especially vital when interlocutors do not share a common language. Plurilingual competence provides the essential foundation for effective mediation, enabling learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to overcome communicative challenges. According to the framework, plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are closely linked, with mediation playing a central role in facilitating communication across languages and cultures. It empowers learners to act as effective mediators, linking languages and cultures, fostering shared understanding, and building social cohesion.

This reciprocal relationship underscores the CEFR's holistic approach to language education, where proficiency is measured not by mastery of each language in isolation but by the ability to use them flexibly and effectively across diverse and complex communicative situations.

English language facilitating Chinese language learning Research has shown that in Chinese-as-a-foreign-language (CFL) classrooms, English often serves as the medium of instruction. English instruction makes the progress of the phonological awareness of Chinese language and Pinyin skills faster through the cross-language transfer (Chen et al., 2010). Wang (2013), found that to explain grammatical structure, discuss meanings, and manage classroom communication with international learners, native Chinese instructors frequently switch to English. Zhang and Hu (2018) examined 115 CFL learners in China and found that over 80% occasionally opted for explanations in English, particularly for complex concepts where English functioned as a facilitative tool.

These findings have led scholars to support translanguaging, which involves using a learner's full linguistic repertoire to facilitate learning Chinese until they can engage directly in Chinese, with English serving as an interim support (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Li, 2020). Saudi students view proficiency in English as important for both academic advancement and career development (Alrabai, 2014). Hamid and Alkhalaf (2021) report that learners perceive no conflict between English language and Chinese; instead, they regard both as integral to their study plans and daily lives despite anticipating challenges. Almalki (2025) surveyed Saudi learners' beliefs and challenges about Chinese language learning. His results highlighted that Saudi female learners faced greater learning difficulties than their male counterparts. He stressed the need for instructional approaches that are both culturally attuned and responsive to gender differences to help overcome these obstacles.

This study fills a gap in the literature by examining how the English language influences Chinese-language learning. To that end, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How important is the English for learning Chinese from the perspective of Saudi female CFL learners?
2. In what aspects does the English language facilitate Chinese-language learning?
3. What beliefs do Saudi learners of Chinese hold about English?

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a concurrent embedded mixed-

methods survey, combining quantitative attitude measures with qualitative reflections. The structured questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items assessing beliefs and attitudes. In addition, an open-ended question was used for the participants to reflect on how English has supported their Chinese learning. These qualitative insights enriched and contextualized the numerical findings.

Participants

The study sample comprised 49 female Saudi undergraduates enrolled in a Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language (CFL) program, with ages ranging from nineteen to early twenties. Participants were distributed across program levels as follows: Level 7 (senior year) - 17 students (34.7%); Level 3 - 14 students (28.6%); Level 4 - 6 students (12.2%); Level 5 - 8 students (16.3%); Levels 1 and 6 - 2 students each (4.1% each); and no Level 2 students. Most were at intermediate to advanced CFL stages, reflecting greater Chinese-learning experience than beginners.

All participants were native Arabic speakers who had studied English as a foreign language prior to beginning Chinese. English-study durations were: ≤ 2 years - 6%; 3-4 years - 18%; 6 years - 16%; and > 7 years - 59%, suggesting that most began English in elementary or middle school. Consequently, nearly all students achieved upper-intermediate to advanced English proficiency before starting Chinese, making them functionally bilingual (Arabic-English) with Chinese as their third language.

Research Instrument

The survey borrowed and adopted 27 items from Horwitz's (1988) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), modifying them to reference both Chinese and English. Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The items addressed five themes:

- General language learning beliefs: e.g., "Some languages are easier to learn than others."
- Self-efficacy and aptitude: e.g., "I have a special ability for learning foreign languages (such as English/Chinese)."
- Role of English in learning Chinese: e.g., "English makes Chinese easier to learn in a non-Chinese-speaking country.", "English is essential for learning Chinese.", "Learning English helps me in translating from Chinese to Arabic and vice versa."
- Learning strategies and anxiety: e.g., "If you don't know a term in English, it's fine to guess.", "I feel embarrassed speaking English/Chinese in front of others."
- Motivation and societal beliefs: e.g., "If I improve my English skills, many opportunities will open up for me, "People in my country think it is important to speak English/Chinese."

Each statement was presented in English alongside an Arabic translation to prevent misunderstanding. The final

item was an open-ended question: “How did English language help you in learning Chi-nese?”. Participants were allowed responses in ei-ther English or Arabic.

Validity and Reliability:

Content validity was ensured by adapting BALLI items, which were slightly modified to address the research ques-tions. Two language-learning experts reviewed the draft questionnaire to confirm its rele-vance and clarity for Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents’ anonymity was strictly maintained to ensure ethical rigor

Ethical Considerations:

Standard research-ethics protocols were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from the participants via the survey’s cover page, and no per-sonally identifying in-formation (e.g. names) was collected. Confidentiality was ensured by reporting only aggregate statistics and anony-mous quotation from the open-ended responses.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Likert-scale responses were entered into SPSS to calculate descriptive statistics for each item: fre-quencies, percent-ages, means, and standard devia-tions. Mean scores were interpreted using a five-point scheme:

- 1.00 to 1.80 = Strongly Disagree
- 1.81 to 2.60 = Disagree
- 2.61 to 3.40 = Neutral
- 3.41 to 4.20 = Agree
- 4.21 to 5.00 = Strongly Agree

Items were then ranked by mean value to identify the most strongly held beliefs.

Qualitative Analysis:

Open-ended responses were coded thematically, yielding six key themes:

1. Translation facilitation
2. Access to educational resources
3. Instructor communication
4. Grammatical transfer
5. Audio-based learning
6. Pinyin acquisition

Integration

Qualitative themes were triangulated with the quan-ti-tative findings to provide a richer understanding of stu-dents’ beliefs and experiences

3. RESULTS

Measuring Attitudes

Participants’ attitudes were determined by the mean scores of

their responses to the Likert-scale state-ments. Table 1 pres-ents the criteria used to interpret each mean score’s direction.

Table (1): Criteria for Determining Respondents’ Attitudes

Respondents’ Attitudes	Mean Value
Strongly Disagree	to 1.80 1.00
Disagree	to 2.60 1.81
Neutral	to 3.40 2.61
Agree	to 4.20 3.41
Strongly Agree	to 5 4.21

As shown in the previous table, if the mean value of the sam-ple individuals’ responses ranges from 1.00 to 1.80, it means they strongly disagree with the statement. If the value ranges from 1.81 to 2.60, it means they disagree with the statement. If the value ranges from 2.61 to 3.40, it indicates a neutral posi-tion towards the statement. If the value ranges between 3.41 to 4.20, it indicates a positive attitude towards the statement. If the value ranges between 4.21 to 5, it indicates strong agree-ment with the statement.

Table (2): Attitudes of Sample Individuals towards the Scale Statements

.No	Statements	Fre quency/ Percent age	Strongly Dis agree	Disagree	Neu tral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Val ue	Stan dard De via tion	Im por tance
1	Some languages are easier to learn than others	f	0	0	4	10	35	4.03	0.84	2
		n	0	0	8.16	20.41	71.43			
2	I believe I will eventually learn to speak Chinese well	f	0	1	5	23	20	4.27	0.73	6
		n	0	2.04	10.2	46.94	40.82			
3	English makes learning Chi- nese easier	f	5	10	13	12	9	3.2	1.26	17
		n	10.2	20.41	26.33	24.49	18.37			
4	English is essen- tial for learning Chinese	f	7	15	12	10	5	3.63	1.22	22
		n	14.29	30.61	24.49	20.41	10.2			
5	English helped me understand Chinese	f	5	15	10	12	7	3.63	1.25	20
		n	10.2	30.61	20.41	24.49	14.29			
6	Reading and writing English is easier than speaking and	f	5	19	16	6	3	2.65	1.03	25
		n	10.2	38.78	32.65	12.24	6.12			
7	understand- Learning ing it English as a foreign language is easier for	f	2	2	8	17	20	4.04	1.06	8
		n	4.08	4.08	16.33	34.69	40.82			
8	children than Some people adults are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English	f	1	5	8	15	20	3.08	1.09	9
		n	2.04	10.2	16.33	30.61	40.82			
9	Anyone who speaks a foreign language can learn another language easily	f	3	10	14	12	10	3.33	1.2	16
		n	6.12	20.41	28.57	24.49	20.41			

No	Statements	Frequency/ Percentage	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Importance
10	I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like	f	0	6	4	21	16	3.94	0.98	10
		n	0	12.24	12.24	42.86	32.65			
11	English I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like	f	1	5	10	21	12	3.78	1.01	12
		n	2.04	10.2	20.45	42.86	24.49			
12	Chinese Math and science achievers struggle with learning new	f	2	15	14	11	5	3.04	1.06	19
		n	4.08	30.61	32.45	22.45	10.2			
13	Languages People who can communicate well in more than one language are very talented	f	0	0	3	9	37	4.69	0.58	1
		n	0	0	6.12	18.37	75.51			
14	People in my country are excellent at acquiring	f	0	5	11	20	13	3.84	0.94	11
		n	0	10.2	22.45	40.82	26.53			
15	English Everyone can learn to speak English	f	0	1	4	21	21	4.27	0.76	7
		n	0	2.04	12.24	42.86	42.86			
16	English is necessary to understand the culture of Chi-	f	7	17	14	7	4	3.67	1.14	24
		n	14.29	34.69	28.57	14.29	8.16			
17	New speakers English makes learning Chinese easier in a non-Chinese	f	7	8	11	16	7	3.16	1.28	18
		n	14.29	16.33	22.45	32.65	14.29			
18	Speaking Learning country English involves learning a lot of grammar rules	f	3	17	11	14	4	3.98	1.11	21
		n	6.12	34.69	22.45	28.57	8.16			
19	Learning English helps me translate from Chinese to Arabic and from Arabic to	f	5	7	10	14	13	3.67	1.11	14
		n	10.2	14.29	20.45	28.57	26.53			
20	It is important to speak English fluently and with a good accent in order to learn Chinese	f	9	19	11	6	2	2.45	1.06	26
		n	18.37	38.78	26.53	12.24	4.08			
21	If you don't know an English term, it's okay to guess	f	2	5	12	22	8	3.19	1.02	13
		n	4.08	10.2	24.49	44.9	16.33			
22	I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of others	f	10	21	7	9	2	2.43	1.14	27
		n	20.41	42.86	14.29	18.37	4.08			
23	I feel embarrassed to speak Chinese in front of others	f	4	12	9	9	15	3.19	1.07	15
		n	8.16	24.49	18.37	18.37	30.61			
24	If I improve my English skills, many opportunities will open up for me	f	0	0	4	19	26	4.45	0.65	5
		n	0	0	8.16	38.78	53.06			

No	Statements	Frequency/ Percentage	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Importance
25	If I learn to speak English well, it will help me get a	f	0	1	1	12	31	4.49	0.77	4
		n	0	2.04	10.2	24.49	63.27			
26	Good job People in my country believe it is important to speak	f	0	1	1	17	30	4.55	0.65	3
		n	0	2.04	2.04	34.69	61.22			
27	English People in my country believe it is important to speak	f	5	15	14	8	3	2.78	1.45	23
		n	10.2	30.61	26.73	16.33	6.12			

Chinese

The general mean value of the sample individuals’ responses to the scale statements, which is (3.55 out of 5) with a standard deviation of (1.01), indicates a generally positive attitude towards the scale statements. When examining the details of the sample individuals’ responses to the scale statements, we can divide their attitudes into three sections:

Section 1: Statements that Achieved “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” Attitudes

- “People who can communicate well in more than one language are very talented” with a mean value of (4.69 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.58), indicating a “Strongly Agree” attitude.
- The statement “Some languages are easier to learn than others” ranked second with a mean value of (4.63 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.64), indicating a “Strongly Agree” attitude.
- The statement “People in my country believe it is important to speak English” ranked third with a mean value of (4.55 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.65), indicating a “Strongly Agree” attitude.
- The statement “If I learn to speak English well, it will help me get a good job” ranked fourth with a mean value of (4.49 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.77), indicating a “Strongly Agree” attitude.
- The statement “If I improve my English skills, many opportunities will open up for me” ranked fifth with a mean value of (4.45 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.65), indicating a “Strongly Agree” attitude.
- The statement “I believe I will eventually learn to speak Chinese well” ranked sixth with a mean value of (4.27 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.73), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
- The statement “Everyone can learn to speak English” ranked seventh with a mean value of (4.27 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.76), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
- The statement “Learning English as a foreign language is

easier for children than adults” ranked eighth with a mean value of (4.04 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.06), indicating an “Agree” attitude.

9. The statement “Some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English” ranked ninth with a mean value of (3.98 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.09), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
10. The statement “I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English” ranked tenth with a mean value of (3.96 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.98), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
11. The statement “People in my country are excellent at acquiring English” ranked eleventh with a mean value of (3.84 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (0.94), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
12. The statement “I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like Chinese” ranked twelfth with a mean value of (3.78 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.01), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
13. The statement “If you don’t know an English term, it’s okay to guess” ranked thirteenth with a mean value of (3.59 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.02), indicating an “Agree” attitude.
14. The statement “Learning English helps me translate from Chinese to Arabic and from Arabic to Chinese” ranked fourteenth with a mean value of (3.47 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.31), indicating an “Agree” attitude

Section 2: Statements that Achieved a “Neutral” Attitude

“Neutral” attitude.

15. The statement “Anyone who speaks a foreign language can learn another language easily” ranked sixteenth with a mean value of (3.33 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.20), indicating a “Neutral” attitude.
16. The statement “English makes learning Chinese easier” ranked seventeenth with a mean value of (3.20 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.26), indicating a “Neutral” attitude.
17. The statement “English makes learning Chinese easier in a non-Chinese speaking country” ranked eighteenth with a mean value of (3.16 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.28), indicating a “Neutral” attitude.
18. The statement “Math and science achievers struggle with learning new languages” ranked nineteenth with a mean value of (3.04 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.06), indicating a “Neutral” attitude.
19. The statement “English helped me understand Chinese” ranked twentieth with a mean value of (3.02 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.25), indicating a “Neutral” attitude.

Section 3: Statements that Achieved a “Disagree” Attitude

20. The statement “Learning English involves learning a lot of grammar rules” ranked twenty-first with a mean value of (2.98 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.11), indi-

cating a “Disagree” attitude.

21. The statement “English is essential for learning Chinese” ranked twenty-second with a mean value of (2.82 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.22), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.
22. The statement “People in my country believe it is important to speak Chinese” ranked twenty-third with a mean value of (2.78 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.05), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.
23. The statement “English is necessary to understand the culture of Chinese speakers” ranked twenty-fourth with a mean value of (2.67 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.14), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.
24. The statement “Reading and writing English is easier than speaking and understanding it” ranked twenty-fifth with a mean value of (2.65 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.03), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.
25. The statement “It is important to speak English fluently and with a good accent in order to learn Chinese” ranked twenty-sixth with a mean value of (2.45 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.06), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.
26. The statement “I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of others” ranked twenty-seventh with a mean value of (2.43 out of 5) and a standard deviation of (1.14), indicating a “Disagree” attitude.

Summary of Findings: Thematic Classification of Statements

The results are organized into three thematic categories:

Theme 1: English as a Mediational Tool in Chinese Learning

1. “Learning English helps me translate from Chinese to Arabic and from Arabic to Chinese.” M = 3.47, SD = 1.31 (Rank 14) - Positive
2. “English makes learning Chinese easier in a non-Chinese speaking country.” M = 3.16, SD = 1.28 (Rank 18) - Neutral
3. “English makes learning Chinese easier.” M = 3.2, SD = 1.26 (Rank 17) - Neutral
4. “English helped me understand Chinese.” M = 3.02, SD = 1.25 (Rank 20) - Neutral
5. “English is essential for learning Chinese.” M = 2.82, SD = 1.22 (Rank 22) - Disagree
6. “English is necessary to understand the culture of Chinese speakers.” M = 2.67, SD = 1.14 (Rank 24) - Disagree
7. “It is important to speak English fluently and with a good accent in order to learn Chinese.” M = 2.45, SD = 1.06 (Rank 26) - Disagree

Theme 2: General Language-Learning Beliefs

1. “People who can communicate well in more than one language are very talented.” M = 4.69, SD = 0.58 (Rank 1) - Strongly Agree

2.

“Some languages are easier to learn than others.” M = 4.63, SD = 0.64 (Rank 2) - Strongly Agree
3.

“I believe I will eventually learn to speak Chinese well.” M = 4.27, SD = 0.73 (Rank 6) - Agree
4.

“Everyone can learn to speak English.” M = 4.27, SD = 0.76 (Rank 7) - Agree
5.

“Learning English as a foreign language is easier for children than adults.” M = 4.04, SD = 1.06 (Rank 8) - Agree
6.

“Some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English.” M = 3.98, SD = 1.09 (Rank 9) - Agree
7.

“I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English.” M = 3.96, SD = 0.98 (Rank 10) - Agree
8.

“People in my country are excellent at acquiring English.” M = 3.84, SD = 0.94 (Rank 11) - Agree
9.

“I have a special ability to learn a foreign language, like Chinese.” M = 3.78, SD = 1.01 (Rank 12) - Agree
10.

“I feel embarrassed to speak Chinese in front of others.” M = 3.39, SD = 1.37 (Rank 15) - Neutral
11.

“Anyone who speaks a foreign language can learn another language easily.” M = 3.33, SD = 1.2 (Rank 16) - Neutral
12.

“Math and science achievers struggle with learning new languages.” M = 3.04, SD = 1.06 (Rank 19) - Neutral
13.

“People in my country believe it is important to speak Chinese.” M = 2.78, SD = 1.05 (Rank 23) – Disagree

Theme 3: English Language Beliefs

1.

People in my country believe it is important to speak English.” M = 4.55, SD = 0.65 (Rank 3) - Strongly Agree
2.

“If I learn to speak English well, it will help me get a good job.” M = 4.49, SD = 0.77 (Rank 4) - Strongly Agree
3.

“If I improve my English skills, many opportunities will open up for me.” M = 4.45, SD = 0.65 (Rank 5) - Strongly Agree
4.

“Everyone can learn to speak English.” M = 4.27, SD = 0.76 (Rank 7) - Agree
5.

“If you don’t know an English term, it’s okay to guess.” M = 3.59, SD = 1.02 (Rank 13) - Agree
6.

“Learning English involves learning a lot of grammar rules.” M = 2.98, SD = 1.11 (Rank 21) - Disagree
7.

“Reading and writing English is easier than speaking and understanding it.” M = 2.65, SD = 1.03 (Rank 25) -Disagree
8.

“I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of others.” M = 2.43, SD = 1.14 (Rank 27) - Disagree

Summary of the Qualitative Findings:

Based on participants’ responses to the open-ended question regarding additional ways in which English facilitated Chinese-language learning, six categories of contribution were identified:

Translation Facilitation

Participants reported that translating between Chinese and English was both more accurate and more accessible than direct Chinese-Arabic translation. This bilingual mediation en-

hanced their comprehension of Chinese vocabulary and texts, especially in the absence of reliable Chinese-Arabic electronic dictionaries.

Access to Educational Resources

The predominance of Chinese-learning materials in English, rather than Arabic, led participants to rely on English-medium textbooks, websites, and curricula. This wider availability of English-language resources enabled clearer understanding of lesson content.

Instructor Communication

In classes where instructors lacked Arabic proficiency, English served as the primary medium for instruction and clarification. Participants noted that English-based explanations by non-Arabic-speaking teachers improved lesson comprehension and overall learning engagement.

Grammatical Transfer

Some learners observed that certain Chinese grammatical structures mirrored those of English. This structural similarity allowed them to draw on their existing English knowledge to decode and internalize Chinese grammar more readily.

Audio-Based Learning

The abundance of English-language audio materials such as: podcasts, pronunciation guides, and listening exercises provided crucial pronunciation models and listening practice, thereby strengthening participants’ spoken Chinese proficiency.

Pinyin Acquisition

Participants indicated that familiarity with the Latin-letter system through English facilitated their mastery of Pinyin. English literacy skills helped them map Chinese phonemes onto the Roman alphabet, accelerating their vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation accuracy.

Discussion

The findings are organized according to the three research questions and interpreted in light of relevant literature

1. Perceived Importance of English in Chinese Learning

Saudi female learners of Chinese perceive English as a useful yet non-essential support rather than a prerequisite for mastering the language. Quantitative survey data revealed low agreement with statements such as “English is essential for learning Chinese” ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.25$) and “English is necessary to understand the culture of Chinese speakers” ($M = 2.19, SD = 1.14$), indicating that participants neither endorse nor rely on English as a gatekeeper to Chinese proficiency. Instead, their responses cluster around neutrality on facilitative items like “English makes learning Chinese easier» ($M = 3.2, SD = 1.21$) and “English helped me understand Chinese” ($M = 3.02, SD = 1.25$), suggesting they appreciate its support when available, but do not see it as indispensable.

These attitudes echo Hamid and Alkhalaf’s (2021) findings that Saudi CFL learners regard English and Chinese as co-existing resources, each serving distinct functions in their

study plans without displacing one another. Within the CEFR framework, this stance exemplifies plurilingual competence: learners flexibly draw upon multiple linguistic resources, deploying English when advantageous such as for translational scaffolding or clarifying abstract concepts but also developing the confidence to engage directly with Chinese input as their proficiency grows. In other words, English is part of their dynamic linguistic repertoire, but not a structural requirement for progress.

Contextual factors reinforce this view. The rapid expansion of Chinese education globally including integration into over 70 national curricula and over 20 to 30 million active learners worldwide has been driven by China's economic ascendancy and soft-power initiatives (e.g., Confucius Institutes), rather than reliance on English as a universal instructional medium (Goh, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, government initiatives since 2019 have introduced Chinese into secondary schools and launched university-level Chinese degree programs, supported by teacher-training collaborations with the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Chen, 2019). These systemic developments underscore a direct pathway to Chinese learning, mitigating the perceived necessity of English as an intermediary.

At the same time, qualitative feedback from female learners highlights that affective factors including foreign-language anxiety shape their perceptions of English's importance (Liu et al., 2023). When Chinese-Arabic dictionaries or instructional resources in Arabic are unavailable or insufficient, English often steps in as the default lingua franca of international academia, offering comprehensible input and pedagogical clarity. Nonetheless, learners emphasize that as they accumulate Chinese vocabulary and develop metacognitive strategies aligned with CEFR-defined mediation competence such as re-formulation, summarization, and collaborative negotiation they progressively reduce their dependence on English scaffolding.

Moreover, Aatif's (2022) study of Arab students' attitudes toward Chinese reports a positive overall enthusiasm for engaging directly with Chinese language and culture, reflecting a growing confidence in direct CFL immersion rather than channeling through English. This motivational dynamic is critical: learners' belief in their ability to learn Chinese independently correlates with stronger self-regulated learning behaviors and reduced reliance on English mediation, further attenuating its perceived importance.

In sum, Saudi female CFL learners view English as a valuable auxiliary tool; a means to access resources, decode unfamiliar scripts (e.g., Pinyin), and moderate anxiety but do not consider it essential for achieving Chinese proficiency. Their attitudes illustrate a mature plurilingual orientation in which English and Chinese coexist within an integrated repertoire, each leveraged strategically according to task demands, emotional states, and instructional contexts

2. English as a mediating tool

The second research question was to find out the aspects that English facilitates Chinese language learning. Saudi female learners identified four primary roles through which English **mediates** their Chinese acquisition, reflecting translanguaging strategies that align with CEFR (2020) concepts of mediation competence.

Translation Facilitation

The way Saudi CFL participants use English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation as a scaffolding mechanism maps directly onto the CEFR's twin notions of plurilingual and mediation competence. By reporting that English-Chinese mediation felt "more accurate and accessible" than direct Chinese-Arabic translation, learners demonstrate the fluid deployment of their entire linguistic repertoire which is a hallmark of plurilingual competence. The CEFR (2020) defines the plurilingual competence as the ability to draw on and integrate multiple languages dynamically rather than treating them as isolated systems. At the same time, this translation facilitation exemplifies mediation competence, which goes beyond word-for-word transfer to involve re-formulation, cross-linguistic interpretation, and negotiation of meaning until learners can operate fully in the target code. Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) translanguaging framework further clarifies this process as a deliberate "shuttling" among languages, supporting comprehension and gradual internalization of Chinese structures. In effect, learners' L1s or their "familiar languages" become a cognitive tool that aids target-language acquisition (Wang, 2010). By combining translanguaging with mediation as envisioned in the CEFR Companion Volume, learners both leverage English to bridge gaps in Arabic-Chinese resources and enact the very "linguaging" practices that the Council of Europe (2020) prescribes for effective plurilingual mediation.

Access to Educational Resources

According to Saudi female Chinese CFL learners, much CFL pedagogy—including textbooks, online tutorials, audio resources and scholarly articles is produced in English, so they depend on English as their primary gateway to instructional materials. These resources provide pronunciation models and listening practice that bolster accuracy in spoken Chinese. Similarly, Zhang and Hu (2018) found that most CFL students request explanations in English for challenging phonetic or tonal concepts, demonstrating its role in oral mediation. Furthermore, Goh (2014) noted the rapid global proliferation of Confucius Institutes and CFL courses, which occurs predominantly within Anglophone academic infrastructures and accounts for the abundance of English-medium resources.

Instructor Communication and Code-Switching

In classes taught by instructors with limited Arabic proficiency, Saudi CFL learners reported that English serves as the primary medium for clarifying complex grammatical structures, conveying abstract meanings, and managing classroom interaction. Wang (2013) observed that native Chinese instructors frequently switch to English when addressing international learners, highlighting its function as an effective pedagogical bridge. Similarly, Zhang and Hu (2018) found that over 80 percent of their CFL participants in China occasionally requested explanations in English for particularly challenging concepts, demonstrating English's role as an essential instructional scaffold. Moreover, Hu et al. (2022) reported that elementary and intermediate CFL learners preferred teachers to code-switch to English, believing that strategic use of English enhances their Chinese-learning process.

Grammatical Transfer & Pinyin Acquisition

Several Saudi CFL learners reported that drawing analogies between English and Chinese syntactic patterns helped them

internalize Chinese grammar more quickly. This form of cross-linguistic, metalinguistic transfer is in line with Chen et al.'s (2010) findings that English phonological instruction accelerates Pinyin acquisition and enhances phonological sensitivity in Chinese. Familiarity with the Roman alphabet through English literacy greatly facilitates mapping Chinese phonemes onto Pinyin Romanization, enabling learners to decode new vocabulary with reference to their existing orthographic knowledge. This direct application of re-formulation strategies exemplifies the CEFR's holistic emphasis on using all linguistic resources flexibly across modalities.

Collectively, these mediational functions demonstrate that English serves not simply as a temporary scaffold but as an integral element of learners' plurilingual repertoires. As learners' proficiency in Chinese phonology, script, and discourse conventions advances, they gradually reduce their reliance on English mediation which is an indicator of progress toward direct CFL engagement and enhanced cognitive autonomy. Therefore, instructional designs that formally integrate English-mediated scaffolds such as translanguaging tasks, bilingual glossaries, and code-switching protocols can harness this dynamic to accelerate early CFL development while charting clear paths toward full Chinese immersion.

3. Beliefs towards English language proficiency

The third research question examined Saudi female CFL learners' beliefs about English proficiency. Overall, participants viewed English pragmatically as a valuable mediating tool rather than an obligatory prerequisite for Chinese study. They rejected the notion that "English language fluency or a good accent is a requirement for learning Chinese" ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.01$), and held neutral attitudes toward statements such as "English makes learning Chinese easier" ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.12$) and "English makes learning Chinese easier in a non-Chinese speaking country" ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.08$). These results echo Hu et al. (2022), who found that learners favor English use in the classroom for scaffolding purposes rather than viewing it as indispensable to their CFL progress.

Instrumental and Societal Value

Participants overwhelmingly endorsed the instrumental benefits of English for their academic and professional futures. They strongly agreed that "if I learn to speak English well, it will help me get a good job" ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.77$) and that "if I improve my English skills, many opportunities will open up for me" ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.65$). These elevated means mirror Alrabai's (2014) finding that Saudi students perceive English proficiency as indispensable for advancement in both national and multinational contexts. Equally, societal norms reinforced this view: learners strongly concurred that "people in my country believe it is important to speak English" ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.65$), underscoring English's entrenched status as a global lingua franca (Crystal, 2003).

Aptitude, Age, and Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Learners attributed success in language learning to both innate ability and age. They agreed that "some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, like English" ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.81$) and believed that "learning English as a foreign language is easier for children than adults" ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.06$). These results suggest that participants view English proficiency as a marker of multilingual talent and consider

younger learners to be at an advantage. At the same time, they maintained a growth-oriented mindset: "everyone can learn to speak English" ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.76$) and "if you don't know an English term, it's okay to guess" ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.02$). Such means indicate confidence in their capacity to acquire the language and a willingness to employ risk-taking strategies in communication.

Affective and Skill-Dimension Barriers

Despite these positive beliefs, learners reported challenges in productive skills and affective inhibition. They perceived "reading and writing English is easier than speaking and understanding it" ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.03$) and acknowledged some embarrassment when "speaking English in front of others" ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.14$). These lower means point to persistent anxiety around oral proficiency-particularly in public or high-stakes situations-which aligns with broader EFL research documenting speaking-related apprehension (Woodrow, 2006).

Integrated Bilingual Orientation

Finally, participants affirmed English's complementary role alongside Chinese rather than as a rival language. They agreed that "learning English helps me translate from Chinese to Arabic and from Arabic to Chinese" ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.31$), underscoring its mediational function. Hamid and Alkhalaf (2021) similarly found no conflict between investing in English versus Chinese; rather, Saudi learners integrate both languages as synergistic cultural and academic assets. These integrated bilingual attitudes suggest that CFL curricula should continue to support dual-language competencies, leveraging English-mediated scaffolds such as translanguaging tasks and bilingual glossaries to facilitate early CFL gains while charting clear paths toward full Chinese immersion.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings suggest that Saudi female CFL learners regard English as a valuable auxiliary rather than an indispensable prerequisite for Chinese mastery. Quantitative data show low agreement with statements asserting English's essentiality for Chinese learning or cultural understanding, and neutral midpoints on facilitative items. This indicates that learners appreciate English support when needed such as clarifying difficult concepts or reducing anxiety via English-Chinese mediation but maintain confidence in engaging directly with Mandarin as their proficiency develops.

Participants identified four specific mediational roles of English in their Chinese-learning process: facilitating more accurate translation than direct Chinese-Arabic tools; granting access to a broader range of English-medium CFL resources; enabling clear instructor communication when teachers code-switch; supporting grammatical transfer by mapping familiar English structures onto Chinese patterns and easing Pinyin acquisition through Roman-alphabet familiarity. These strategic uses of English align with the CEFR's notion of mediation competence, whereby learners draw flexibly on their full plurilingual repertoires to scaffold comprehension.

Learners' attitudes toward English proficiency are overwhelmingly positive in instrumental and social dimensions: they strongly believe that English skills open academic and career opportunities and confer national prestige. High agree-

ment that “everyone can learn English” and allowance for communicative risk-taking reflect a growth-oriented mindset, even as some report anxiety around speaking and distinctions between receptive and productive skills. Overall, Saudi CFL learners integrate English and Chinese as complementary resources leveraging English strategically to support early Chinese gains while steadily progressing toward autonomous Mandarin use.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, it draws exclusively on self-report data from a single cohort of Saudi female CFL learners in one educational setting, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other populations, institutions, or cultural contexts. Second, the reliance on questionnaire responses without observational or performance-based measures limits the ability to triangulate stated beliefs with actual classroom behaviors and proficiency outcomes. Future research should address these gaps by combining survey data with classroom observation and learner performance metrics, and expanding the sample to include diverse learner groups and instructional environments.

Research implications

The present findings suggest that Chinese language programs serving Saudi and similar learner populations can benefit from the strategic integration of English as a mediating resource without compromising Chinese immersion. Instructors might employ English selectively; for example, through annotated glossaries, targeted instructional videos, or occasional classroom explanations while ensuring that Chinese remains the primary language of instruction. Curriculum developers should prioritize bilingual materials, such as English-annotated Chinese textbooks and parallel texts, to bridge gaps where Arabic-Chinese resources are scarce. At the same time, teachers should cultivate learner confidence by balancing English-mediated clarifications together with ample opportunities for Chinese practice, gradually withdrawing English support as proficiency grows. Such calibrated use of English scaffolds can accelerate early CFL gains and foster students' transition toward autonomous Mandarin use.

Conflict of Interest

I confirm that I have no financial interests, affiliations, personal relationships, or other circumstances that might create a conflict of interest in relation to this research

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the author. Any further inquiries regarding the data or its availability should be directed to the author.

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