



Would you work abroad? The effect of English proficiency on Chinese employees' willingness to accept international assignments

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ABSTRACT

The process of globalization has led to a considerable number of expatriates working abroad. In this article, we investigate whether those with a higher level of English proficiency are more willing to accept international assignments. To examine our hypotheses, we conducted a time-lagged survey of 239 employees from Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs). The results reveal that employees' English language proficiency is positively related to their willingness to accept international assignments, and that their openness to corporate globalization mediates this relationship. In addition, employees' foreign language anxiety (FLA) moderates the mediating effect of English language proficiency on willingness to accept international assignments via openness to corporate globalization. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the deepening of economic globalization has witnessed an increasing number of Chinese companies expanding their business around the world. Outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) from China increased almost six-fold between 2005 and 2017, reaching \$124 billion by 2017 (UNCTAD, 2018). This marked increase in China's OFDI reveals that more and more Chinese companies have been pursuing multinational development (Wang, Fan, Freeman, & Zhu, 2017). Nowadays, factories and subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs can be found throughout the world. Accompanying the rapid growth of Chinese MNCs, a growing number of expatriates from China appear in the global market (He, An, & Berry, 2019; Zhong, Zhu, & Zhang, 2015). The expatriate ratio for Chinese MNCs is notably higher than that for western MNCs (Oki, 2013). Numerous Chinese expatriates have been sent abroad because of their competitive advantages such as higher performance and lower cost (Rui, Zhang, & Shipman, 2017). However, according to a Mercer survey, Chinese employees' expatriation willingness is much lower than the expatriation willingness of employees in other Asia Pacific nations (MERCER, 2017). In addition, the existing literature on expatriate management consists mostly of research conducted on employees from western countries; little is known regarding Chinese expatriate management (He et al., 2019). Considering China's booming economy and vital political position on the world stage, there is a growing need for research into Chinese expatriate management.

According to Harrison, Shaffer, and Bhaskar-Shrinivas (2004), expatriates are defined as "employees of business organizations, who are sent overseas on a temporary basis to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal" (p. 203) and thus are different from tourists, immigrants, and other varieties of international mobility. In our study, "expatriates" are Chinese employees from Chinese MNCs who are company-assigned overseas to complete international tasks in order to achieve organizational goals. Expatriates are considered to be the key to the core competitiveness of MNCs (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007). Prior research has shown that international assignments are vital to MNCs' implementation of global strategies and benefit employees' career development as well (He et al., 2019; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). In view of the significance of international assignments, researchers have devoted considerable effort to investigating the factors influencing employees' expatriation willingness, including geographical location of subsidiaries, work-family conflict, employee career development, and communication barriers (Cheong, Sandhu, Edwards, & Poon, 2019; Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Noe, Steffy, & Barber, 1988; Zhang, Harzing, & Fan, 2018).

In the international business literature, language is recognized as a considerable barrier to or facilitator of communication, coordination, and collaboration in MNCs (Bordia & Bordia, 2015). However, how language influences employees' willingness to accept international assignments has to date received limited attention. Language is a key resource for the success of international assignments because it is the

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basic means of communication within organizations. Given that English is the lingua franca in international business, English skills could influence employees' expatriation willingness (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014). Accordingly, this article aims to investigate how English language proficiency influences Chinese employees' willingness to accept international assignments. Furthermore, employees in MNCs encounter both cognitive challenges (e.g., foreign language proficiency) and emotional barriers such as foreign language anxiety (Harzing & Feely, 2008). However, prior research has generally overlooked the emotional impact of English on expatriate management (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). In fact, many Chinese employees are afraid to speak English in public even though they have high levels of English proficiency, which poses barriers to accepting international assignments (Liu, 2006). Therefore, we introduce FLA as a crucial factor influencing whether Chinese employees accept international assignments.

The current study contributes to the literature on expatriate management in a number of ways. First, it focuses on the expatriation willingness of Chinese employees, which is both an understudied and important research area. By providing detailed explanation of the Chinese context, this study helps enrich research on expatriate management. Second, the present study investigates how English language proficiency influences the willingness of Chinese employees to accept overseas assignments. Specifically, it proposes that openness to corporate globalization mediates the above-mentioned relationship. The intermediary mechanism both enriches literature regarding language and expatriation and contributes to a better understanding of employees' attitudes towards corporate globalization; we also suggest that future research explores the role that employee attitudes towards corporate globalization plays in international business and considers applying the notion of openness to corporate globalization to further theory development in the international business literature. Third, our study is among the first to explore the effects of foreign language anxiety on employee attitudes and behavior in MNCs. It inspires future research to take language-induced emotion into account when studying phenomena in MNCs. In addition, this study has practical application in that it provides suggestions for facilitating employees' expatriation willingness and managing the myriad challenges of "going global".

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments

With the quickening of the economic globalization process, MNCs are increasingly stipulating or mandating a common language policy to expand their global reach, coordinate geographically dispersed subsidiaries, and promote collaboration across national and linguistic barriers (Konara & Wei, 2019; Konopaske, Robie, & Ivancevich, 2009; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012). English, which has been recognized as the lingua franca, is the most commonly used language in international business, regardless of corporate origin or headquarter location (Brannen et al., 2014; Neeley et al., 2012; Peltokorpi, 2017). Accordingly, researchers have paid great attention to the role that English language plays in MNC management. For example, Froese, Peltokorpi, and Ko (2012) have argued that English usage in the workplace is positively related to foreign workers' work adjustment and job satisfaction and negatively related to their turnover intention. Based on a sample of 693 non-native English speakers in Japan, Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015) suggest that English language proficiency can promote employees' affective and normative commitment to their firms' globalization.

Nowadays, in order to meet the needs of globalization, MNCs frequently send employees to different countries or regions. As a consequence, expatriates confronting a high diversity of local languages are increasingly relying on an official corporate language (Tenzer & Schuster, 2017). With a growing number of Chinese MNCs (e.g., Lenovo, Huawei) selecting English as the official language to deal with the

international business, there is significant pressure and motivation for Chinese employees working in MNCs to master English skills. However, the latest Education-First English Proficiency Index (EF-EPI) saw the English language proficiency of Chinese ranked towards the bottom (King, 2015); the average score of Chinese in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was below the global average (ETS, 2018). Poor English skills could thus be a barrier for Chinese employees working in MNCs to tackle international assignments.

We propose that English language proficiency influences whether Chinese employees working in MNCs are willing to accept international assignments. According to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy, which represents an individual's perceived ability to accomplish a certain goal under certain circumstances, predicts her/his work attitudes and behavior (Consiglio, Borgogni, Di Tecco, & Schaufeli, 2016; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). "Individuals will avoid activities believed to exceed their coping capabilities but will undertake and perform those which they judge themselves to be capable of" (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993, p. 686). Since English language proficiency has been regarded as an essential skill in handling international transactions (Neeley et al., 2012), employees with high English language proficiency are more confident in their ability to cope with multilingual work environments (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). For example, prior research has shown that individuals are more willing to take part in classroom activities using the foreign language they are learning if they perceive their language proficiency as high (de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009; Fushino, 2010). Moreover, non-native English speakers are more willing to contribute to the globalization of the companies they are working for if they perceive themselves to be good at English (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). Accordingly, Chinese employees might be more willing to accept international assignments if they have high English proficiency because they have greater confidence in coping with a multilingual environment.

According to role identity theory, role identity reflects a set of internalized role expectations (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-Mcintyre, 2003). It derives from social interactions and self-views and functions as one's commitment to the relevant role (Farmer et al., 2003; Riley & Burke, 1995). Individuals are motivated to fulfill their self-verification by completing relevant role tasks (Farmer et al., 2003). In our case, Chinese employees with high English proficiency are more likely to develop their identity as international employees who are capable of taking on international tasks and have strong senses of responsibility to contribute to the companies' globalization (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012; Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). Regarding taking overseas assignments as a way of contributing to the company's globalization, Chinese employees might be more willing to accept international assignments if they have high English proficiency because they identify themselves as international employees.

Given these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, we propose:

H1. Employees' English language proficiency is positively related to their willingness to accept international assignments.

2.2. The mediating role of openness to corporate globalization

The globalization of a company has been considered to be a specific case of organizational change. Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015, p. 169) argue that "commitment to a firm's globalization is a specific and narrow case of commitment to organizational change". In accordance with this perspective, we consider openness to corporate globalization as a specific case of openness to organizational change. Miller, Johnson, and Grau (1994) conceptualize openness to organizational change as employees' willingness to support the change and positive affect about its potential consequences (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). In the current study, openness to corporate globalization is defined as willingness to support the company's globalization and positive affect about its potential consequences.

In this study, we argue that English language proficiency is positively related to openness to corporate globalization. Prior research indicates that English language proficiency can enhance one's confidence in navigating an environment in which English skills are needed (Yamamoto & Sekiguchi, 2015). According to Wanberg and Banas (2000), self-efficacy in coping with change enhances an employee's openness to organizational change. Likewise, English language proficiency might promote Chinese employees' openness towards corporate globalization because it enhances their self-efficacy. Moreover, according to role identity theory, high English language proficiency enables employees to develop their identity as international employees, which in turn facilitates their willingness to support the company's globalization and positive affect about the potential consequences of it (Kraimer et al., 2012; Yamamoto & Sekiguchi, 2015). Therefore, we propose that Chinese employees' English language proficiency is positively related to their openness to corporate globalization.

Employees' open attitudes towards corporate globalization can serve as the catalyst for accepting international assignments. According to the theory of reasoned action, one's attitude is a considerable predictor of her/his behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In the literature on organizational change, employees' openness towards organizational change influences their willingness to behave in ways whether promote or hinder the change (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Likewise, because openness to corporate globalization reflects the employee's willingness to support the company's globalization and positive affect about the potential consequences of it, high openness to corporate globalization may motivate employees to play a positive role in the corporate globalization. As such, employees who are open to corporate globalization are more willing to accept international assignments because they regard taking overseas assignments as contributing to the company's globalization with benefits for both the company and themselves. Accordingly, we propose that openness to corporate globalization can facilitate Chinese employees' willingness to accept international assignments.

Taken together, we argue that English language proficiency helps enhance Chinese employees' openness to corporate globalization, which in turn promotes their willingness to accept international assignments.

H2. Employees' openness to corporate globalization mediates the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments.

2.3. The moderating role of foreign language anxiety

The concept of foreign language anxiety originates from literature on second language learning and teaching. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) conceptualize FLA as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts" (p. 284). No matter what their native language is, individuals often experience anxiety when using English as a foreign language (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Neeley, 2013). The impeding effects of FLA have been well documented. For example, individuals with high FLA have difficulty in communicating with native English speakers, tend to avoid

interpersonal communication, and are more likely to give up foreign language learning (Elaldi, 2016; Gargalianou, Muehlfeld, Urbig, & van Witteloostuijn, 2016; Yamamoto & Sekiguchi, 2017).

Foreign language anxiety is often accompanied by feelings of unease, tension, stress, and frustration connected to issues such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety about being negatively evaluated by others, and worry about being misunderstood by others (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Gargalianou et al., 2016; Neeley et al., 2012). Researchers have found that FLA has a detrimental impact on self-perceived competence, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004). Neeley (2013) further points out that FLA can translate into feelings of job insecurity and status loss. English is widely used in Chinese MNCs to meet their need to 'go global'; it follows, then, that Chinese employees of these MNCs who are anxious about using English may be less open towards corporate globalization because they perceive themselves as incompetent in such environments.

Language barriers comprise both cognitive (e.g., English language proficiency) and emotional dimensions (e.g., FLA) (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Harzing & Feely, 2008). Even with high proficiency in the language, non-native speakers may still feel nervous (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Neeley, 2013). English language contributes to an employee's openness to corporate globalization only if she/he is not anxious about using English as a foreign language. In contrast, employees with a high level of FLA may not hold open attitudes towards corporate globalization even if they are proficient in English. This is because they identify themselves as incompetent and fear not being able to cope with the company's globalization (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004). Therefore, we predict the following:

H3. Employees' foreign language anxiety moderates the relationship between English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization such that the relationship is stronger among employees with low foreign language anxiety.

Assuming that foreign language anxiety moderates the relationship between English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization, we propose that FLA conditionally influences the indirect effect of English language proficiency on willingness to accept overseas assignments via openness to corporate globalization, thereby demonstrating a pattern of moderated mediation among our research variables. FLA can diminish employees' self-efficacy and make them view themselves as incompetent in the global environment. Thus, employees are less open to the globalization of the company even though they are fluent in English, which in turn, decreases their willingness to accept international assignments. In contrast, high English language proficiency promotes employees' openness to corporate globalization when they are not anxious about using English as a foreign language, thus contributing to their enhanced willingness to accept overseas tasks. To sum up, we predict the following:

H4. Employees' foreign language anxiety moderates the mediating effect of English language proficiency on willingness to accept international assignments through openness to corporate globalization such that the indirect effect is stronger among employees with low foreign language anxiety. Fig. 1 shows our hypothesized model.

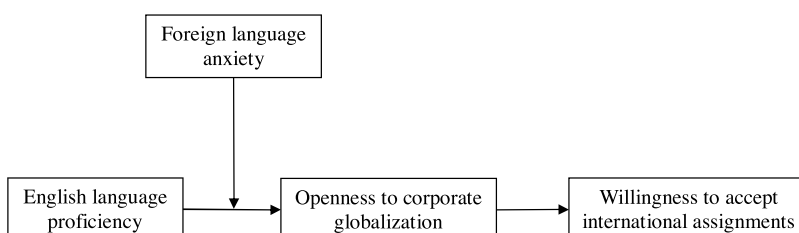


Fig. 1. Hypothesized Model.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedures

To examine our hypotheses, we hired an online survey company to collect data from September to October 2017. This firm has millions of registered respondents in China who had agreed to answer surveys. Following random sampling procedures, this firm distributed our survey link to participants who were full-time Chinese employees working in Chinese MNCs. All of these MNCs had selected English as the official language for their international business dealings. We assured the participants that their responses would be anonymous and that their personal information would be kept confidential. We also assured respondents that all data would be collected and used for research purposes only. We invited employees to respond to our questionnaire, which assessed their English language proficiency, openness to corporate globalization, willingness to accept international assignments, foreign language anxiety, and demographic variables. We collected data from participants at two points to avoid common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In the first stage, we collected data on employees' English language proficiency, openness to corporate globalization, FLA, and demographic variables (Time 1). For this stage, 1,000 surveys were sent out and 556 usable surveys were returned, representing a response rate at 55.6 %. Participants were compensated with 20 yuan (approximately \$3) after completing the survey. One month later, we measured participants' willingness to accept international assignments (Time 2). Of the questionnaires sent to participants in this subsequent stage, 266 were returned. The response rate of Time 2 is 47.8 %. We awarded participants with a 20-yuan (approximately \$3) honorarium for completing the survey. After excluding mismatched respondents, we obtained a final sample of 239 employees. The overall response rate reaches 23.9 %, which is comparable to prior studies using time-lagged surveys (Lauring & Selmer, 2018).

Participants consisted of 92 males and 147 females, with an average age of 33 years ($SD = 5.38$). With regards to the organizational tenure, 1.3 % of the respondents had worked for their company for no more than 1 year, 41.8 % between 1 and 5 years, 44.3 % between 6 and 10 years, and 12.6 % for more than 10 years. Participants were employed in a variety of industries, including manufacturing (35.6 %), services (22.6 %), information technology (14.2 %), retail (14.2 %), finance (5.4 %), healthcare (2.9 %), education (2.5 %), and others (2.5 %).¹

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. English language proficiency

English language proficiency was measured using the 5-item scale from Liu and Jackson (2008). Participants answered items based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). A sample item was "I rate my reading ability in English as...". The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.80.

3.2.2. Openness to corporate globalization

Based on the conceptualization of openness to corporate globalization, we adapted Wanberg and Banas's (2000) openness to change scale to fit our research context. The scale consists of 5 items assessing the extent to which a respondent agrees with the globalization of the company. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), participants were requested to answer items such as "I am somewhat resistant to the globalization of my company (reversed)". The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.81.

3.2.3. Foreign language anxiety

Seven items taken from Gargalianou et al. (2016) were used to assess foreign language anxiety. Sample items included "I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English" and "I can feel my heart pounding when I'm about to be called on in a meeting in English". Respondents were asked to rate items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.92.

3.2.4. Willingness to accept international assignments

We rated participants' willingness to accept international assignments using a scale consisting of 6 items from Yamao and Sekiguchi (2012). Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), items such as "I am willing to accept an international assignment, for a maximum period of one year", were rated. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.71.

3.2.5. Control variables

We collected demographic information during our research to minimize the impacts of exogenous variables. These control variables included the respondents' gender, age, organizational tenure, previous experience of working for foreign firms, previous experience of working with foreign staff, and frequency of English use in the workplace. To control the effect of industries, we created 8 dummy variables that represent different types of workplace.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement properties

As a preliminary analysis, we conducted the Harman's single-factor test (i.e. an exploratory factor analysis of all the constructs) to ensure that our findings were not attributed to CMV (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The result revealed no evidence of this concern. Therefore, CMV does not pose a serious problem in this study.

To examine the discriminant validity of the measurements, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses using Lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). First, we tested a four-factor model that included English language proficiency, openness to corporate globalization, willingness to accept international assignments, and foreign language anxiety. The four-factor model we hypothesized yielded a proper fit to the data ($\chi^2[59] = 146.99, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.06), and all the indicators loaded on their intended latent variables significantly at $p < 0.01$ level (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Furthermore, the four-factor model fit the data better than the following possible models: one null model (M_0); one model loading English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization on a same factor (M_2); one model examining whether English language proficiency and FLA could be distinguished from each other (M_3); one model loading openness to corporate globalization and FLA together (M_4); one model testing whether the four constructs represented a single dimension (M_5). Table 1 shows the results of the confirmatory factor analyses. Together, these results revealed that we could treat the four variables as distinct constructs.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables used in this study. As shown in Table 2, English language proficiency was negatively related to foreign language anxiety ($r = -0.62, p < 0.01$) but positively related to openness to corporate globalization ($r = 0.35, p < 0.01$) and willingness to accept international assignments ($r = 0.26, p < 0.01$). FLA was negatively related to openness to corporate globalization ($r = -0.48, p < 0.01$) and willingness to accept international assignments ($r = -0.28, p < 0.01$). In addition, the correlation between employees' openness to corporate

¹ These percentages add up to 99.9% because of rounding.

Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Measurement Models.

Model Specifications	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	CFI	NNFI	IFI	SRMR
Null model (M_0)	1359.36	78	–	–	–	–	–
Baseline four-factor model (M_1)	146.99	59	–	0.93	0.91	0.93	0.06
English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization combined (M_2)	295.71	62	148.72**	0.82	0.77	0.82	0.11
English language proficiency and foreign language anxiety (M_3)	185.79	62	38.80**	0.90	0.88	0.90	0.06
Openness to corporate globalization and foreign language anxiety (M_4)	336.75	62	189.76**	0.79	0.73	0.79	0.09
Four constructs represent a single dimension (M_5)	512.39	65	365.40**	0.65	0.58	0.65	0.12

Notes. $N = 239$.

$\Delta\chi^2$ is the change of χ^2 compared with the baseline model.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. English language proficiency	3.68	0.66	–									
2. Foreign language anxiety	2.47	0.85	–0.62**	–								
3. Openness to corporate globalization	4.16	0.72	0.35**	–0.48**	–							
4. Willingness to accept international assignment	3.60	0.67	0.26**	–0.28**	0.22**	–						
5. Age	32.96	5.38	–0.12	0.01	–0.06	–0.00	–					
6. Gender	0.62	0.49	0.00	–0.04	0.10	0.02	–0.15*	–				
7. Organizational tenure	6.79	4.00	–0.00	0.01	–0.04	0.03	0.68**	–0.12	–			
8. Frequency of English use in the workplace	3.90	0.78	0.48**	–0.31**	0.26**	0.05	–0.18**	–0.09	–0.14*	–		
9. Prior experience working in foreign companies	0.61	0.49	0.24**	–0.18**	0.06	0.10	0.13*	–0.02	0.04	0.24**	–	
10. Prior experience working with foreign colleagues	0.69	0.46	0.27**	–0.19**	0.16*	0.11	0.11	–0.01	0.09	0.32**	0.63**	–

Notes. $N = 239$.

Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

globalization and willingness to accept international assignments was positively significant ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$). Together, these results lend preliminary support to our hypotheses.

To further examine our hypotheses, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The results are presented in Table 3. In Model 6, the English language proficiency of employees was positively related to their willingness to accept international assignments ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that employees' openness to corporate globalization mediates the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments. First, we adopted the method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) to examine the mediating effect of employees' openness to corporate globalization. Model 6 revealed employees' English language proficiency to be positively related to willingness to accept international assignments ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$). According to the results of Model 8, openness to

Table 3
Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression.

Variables	Openness to corporate globalization				Willingness to accept international assignment			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Control variables								
Age	0.00	0.01	–0.00	–0.00	–0.00	0.00	–0.00	0.00
Gender	0.19*	0.18	0.14	0.15	0.04	0.02	–0.00	–0.00
Organizational tenure	0.00	–0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
Frequency of English use in the workplace	0.25**	0.13	0.12	0.16*	0.02	–0.10	–0.03	–0.12
Prior experience working in foreign companies	–0.11	–0.16	–0.16	–0.17	0.07	0.02	0.09	0.04
Prior experience working with foreign colleagues	0.20	0.18	0.16	0.17	0.10	0.08	0.06	0.06
Independent variable								
English language proficiency		0.30**	0.00	0.06		0.30**		0.26**
Mediator								
Openness to corporate globalization							0.19**	0.14*
Moderator								
Foreign language anxiety			–0.37**	–0.37**				
Interaction								
English language proficiency $\times$ Foreign language anxiety				–0.19**				
R^2	0.13	0.18	0.29	0.31	0.07	0.13	0.11	0.15
ΔF	2.60	14.15	33.77	7.59	1.27	15.73	9.33	4.91

Notes. $N = 239$.

The regression coefficients in the table are all standardized regression coefficients. Owing to space considerations, the beta values of dummy variables for industries are not reported here but are available from the authors upon request.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

corporate globalization was positively associated with willingness to accept international assignments ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.05$). Moreover, the coefficient of English language proficiency for willingness to accept international assignments decreased from 0.30 to 0.26, showing that employees' openness to corporate globalization plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments. Meanwhile, bootstrap analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2004) was conducted to further verify the mediating role of openness to corporate globalization. The result of the mediation test did not contain zero (LLCI = 0.01, ULCI = 0.10) under the 95 % confidence interval and the coefficient was .04, indicating that the mediating effect is significant. Considering these results, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

When examining the interactive effects, we centered the predictors to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Variance inflation factor (VIF) scores for each variable (range from 1.07 to 2.20) indicated that multicollinearity was not an issue. Model 4 revealed that the interaction item significantly and negatively predicted employee openness to corporate globalization ($\beta = -0.19, p < 0.01$), indicating that foreign language anxiety moderates the relationship between English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization. Subsequently, we conducted PROCESS (5000 bootstrap samples) analyses to further validate the moderating role of FLA. The result of the moderation test did not contain zero (LLCI = -0.32 , ULCI = -0.05) under the 95 % confidence interval, indicating that FLA plays a moderating role in the relationship between English language proficiency and openness to corporate globalization. Further, we conducted a simple slope analysis to explore the interaction of English language proficiency and FLA on openness to corporate globalization. As shown in Fig. 2, employee English language proficiency was significantly related to openness to corporate globalization ($b = 0.22, t = 2.00, p < 0.05$) when FLA was low (-1 SD); this correlation became non-significant ($b = -0.11, t = -0.99, n.s.$) with high FLA ($+1$ SD). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted a first-stage moderated mediation; that is, employees' foreign language anxiety moderates the indirect relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments through openness to corporate globalization such that the mediating effect is stronger with low FLA. According to values for moderators being the mean and plus/minus one SD from the mean, the degree of FLA at low, middle and high levels was distinguished. The conditional indirect effect of English language proficiency on willingness to accept international tasks through openness to corporate globalization at three levels of moderator is shown at the bottom of Table 4. The results showed that for employees with high and medium FLA, openness to corporate globalization did not play a

Table 4

Moderated Mediation Analysis Examining the Impact of English Language Proficiency on Willingness to Accept International Assignments through Openness to Corporate Globalization with Foreign Language Anxiety as Moderator.

Predictor	β	SE	t	LLCI	ULCI
Outcome: Openness to corporate globalization					
Constant	3.29	0.47	7.03**	2.37	4.21
English language proficiency	0.07	0.09	0.83	-0.10	0.25
Foreign language anxiety	-0.36	0.06	-5.70**	-0.48	-0.23
English language proficiency $\times$ foreign language anxiety	-0.19	0.07	-2.67**	-0.32	-0.05
Outcome: Willingness to accept international assignments					
Constant	3.23	0.51	6.31**	2.22	4.24
Openness to corporate globalization	0.14	0.06	2.15*	0.01	0.26
English language proficiency	0.25	0.08	3.20**	0.09	0.40
Conditional bootstrap estimates for openness to corporate globalization					
Foreign language anxiety	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
-1 SD	0.03	0.02	0.001	0.10	
Mean	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.05	
+1 SD	-0.01	0.02	-0.06	0.01	

Notes: Bootstrap sample size = 5000.

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals is 95 %.

LL = Lower Limit; CI = Confidence Interval; UL = Upper Limit.

N = 239.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

moderating role. The intervals of the bootstrap test were ($-0.06, 0.01$) and ($-0.01, 0.05$) respectively, containing zero. For those with low FLA, the mediating effect of openness to corporate globalization was significant and the interval was (0.001, 0.10), not containing zero. In addition, the index of the moderated mediation was -0.03 and the 95 % confidence interval did not contain zero (LLCI = -0.08 , ULCI = -0.002). Based on these results, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates a moderated mediation model to explain the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments among Chinese employees working in Chinese MNCs. According to our results, employees with high English language proficiency are more willing to accept international assignments. Moreover, this relationship is mediated by employees' openness to corporate globalization. Additionally, we find that the indirect effect of English language proficiency on willingness to accept international

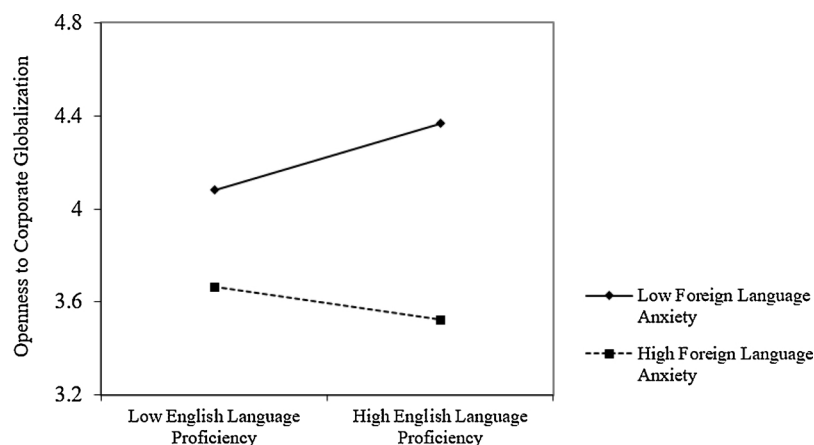


Fig. 2. Interaction of English Language Proficiency and Foreign Language Anxiety on Openness to Corporate Globalization.

assignments via openness to corporate globalization is moderated by FLA. For employees with low FLA, the higher their English language proficiency is, the more open they are to corporate globalization and thus are more willing to accept international assignments. In contrast, for employees with high FLA, English proficiency cannot promote their openness to corporate globalization and willingness to accept international tasks.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research makes three theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on expatriate management by identifying factors influencing Chinese employees' willingness to accept international assignments in Chinese MNCs. In the international business literature, research on Chinese expatriate management and Chinese MNCs is scarce (He et al., 2019; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). With an increasing number of Chinese companies 'going global', the demand for expatriates is growing rapidly. Many Chinese employees are sent abroad to meet the needs of the company's global operations. Therefore, investigating expatriate management in Chinese MNCs enriches the knowledge of expatriate management and makes the theoretical picture for this field more complete.

In addition, this study adds to nascent research on how English language proficiency shapes employees' willingness to accept international assignments. Although previous research has found a positive relationship between foreign language skill and expatriation willingness (Froese, Jommersbach, & Klautzsch, 2013), the underlying mechanism lacks sufficient clarity. Applying concept and framework drawn from the research on organizational change, this study introduces openness to corporate globalization into our theoretical model. From the perspective of role identity theory (Farmer et al., 2003; Riley & Burke, 1995), our results demonstrate the mediating effect of openness to corporate globalization on the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments. It suggests that employee skills critical to cope with corporate globalization may serve as a key to nurturing the employee's positive attitude toward corporate globalization, which in turn influences her/his behavior (support or resist the company's globalization). The mediating mechanism not only enriches literature regarding language and expatriation, it also contributes to a better understanding of employees' attitudes towards corporate globalization. Moreover, we suggest that the notion of openness to corporate globalization deserves to be applied to further theory development in the international business literature.

Finally, in contrast to prior studies focusing on the effect of cognitive factors on expatriation willingness (Doherty et al., 2011; Froese et al., 2013; Noe et al., 1988), our research explores the emotional barriers influencing employee willingness to accept international assignments. Specifically, we introduce foreign language anxiety into our theoretical framework and demonstrate the moderating role of it. Although research on FLA is well documented in linguistic literature, its role in international business remains underexplored (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). According to Aichhorn and Puck (2017), "a major challenge for MNC employees is the FLA they typically experience in a non-native language" (p. 749). Such emotional challenges can lead to communication avoidance, communication withdrawal and code-switching, thus harming communication effectiveness and interpersonal relationship. Accordingly, the role of FLA should be paid great attention to. This study is among the first to look into the effects of FLA on employee willingness to accept international assignments. In doing so, our research enriches relevant literature in the field and offers insights for future research on international business to take language-induced emotion into consideration.

5.2. Practical implications

Our research has a number of practical implications for MNCs towards effective implementation of expatriation management. First, our findings can help HR departments to understand how language barriers restrain Chinese employees' willingness to work abroad. The results reveal that employees who are proficient in English are more willing to accept international assignments. As the global lingua franca, English has become the dominant language in international business activities. Accordingly, it is critical for employees working in MNCs to improve their English language proficiency. This is especially the case for Chinese, who are generally regarded as being poor at English (ETS, 2018; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). Being aware of the importance of English and then becoming self-motivated to improve one's English language proficiency is the key to survive in the furiously competitive global business environment. Employees themselves can actively participate in English training courses after work. Seizing every opportunity to communicate with foreigners (especially foreign colleagues) in English would also be helpful. As for MNCs, they should utilize adequate selection and recruitment tactics to identify potential expatriates. For example, they could use role plays or interviews to evaluate candidates' English proficiency. Moreover, companies can provide English language training for employees and reward employees who perform well or make good progress in improving their English language proficiency. Companies can also carry out fun activities in English, such as dubbing competitions or English debating or singing contests, so that employees can "fall in love" with English in a relaxing and pleasant environment.

Second, our study reveals that openness to corporate globalization plays a critical role in enhancing Chinese employees' expatriation willingness. This reminds us that sufficient attention should be paid to the employees' attitudes towards company globalization. In MNCs, being open towards a company's globalization contributes to both the company and its employees. Employees can develop open attitudes towards the company's globalization by seeking out information about corporate globalization, participating in international business activities, and so on. In addition, creating a more globally minded organizational culture would help to reduce potential problems of cross-cultural adjustment and expatriate failure (Kim, 1999). For example, MNCs can incorporate more foreign talents in the company and provide more opportunities for native employees to go abroad. Moreover, promoting the benefits of globalization to their employees in a visible and prominent way and offering favorable rewards to encourage behaviors (e.g., accepting international assignments) that contribute to the company's globalization are also helpful.

Third, our study implies that employees' foreign language anxiety plays a crucial role in affecting willingness to accept overseas tasks. Employees with high FLA will not accept relocating internationally even though they are good at English language. Accordingly, employees and MNCs must pay sufficient attention to the emotional challenges that non-native English language speakers experience when communicating in English. In order to alleviate such challenges, employees should strengthen communication with their foreign colleagues and express their ideas actively, cultivating the habit of using English without fear. Furthermore, employees should strive to develop a mindset in which they regard themselves as linguistic communicators and integrate English into their daily work and life, rather than simply viewing using English as a burdensome task. In addition, when selecting candidates for a job, managers should take FLA into consideration. For example, managers can identify candidates with low levels of FLA through English interviews. Moreover, MNCs can play a vital role in alleviating FLA by cultivating inclusive organizational values and culture via a positive and respectful attitude towards varying degrees of English language proficiency among employees. Corporations and managers can encourage employees to speak up and share insights by creating an atmosphere of openness, trust, and participation.

Furthermore, language training should not only focus on improving English language proficiency but also aim at mitigating FLA.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The current study also has some limitations. First, all the measurements used in this research are self-reported, the CMV may inflate our results. As for willingness to accept international assignments, however, it occurs within employees' mind. Thus, it is difficult for other people, such as managers and colleagues to observe an employee's willingness. Moreover, the results of Harman's single-factor test reveal that CMV is not a serious issue. Nevertheless, employees' self-perceived English language proficiency may be influenced by social desirability bias. Future studies are encouraged to collect employees' objective English proficiency, e.g., their TOEFL scores, to avoid the CMV concern.

Moreover, our research design is cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, it provides limited support for the causal relationships. For example, there might be potential reverse causality in the relationship between English language proficiency and willingness to accept international assignments. However, we adopt the time-lagged survey, in which predictors and outcomes were measured at different time points, to mitigate potential reverse causality concern. Nevertheless, we suggest that future studies adopt the experimental design or longitudinal research to rigorously examine the causal relationships.

Another potential limitation is that the data were only collected in China. Thus, our findings may be more applicable to China's situation,

leading to limited generalizability. However, previous studies may lend some support to our results. For example, Aichhorn and Puck (2017) argue that "a major challenge for MNC employees is the foreign language anxiety they typically experience in a non-native language" (p. 749). Through an inductive case study, they suggest that such challenges can lead to communication avoidance, communication withdrawal, and code-switching, thus harming communication effectiveness and interpersonal relationship. In addition, researchers argue that English language proficiency is positively related to perceived adjustment of Japanese expatriates working in the USA (Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002). Accordingly, we believe that our results can be applied in other national and international contexts. Nevertheless, considering the diversity of home-country language teaching and instruction in schools, we encourage future research to be conducted in other national and international contexts to further examine our framework.

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Appendix A. Variables measured

Variable	Item	Source
English language proficiency	I rate my reading ability in English as.. I rate my listening ability in English as.. I rate my writing ability in English as.. I rate my speaking ability in English as.. I rate my overall English ability as..	Liu and Jackson (2008)
Openness to corporate globalization	I would consider myself open to the globalization of my company. I am somewhat resistant to the globalization of my company. I am quite reluctant to accommodate and incorporate the globalization of my company into my work. Overall, the globalization of my company is for the better.	Wanberg and Banas (2000)
Foreign language anxiety	I think that the globalization of my company will have a negative effect on the clients we serve. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm about to be called on in a meeting in English I am afraid that many people will laugh at me when I speak English. I get nervous when I don't understand every word persons who have power on me say to me in English. I get nervous when persons who have power on me ask questions in English which I haven't prepared in advance. I don't worry about making mistakes when I interact in English. I keep thinking that many other people are better in English than I am.	Gargalianou et al. (2016)
Willingness to accept international assignment	I am willing to accept an international assignment, for a period of maximumly one year. I am willing to accept an international assignment, for a period of minimally one year. Although I am unwilling to work abroad, I will accept an international assignment, for a period of maximumly one year. Although I am unwilling to work abroad, I will accept an international assignment, for a period of minimally one year. I am willing to accept an international assignment to a developed country (e.g., North America and Europe). I am willing to accept an international assignment to a developing country.	Yamao and Sekiguchi (2012)

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