

FACTORS SHAPING CHINESE ENGLISH MAJORS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Willingness to communicate is an important concept in second language acquisition because it explains why learners may or may not enter classroom interaction when they have opportunities to use the target language. Although English majors in Chinese universities are often expected to possess relatively strong English knowledge, many still remain silent in speaking-oriented classes. This paper explores the factors shaping Chinese English majors' willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight third-year English-major students from a university in northern China. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the interview data. The findings show that students' willingness to communicate was shaped by three interconnected dimensions: psychological barriers, classroom interactional conditions and sociocultural constraints. L2 anxiety and low self-perceived communicative competence limited students' readiness to speak. Familiar peers, group discussion and familiar topics generally supported communication, but group work could also reduce willingness when dominant peers interrupted others. Face concern and teacher-centred learning norms further shaped students' silence. The paper argues that classroom silence should not be interpreted simply as lack of motivation. Instead, it reflects a dynamic negotiation among emotion, perceived competence, classroom relations and cultural expectations.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate; English majors; EFL classroom; Classroom interaction; Face concern

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of communicative competence is a central aim of second language education. In English as a foreign language classrooms, interaction is particularly important because many learners have limited opportunities to use English outside formal instruction. Willingness to communicate, usually shortened as WTC, has therefore become a useful concept for explaining why learners may participate actively in classroom interaction or remain silent even when communication opportunities are available. MacIntyre et al. define L2 WTC as a learner's readiness to enter discourse at a particular time with a particular person or group[1]. This definition is valuable because it shows that communication is not determined by language proficiency alone. Learners also need emotional readiness, perceived competence and a supportive interactional context.

In Chinese higher education, English majors are often expected to have stronger English knowledge than non-English majors. They study intensive English courses and are usually required to pass national professional English tests. However, strong performance in reading, writing or grammar does not necessarily lead to confidence in spontaneous classroom speaking. Some English majors still hesitate to answer questions, initiate discussion or speak in front of peers. This creates a pedagogical problem: communicative teaching requires participation, but many learners experience classroom speaking as risky and evaluative.

Previous research has identified many factors influencing WTC, including anxiety, self-perceived communicative competence, interlocutor familiarity, topic familiarity, classroom atmosphere and cultural norms[2-5]. In the Chinese context, Wen and Clement argue that learners' desire to communicate may not become actual willingness because face concern, respect for authority and learning traditions may intervene. More recent studies also suggest that WTC is dynamic and situated rather than fixed. A learner may be willing to speak in one activity but silent in another depending on the task, topic and interlocutor.

This paper reports a qualitative investigation of Chinese English majors' classroom WTC. It addresses one research question: What factors shape Chinese English majors' willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms? By focusing on students' own accounts, the paper aims to provide a context-sensitive understanding of classroom silence and participation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of L2 WTC was developed from earlier work on first language communication, but L2 communication involves additional challenges. Learners may worry about grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and social

evaluation. MacIntyre et al.'s model places WTC as the most immediate antecedent of L2 use, while variables such as communicative confidence, motivation, anxiety and social context influence whether learners are ready to speak[1]. This model is useful because it explains why learners with similar proficiency levels may show different levels of participation. Two psychological variables are especially relevant: L2 anxiety and self-perceived communicative competence. Anxiety can reduce learners' readiness to communicate because speaking exposes them to mistakes and negative evaluation. Self-perceived communicative competence refers to learners' subjective judgment of their ability to communicate effectively. It may differ from actual competence. A learner may achieve good test results but still feel unable to manage real-time conversation. Studies in Chinese and other EFL contexts have repeatedly shown that lower anxiety and higher perceived competence are associated with stronger WTC[4-5]. Recent domestic research has also indicated that students' oral self-efficacy is closely related to their willingness to communicate in English classrooms[6].

Classroom factors also shape WTC. Cao's ecological perspective suggests that willingness emerges through the interaction between learners and classroom environment[7-8]. Familiar interlocutors, small-group discussion and familiar topics may reduce pressure and increase participation[9-10]. However, such effects are not automatic. Group work may promote communication when it creates support, but it may silence less confident learners if dominant peers control the discussion. Sociocultural factors are also important in Chinese classrooms. Wen and Clement's model highlights how face concern, other-directed self and teacher authority can influence whether learners transform communicative desire into actual participation[2]. Silence may therefore have multiple meanings. It may indicate anxiety or avoidance, but it may also represent respect, preparation or protection of social image. This study draws on these psychological, ecological and sociocultural perspectives to interpret Chinese English majors' classroom WTC.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative design because it aimed to understand how students interpreted their own classroom communication experiences. Eight third-year English-major students from a university in northern China participated in the study. They were selected through purposive sampling because they shared relevant learning experience as English majors but differed in gender, English test scores and self-rated WTC levels.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored students' English learning backgrounds, classroom speaking experiences, feelings about speaking English, preferred classroom tasks, preferred interlocutors and perceived barriers to communication. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' first language, so that they could express their views fully and accurately. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The researcher first read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were then generated and grouped into broader themes according to repeated patterns. The final themes were psychological barriers, classroom interactional conditions and sociocultural constraints. Ethical procedures were followed. Participants were informed about the research purpose, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Psychological Barriers to WTC

The first major theme concerns psychological barriers, especially L2 anxiety and low self-perceived communicative competence. Most participants described classroom speaking as emotionally risky. Their anxiety was closely related to fear of mistakes, teacher correction and peer evaluation. Participant B stated, "I am afraid to speak English in class because I worry that the teacher may suddenly interrupt me. Sometimes I cannot even finish a complete sentence, so I choose to stay quiet." Similarly, Participant C explained that even small pronunciation or intonation errors could make her anxious because she worried that mistakes would affect the teacher's evaluation.

These comments show that anxiety was not only an internal emotional state. It was produced through classroom interaction. When correction was sudden or public, students experienced speaking as exposure to judgment. Silence then became a protective strategy. This finding supports previous studies showing a negative relationship between anxiety and WTC[4-5]. It also suggests that teachers' feedback practices can shape learners' emotional readiness to communicate.

Low self-perceived communicative competence also limited WTC. Although the participants were English majors, several were dissatisfied with their spoken English. Participant D said, "I have always felt that my English is not good enough. When I meet unfamiliar words, my speech stops. After several embarrassing experiences in front of classmates, I found it easier to remain quiet." Participant F also noted that when talking with foreign teachers or students, she sometimes did not know how to continue the conversation politely or appropriately.

These accounts reveal a gap between formal English learning and communicative confidence. The participants had studied English for many years, but they did not always feel able to use it spontaneously. Their identity as English majors may even

increase pressure, because they are expected to speak well. Thus, WTC is shaped not only by actual competence but also by how learners evaluate their competence in relation to social expectations.

4.2 Classroom Interactional Conditions

The second theme concerns classroom interactional conditions. Students' WTC changed according to interlocutor, task type and topic. Familiarity with interlocutors was especially important. Participant B said that she preferred to speak with close friends because friends could provide hints and encouragement. Participant C similarly explained that she usually chose to work with friends because she did not want unfamiliar classmates to see her mistakes or laugh at her.

These data suggest that familiar peers reduce the social risk of L2 communication. Speaking English involves exposing incomplete language and uncertain ideas. Familiar classmates can create a sense of safety, while unfamiliar peers may increase fear of embarrassment. Interlocutor familiarity therefore supports WTC by reducing interpersonal distance.

Task type also influenced willingness. Several participants preferred small-group discussion because it felt less public than whole-class speaking. Participant A said that small groups made her relaxed because classmates listened to each other and gave supportive feedback. Participant F added that group discussion made her feel like an active participant rather than someone passively selected by the teacher.

However, group work was not always positive. Participant H said, "I do not really like group activities. Sometimes others interrupt me or disagree with me, and they are more confident than I am. I prefer individual presentations because I can continue speaking without being interrupted." This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that group discussion automatically promotes communication. Group work supports WTC only when it creates equal participation and emotional safety. If stronger speakers dominate, less confident students may become silent.

Topic familiarity was another key factor. Participant C explained that she could talk a lot about music because she knew the topic well, but she would say nothing about football. Participant E also said that unfamiliar topics made her prefer listening to others. These comments suggest that silence may reflect lack of content knowledge rather than lack of motivation. Familiar topics increase both idea availability and linguistic confidence. This supports a dynamic view of WTC: the same learner may speak actively in one situation but remain silent in another[9-11].

4.3 Sociocultural Constraints

The third theme concerns sociocultural constraints, particularly teacher-centred learning norms and face concern. Several participants described themselves as accustomed to listening rather than interrupting or challenging the teacher. Participant A said, "I have become used to this way of learning: listening to the lecture, not expressing different opinions and not contradicting the teacher. I respect the teacher, and I think the teacher can help me prepare for exams." Participant G similarly stated that many classmates preferred listening because they respected the teacher and believed the teacher knew more.

These accounts show that silence does not always mean disengagement. In some cases, silence reflected respect, attentiveness and trust in teacher authority. This is consistent with Wen and Clement's argument that Chinese learners' WTC may be mediated by culturally shaped learning norms[2]. However, such norms may reduce opportunities for spontaneous interaction if students wait for teacher invitation before speaking.

Face concern was also central. Participant C stated, "I am very worried that if I say something wrong, others will think my English is poor. For me, making mistakes means losing face and feeling embarrassed." Participant E explained that she often spent a long time preparing a perfect answer but sometimes missed the chance to speak. These comments indicate that students may desire to communicate but still remain silent because they want to protect their social image.

This finding supports the distinction between desire to communicate and willingness to communicate. A student may want to speak, but the desire may not become actual participation when the risk of losing face is high. Face concern also interacts with classroom conditions. Whole-class speaking, unfamiliar peers and sudden correction all increase the public risk of communication. Therefore, Chinese English majors' WTC should be understood as culturally mediated as well as psychologically and situationally shaped.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper examined factors shaping Chinese English majors' WTC in EFL classrooms. Based on interviews with eight students, the findings show that WTC was influenced by psychological barriers, classroom interactional conditions and sociocultural constraints. L2 anxiety and low self-perceived communicative competence reduced students' readiness to speak. Familiar interlocutors, supportive group discussion and familiar topics generally promoted communication, although group work could also silence students when interaction was unequal. Face concern and teacher-centred learning norms further shaped students' classroom silence.

The study contributes to WTC research by showing that Chinese English majors' silence should not be interpreted simply as lack of motivation or low proficiency. Rather, it reflects a dynamic negotiation among emotion, perceived competence, peer

relations, task conditions and cultural expectations. Pedagogically, teachers should create low-risk interactional spaces, normalize mistakes, provide supportive feedback and design tasks that allow students to prepare ideas before speaking. The study is limited by its small sample and reliance on self-reported interview data. Future research could combine interviews with classroom observation to examine how WTC changes during actual interaction.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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