An Empirical Study of the Willingness to Communicate in College English Classes from an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing on an ecological perspective, this study investigated the link between classroom environment and willingness to communicate (WTC) in an EFL classroom. We applied a mixed methods approach to collect data from 389 Chinese students where a questionnaire was used before semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen participants. The results showed that there was a significant correlation between classroom dynamics and WTC in an EFL classroom. The qualitative data also showed the importance of the integrated individual, linguistic and environmental factors in shaping learners' WTC in EFL classrooms. The in-depth findings of this inquiry suggest that language teachers should be mindful of the interdependence of all these involved factors that create students' WTC in class.

Keywords

Classroom Environment, Willingness to Communicate, Student Cohesiveness, Teacher Support, Task Orientation

1. Introduction

"The quality of teaching and learning is entirely different depending on whether the classroom is characterized by a climate of trust and support or by a competitive, cutthroat atmosphere" (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019: p. 721). Student participation is crucial in a communicative language class, but the extent to which classroom interaction is successful may depend on the willingness of students to speak the target language. Second language (L2) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) has been extensively researched recently (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Cao, 2011; Lee & Lee, 2020). Learners with high L2 WTC, according

to MacIntyre et al. (1998), seek out more opportunities to engage in L2 communication, which contributes to their L2 acquisition.

In the context of education, the study of WTC in L2 is of great significance for decoding learners' communication psychology and promoting their participation in classroom communication. MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that the creation of WTC should be "the primary goal of language instruction" (p. 545). Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between L2 WTC and various ID variables such as personality, confidence, attitude, and motivation (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2002), however, little has been devoted to the study of L2 WTC combined with classroom situational variables. In countries and regions where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), the language classroom is an important platform for learners to experience interactive communication using the target language. Therefore, the role of classroom environmental factors in L2 WTC warrants close examination. To date, however, this aspect remains under addressed. The present study, inspired by an ecological perspective of classroom dynamics (Van Lier, 2002), aims to incorporate this variable into a broader WTC study, focusing on Chinese college students in EFL classes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The L2 WTC Research

The concept of WTC was originally defined as a stable personality trait, originating from the study of first language (L1) communication (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). MacIntyre et al. (1998) applies this concept in the context of L2 and conceptualizes L2 WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). They propose a pyramid model in which L2 WTC is perceived to be influenced by enduring factors (e.g. personality, intergroup climate, attitudes, and motivation) and transient factors (e.g. desire to communicate with a specific person).

Recently, efforts have been made to situate the heuristic model of MacIntyre et al. in a specific cultural context (e.g. Yashima, 2002, Wen & Clément, 2003). Wen and Clément (2003) extended MaIntyre et al.'s model from a Chinese perspective. They posited that "cultural values are the dominant force shaping the individual's perception and way of learning, which is manifested in L2 communication" (p. 18). Although culture influences human behavior everywhere, it is worth noting that culture is fluid and constantly evolving. Recent studies have shown that communication-oriented pedagogy is embraced by contemporary Chinese students (Littlewood, 2010; Shi, 2006). This suggests that L2 WTC research should adopt a dynamic rather than static cultural perspective to avoid any rigid assumptions.

2.2. Ecological Perspective on WTC

With the lens focused on the classroom context, an ecological perspective was

deemed to be particularly informing. Ecology refers to the "study of the relationships between all the various organisms and their physical environment" (Van Lier, 2002: p. 144). From the ecological perspective, a language classroom represents a social environment in which students and the teacher negotiate their subjectivities as social members. In this study, the components of environment were conceptualized as teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation, following the research of Moos (1979) and Fraser (2002). Teacher support refers to the teacher's help, friendship, trust and interest to students; student cohesiveness is the degree to which students understand, help and support each other; task orientation refers to the importance of completing activities and staying on the subject matter and the perceived usefulness of the activity (Dorman, 2003). Fraser, Fisher and McRobbie (1996) developed a questionnaire of "What Is Happening In This Class" (WIHIC), measuring seven aspects of the classroom environment: student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. This questionnaire has been widely used in assessing educational environment and validated across cultures (Fraser, 2002).

3. Method

3.1. Research Questions

Motivated by the ecological perspective and based on previous research, the present study, aimed to test the relationships of WTC and classroom contextual variables. The two research questions proposed were as follows:

1) What are the effects of teacher, student and learning task in classroom environment on learners' WTC in an EFL classroom?

2) From individual learner's own account, to what extent does classroom environment and other factors influence their WTC?

3.2. Participants

In this study, participants were 389 college students from entire classes of three universities in the southern area of China (male, n = 106; female, n = 178; n = 5 without indication of gender). English is a required subject in these universities. The participants were undergraduate sophomores majoring in non-English disciplines, such as business administration, computer science, Japanese, politics and law, electrical engineering and international education of Chinese language, which ensured the consistency of the participants' grades and the diversity of majors. The classes investigated in this study were intensive reading and writing courses in which the students got involved in indifferent kinds of listening, speaking, reading and writing activities.

3.3. Instrument

The current study employed a mixed methods approach combining a survey study and a qualitative research approach. The survey data were solely obtained

from a questionnaire, in which each of the variables was measured by several five-point scale Likert-type questionnaire items. The response items were written based on the previous relevant studies (e.g. McCroskey, 1992; Fraser et al., 1996; Fisher et al., 2001; Fushino, 2010). A copy of the final version of the questionnaire is available in the **Appendix**.

The four factors used in this study were as follows:

WTC in an EFL classroom (Cronbach's alpha = 0.754, 8 items): the readiness of the students to engage in communication in English classes. A sample item is, "I like to get involved in group discussions."

Student cohesiveness (Cronbach's alpha = 0.782, 8 items): the extent to which students know, help, and support each other. A sample item is, "I make friends among students in this class."

Teacher support (Cronbach's alpha = 0.735, 8 items): the teacher's help, friendship, trust, interest shown to students. A sample item is, "The teacher goes out of his/her way to help me."

Task orientation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.747, 8 items): the importance of completing activities and staying on the subject matter and the perceived usefulness of activities. A sample item is, "I know what I can accomplish in this class."

The relationship between classroom environment and WTC was further explored during semi-structured interviews, in which 15 questionnaire respondents were asked to talk about the role of the classroom environment in their willingness to participate in class. The interviews were conducted at the beginning and at the end of the semester respectively, during which the interviewees were asked to respond to the questions: How do the environmental factors create your WTC in L2 class? Do you think there are other factors?

3.4. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Some simple descriptive statistical procedures (means, minimum, maximum, standard deviation) were conducted first to explore the level of student cohesiveness, teacher support, task orientation and WTC. Then a Pearson's correlation test at two-tailed significance level was administered to test the study's hypothesis, which looked at whether the three components of the classroom environment correlate with learners' WTC in an EFL classroom. As for the qualitative interview data, all of them were transcribed first and a qualitative inductive approach was adopted in data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the process of data analysis, three meetings were held between the two authors to discuss the emerging themes and categories to reach a consensus on the final interpretation of the data.

4. Results and Discussion

As is shown in the Pearson's test, among the three factors, task orientation and teacher support have a more significant correlation with WTC (0.844, $p = 0.000$ and 0.799, $p = 0.006$ respectively) in this study, while the correlation between

student cohesiveness and WTC (0.641, p = 0.046) is not so significant. This finding is in line with the research evidence obtained in Peng & Woodrow's (2010) study regarding the impact of classroom climate on WTC. This result may indicate that for university students who are comparatively mature, their perceptions of the classroom environment largely reflect how useful they perceive the learning tasks to be and how well the teacher can boost their enthusiasm with supportive behaviors (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). In the interview, the majority of the participants expressed preference for the project work which involved teamwork rather than teacher-fronted activities. As Chen Ming noted, he liked the project work because it had a kind of continuity that helped sustain their WTC and they had abundant opportunities to talk to other group members. Li Cen expressed her dislike for the task of role-play because she considered this activity as meaningless and contributing little to learning. By having students complete a challenging assignment that allows some autonomy and social interaction, students may be more engaged in learning, and therefore achieve more (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

In a language classroom, it is unavoidable that the teacher plays an influential role in affecting students' WTC. Wen and Clément (2003) suggested that the teacher's involvement, attitude, immediacy and teaching style exerts a significant and determining sociocultural influence on student engagement and WTC. The students in this study tended to be more willing to ask questions and participate more actively in class when they liked the teacher of that class. The participants particularly appreciated teacher support and immediacy behavior, such as giving explanations in Chinese, talking with students in Chinese during the break, and being humorous or telling jokes. Qin Hao commented that occasional humor was helpful in relaxing the classroom atmosphere. Some students particularly appreciated the teacher as a more competent interlocutor and welcomed the idea of the teacher's participation in group discussions. As was commented by Zheng Li, "I like teacher join us, because if we have the grammar mistake he can correct it. He's more friendly when he's in a group, like an elder student". Thus when the teacher chose to actively participate in group discussion, this produced interpersonal closeness with Zheng Li and consequently promoted her WTC. In sum, in EFL classrooms, to inspire and sustain students' L2 WTC, teachers need to build rapport with students so as to create a non-threatening and collaborative learning environment.

Although the correlation between student cohesiveness and WTC is not so significant as the other two factors, cohesiveness is also a contributor to students' perception of environment. Students who share feelings of cohesiveness may feel psychologically closer to each other and perceive the class as a more pleasant community, which can impact on their classroom learning behaviors (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Some interviewees reported relative relaxation and a high WTC within a cohesive group because it could provide a safer context for them to rehearse the foreign language. "I would say whatever I want in group

discussion and need not worry about being laughed at or distained for mistakes," said Yu Yang. Most interviewees preferred to talk to interlocutors who were more competent than them, who were talkative and outgoing, and who had a lot of ideas to share. However, it should be noted that student cohesiveness didn't guarantee students' WTC. As Li Yi commented, "We get on well with each other, but in class, I always keep silent because I don't want to disappoint my group members." In this case, Li Yi's low WTC level was due to personal factors such as low linguistic competence, feelings of frustration and boredom. For a student with lower language proficiency, having relatively limited linguistic competence is likely to have a stronger and more predictable effect than many of the other factors (Cao, 2011).

The significant correlation between classroom environment and WTC suggests that an engaging environment has the potential to foster WTC. This finding is in line with the research evidence obtained in Peng's (2007) qualitative study regarding the impact of classroom climate on WTC. However, there was no single factor solely responsible for changes in WTC level, instead, different combinations of factors would influence a student's WTC at particular moments. As is showed in Cao's (2011) study, the individual predictors, environmental variables and linguistic factors played a joint role in WTC in different tasks and at different stages of the lesson. Students with such personality dispositions as extraversion, impulsiveness, socialisation and flexibility tend to be more risk-taking and more prone to communication (Wen and Clément, 2003). In the present study, Zhao Nan described himself as an extraverted and sociable student, "I always talk first with other group members, and I felt I should fill the gap when others in class were too quiet". Also, low linguistic proficiency could prevent students from risking speaking the L2 in class (Liu and Jackson, 2008). In the current study, some reported when difficulty occurred in comprehension, they felt bored and unwilling to talk in class. As Cai Xu reported, "I didn't talk much, because I didn't quite understand the passage, it was too hard for me." The interrelationship among the different dimensions supports the main assumption of an ecological perspective, which posits the complex interaction between a human individual and the surrounding environmental characteristics (Cao, 2011).

5. Conclusion

Studies of WTC, especially inside the classroom context, are significant for the English language teaching and learning in EFL contexts. Students with high WTC tend to embrace and make good use of opportunities to practice communication using the target language. Illuminated by the ecological perspective on classroom dynamics, the present study investigated the relationship between classroom environment and WTC. This study has identified that student cohesiveness, teacher support and task orientation have a significant effect on learners' WTC in an EFL classroom. Such findings support the previous researchers' belief that more

attention needs to be paid to the influence of classroom dynamics on language learning (Fraser, 2002; van Lier, 2002; Cao, 2011).

In a learning environment where English is a foreign language, English classrooms are the main platform for students to learn and practice language skills. Students' interest in learning and the enthusiasm of classroom participation should be mobilized as much as possible. MacIntyre et al. (1998) advocated that cultivating the communicative willingness of language learners should be the ultimate goal of language teaching. Through the research on the influence of teacher support, student cohesiveness and task orientation in the classroom environment on the students' WTC, the results of this research have certain reference and enlightening significance for the classroom teaching practice in our country.

While classroom dynamics had a positive influence on learners' engagement in class activities, it is significant to note from the interview data that the existence of the integrated individual, linguistic and environmental factors also play significant mediating roles in shaping learners' WTC. In L2 classrooms, it is important for teachers to promote facilitating factors of WTC as much as possible (Kang, 2005), and they should be mindful of the interactions between the factors when planning learning activities. Given this understanding, future research should be conducted to study the complexity and dynamics of the classroom WTC construct within the ecological theoretical framework.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Questionnaire to Measure Classroom Environment and Willingness to Communicate

Items and composite variables in the questionnaire (5-point Likert scales)

Willingness to Communicate

1) I volunteer to answer questions in class.

2) I answer when I was called upon by the teacher.

3) I am ready to give help to my classmates if it is needed.

4) I will turn to my classmates for help if I have difficulties in study.

5) I will raise questions in class.

6) I like to get involved in group discussions.

7) I am willing to express my different ideas or opinions in class.

8) I am willing to make a plan for group projects with group members.

Student Cohesiveness

9) I make friends among students in this class.

10) I know other students in this class.

11) I am friendly to members of this class.

12) Members of this class are my friends.

13) I work well with other class members.

14) I help other class members who are having trouble with their work.

15) Students in this class like me.

16) In this class, I get help from other students.

Teacher Support

17) The teacher is interested in my problems.

18) The teacher goes out of his/her way to help me.

19) The teacher considers my feelings.

20) The teacher helps me when I have trouble with the work.

21) The teacher talks with me.

22) The teacher takes an interest in my progress.

23) The teacher moves about the class to talk with me.

24) The teacher's questions help me to understand.

Task Orientation

25) Getting a certain amount of work done is important to me.

26) I do as much as I set out to do.

27) I know the goals for this class.

28) I am ready to start this class on time.

29) I know what I can accomplish in this class.

30) I pay attention during this class.

31) I try to understand the work in this class.

32) I know how much work I have to do.

33) To what extent does classroom environment influence your WTC?