On Approaches to Cultivate Willingness to Communicate in College English Students

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Abstract

Nowadays, in college English class, there always exists a problem that no matter how much teachers inspire and induce students, they always remain silent and unwilling to speak, which means they have low or even no willingness to communicate. The fundamental reason lies in the lack of communicative confidence due to their low communicative competence. Based on this dilemma, a series of measure are put forward, namely, updating educational concepts, establishing a good teacher-student relationship, implementing student-centered education, and arousing integrative orientation. Hopefully, after the carrying out these measures, college English student's willingness to communicate can be developed to gain a more comprehensive second language acquisition.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Willingness to Communicate, Cultivate, College English Students

1. Research Background

For college English learning, it is crucial to effectively carry out English communication activities. Sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972) pointed out that students' acquisition of communicative competence is the ultimate goal of any language teaching [1]. In the practice of college English teaching, we often encounter a situation where students always remain silent and unwilling to speak, no matter how much teachers inspire and induce them during class. This silence phenomenon is particularly obvious among Chinese students. In terms of Harumi (2011), Asian students have been described as reticent, quiet, and uninvolved

[2]. Based on the research of Wang Rui (2023), the silence phenomenon can be attributed to internal reasons and external reasons. The internal reasons consist of the influence of Confucianism to be humble rather than competitive, the positive silence to absorb knowledge during class and the negative silence to resist the teacher and the class, failure in time management and insufficient preparation before class. The external reasons include teachers' inappropriate behavior, mindset and traditional teaching mode [3]. The fundamental reason for being unwilling to communicate is a lack of willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) pointed out that WTC in second language is the most direct factor that determines whether language learners will eventually participate in second language (L2) communication [4].

In the past two decades, WTC in L2 has received widespread attention in the field of L2 acquisition research. Tang Lei and Huo Hong (2006) found that learners' anxiety and self-efficacy both affect WTC, but self-efficacy has a greater influence [5]. Peng Jian'e (2007) conducted model assumptions and data verification on the multivariate variables that affect WTC in L2 of Chinese college students. She found that integrative orientation has a direct impact on their English proficiency and communicative self-confidence, thereby stimulating WTC in L2 [6]. Li Lin (2012) investigated the classroom WTC of non-English majors and found that the students' WTC was significantly lower than that of French learners from English-speaking countries [7]. Wen & Clément (2003) found that in the Chinese classroom environment, social and environmental factors have a great impact on students' WTC [8].

WTC in L2 refers to "a second language learner's desire to communicate with a specific person or group in a second language at a specific time" [4]. Researchers have found that WTC in L2 is affected by both personality and situational factors. The former is a stable psychological characteristic based on personality traits. MacIntyre, Babin, and Clement (1999) have illustrated that personality traits of introversion/extroversion and emotional stability are related to WTC through communication apprehension and perceived language competence [9]. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) have demonstrated that while personality traits of intellect, extroversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are related to WTC through perceived language competence, communication apprehension, and motivation, the personality trait of agreeableness is directly related to WTC [10]. The latter is external environmental factors, among which L2 motivation, class atmosphere, communication objects, social and cultural environment, etc. are the main variables [11]. L2 motivation, according to Cha and Kim (2013), had a direct effect on WTC in L2, which in turn affected the frequency with which L2 was used in a Korean EFL classroom as well as on L2 speaking proficiency [12]. Wen and Clément (2003) analyzed the Chinese culture and argued that culture is the key factor that influenced WTC in L2 for Chinese EFL learners [8]. Although situational factors do not directly affect WTC, they can provide communicators with the psychological antecedents of a

sense of security, excitement, and responsibility, acting on WTC by affecting communicative confidence and anxiety [13]. Personality factors are long-term and stable, and once formed, are difficult to change; in contrast, situational factors are unstable, variable, and controllable. Therefore, teachers can create a positive, cooperative, and relaxed learning situation by adjusting class management strategies to improve college students' WTC in English.

From the increasing research on WTC in L2 at home and abroad in recent years, it is not surprising to see that more and more educational professionals have realized that in order to truly improve college students' foreign language communicative competence, they must first cultivate students' willingness to use foreign languages for communication. Therefore, the goal of foreign language instruction should be to enhance WTC in L2, any foreign language teaching that cannot generate it is a failure. The innovation of this research lies in the four measures that teachers can easily implement in foreign language teaching, namely, updating educational concepts, establishing a good teacher-student relationship, implementing student-centered education, and arousing integrative orientation. Through these measures, college students' WTC in L2 can surely be elevated, forming the solid foundation for developing L2 communicative competence.

2. MacIntyre *et al.*'s Heuristic Model of L2 WTC

In the six-layer pyramid model of WTC proposed by MacIntyre *et al.* (**Figure 1**),
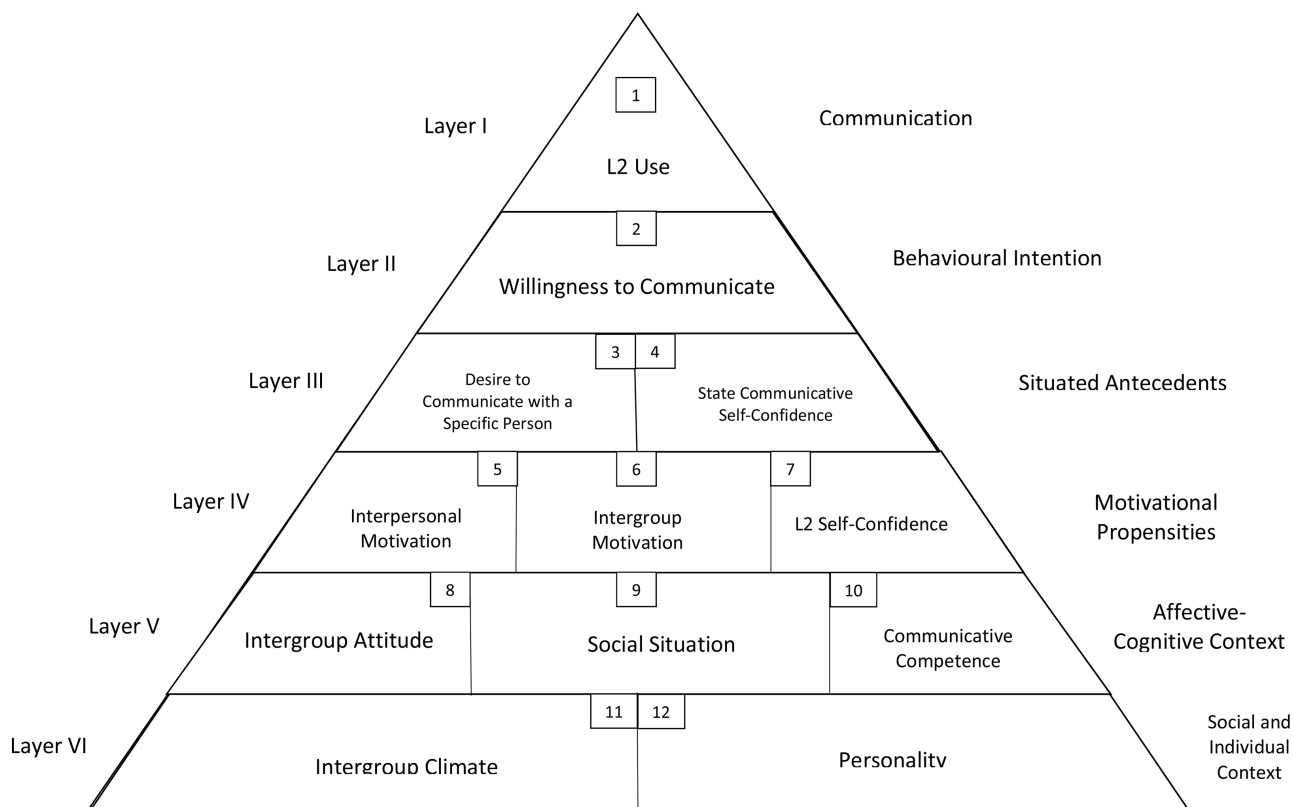

Figure 1. MacIntyre *et al.*'s heuristic model of L2 WTC.

from top to bottom, the upper three layers are composed of specific situational factors, and the lower three layers are more stable influencing factors.

Layer I is L2 use (box 1), and layer II is WTC (box 2). It is very simple to understand that a person's use of L2 comes from his WTC in it at first. For example, a foreign language learner raises his hand to show that he wants to answer the teacher's question and also shows his WTC. If he is called on by the teacher, this learner is willing to answer in L2, that is, he has achieved L2 application. Further below are the situated antecedents that lead to WTC according to the structure.

Layer III is the desire to communicate with a specific person (box 3) and state of communicative self-confidence (box 4). The reason why it is called "specific" is because it is related to a specific situation. The desire or lack of desire to communicate stems from the desire to have connection or control. If you want to build a relationship with someone or accomplish a certain task, then you will be more willing to communicate. For example, foreign language teachers must use L2 to control students' activities in class, or language learners must complete foreign language speech tasks assigned by teachers. However, they may not have WTC if they are not in such specific teaching situations. This may also explain why some foreign language teachers do not like to attend parties held by foreigners.

Layer IV is the motivational propensities, which from left to right are interpersonal motivation (box 5), intergroup motivation (box 6) and self-confidence (box 7). The factors at this layer are relatively stable and refer to the motivations a person has for interpersonal relationships and intergroup communication in most situations. The self-confidence on the far right is different from the specific state of communicative self-confidence mentioned before. Here is a stable personal character.

Layer V is the contextual factors of affection and cognition, which from left to right are intergroup attitudes (box 8), social situation (box 9) and communicative competence (box 10). Attitudes toward social groups can be explained by the fact that if learners learn the language because they are interested in the art or literature of that culture, they may also want to connect with members of that culture. Social situations have a relatively stable effect on WTC because they tend to follow consistent patterns, such as when speaking in formal situations or when ordering food at a restaurant. Communicative competence can be called language ability, and it also includes the level of cultural context, that is, the ability to communicate appropriately in a specific social or cultural context. This is why teachers teach about the culture of politeness in L2 and how native speakers express themselves in certain situations.

Finally, at layer VI, the most stable factors affecting WTC are contextual factors from society and individuals. The left side is intergroup climate (box 11), and the right side is personality (box 12). Intergroup climate can be regarded as one group's understanding of another. Quite simply, if a country is rich and po-

werful, that country's language will be given a higher status. If you learn to speak that language, you may also be in a higher position. Personality is the most stable and durable, and it is also an important factor affecting WTC.

3. Approaches to Cultivate College English Students' WTC

3.1. Updating Educational Concepts

For a long time, a teacher-centered mindset has been formed in Chinese classrooms. Teachers are often in a position of authority, the imparters of knowledge, the disciplinarians of discipline and the subjects of evaluation, while students can only passively accept knowledge. In such a classroom, the teacher fills the class, and the interaction between teachers and students is limited to simple questions and answers about textbook knowledge. The teaching method is single and boring, which is difficult to mobilize students' enthusiasm and initiative. In the meanwhile, students have the following learning shortcoming such as inertness, weak learning ability, poor self-control, and lack of motivation.

Based on this situation, the first thing teachers should do is to update their educational concepts from "teacher-centered education" to "student-centered education" and provide help based on the actual needs of students. The purpose of education is to stimulate students' inner autonomy as well as realize students' self-exploration, self-motivation, self-discipline and self-examination. Only in a safe and relaxed learning atmosphere can students eliminate their wariness and resistance, develop a sense of autonomy, enhance their sense of value in the process of self-realization, and gain the joy of learning. Therefore, the classroom microenvironment guided by teachers is crucial for learners. Teachers must be committed to creating a supportive, tolerant, and relaxed classroom atmosphere, and ideologically transform "instruction" into "guidance". Teachers are supposed to reduce the starting point of difficulty of initial courses so that students can build confidence from the first class and feel accepted and recognized. Only then will they have enough confidence to express themselves and internalize this confidence into a steady stream of driving force [14].

3.2. Establishing a Good Teacher-Student Relationship

The best education is caring education. Without care, no matter how good the teaching method is, it will be useless. All the students actually need care and encouragement from teachers. When a teacher, whether for his/her knowledge or charisma, is loved and admired by students, students will naturally follow suit, and education will proceed naturally. Teachers should be more compassionate, patient and responsible, treat every student equally, understand and respect their personality differences, guide them to discover their own strengths and build self-confidence.

The establishment of a good relationship between teachers and students also relies on the adoption of some behavioral and verbal strategies which can be attributed to teacher intimacy behaviors. Andersen (1979) defines intimacy beha-

viors as those that shorten the distance between people [15]. Butland *et al.* (1992) pointed out that teachers' intimate behavior can enhance students' love for teachers, reduce students' anxiety, and thus make students prefer the course taught by teachers [16]. First of all, in terms of language strategies, teachers should use clear, logical, and concise language when teaching, giving clear instructions to students and focusing on guiding them to "learn" rather than "teach"; teachers can share more of their own life and learning experiences to make the teaching come alive; teachers' encouragement and praise are essential, teachers can thus use positive language to affirm students' good behavior so that it solidifies into a part of the subconscious and forms good habits. Secondly, in terms of behavioral strategies, a smile in addition to natural body postures and movements can create a relaxed and comfortable learning atmosphere, show teachers' self-confidence, and improve students' acceptance of teaching; eye contact can convey a signal of respect for each other and interest in others' speaking, it can also encourage students and help them overcome their nervousness; glances and appropriate movements during class can attract students' attention, allowing students who are distracted or making small movements to consciously correct their behavior without causing harm to their self-esteem [17].

3.3. Implementing Student-Centered Education

Classroom teaching is the implementation of teaching concepts. To fully realize "student-centered education", teachers must start from the students' actual conditions, take into account the students' starting level, cognitive style, learning motivation and personality differences, and formulate a reasonable, feasible, and thorough teaching plan.

3.3.1. Properly Forming Study Groups

College English have large class sizes and uneven quality of students. In English class, often only a few students with good quality are willing to interact with teachers. Most students dare not speak, nor can they speak well. Over time, the classroom has become a stage for a few excellent and daring students. Most students have been ignored, their self-confidence has been frustrated, and they have gradually developed a mood of learning weariness. In response to this situation, some people have proposed the method of stratified teaching. Although stratified teaching helps teachers teach students in accordance with their aptitude and improve teaching efficiency, the self-confidence of the students assigned to the "ordinary class" will be affected and they will become more passive and slacker. Therefore, stratified teaching is unfair and unreasonable, going against the original intention of education. A better way is to implement "invisible stratification", that is, students are divided into several levels based on their grades and daily performance. When dividing students into study groups, the teacher takes control and secretly assigns students of different levels to one group. In teaching design, different teaching objectives and evaluation standards are set for students at different levels. In the implementation of teaching, teachers should try their

best to consider all students and give everyone a chance to perform. On the one hand, teachers can design some open-ended and difficult questions or exercises for students with academic excellence, on the other hand, some basic and less difficult questions for students with learning difficulties. In this way, top students are inspired, average students are guided, and students with learning difficulties are driven, so that each student can develop to the fullest within their own zone of proximal development. Invisible stratification avoids the disadvantages of explicit stratification, and can also achieve the purpose of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude and improving teaching efficiency, which is more reasonable and feasible. Invisible stratification puts higher requirements on teachers, so teachers need to conduct in-depth investigation of academic situations and make comprehensive and careful planning for teaching. At the same time, teachers are also required to have good classroom organization skills and innovative thinking.

3.3.2. Optimizing Teaching Content and Teaching Methods

Some students have poor English foundation and lack learning initiative. They need more guidance and stimulation from teachers. Based on the actual situation and characteristics of college English students, college English education should be based on the policy of "focusing on practical and sufficient use". First of all, in terms of teaching design, teachers can base on but not limit to teaching materials. They should select, delete and adapt the content, and add some teaching material related to students' majors and daily life needs. Secondly, in terms of teaching methods, more flexible approaches can be adopted. For example, the majority of students express their preference to watching movies, playing games, imitating dubbing, and performing in dramas when learning English. Teachers should grasp students' excitement points based on students' actual situations, and use flexible and interesting content and methods to stimulate students' interest in learning. When students feel that learning is interesting and useful, their subjective initiative can be truly spurred.

3.3.3. Changing the Classroom Management Mechanism

In addition to the sense of security and excitement, the sense of responsibility is also an important psychological factor that affects WTC in English. Class atmosphere is influential to students. If the class atmosphere is dull, students don't want to answer questions; but if the atmosphere is relaxed and lively, they will be more willing to participate in activities. The former situation reflects students' lack of responsibility. After leaving the tense study rhythm of high school, students may become lazy and unrestrained in the relatively relaxed management environment of the university. It can be seen that it is crucial to cultivate students' sense of responsibility and guide them to switch from teacher management to self-management.

Firstly, rulemaking. As the saying goes, nothing can be accomplished without rules. If students participate in formulating the rules from the beginning, they

will consciously abide by, maintain and supervise the implementation of this rule. Therefore, teachers can organize students to discuss and formulate classroom behavioral norms at the beginning of learning, so that everything is supported by the norm. In this way, the classroom will naturally be in order, and at the same time, it will also cultivate students' sense of rules and responsibility.

Secondly, teamwork. When members of a team support each other and work together for a common goal, everyone's potential is stimulated, which will generate immense power. Invisible stratification makes each team/study group have the same level, with the possibility of healthy competition. Students can take turns to be the group leader, and everyone must have a responsibility. The group can be set up with moderators, observers, and disciplinary team leaders, and students take turns to serve, so that students are able to learn to manage themselves. When teachers assign group tasks, they should be hierarchical to match different levels of students and teaching goals. With tasks assigned in this way, students at all levels have something to do and their abilities are developed.

Finally, multi-party process evaluation. Multi-party evaluation means that in addition to teacher evaluation, it also integrates multi-party evaluation mechanisms such as self-evaluation, intra-group evaluation, and inter-group evaluation. Self-evaluation enables students to make progress through reflection. Intra-group evaluation can help cultivate students' sense of teamwork and responsibility. Inter-group evaluation can promote healthy competition among students, allowing them to see the bright spots of others and learn to be tolerant and respectful to others. Process evaluation refers to including students' performance in completing tasks into the evaluation, such as whether they actively participate, whether they have teamwork spirit, etc. Process evaluation focuses on the process rather than the results, and teamwork rather than individual achievements. It can effectively mobilize the enthusiasm of all students to participate in activities, so that everyone has a sense of value and achieves something.

3.4. Arousing Integrative Orientation

Integrative orientation refers to an individual learner's strong desire to learn based on his desire to communicate better with a language community he considers valuable. It reflects the learner's personal interest in the people and culture of the target language country. Gardner *et al.* (1959) thought that language is the carrier of culture, and the ultimate goal of learning a language is to understand a culture [18]. But most students learn English only for instrumental reasons such as professional requirements, job search, obtaining corresponding English proficiency certificates, and convenience for traveling abroad. Only a small number of students learn English to satisfy their curiosity about Western culture and their desire to understand the world and broaden their horizons. Compared with instrumental motivation, integrated orientation drives learners more stably and has a long-term effect. Therefore, teachers should focus on stimulating students' integrated orientation and improving their inner driving force.

First of all, teachers should use every possible opportunity to enhance students' perception of English society and culture, guide students to discover cultural phenomena, and trace the cultural origins behind them through these phenomena. Secondly, teachers should strive to cultivate students' intercultural communication skills. Cross-cultural communication ability is a core ability ensuring that students can interact well with people from a wide range of different cultures. Thirdly, teachers should be good at guiding students to discover the similarities and differences between Chinese culture and the culture of English-speaking countries, enhance their cultural sensitivity, so that students can learn to understand and respect foreign cultures, and at the same time deepen their understanding and identification with their own national culture.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, WTC in English is a complex emotional variable. The fundamental reason for the low willingness of college English students to communicate in English is the lack of communicative confidence due to their relatively low communicative competence. Teachers can create a positive, cooperative, and relaxed learning atmosphere by adjusting classroom management strategies to make students feel safe and excited, thereby changing their understanding and requirements of their own abilities and achieving the teaching goal of truly improving students' WTC in English. While the research focuses on the four approaches that teachers can make sure of to cultivate students' WTC in L2, all of these approaches are from the teachers' perspective, further research can explore individualized factors such as L2 self-confidence, L2 self-perceived communicative competence, L2 anxiety, and fear of making mistakes to get a deeper understanding of the elements ensuring the development college students' WTC in L2.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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