

Research Article

A Study of Factors That Affect Chinese Tertiary EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate in Class

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Abstract

Classroom interaction characterizes communicative language teaching. Effective classroom interaction promotes second language acquisition (SLA) and serves as an important means of using the language especially for students in a foreign language context. Willingness to communicate (WTC) has received constant attention since its application to the SLA field in the 1990s. Students' WTC ensures the quantity and quality of classroom interaction. By analyzing the data from an end-of-year questionnaire in an ordinary Chinese college English class, the present study aims to examine Chinese non-English major students' general attitudes towards classroom communication activities and two major categories of factors, namely Teacher Factors and Task Factors, that influence students' WTC in English classes from students' perspective. The results show that the factors affecting WTC in college English classrooms are multidimensional, with Teacher's Emotions (being patient, encouraging, guiding, positive, happy, lively, passionate, trust), Teacher's Professional qualities (content selection, class organization, pronunciation, wait-time) and Task Content (usefulness, degree of difficulty, interest) having relatively greater effects. At the end of the paper, direction for future research is given. Second/foreign language teachers are advised to conduct further classroom research and actively regulate these factors for a more interactive English class and thus improve students' class participation and learning efficiency.

Keywords

Chinese Tertiary EFL Learners, Willingness to Communicate, Factors, English Class, Student Participation

1. Introduction

Foreign language classrooms have always been the main "battlefield" for foreign language teaching and learning in China. They provide an ideal environment for learners to engage with and practice foreign languages, improve learning outcomes, and for teachers to implement and refine teaching philosophies and methods [1]. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the classroom environment (Instructed SLA, ISLA), as a branch of SLA, primarily explores SLA within a teaching context. Due to its strong practical applica-

bility, ISLA has attracted attention from international scholars [2]. "Classroom environment" includes various forms of online and offline language learning settings. In China, where there is no natural environment for acquiring English and most learners study foreign languages through classroom instruction, ISLA research holds particularly important practical significance for foreign language teaching in China [2].

The rapid development of information technology, multimedia technology, big data, and artificial intelligence has

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resulted in two major characteristics in college English teaching: the integration of information technology with foreign language teaching and the combination of foreign language teaching with morality cultivation [1]. However, the current state of tertiary English classroom teaching in China is far from satisfying: teacher-centered explanatory teaching, a separation between learning and application, classroom reticence, and poor quality of interaction. Most foreign language teachers have experienced the embarrassing situation where, while waiting for an enthusiastic response to a question, the classroom remains silent with no lively interaction. This, therefore, raises the question: Do our post-00s students really lack a desire for classroom communication? If they have this desire, what factors might enhance their willingness to communicate (WTC)?

To address these questions, this paper will first review relevant ISLA theories, particularly research on interaction and communication willingness. It will then examine, through end-of-year questionnaires, the attitudes of students toward communicative activities in English classrooms and the main factors influencing their willingness to communicate. It is hoped that the research results will provide more reliable information for ISLA research in China, helping English teachers to enhance students' WTC and improve the quality of classroom interaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Current State of Classroom Interaction in China

Allwright argued that "Classroom pedagogy can proceed only via interaction" meaning that without interaction, there is no classroom teaching [3]. As the field of linguistics has shifted from a focus on methods to the study of classroom interaction, interaction has received increasing attention from foreign language researchers worldwide. A large body of empirical research shows that classroom interaction is a highly effective organizational form that greatly facilitates L2 learning [4, 5]. However, the current state of college English classroom teaching in China is less than satisfactory, characterized by a single teacher-centered model and a lack of genuine, effective, and high-quality interaction between teachers and students. Most classroom interactions are still teacher-centered, with students passively responding to teachers' questions. Although group interactions have become common classroom activities in some classes, they are not real and meaningful teacher-student communication, which significantly dampens students' enthusiasm for participating in classroom activities [1, 5]. Classroom interaction largely depends on student participation [6]. Therefore, not only should interactive teaching be encouraged, but the quality of interaction must also be improved, with students' WTC being a crucial prerequisite and safeguard.

2.2. Studies of Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to Communicate (WTC), an important concept for explaining both native and L2 communication, first proposed by McCroskey & Baer (1985: 3-11, cited by [7]), refers to the intention to initiate communication when free to do so. It has gradually been applied to SLA research and received ongoing attention. The emergence of this field may be due to the critical role of communication and interaction recognized by modern L2 pedagogy. Skehan suggested that learners need to engage in conversation to learn the target language [8]. Wu posited that fostering communication willingness is one of the key elements of L2 teaching [9]. Kang identified WTC as a crucial factor in the success of L2 acquisition, suggesting that it should be a goal of L2 teaching and learning [10].

Numerous studies have explored individual and environmental factors affecting L2 learners' communication willingness both inside and outside the classroom. For example, Wen & Clemen proposed a Chinese perspective on WTC, incorporating societal context, personality factors, motivational orientation, and emotional factors, thus complementing MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model of communication willingness [11]. They found that cultural values (such as face-protection, insider effects, and submissive way of learning) are dominant factors shaping individuals' attitudes and learning styles in L2 communication, based on their study of Confucian thought and teachings. Using interviews, conversation recordings, and stimulated recall with four Korean students in an American university, Kang found that situational willingness to participate in a L2 is influenced by psychological factors such as a sense of security, excitement, and responsibility, as well as environmental factors including topics, interlocutors, and conversation settings [10]. Notably, this researcher redefined L2 communication willingness as a dynamic, situational concept rather than a stable trait. From an ecological perspective, Mai & Fan study students' WTC in Chinese college English classrooms through questionnaires and interviews and discovered that classroom dynamics is closely related to students' WTC, with personal, linguistic, and environmental factors all contributing to students' WTC in English classrooms [12]. Hai found that the organizational form of classroom interaction (whole class, one-on-one, or group) affects students' classroom participation through classroom self-observation and questionnaires with lower-grade English majors. Foreign language classroom anxiety was identified as a predictor of whole-class interaction, while WTC was a predictor of one-on-one and group oral activities [6].

Although the research methods and subjects vary a lot, these studies generally confirm that second language/foreign language communication willingness results from the interplay of personal, environmental, emotional, and cultural factors, and is dynamically changing.

2.3. Studies of Teacher's Roles

Teachers play a crucial role in effective classroom instruction and achieving educational goals. Research on factors affecting teachers has become a major aspect of this field. Researchers have found that teachers' attitudes, involvement, and teaching styles significantly impact students' WTC [11, 13]. Zarrinabadi used focused essay technique to study the influence of L2 teachers on students' WTC. Students were asked to describe situations in which they were most and least willing to engage in classroom communication in English. The study found that teachers' wait time, error correction, topic selection, and support all significantly influence students' WTC [14]. Lin & Wang also used a combination of focused essay technique and interviews to survey 86 students and 12 teachers from a university in Shandong [7]. They examined the teacher-related factors affecting students' WTC in English classrooms and found that these factors could be categorized into four main types: teaching performance, inherent characteristics, personal attitudes, and feedback types. From a comparative perspective, teachers and students generally agree on these factors, though there are differences in the quantity and extent of these factors. Wen & Clement found that teachers' attitudes, involvement, and closeness are the most effective supports for promoting students' willingness to participate [11]. Teacher involvement can reduce students' anxiety, increase emotional security, and encourage more enthusiastic classroom interaction. Teachers' closeness can reduce student anxiety and enhance participation. In a positive communication environment, students are more willing to take risks, engage in communication, and collaborate with peers.

These studies prove that teachers are a crucial driving force behind classroom communication willingness. Therefore, examining the roles of teachers and communication tasks in stimulating and maintaining students' willingness to participate has significant practical implications.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

Previous research has confirmed the importance of interaction in L2 and foreign language classrooms and explored various factors affecting students' WTC in L2 classrooms. However, L2 learning is a complex, dynamic system, and different learners may exhibit varying levels of communication willingness in different contexts. To deepen the understanding of the factors influencing classroom communication willingness in L2 and help teachers gain more insights into this field, this study, based on the aforementioned theories and research, uses end-of-year questionnaires to investigate the main factors affecting college students' willingness to participate in L2 classroom activities. The study aims to address the following research questions:

1) What are the general attitudes of Chinese tertiary EFL

learners toward communication activities in English classrooms?

2) What are the main teacher-related and task-related factors influencing students' classroom communication willingness?

3.2. Participants

A total of 109 students from two English classes at an ordinary college in Beijing participated in this study. They were all first-year students who had just completed a year of college English study (128 hours in class). Among them, there are 49 male students and 60 female students. They are from different provinces of China and study in four schools of the college: Information, Electromechanical, Journalism, and Publishing.

3.3. Data-Collection Instrument

To quickly obtain data from a relatively larger sample, this study used a questionnaire at the end of the students' first academic year. The questionnaire was designed based on relevant literature, classroom observations and teaching experience of the authors. It employed a 5-point Likert scale and was designed to cover three aspects: teacher factors and task factors along with some overall evaluation items, totaling 34 questions. The questionnaire was distributed by their English teachers of the two classes through a Chinese online platform called "Wenjuanxing" (Questionnaire Star, literally, which is a professional platform for conducting questionnaires in China) and completed anonymously by students during their last class. The choices were made seriously by the students, and all completed questionnaires were considered valid.

3.4. Data-Analysis

According to the data statistics and analysis provided by the Wenjuanxing platform, the reliability of the questionnaire is 0.874 (see Table 1), which is considered a good level.

Table 1. Questionnaire Reliability Analysis.

Sample Size	No. of Items	Cronbach's alpha
109	34	0.874

Additionally, the items of the questionnaire were further classified into three categories: overall evaluation, teacher-related factors and task-related factors. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, median) were also obtained through SPSS 26.0.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. General Attitudes Toward Communication Activities

Teachers are often frustrated by silent college English classrooms, complaining about students' laziness and reluctance

to participate in classroom communication activities. In Chinese cultural contexts, where face-saving, obedience to authority, and distinctions between in-groups and out-groups are prevalent [11], is silence truly a characteristic of Chinese students? Understanding students' real thoughts is therefore necessary.

Table 2. Overall Situation of Students' WTC in Class.

Item	Mean	SD
willing and able to actively participate	4.11	0.815
willing to take initiative in participating	3.79	0.977
hope the teacher provides more opportunities to participate	3.66	0.997

Table 2 shows that the means for the three items are all relatively high, indicating that these students generally have a strong WTC with the highest mean of 4.11. This suggests that students are not truly inclined to remain silent; they understand the importance of engaging in communication activities for foreign language learning and are willing to participate actively when the opportunity arises. Littlewood

found that the stereotype of "Asian students passively sitting and listening in class" does not reflect the real learning preferences of Asian students, who, like European students, crave active, independent, and collaborative group activities aimed at common goals [15]. Therefore, it is important for teachers to learn how to create appropriate classroom communication environments and opportunities for students.

4.2. Main Factors That Influence Chinese Tertiary EFL Students' WTC

4.2.1. Teacher Factors

Table 3. Teacher Factors Influencing Students' WTC in Class.

Item	Mean	SD	Factor
encourages and guides me patiently	4.29	0.686	Emotional - Teacher's Emotion - Patience, Motivation, Guidance
appears positive, happy, and full of energy	4.26	0.661	Emotional - Teacher's Emotion - Positive and Happy
lecture content is interesting, well-organized, and the pronunciation is accurate	4.22	0.705	Professional Quality - Content Selection, Organization, Pronunciation
teaching is lively and passionate	4.18	0.744	Emotional - Teacher's Emotion - Lively and Passionate
provides enough wait time	4.17	0.779	Professional Quality - Wait Time
a relaxed and pleasant classroom atmosphere	4.13	0.787	Emotional - Teacher-Student Relationship - Classroom Atmosphere
trust the teacher	4.11	0.737	Emotional - Teacher-Student Relationship - Trust
the relationship between teachers and students is equal and cooperative	3.94	0.952	Emotional - Teacher-Student Relationship - Equality and Cooperation
provides improvement suggestions (on pronunciation or content)	3.83	0.9	Professional Quality - Feedback

Table 3 shows that the nine items related to teacher factors affecting college English classroom participation all received high means, ranging from a maximum of 4.29 to a minimum of 3.83, with all medians being 4. These factors can be categorized into two types: emotional factors and professional quality. Emotional factors include teacher's emotions and teacher-student relationships. The highest scores were given for teacher's patience, motivation, guidance, and the teacher's own positive and happy emotions. Professional qualities (including content selection, organization, pronunciation, the liveliness and passion of the teaching, wait time, and teacher's feedback) also significantly affect students' participation in class. This result confirms previous research: the selection of teaching content has the greatest impact on students' WTC, followed by activity organization and teaching methods, with classroom management having the least effect [7]. Trust and an equal, cooperative teacher-student relationship, which contribute to a relaxed and pleasant classroom atmosphere, are also important factors influencing student participation [16].

This result confirms the important role of teachers in foreign language classrooms: teachers are key to achieving classroom teaching goals and are a powerful influence on effective teaching [17]. In teacher-directed classroom interactions, teachers act as mediators (organizing, advising, collaborating, and consulting), guiding students to actively explore knowledge, develop conceptual schemata, and co-construct meaning. They also serve as "motivators" and "facilitators" helping students develop and transcend themselves [17]. Research on SLA from a positive psychology perspective emphasizes the importance of positive emotions

between teachers and students for L2 classroom learning. For example, Moskowitz & Dewael found through 129 online questionnaires that teachers' positive emotions are contagious; when students perceive their teachers as happy, they also experience similar positive emotions, which in turn enhances learning motivation and facilitates the language learning process [18].

Teachers' positive emotions (such as patience, affection, happiness, passion, and empathy) help create a trusting and equal classroom atmosphere, thus establishing an emotionally supportive classroom environment and a shared learning community. Good teaching outcomes and learner development are achieved through the joint efforts of both teachers and students, reducing teachers' feelings of isolation [19]. In L2 communication, teachers' support, including verbal behaviors (such as positive responses like "yeah", "uh-huh", "really", "that's great") and non-verbal behaviors (such as showing keen interest and smiles), can provide students with a sense of security and increase their WTC [10].

Extending "wait-time" reflects the professional quality of foreign language teachers and is crucial for English learning. It ensures that students fully understand questions, increases the content of responses, develops students' thinking and language output abilities, and ultimately facilitates meaningful communication between teachers and students [20]. Although it may seem to slow down the pace of the class, it actually improves the quality of classroom interaction and student learning [21]. Therefore, when teachers appropriately extend wait times and tolerate students' silence—positive silence—it helps to effectively unfold classroom activities and increase meaningful interaction [16].

4.2.2. Task Factors

Table 4. Task Factors Affecting Students' WTC in Class.

Item	Mean	SD	Factor
the tasks given by the teacher are interesting	4.06	0.814	Task Content - Interest
tasks are useful for my English learning or exams	4.18	0.687	Task Content - Usefulness
the difficulty of the tasks is moderate	4.07	0.756	Task Content - degree of difficulty
extra points given for participating	3.79	0.967	Task Management
participate through peer teaching or presentations	3.45	1.077	Task Form
prefer peer discussions to answering teacher's questions	3.42	0.934	Task Form

Tasks, as a medium for classroom communication, inevitably influence students' WTC. Table 4 shows that the six task-related factors affecting college English classroom participation include task content (usefulness, degree of difficulty, and interest), task management, and task form. The first category represents students' subjective evaluations,

while the latter two are teachers' management and organization of class activities. Factors related to classroom tasks all influence students' WTC, with task content's usefulness, degree of difficulty, and interest having relatively greater impacts (mean>4, median=4). Besides, extra points, peer teaching or presentation, and peer discussions can also pro-

mote students' participation. The choice of communication task content and organization form is key to effective teaching [17]. Students are more willing to communicate on topics they find interesting, familiar, or personally experienced, as these topics provide a sense of security and excitement [10] [16]. Students' preference for peer teaching and presentations indicates a desire for more challenging and controllable interactive forms. Classroom observations also show that students appear natural and relaxed when completing such tasks, reflecting a characteristic of post-2000s students except that they still need native language (which is Chinese) sometimes and cannot communicate all in English.

5. Conclusions

This study used an end-of-year questionnaire to examine the main factors affecting Chinese tertiary EFL learners' WTC in the language classroom from the students' perspective. The results suggest multiple dimensions of teacher-related and task-related factors, with teachers' emotional factors, professional qualities, and task content having greater effects on students' classroom communication willingness.

Future research could improve the reliability of the questionnaire, conduct surveys with larger sample sizes, and employ various research methods, such as focused essays, interviews, and classroom recordings. Additionally, it could explore the differences in WTC factors among students from different majors (especially liberal arts and sciences), proficiency levels and genders.

In conclusion, this research aims to unlock the "black boxes" of the classroom and emotions, and actively regulate key factors (such as teachers' emotions, professional qualities and task content) to effectively improve student participation and ensure the effectiveness of foreign language learning. The authors hope that colleagues will build on this research, adopting a broad perspective on foreign language teaching to further investigate classroom SLA and in particular, from the positive psychology perspective.

Abbreviations

SLA	Second Language Acquisition
WTC	Willingness to Communicate
ISLA	Instructed Second Language Acquisition

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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