

A Review of WTC Research in L2 and its Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract—WTC (willingness to communicate) has long been the research focus because of the salient role it plays in second language learning. This paper reviews the related WTC research in L2 and Chinese EFL context, and the definition of related WTC variables, with a discussion of the implied pedagogical implication of the review and a suggestion for future research.

Keywords—WTC; L2; communication apprehension; perceived competence

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become a compulsory course in middle schools and universities for a long period of time, and English language proficiency has been highly valued in society and among students [1]. According to Bryson, the people learning English in China have outnumbered the people speaking English in the United States [2]. In spite of such great recognition of English from both government and families, Chinese English learners are widely recognized as good English learners in grammar-based examination, but not good English speakers. What's worse, Chinese students are often referred to as passive learners in learning English [3], and they are often not willing to participate in class activities and are always reticent in class [4], which makes the communicative curriculum hard to implement and many teachers are trying every means to find a way out. Moreover, according to Koch and Terrell [5], speaking is regarded as the most anxiety-provoking modality in communication of L2, and the situation is more severe in Chinese English learning context. Therefore, for English teachers an important issue in Chinese EFL classroom is how to make students willing to speak and communicate in English (WTC), which is also a salient issue for EFL researchers.

This paper aims to review related literature concerning WTC in L2 and tentatively discuss its pedagogical implications.

II. DEFINITION OF WTC AND RELATED VARIABLES

The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) was first introduced in L1, which was “developed to describe individual differences in L1 communication” [6] and was defined as the intention or probability of taking part in communication when s/he had the choice [7]. WTC was then introduced to L2, in which is more complex and uncertain, and

was defined as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” [8]. After Kang conducted a qualitative study through interviews, videotaped conversations and stimulated recalls, he redefined WTC as “an individual’s volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context” [9].

Two important variables that may affect WTC are communication apprehension as well as perceived competence [10]. Communication apprehension was conceptualized as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” [10], while perceived competence was referred to as how a learner perceived his/her communication “ability to properly process information in such a way that communicative behaviors occur in some orderly, rule-governed way” [10].

III. WTC RESEARCHES IN L2

A model of WTC in L2 was firstly constructed by MacIntyre, in which he thought several variables contributed to WTC, including communication apprehension, self-perception to communication competence, self esteem, anomie and introversion [11].

Two years later, the previous model was reconstructed by MacIntyre and Charo, in which some variables were omitted and some were added. In this model, perceived L2 competence and L2 anxiety remained to be important variables in L2 WTC, with integrativeness and motivation added in [11].

Another more comprehensible model was designed by MacIntyre et al., in which a series of layers of variables are considered, including social and individual context (intergroup climate and personality), affective-cognitive context (intergroup attitudes, social situation, communicative competence), motivational propensities (interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation and self-confidence) and situated antecedents (desire to communicate with a specific person and state communicative self-confidence) [8]. The construct shows that both “internal” and “external” [12] variables may affect L2 learners WTC.

This construct has aroused many further researches which are to investigate how and to what extent those variables may

affect WTC and to testify whether it is applicable in different cultural contexts.

A series of research has been conducted by MacIntyre and his colleague, mostly among immersion students, which verified that the relation between anxiety, perceived competence with WTC may “vary over time, across situations, and among languages” [13], however, they are still among the most important variables that may affect one’s WTC. Besides, students having the experience of immersion education may have more privilege in WTC, and social support is very important for L2 learners.

MacIntyre, et al. conducted research on junior high school students to investigate the relations among WTC, social support and language-learning orientations. The research result indicated that students had higher WTC in the L2 inside the immersion classroom than those outside the classroom setting and social support is needed in the development and maintenance of WTC, since having “an interlocutor for authentic communication” is important [6].

Baker and MacIntyre also published another paper with participants from Grade 10, 11 and 12, with both immersion and non-immersion students included [10]. As expected, immersion students show higher WTC, lower communication anxiety, higher perceived communicative competence and more frequent communication. Among non-immersion students, perceived competence was strongly correlated with WTC, but communication anxiety correlated most strongly with WTC among immersion students. The research result was again testified by MacIntyre, et al. [14], when doing another similar research on first year, university-level students enrolled in introductory conversational French courses. Some of the participants had French immersion or other intensive learning experience, and some didn’t. The regression analysis for the students with previous intensive experience showed WTC was predicted by communication apprehension but not by perceived competence. However, WTC of FSL group who had no experience of immersion was predicted by perceived competence and not communication apprehension.

MacIntyre, et al., did research on junior high school students from a late French immersion program to investigate the effects of language, sex and grade on WTC [13]. The result showed that L2 WTC, language anxiety and perceived competence are highly correlated among Grade 8 and 9 students, not among Grade 7 students.

After doing a study which lasted for a semester, Leger & Storch also found students’ WTC highly correlated with their perceived competence; however, their WTC with classmates in groups was variational which may be affected by their relationship among each other [15].

Another series of studies on WTC were conducted by Yashima and her colleagues in Japanese EFL context, which confirmed MacIntyre’s WTC construct. Based on the series of models developed by MacIntyre and his colleagues, Yashima replicate a model based on Japanese EFL context. In this model, mainly four variables are included, which are L2 communication confidence (communication anxiety in L2 and perceived communication competence in L2), L2 proficiency

(grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension), L2 learning motivation (motivational intensity and desire to learn English) and international posture (intercultural friendship orientation in learning English, interest in international vocation/activities, interest in foreign affairs and intergroup approach avoidance tendency) [16]. Through her research, she found that communication anxiety and perceived communication competence in L2, together with students’ interest in international relationship, are variables that can directly influence WTC in L2.

Kang carried out a qualitative study on four male Korean students studying English as a second language at the English Language Institute in U.S. to investigate how WTC can dynamically arise and change during a conversation situation. The result shows that three interwoven “psychological conditions of excitement, responsibility, and security” have joint impact on situational WTC in L2, and each of them was affected among each other by “interacting situational variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context” [9], through which he constructed a preliminary model of situational WTC in L2.

The above mentioned researches supported the point that WTC is not isomorphic with communication apprehension as well as perceived competence [11], even though they should be significantly correlated. Besides, some external factors such as social support as well as situational variables may affect WTC.

IV. WTC RESEARCHES IN CHINESE EFL CONTEXT

The above reviewed literature has laid a great foundation for research in WTC, however, some scholars argued that the construct cannot be borrowed to Chinese learning English as foreign language, since Chinese culture is quite different from that of the western world.

Wen and Clement examined the basic concepts of Confucianism as well as teaching of Confucian classics [17], which revealed that in shaping a learner’s perception and way of learning, cultural values are the basic force. They also extended MacIntyre et al’s model [8] in changing some relationship between constructs in structure as well as reshaping some of the variables from a Chinese point of view. A model was constructed from four perspectives, societal context (group cohesiveness and teacher support), motivational orientation (affiliation and task-orientation), personality factors (risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity) and affective perceptions (inhibited monitor and positive expectation of evaluation). In their paper, a distinction between desire and willingness to communicate is made, which is specified in Chinese culture. According to Wen and Clement, “desire refers to a deliberate choice or preference, while willingness emphasizes the readiness to act” [17]. Most Chinese students do have the desire to communicate in English; however, for one reason or another, they do not have the willingness to communicate.

Peng analyzed the culture of communication and learning in China and categorize factors contributing to L2 WTC in Chinese EFL classroom into individual and social context through conducting a qualitative study to students from a key

university in Guangdong Province [18]. Similar to previous studies, the individual context includes communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking and learners' beliefs, whereas social context is a little different, with classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support and classroom organization.

Liu and Jackson invited 547 first-year non-English majors at Tsinghua University and found that students' WTC was significantly negatively correlated with their FL anxiety [19]. Besides, both their WTC and their FL anxiety were significantly correlated to their perceived English proficiency as well as to access to English. This result has largely testified the research hypothesis and results of previous studies.

Another factor, classroom, was also added in the variables affecting English learners' WTC in Chinese context, since most of English communication for Chinese learners happen in classroom. According to Peng, classroom environment was labeled as external variable in the structural model, and results showed classroom environment could directly influence WTC, communication confidence and learner beliefs [12].

From the above reviewed literature, we can draw the conclusion that comparing with other cultures, the variables affecting WTC of Chinese students are mainly FL anxiety, self-perceived competence, together with teacher support, risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity, which will be analyzed in detail in next part.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

WTC has been regarded as both an "individual difference variable" which will affect L2 acquisition and it is also "a goal of L2 instruction" [8]. Dornyei also regarded WTC as "a means and an end at the same" [20] in L2 instruction. "Fostering an enhanced WTC is a valid goal of language education" [14], L2 language teachers should be aware of the importance of WTC and consciously arouse students' willingness to communicate, especially in classroom, which is the major platform of learning English for Chinese students

From the literature reviewed in previous two parts, several variables that may affect Chinese learners' WTC can be concluded as following: FL anxiety, perceived competence, teacher support, risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity.

FL anxiety is a variable affecting both Chinese L2 learner and learners from other cultures. Much research has testified the negative correlation between WTC and FL anxiety. To release students' anxiety both in learning a second language, teachers can ask students to self-rate their own language proficiency. Most students' perceived competence might be low, since Chinese people values modesty, and many students may say they were anxious in English classroom. Teachers can share those ideas with students to let them know that they are not alone; actually nearly everyone shares the same anxiety. Besides, teachers can share their own learning experience of English with students and remind the students that making mistakes in class will not be criticized, but if they never make mistakes in class, in other words, if they never open their mouth or to communicate in class, they will never be able to make progress so as to relieve students' anxiety towards the foreign language as well as the English learning environment.

Moreover, since many students feel more comfortable in smaller group than in class discussion [19], teachers can also prefer more group discussion than class discussion.

Perceived competence is another variable that may affect students' WTC. It is also a variable that can account for the phenomenon that some relatively higher competent students kept reticent in class while some relative lower competent students were relatively more active in class. To help students achieve higher self-perceived competence, teachers should help students to see realistic, short-term goals in learning English [19]. Teachers can also point out students' progress and encourage them to build up their self confidence so as to make their self-perceived competence go up. Bonus can also be given to those students who have obvious progress.

Teacher support is a variable unique among Chinese students. The reason might lie in the cultural tradition of learning in China. Teachers have long been regarded as authority in class, and students are always trying to seek the justification and attention from teachers. Anderson noted that there was a positive correlation between teacher immediacy and students' affective learning [17]. In Chinese setting, "teacher involvement and teacher immediacy" are of vital importance for the efficiency and learning attitude of students [17]. This variable requires teachers to show concern to students, especially those with low WTC, which may make students feel they were paid attention to, and motivation will increase, which may have a direct impact on WTC.

The variable of risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity can be analyzed through two distinctive communicative styles: Eurocentrism versus Asiacentrism. The communication style in Eurocentrism emphasizes "personal thoughts, feelings and actions in communication", in which people are aroused to express their ideas directly, whereas Asiacentrism values "harmonious relationship", in which direct confrontation is not encouraged [21]. Another cultural factor is that Chinese nation value mianzi (face) very much, which makes them avoid taking risk, and if there is any ambiguity in their answer, they may choose to keep silent in class. What's more, the education before college in China emphasizes correctness among students. There is always one answer to any problems, which gives students the impression that all the issues in the world are wrong if they are not right. Never will they take the risk to negotiate or to balance their thought. Teachers should explicitly tell students that not all the things in the world belong to the category of formula like one plus one equals two. All opinions and suggestion should be welcome in class to make students dare to take the risk to speak even when they feel the topic or answer might be ambiguous.

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most of the studies reviewed used questionnaires and asked students to do self-report, which might not be reliable enough, since some students' self report might not be consistent to their authentic performance in real classroom situation. Class observation might be a better way in conducting the research.

Further research can also be done in how teachers can adjust the task in EFL classroom in Chinese context so as to

increase the willingness to communicate among Chinese students.

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