

Chinese Postgraduate Students' Willingness to Communicate in the Classroom Interactions in a British University

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Abstract—Research on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in the classroom for Chinese postgraduate students who are studying in British universities, rather than in second language learning classes, adopted a quantitative method to find out related factors and seek answers. Although it may be difficult for learners to change their beliefs about appropriate classroom behaviour, their long-term conceptual framework of evaluating teaching and learning experience in the one-year postgraduate program abroad and the ways of eliciting more participation from students and facilitating their learning process need to be investigated.

Index Terms—Chinese postgraduate students, willingness to communicate, interactions in a British university

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese students have always considered British universities as one of the most popular destinations to study abroad. Such a large scale draws more and more attention to this group of learners, which can be reflected in a large number of studies on the learning experience of Chinese overseas students (MacIntyre, 2011; Quan, He & Sloan, 2016) [1] or their willingness to communicate (WTC) in class (Cao & Philp, 2006; Cao, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Costa, 2014; Gallagher, 2012; Robson, 2015; Zhong, 2013). [2]-[7]

On the former, however, the related findings do not seem very optimistic. While considerable efforts have been made by UK higher education institutions to accommodate to a more global teaching and learning culture, some Chinese students are still struggling to adapt to the cultural and academic context in the U.K. Considering the goodwill and sincere efforts of both parties, the existing difficulties and discontents may be caused by inadequate or improper exchange of information about the expectations of students and teachers, as well as their understanding about classroom experience, which can shape their behavior in the classroom.

As for the WTC of Chinese students in the classroom, previous studies mainly focus on the acquisition and use of the second language, and have achieved considerable

findings. The factors that affect their WTC include communicative anxiety and self-perceived communicative competence (Cao, 2011, 2013; Gallagher, 2012; Jackson, 2002; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Peng & Woodrow, 2012; Robson, 2015), [8] classroom environment (Cao & Philp, 2006; Cao, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Peng, 2014; Zhang & Oetzel, 2006), culturally-shaped learner beliefs (Peng, 2014; Peng, 2012; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Wen & Clément, 2003; Zhong, 2013) and so on. However, research on WTC in the classroom for Chinese postgraduate students who are studying in western countries, rather than in second language learning classes, is somehow missing from scholars' agendas. Therefore, the present study adopted a quantitative method to deal with these issues and seek answers to the following research question: what factors influence Chinese postgraduate students' WTC in the classroom interactions in a British university?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

77 Chinese postgraduate students who were on a one-year postgraduate course at a British university were involved in the present study.

B. Instruments

The questionnaire which was adopted from the work of Peng's (2012) was used in this study to examine the relationship between participants' WTC in class and four variables that would be clarified later. Students' WTC in English in classroom interactions, Communication Anxiety (CA), Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), Learner Beliefs (LB), and their perception of the Classroom Environment (CE) were measured in the first five parts. The last section included four questions about the demographic information of the participants (see Appendix A).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. WTC in Class and Communication Anxiety (CA)

As is illustrated in Table I, WTC in class was significantly, negatively correlated to CE ($r = -0.32$,

$p < 0.05$), which has always been considered as one of the important factors leading to low WTC in second language.

TABLE I: STATISTICAL RESULTS USING PEARSON CORRELATIONS (N=77)

	WTC	CA	SPCC	LB	CE
WTC	1	—	—	—	—
CA	-.32*	1	—	—	—
SPCC	.62*	-.32*	1	—	—
LB	.28*	-.33*	.35*	1	—
CE	.37*	-.07	.28*	.37*	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Based on the research of MacIntyre and Charos (1996), CA can directly lead to the decrease of SPCC and willingness to participate in class discussions. As reported by Horwitz and Cope (1986) [9], Foreign language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has been attributed to CA, exam anxiety and fear of negative evaluations, all leading to classroom panic or silent behavior (Liu & Jackson, 2008). [10], [11]

Although the original concept was related to the L2 learning process, it was not entirely in the context of the current study. Our participants had to study in an English-medium environment, and according to the survey results, the L2 related variables did make them feel anxious. Nevertheless, due to the scale of the project in the current questionnaire cover not only these factors (e.g. "I am worried that other students will think my English is not very good."), but can also be associated with anxiety in general (e.g. "I feel anxious when the teacher asks me a question."), it is not clear to what extent it is due to either factor. However, since using the first language is impossible for Chinese students when they interact with their foreign teachers during their study in the UK, the above situations always coexist, leading to a certain degree of CA in classroom interactions.

B. WTC in Class and Self-Perceived Communicative Competence (SPCC)

SPCC was significantly positively correlated with WTC ($r = 0.62$, $P < 0.05$), and negatively associated with CA ($r = -0.32$, $P < 0.05$), again confirming previous research results. In fact, WTC in a classroom is more strongly influenced by one's perception of L2 proficiency and other communication-related skills and abilities than actual communicative competence (Peng, 2014). Based on the model established by MacIntyre and Charos (1996), the more times a person encounters and uses L2 in his daily life, the higher his SPCC level will be. Similar findings have been found in other studies (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Lu & Hsu, 2008) [12], [13], showing that immersive experiences such as living and learning in L2 environment can help to enhance self-confidence and WTC level. [14]

C. WTC in Class and Learner Beliefs (LB)

LB about classroom teaching and learning were significantly associated with classroom WTC ($r = 0.28$, $P < 0.05$). Students' attitudes and opinions on correct teaching and learning practices were reflected on the

items within the scale. When students enter classroom, they usually have their own ideas about how teachers should teach certain subject, what behaviors are considered appropriate for teachers and students etc. Such ideas are deeply rooted in the cultural background, which would profoundly, but unconsciously influence their participation in classroom interactions (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). [15]-[17].

D. WTC in Class and Classroom Environment (CE)

CE perceived by students was positively correlated with WTC ($r = 0.37$, $P < 0.05$), SPCC ($r = 0.28$, $P < 0.05$) and LB ($r = 0.37$, $P < 0.05$). Although the communicative atmosphere, teaching methods, and task quality was evaluated through the participants' after-class reflection rather than live recording, which may lead to some actual differences, the survey was conducted during the normal semester when students attended daily classes. Therefore, the evaluation of their CE was quite promising, so were the test results. In the study involving 579 college students in China, Peng and Woodrow (2010)[17] found that this variable is most prominent in all other factors that can influence the WTC in class, because factors such as the support of the teacher and group cohesion can promote the cognitive and emotional learning and students' recognition and explanation of CE factors will also have an impact on their motivation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As for the variables that may enhance or weaken one's WTC in class, Pearson Correlation test results have confirmed the previous research results, showing that WTC is negatively correlated with CA, and positively correlated with SPCC, LB, and CA. In addition, it has been found that these four variables were related to each other. This can provide some enlightenment for teachers' practice in the classroom. Specifically, although it may be difficult for learners to change their beliefs about appropriate classroom behaviour and their long-term conceptual framework of evaluating teaching and learning experience in the one-year postgraduate program abroad, the ways of eliciting more participation from students and facilitating their learning process need further investigation.

APPENDIX A QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT WTC IN CLASS

This survey deals with the extent to which Chinese postgraduate students are willing to communicate in the whole-class and pair/small-group discussions when studying in the U.K.

It will take you about 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Thank you very much!

Part I Willingness to communicate in English inside the classroom

Directions: The following statements describe some communicative situations/tasks in a class. Please indicate how willing or unwilling you are to engage in these

communication activities using English. Please select the item that best describes your feelings.

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Slightly disagree

4 = Slightly agree 5 = Agree 6 = Strongly agree

1. I am willing to do pair/small-group work with my Chinese peers in English.

2. I am willing to ask the teacher to repeat what he or she just said because I didn't understand.

3. I am willing to give a short presentation to the class.

4. I am willing to do a demonstration with peers in front of the class. [18]

5. I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes to the class.

6. If my Chinese group members ask me questions in English, I am willing to answer them in English.

7. If I need help from my Chinese group members, I am willing to ask them in English.

8. If I have a different idea or opinion from my Chinese group members, I am willing to speak it out in English.

9. I am willing to convey my opinions/ideas in English with the help of gestures or other nonverbal means.

10. I am willing to express complex ideas in English.

Part II Communication anxiety in classroom

Directions: Please indicate how anxious you may feel when you communicate with the teacher and classmates in the following situations using English in your classroom. Please select the item that best describes your feelings.

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Slightly disagree

4 = Slightly agree 5 = Agree 6 = Strongly agree

11. I feel anxious when the teacher asks me a question.

12. I feel anxious when speaking informally to my teacher during classroom activities.

13. I feel anxious when doing demonstration with peers in front of my class.

14. I feel anxious when giving an oral presentation to the rest of the class. [19]

15. I feel anxious when asked to contribute to a formal discussion in class.

16. I feel anxious when I have to speak without preparation in class.

17. I am worried that other students will think my English speaking is not so good. [20]

18. I feel unhappy if other students cannot understand my English in class.

19. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.

20. I feel more tense and nervous in English-medium classes than in Chinese-medium classes.

Part III Perceived communication competence in English

Directions: A number of situations are described below that involve classroom communication using English. Please select the item that best describes your opinions.

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Slightly disagree

4 = Slightly agree 5 = Agree 6 = Strongly agree

21. I am able to do pair/small-group work in English at my desk, with my peers.

22. I am able to tell my group-mates in English about the story of a television show I saw.

23. I am able to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.

24. I can make a conversation with someone in English.

25. I can convey my opinions/ideas in English with the help of gestures or other non-verbal means.

Part IV Learner's beliefs about classroom learning

Directions: The following statements describe some beliefs people have about teaching and learning. Please indicate to what extent you agree with these statements by selecting the item that best describes your opinions.

1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly disagree;

4 = Slightly agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly agree

26. Students should not say anything until you are sure about the answer.

27. I learn little by participating in group work in class.

28. The student who always speaks up in class is showing off.

29. The student who always speaks up in class will be disliked by other classmates.

30. I learn well in a teacher-led class that has no group work.

31. A lecture style should be employed in college classes more often than group work.

32. The teacher is the only one who should convey knowledge to students.

33. The teacher is the only one who can provide the right answers.

Part V Classroom environment

Directions: The following statements describe some characteristics of a classroom. Please indicate how often you feel in this way in the modules you have taken since studying abroad by selecting the item that best describes your feelings.

1 = Always; 2 = Most of the time; 3 = Sometimes;

4 = Never;

34. The teacher is patient in teaching.

35. The teacher encourages students to talk about their opinions or ideas in the class.

36. The teacher provides a timely response to students' concerns. [21]

37. I make friends among students in this class.

38. Tasks designed in this class are attractive.

39. Tasks designed in this class are useful. [22]

40. Activities in this class are clearly and carefully planned.

Part VI Demographic information

41. Gender: Female Male

42. Age: _____

43. Academic major: _____

44. How long have you been studying abroad?

a) Less than a year b) 1–3 years c) longer than 3 years

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest to this work. The authors declare that they do not have any commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in connection with the work submitted.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ren Qian conducted the research. Sun Yuan analyzed the data. Ren Qian and Sun Yuan wrote the paper and both authors had approved the final version.

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