Teacher Support and Student Willingness to Communicate: The Chinese Context

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that explored EFL teachers' awareness of cultural influence on students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the Chinese context and investigated the strategies employed by the teachers to accommodate students' culturally specific WTC. Twelve teachers and twelve classes participated in this study in a Sino-British university in China. Data were collected through video-taped classroom interactions, interviews with teachers, and stimulated-recall interviews with students. The results show that the teachers are aware of the influence of the deeply-rooted Chinese culture on students' communication behavior. They are equally aware of the influence from the student's prior English learning experience in high school, and their tendency to submit to teacher authority in this specific Chinese sociocultural context. The findings suggest that teachers can use culturally accommodating strategies to promote students' willingness to communicate in class.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, teacher support, teacher immediacy, cultural awareness, classroom interaction

Introduction

Students' quietness in class is considered by many second language researchers and pedagogues as a negative attribute. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), students' quietness is typically labelled reticence (Cheng, 2000; Tsui, 1996). As Tsui (1996) notes, the numerous contributing factors to student reticence include low second language (L2) proficiency level, fear of making mistakes and derision, the uneven allocation of turns, and the teacher's intolerance of silence, to name a few. How to reduce student reticence and get them to communicate willingly in L2 learning contexts is of great concern to language researchers

and teachers. Thus, the L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) construct has attracted an increasing amount of attention in the last decade.

L2 WTC refers to an individual's intention to engage in communication in an L2 when free to do so (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998). L2 WTC constitutes an important component of SLA and L2 pedagogy (Kang, 2005; Peng, 2013), as it can facilitate language learning when higher L2 WTC among students translates into increased opportunity for authentic L2 use (MacIntyre & Legatoo, 2011).

L2 WTC in the Chinese Classroom Context

L2 WTC has been researched in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom contexts and the empirical L2 WTC research has identified a range of psychological, contextual and social predictors of WTC, including motivation, personality, self-confidence, interlocutor, group dynamics, topic and task (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Cao, 2011). As MacIntyre, Burns and Jessome (2011, p. 82) point out, "The notion of WTC integrates psychological, linguistic, educational, and communicative dimensions of language that typically have been studied independently of each other…these dimensions of language are not at all separate; rather, they are integrated as features of the students' experience." Cao (2009, 2014) provided empirical evidence to support MacIntyre et al.'s (2011) proposition that all relevant psychological, contextual and linguistic factors work in concert rather than a single factor works independently to create learners' WTC in an ESL context. Similarly, Peng (2012) demonstrated that L2 WTC in the Chinese EFL context is nurtured by the interaction between the learner-internal and learner-external factors inside and beyond the classroom walls.

Research into Chinese students' WTC is relatively scant. Liu's (2005) study examined Chinese tertiary students' unwillingness to communicate in the oral English language classroom by employing questionnaires, classroom observations and reflective journals. The study found that the factors that prohibited students' WTC in class were lack of practice, low English proficiency, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, cultural beliefs, personality, and fear of losing face. This study highlighted the importance of searching for reticence-coping strategies to promote learners' WTC in class.

Peng's (2007) study investigated contextual and situational factors contributing to Chinese EFL learners' WTC in the classroom. Based on questionnaire and interview data, two groups of factors were identified as influencing Chinese students' L2 WTC; namely, individual contextual factors and social contextual factors. The individual context included factors such as communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking and learners' beliefs. The social context included factors of classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support and classroom organisation. She interpreted the eight factors from a cultural perspective, pointing out that communicative competence is not a priority in the culture of learning in China and therefore still a downplayed variable, and arguing that the classroom climate within the Chinese culture of learning and communication can be viewed as an environment built up by the majority of others to which the individual self is affiliated and oriented. She further argued that Chinese learners' WTC encompasses their linguistic, cognitive, affective and, cultural readiness. That is, their reluctant engagement in L2 communication could be attributable to the lack of one or more of such readiness factors.

Teacher Support and Student WTC

In a language classroom, teachers play an influential role in affecting students' WTC. How teachers conduct the lessons and how they interact with students can influence their communicative behavior in classrooms (Lee & Ng, 2010), and as the enforcer of the classroom regulations, teachers have the potential to increase or decrease students' WTC at any moment (MacIntyre et al., 2011). 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. Teacher involvement refers to the quality of the interpersonal relationship of the teacher with his/her students, willingness to dedicate psychological resources to students, enjoyment of interaction with students, and attentiveness to students' needs and emotions. Teacher immediacy refers to communication behavior, either verbal or non-verbal, which can reduce the actual physical or psychological distance between the teacher and students.

In Cao's (2009) study, teaching method, teacher immediacy, and teacher interaction strategies were found to affect students' WTC in ESL classrooms. Some students seemed to like the varied and vivid teaching style possessed of the teacher

and consequently felt motivated to participate in class. Some students were especially enthusiastic about anticipating and volunteering answers to questions from teachers who adopted a more interactive and learner-centred teaching method. Students tended to be more willing to ask questions and participate more actively in class when they liked the teacher of that class. A teacher's approach behavior was reported to produce interpersonal closeness and promote students' WTC. Conversely, when a teacher kept a physical distance from a student, the student would interpret the distance as a source preventing the students' further clarification with the teacher. The students also felt discouraged from talking if the teacher did not seem to be engaged in the interaction with students or failed to acknowledge their answers.

In the Chinese EFL context, Peng (2007) found that teacher support was considered to be important by the students especially in activating their L2 WTC. Teacher support refers to teachers' dedication to and skills in providing both linguistic and non-linguistic aids and fostering a safe classroom environment to boost L2 communication. Teacher's classroom management skills and teaching styles, termed classroom organisation, was also found to have a role to play in influencing students' L2 WTC. In a follow-up study, Peng (2012) revealed that teacher factors, including teaching styles, methods and classroom procedure, were reported by Chinese students to contribute substantially to their WTC in class. The students appreciated teacher support and immediacy behavior, such as giving explanations in students' L1, chatting with students in L2 during break time, and being humorous or telling jokes in class.

Aims and Research Questions

Despite the fact that the influence of teacher on students' WTC has been explored to some extent in both ESL and EFL classroom contexts, this has been investigated through the perspective from students; that is, the findings were obtained from student self-reported interview, questionnaire or journal data. Very few L2 WTC studies have focused on teachers' perceptions of students' WTC in class and what teachers themselves can do to promote students' WTC level, and what teacher supportive behavior is beneficial for increasing students' WTC.

As MacIntyre et al. (2011) remarked, WTC should be viewed as a socially constructed dialogical process in which the verbal and nonverbal actions of the

other person (for example the teacher of the classroom), are critically important to the dynamics of WTC. Taking a dynamic dialogical approach (MacIntyre et al., 2011), this qualitative study aims to investigate (1) teachers' perceptions of students' WTC as situated in the Chinese cultural context, and (2) what teacher supportive behavior promotes students' WTC in class. It aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is teachers' awareness of Chinese students' cultural inclinations toward willingness to communicate in the English classroom?
2. What are teachers' practices in accommodating students' culturally specific willingness to communicate in the English classroom?

Method

Context and Participants

This research took place at a hybrid British-Chinese university in China. Unlike traditional Chinese universities where the medium of instruction in content programmes is Chinese, this university offers courses accredited by a British university and taught exclusively in English. Some of the students are expected to complete the four-year undergraduate study at this university, whereas others are enrolled in a 2+2 programme to complete the first two years of study in China and the last two years in the UK. All the Year 1 and Year 2 students are required to take an EAP and academic skills course, with 10 hours per week for Year 1 and 8 hours per week for Year 2 students. The EAP and academic skills programme is intended to prepare the students for academic studies in English and equip them with the necessary skills to succeed in their further studies in the academic context in the UK. The programme includes developing skills in note-taking in lectures, oral presentations, communication techniques in tutorials and seminars, group projects, writing academic essays and research reports.

Twelve English tutors at the university English Language Centre, and twelve Year 1 and Year 2 classes of approximately 240 students participated in this study. The participants in each class consisted of less than twenty adult Chinese learners of English between the ages of 18 and 19. All twelve tutors had native or near-native English proficiency and they came from a variety of backgrounds. All of them had

an MA in TESOL or Applied Linguistics and two of them held a PhD in Applied Linguistics. They had a range of teaching experience from five to thirty years.

Data Collection

Data collection involved classroom observations, stimulated-recall interviews with students, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Eleven one-hour lessons, attended by eleven different groups of twenty students, were observed and video-taped. Video-taping was abandoned in one class because a student in that class opposed to being video-taped. One of the researchers sat in to take field notes instead. After observation, two to four participants in each class (a total of thirty-three) volunteered for a stimulated-recall interview (Appendix A). The students watched excerpts of video-recorded classroom interaction and made comments on any factors affecting their WTC. All the teachers were also interviewed after the class observations, for their views of the students' WTC behavior and the techniques they used to promote students' WTC (Appendix B).

Data Coding and Analysis

As this paper focused on teacher perception and practice, the twelve teacher interviews and the teacher-fronted activities in the video-taped classes were transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed. The results from the thirty-three stimulated-recall interviews with students will be reported in a future study.

The interview data was coded and analysed using content analysis (Guba & Lincole, 1994). Prior to coding and analysis of the interview data sets, the researchers gained familiarity with the data in the process of transcribing, reading and re-reading the transcripts. Salient and recurring ideas, and especially the occasions/incidents when the teachers commented on the cultural influences on students' WTC and the strategies they employed to promote students' WTC were identified. The initial step of coding involved identification of the incidences. Then codes were assigned to the incidents and an attempt was made to discover patterns or categories between the codes.

Results and Discussion

RQ1. Teacher's Awareness of Cultural Influence on Students' WTC

Based on interview data, three themes relating to teachers' awareness of Chinese students' cultural inclinations to WTC were identified. They are reported as (a) awareness of deeply rooted influence of Chinese culture on WTC; (b) awareness of influences from students' prior English learning experience; (c) awareness of the teacher being an authoritative figure.

Awareness of deeply rooted influence of the Chinese culture

It seems the majority of the teachers being interviewed are aware of the profound influence of Chinese culture on students' WTC and communication behavior in class. They reported that the students are particularly reluctant to respond to questions in a teacher-fronted activity, even though they already know what the correct answer is, and main reasons being not wanting to show off in front of the class. As Jenny remarked,

> "But when they're asked the questions, there's still the cultural embarrassment of volunteering an answer, and I think it's very much of a cultural background thing where they don't want to be seen to be smart or seen always to give the answer … they know the answer but maybe they're not humble enough to trumpet it, I think that is the thing that holds them back. One or two students do volunteer, but they're extraordinarily extroverted students, and others who do volunteer, do it quite hesitatingly, unless they're called by name."

George confirmed the cultural pressure a student might be under when attempting to volunteer answers in teacher-fronted activities, "When they're answering the teacher and they're the only one speaking, for that response they feel the most scrutiny, with the most cultural pressure."

In this EFL setting, the students are inevitably influenced by the Chinese culture. Chinese culture is commonly recognized as collectivistic. The collectivistic values still contribute significantly to the shaping of the Chinese self and to one's perception of the relationship between self and others. The other-directed self means that Chinese students tend to be very sensitive to the judgments from teachers and peers on their language behavior (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Wen & Clement, 2003), therefore, they will be less likely to get involved in classroom

communication. This is similar to Peng and Woodrow's (2010) finding that if a Chinese student believes that frequently volunteering answers in class may be criticized by peers as "showing-off", he or she may develop anxiety before or during speaking up, especially when others are remaining silent. As a result, this kind of culture-fueled beliefs can have a controlling effect on students' self-confidence, which will have a direct effect on students' WTC.

Another teacher, Gabrielle, noted that students might use not wanting to show off as an excuse, because they are more concerned about not getting the answer wrong, "if they answer all the time, classmates might think they just want to show off, but I think it could also be an excuse, they just don't want to answer in case they get it wrong." As Wen and Clement (2003) suggest, Chinese students are more concerned with correctness and less likely to seek out conversations for fear of being wrong, because it is considered shameful to assume to know what one does not know, and this kind of shame generates loss of face. Usually more extroverted and outgoing students are on the whole, more tolerant of ambiguity.

Awareness of influences from students' prior English learning experience

Some teachers are also aware of the influences from the students' prior high school English learning experience, which was negative, on their current WTC and communication behavior in class. Neil reported that students who were discouraged by the teachers in high school English studies could have anxiety participating in teacher-led activities, "I've read that in high schools in China teachers can humiliate students who don't give the answers they expect to receive. That might make students unwilling to or fearful to contribute in class in open class." Tony expressed similar concern that some students had been criticized too much by their high school teachers,

"I think that Chinese English teaching discourages students, most students… I think they've been told that so many times by their teacher that your English is not good enough, not good enough, that they believe it…they've been sold the story that their English is poor, but when you actually get them talking, they're more competent than they believe they are."

Awareness of the teacher being an authoritative figure

Wen and Clement (2003) claim that submission to teacher's authority, a recognized tendency in Chinese culture, provided another way to look at Chinese students' reluctance to participate in classroom communication. "Teachers are expected to impart knowedge, and students are supposed to be mentally instead of verbally active in class" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Being used to this passive way of learning, that is, receiving knowledge from the teacher, students might not feel comfortable studying in a student-centred mode, and they might feel time is wasted in group discussion. They tend to believe that their English proficiency is built on teacher's lectures rather than on their own practice.

These observations are also reflected in the teachers' comments from the interview data. For example, Jenny commented that students were not even used to maintaining eye contact with the teacher let alone participating verbally in open class, "in schools the authority of the teacher is so high, they are not meant to maintain eye contact with authority…The comfort zone is not there that they do eye contact, they don't feel comfortable."

RQ2 Teaching Practice/Teacher Strategies

In response to the second research question which concerns teacher strategies as to accommodating to students' culturally specific WTC and increase their WTC level in class, a number of themes from the interview and classroom interaction data emerged. They include (a) prolonged waiting time and thinking time; (b) focus-on-meaning activities; (c) teacher involvement and teacher immediacy; and (d) teacher elicitation and prompting techniques.

Prolonged waiting time and thinking time

A number of teachers said that they would give students an extended wait time for about six to seven seconds after they have thrown a question to the floor in the open class discussions. They thought that this prolonged wait time suited Chinese students who were used to being called upon in high school and were under the cultural influence of not showing off. This extra wait time would allow them to be more inclined to volunteer answers. Adrian reported that this extended wait time also gives students some extra time to think through their responses and avoids putting students on the spot. He was against the idea of forcing students to answer

because that would slow down the pace and make the students feel bad. This is also a technique reported in Lee and Ng's (2010) study as being workable to reduce students' reticence in English classes in Hong Kong.

Focus-on-meaning activities

Previous research has shown that when students focus more on the meaning than on the form, they are more tolerant of ambiguity and are thus more actively engaged in communication with less anxiety (Wen & Clement, 2003). This study has also shown that students tend to be more willing to participate in focus-on-meaning type of activities, such as role plays, seminars and debates. George, Neil and Peter commented that when students did debates or role plays, they were very much involved in the process of thinking through the arguments or imagining themselves in the given roles, and they got beyond worrying about the accuracy of the language, focused on advancing their ideas and opinions, and became more risk-taking in the participation process. Robert said that seminars tended to generate more willing participation from different students, rather than one or two more dominant students. It might be because the teacher was sitting back and acting as a facilitator only and the teacher's power was reduced and sort of handed over to the students, and that, in turn, encouraged more willing participation.

Teacher involvement and teacher immediacy

Teacher's involvement and immediacy behavior were reported in previous studies to influence students' WTC in class. These include the quality of interpersonal relationship of the teacher with students, attentiveness to students' needs and emotions, and verbal or non-verbal behavior to reduce the physical and psychological distance between the teacher and students (Cao, 2009; Peng, 2007, 2012; Wen & Clement, 2003). In this study, the teachers reported on several teacher immediacy and involvement strategies to reduce students' anxiety in participation and encourage quieter students to participate. For example, Gabrielle and Neil tended to give quiet students a chance to share the ideas before they contributed to the teacher, so at least they had the confidence knowing their peers had agreed with their ideas. Stanley's strategy for getting quiet students involved was to include them but not put them in the centre of attention. David thought sometimes quiet students would surprise him when he prompted them at a specific question because they would give him an excellent answer which would lead to something else.

Teacher elicitation and prompting techniques

An examination of the classroom interaction data from teacher-fronted activities revealed that the teachers used a range of elicitation and prompting techniques to promote willing participation from students. Excerpt 1 below shows the techniques employed by Alex in the Year 1 EAP for Engineering class.

Excerpt 1:

1. T3: *Have a look at this (pointing at a socket on the wall), what's this thing here?* (Ss looking at it with interest) Do you know this in English, s--- (No response)

2. T3: *Socket, an electric socket, an electric wall socket, how many how many holes has that thing got?*

3. SS: Five

4. T3: *There are actually two different ones. Why are there two different ones?*

5. S1: Different standard

6. T3: *Two different standards, if I want to bring in something called an adapter,* (board up 'adapter'), *how many of you have been to different countries where electricity standard is different?*

7. S2: Hong Kong, Japan, England

8. T3: *What happens in Hong Kong or England, do you know?* (eye contact with S2) *With electricity, is it the same as China?*

9. S3: No (from another table, T3 turns around to look at him)

10. S2: It's strange

11. T3: *It's strange, how is it strange* (turns to S2 and moves closer to him) *if I've brought my laptop and tried to plug it in in Hong Kong,*

12. S3: It won't work

13. S4: It won't work

14. S2: It can't get in

(Year 1, Engineering class)

In this excerpt, the teacher Alex asked two types of questions, display and referential questions. Display questions refer to questions that the teacher already knows the answer to and only asks them for comprehension check. Referential or open-ended questions are those which request information unknown to the teacher (Clifton, 2006; Cullen, 1998). Referential questions are found to elicit longer and

more complex learner responses, and unsolicited turns from students in the teacher-dominated IRF pattern. Display questions, on the other hand, yield minimum learner responses (Toth, 2011). As the excerpt shows, Alex started with display questions in lines 1 and 2 to check prior knowledge. But he then followed up with referential questions asking why (line 4) and how (line 11), to engage students with sustained communication with the teacher. He also used techniques of relating to students' personal experience (line 6) and more elicitation with a specific student (line 8).

Conclusion

This small scale study explored teacher perception of students' culturally specific communicative behavior in English classrooms in the context, and investigated their strategies for prompting students' willingness to communicate in class. The results show that teachers were aware of the profound influence of Chinese culture on students' WTC, as well as the influence from their prior English learning experience and their submission to teacher authority in this specific sociocultural context. The teachers reported that they used a range of accommodating teacher involvement and immediacy strategies to encourage willing participation from students in class.

An obvious limitation with this study lies in its small sample size. Since this study employed classroom observation and video-taping, an observer's paradox problem might have affected the authenticity of data. Some students reported in the interview that they participated more actively in the observed classes than in their normal English classes. Also, a member check should have been performed to test the interpretation of the interview data among the teacher participants.

Despite these limitations, this study has pedagogical implications for teachers who work in both the EFL and ESL contexts. This study shows the students' sociocultural background can have a determining influence on their willingness to participate in language classes. Teachers should not simply attribute students' reticence to individual factors such as motivation or personality, nor linguistic factors such as language proficiency level. Instead, teachers need to be mindful of the deeply rooted sociocultural influences (particularly among the many collectivistic cultures around the world) and employ culturally accommodating strategies to promote students' WTC, including proving teacher support, using meaning-fo-

cused activities, giving extra waiting and thinking time for students, using appropriate elicitation and prompting strategies, as well as trying to include quiet students in discussions.

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Appendix A: Stimulated-recall Interview Questions

General questions:
1. How did you feel about today's class?
2. What did you feel happy/unhappy with?
3. Did you feel like talking in today's class? Why/Why not?

Stimulated-recall questions:
1. What were you thinking right then/at this point?

2. Can you tell me what you were thinking at that point?
3. I saw you were laughing/looking confused/saying something there, what were you thinking then?
4. Can you remember what you were thinking when she said that/those words?
5. Can you tell me what you thought when she said that?

Probing questions:

I was wondering if I could ask you something. I'm just curious. I noticed when you were talking about the recording you mentioned …quite a lot. Is that what you are most concerned about when you are speaking? Can you say a bit more about this?

Appendix B: Guidelines for Teacher Interviews

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching at this school?
3. Which courses have you taught at this school?
4. Could you describe the goals and content of the course you're currently teaching?
5. What's your general impression on the students' participation in this class?
6. What do you think an active learner in class is like? Can you name some of the students who are active in this class and explain why?
7. Do you have any student whom you would consider more or less willing to communicate in a particular context, for example, whole class, small groups, or pairs? What clues do you have that lead you to perceive them as behaving as such?
8. Do you have any students in this class whom you would consider very quiet in class? What do you think inhibited them to communicate in class?
9. In what types of class or task are students more willing to communicate?
10. Can you think of a time when the class was particularly active? When was that? What materials did you use? Could you describe the event?