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Capturing Willingness to Communicate in English of Chinese Students

Studying Abroad in an EFL Context

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With the globalization of the international community, despite the existence of diverse cultures and frequent communication, there is a clear sign that more students are willing to study abroad. Especially for Chinese, UNESCO in 2006 statistically reported that China is the country with the largest number of students studying abroad in the world (Tang, 2006). In addition, as English is the most widely used international language, the proficiency level of English is consequently vital in applying for overseas programs at any level of education. In terms of domestic English teaching policy, the Chinese National University English Test Committee agreed that the CET (College English Test) examination system still needs to be further improved, and suggested that the oral examination should be included in the compulsory subjects as soon as possible (news.e21.cn, 2019). On the other hand, the reform of CET-4 and CET-6 regulation that has been drafted since 2004 claims the examination committee will actively develop the computerized speaking test, in order to further expand the scale of oral English test and promotes oral English teaching

(old.moe.gov.cn, 2005). This implies that college English education focuses more on language use especially on oral output. However, there are few opportunities to use a second language (L2) outside the classroom. Therefore, how an individual is willing to communicate in the target language (TL) out of class is essential in improving English speaking.

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in L2 was defined by MacIntyre and other researchers in 1998 as “an individual’s readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using the L2.” Thus, the term WTC can be regarded as a predictor to indicate learners’ willingness to communicate by using the TL. Furthermore, many scholars have confirmed that WTC is critical to the success of foreign language learning; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) in particular, believe that improving students’ WTC should be one of foreign language teaching’s top priorities. According to various previous studies, environmental factors, individual differences (IDs) and time are all thought to be influencing factors of WTC. In further breakdown, environmental factors includes socio-educational, communicative and cross-cultural environments; factors of IDs contains communication apprehension (CA), gender, international posture (IP), motivation, personality and self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC). All of the variables are explained separately and stressed with examples in the literature review chapter.

Although WTC has been extensively researched around the world, WTC research in English is still in its infancy in most EFL countries. In addition, the term of L2

WTC is examined to be significantly different from the L1 WTC, of which is highly unstable in nature and varies depending on the situation rather than a personality-based trait. Moreover, most of the studies focus on EFL learners study in their home countries, while less concern has been given to international students who are studying abroad in the EFL contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to gain a thorough understanding of the major influencing factors of international EFL learners' WTC and their levels of WTC in English based on the WTC Model (MacIntyre et al., 1998). According to the WTC Model, a variety of factors were investigated to confirm if they hold any relationship with learners' WTC. Therefore, the two research questions that guide this paper are as follows:

- (1) What is the general level of Chinese university students' WTC inside and outside of the classroom?
- (2) What factors have influenced their WTC in English?

In order to find answers to the research questions, both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to examine 30 participants' levels of WTC; six of them have also participated in a semi-structured interview to provide free descriptions about any factors that have an impact on their WTC. Through online random sampling, thirty participants completed the Willingness to Communicate in English Questionnaire (WTCQ) in April 2020. All of them are studying in Tokyo, Japan. For the selection of instruments for the quantitative study, the author referred to the questionnaire used in the prior study of Shi (2008) and made some modifications to it. The WTCQ contains Willingness to Communicate Inside the Classroom Scale (WTCIS) and Willingness to

Communicate Outside the Classroom Scale (WTCOS) with a total of thirty-one items. All scales uses a five-point Likert scale to allow participants to choose the option that best fit their own situation, ranging from one point to five points, with one being the least willing and five being the most willing. In addition, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with eight questions to determine the major factors influencing learners' WTC for the qualitative analysis. Each interview lasted about fifteen minutes, and all questions were posed to the participants online. The responses of the participants were recorded in text on WeChat, and the author classified their interview data using coding during the qualitative analysis. Finally, their levels of WTC in English, potential factors affecting WTC, as well as codes and percentages of participants' responses from the interview are incorporated into related tables.

By using *SPSS* 26.0 software, all the survey data are statistically analyzed, and the researcher also conducted a secondary survey of six participants after one semester in which they were both quantitatively and qualitatively assessed for WTC. The results demonstrate that most of the Chinese international students' WTC in English were generally not so high; gender did not seem to have any direct relationship with Willingness to Communicate in English Outside the Classroom (WTCO) whereas interlocutors and communication situations had a positive correlation with WTCO; major factors that influenced their WTC in English were roughly identified as: motivation and interest in learning English, L2 self-confidence, personality, the particular communication partner, the specific communication atmosphere and the setting of the conversation. Past learning experiences, in addition

to their special status as trilingual learners, were also considered to be one of the factors influencing their WTC, as past experiences can affect learners' attitudes toward the subjects they are currently studying.

Despite the fact that the WTC of 30 participants was thoroughly examined this time, the WTCO was investigated as the focus this time due to the uneven number of questions in WTCIS (six items) and WTCOS (twenty-five items). Another reason for this is that free communication activities outside of the classroom reflect students' desire to communicate in a foreign language more realistically and naturally.

Additionally, the WTC levels of the six individuals were roughly compared despite the difference in the number of participants in the second survey and the number of participants in the first investigation. The findings revealed that the six participants' WTC levels did not change significantly after one semester. As a result, the limitations of this thesis can be seen in the imbalanced number of questionnaire questions, the uneven number of participants, and the singularity of participants' backgrounds (most students come from the same major at the same university).

Moreover, this research did not record the cities in which learners grew up. In China, where multiple education systems coexist, it is also highly likely that the city of residence influences students' English proficiency and perceptions of the importance of English, and indirectly has an impact on students' WTC.

Considering their special status as EFL international students who are studying in an EFL context outside of their home country, several pedagogical suggestions are made: First, teachers are suggested to value their students' prior learning experiences

and acknowledge the existence of individual differences; Second, instructors are encouraged to prepare diversified communicative activities; Third, letting students to imagine them using English, and to write down as short diaries or journals are considered as effective; Finally, inviting guest speakers who can speak two foreign languages or more could inspire those EFL studying-abroad students. More importantly, the fundamental change of WTC lies not only in the guidance of the teacher, but also in the learners themselves. Therefore, students are suggested to pay attention to the subject of English, and while English is not as important in everyday life in the EFL environment, they should actively pursue any opportunity to practice English, both inside and outside the classroom.