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Journal of Educational Theory and Management

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Exploring Factors Influencing Willingness to Communicate in a Chinese Ethnic Minority College

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: 2 February 2026
Accepted: 12 February 2026
Published Online: 30 March 2026

Keywords:
Keywords Willingness to Communicate
motivation
self-perceived communication competence
speaking anxiety
multiple linear regression

ABSTRACT

This study adopts a quantitative method to examine whether motivation, self-perceived communication competence and speaking anxiety can predict learners' willingness to communicate in a Chinese ethic minority EFL class. 190 students participated in the study.The findings reveal that the combination of three independent variables, motivation, self-perceived communication competence and speaking anxiety can predict students WTC inside the classroom, with motivation (r=0.302) as the moderate influencing variable and speaking anxiety (r=0.569)significantly predicting WTC.Different from the prior studies, self-perceived communication competence contributes little to the regression equation. Future study can explore other variables affecting willingness to communicate in the Chinese ethnic minority college.

1. Introduction

L2 acquisition is a complex system involving numerous factors, including individual differences, psychological factors, L1 transfer, cognitive factors, social factors etc. The study of L2 acquisition from the psychological perspective has long been a tradition, and a considerable number of research has focused on learners' language aptitude, motivation, and anxiety[1]. In addition to these contributive psychological factors, L2 acquisition lies in both input and output. External factors also play a vital role in the acquisition of L2 language. Many brilliant thoughts has expounded on the relationship between input and output. Swain's Output Hypothesis has proved the importance of output. Language use has been the ultimate goal of language learning. Peter. D. MacIntyre (1998) said that the manifestation of language attainment can be reflected in the authentic communication by language learners. Willingness to communicate is the precursor of communication. So, the study of WTC has drawn increasing attention among researchers and practitioners. However, studies on WTC are overwhelmingly set under western constructs (MacIntyre, 1997, 2007, 2010,2021). Given the complexity of WTC, Wen & Clément (2003) constructed a conceptualization of WTC in Chinese setting. Wen & Clément (2003) constructed WTC in L2 influenced by Chinese cultural values by making some modifications of the heuristic model. Chinese scholars make efforts to elaborate WTC in Chinese setting (Peng, J.-E., & Woodrow, L. 2010; JE Peng,2019;Yue Zhen ,2016; J Zhang et al.2018,2022).However, researches conducted by Chinese scholars are most carried out in normal universities, few studies are done in universities for ethnic minorities. The

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 DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v10i1.36510

identification of variables affecting WTC among students in universities for nationalities is required in order to improve students' language proficiency and communication competence, which has theoretical, pragmatic, and pedagogical implications. The purpose of this study is to identify variables affecting WTC, and three proposed variables are examined in the research[2].

This present study consists of an introduction of research design, a discussion of the population and sample. In addition, the study also presents the data collection procedure, what's more, data analysis is conducted in present research.

2. Literature Review

2.1Willingness to communicate

Much of the initial research show that WTC is associated with low communication apprehension, high extroversion and low anomie; it is also correlated with postive self-esteem and self-perceived communication competence(McIntyre & Charos, 1996;McIntyre, 1994).

As regard to personality-based variables, a number of researchers have carried out studies on it. MacIntyre (1996) examined the ways in which personality variables combine to influence WTC personality variables strongly (anomie, self-esteem, introversion, alienation, communication apprehension, self-perceived communication competence). Besides personality, emotions (enjoyment, fear and so on) are also the variables affecting WTC (Hui Wang, Anqi Peng, &Meagan M. Patterson,2021; Dewaele & Pavelescu ,2021). Up to now, studies on WTC from affective-cognitive level are commonly seen in academia.

Many prior studies approach WTC at trait-levle, which emphasize stability, and WTC show high correlation with identified affecting variables across different situations (MacIntyre, 2020). Yashima (2002) constructed a WTC model in Japanese EFL context, using the model developed by MacIntyre and Charo ,together with a socioeducational model by Gardner as the framework. In his research, he tested the variables affecting WTC in Japan using structural equation modeling[3]. As expected, he found international posture defined by Yashima had a direct influence on WTC. Also, Yashima (2002) found the variable, L2 communication confidence was strongly related to WTC. The model constructed by Yashima had a significant implication for the Asian countries. However, his study just represented a cross-section study of WTC, further research in the dynamic nature of WTC among the Japanese is needed.

2.2 Communication anxiety

Anxiety is defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system"(Spielberger 1983, as cited in Horwitz 1986). Communication anxiety is a treat-like quality, which refers to "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons"(McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, as cited in MacIntyre, 1999). Communication anxiety is the variable most immediately affecting WTC (McIntyre, 1994). Communication anxiety is caused by the combination of introversion and low self-esteem(McIntyre 1994).MacIntyre et al. (1999) examined WTC from trait perspective using Structural Equation Model and confirmatory factor analysis, specifically extraversion, emotional stability, self-esteem, communication apprehension and perceived communication competence[4]. 226 were enrolled. The results showed that there was a negative path from communication apprehension to self-perceived communication competence(-.33), which indicated that communication anxiety exerts its influence on WTC indirectly through self-perceived communication competence[5].

Numerable findings show that communication anxiety is significantly correlated with L2 WTC(Majid Elahi Shirvan et al. 2019;). Majid Elahi Shirvan et al. (2019) employed meta-analysis to investigate the overall average correlation between three high-evidence variables (perceived communicative competence, language anxiety and motivation) and L2 WTC. The results of the meta-analysis showed that all three variables significantly correlate with L2 WTC, language anxiety r=-.29 and CI =[-.38 to -.19].

2.3 Motivation

Motivition is viewed as the one of the major factors that affect L2 language attainment (Dornyei, 1998). Motivation is treated as a stable trait, conceptualized as the generalized attitude toward the L2 learning situation, such as the appraisal of the course or the teacher(Dornyei, 2001). The 1990s extended the conception of motivation by adding cognitive and situated features to it, and later, motivation was viewed as a more dynamic factor which is in a constant process of change and evolution under the internal and external influences (Dornyei, 2001).

The significant correlation of motivation with WTC has long been built[6]. Some studies on motivation reported a direct relationship with WTC (Fallah, 2014).However, quite a few studies reported an indirect path to WTC. Denies and Yashima (2015) investigated the relationship

DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v10i1.36510

between classroom WTC and societal WTC by verifying a proposed model by structural equation modelling (SEM), covering several commonly studied determinants of WTC, specifically, motivation, integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, anxiety and perceived competence. Unlike prior studies on WTC using English as the target language, their studies investigated French as a second language in Flanders, in which more than 1,000 grade 12 students joined in the study. In the study, motivation was measured through three subsets: desire to learn French, attitude toward learning French, and motivational intensity. In consistent with previous studies, motivation neither has a direct relation to classroom WTC nor in societal WTC[7].

2.4 Self-perceived communicative competence

Communicative competence consists of the knowledge required to understand and produce messages in a language. Various models of communicative competence have been proposed, but most of them recognize that it entails both linguistic competence—for example, knowledge of grammatical rules—and pragmatic competence—for example, knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour in a particular situation.

Ceke-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) have posited five main constituent competencies making up communicative language abilities.The first of these competencies is linguistic competence. This includes knowledge of the basic elements of communication, including syntactic and morphological rules, lexical resources, and the phonological and orthographic systems needed to realize spoken or written communication. A second dimension of communicative competence is discourse competence. This refers to competence in selecting, sequencing, and arranging words, structures, sentences, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text. The main subareas include cohesion, deixis, coherence, generic structure, and the conversational structure inherent to the turn-taking system in conversation.Actional competence refers to matching communicative intent with linguistic form, based on the knowledge of an inventory of verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force. From a pragmatic perspective, this component can be conceived as "pragmalinguistic competence" (cf. Thomas, 1983). The key units are speech acts, which are utterances that are used to carry out actions (e.g., giving a command or making a request), and language functions, as well as speech act sets, which are conventionalized patterns and sequences of speech acts. Development in this competence is required to be able to accomplish one's goal when engaging in communication. Sociocultural competence involves knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context, in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in language use. It also might be conceived as a "sociopragmatic" counterpart of pragmalinguistic competence (Thomas, 1983). Key areas involved include social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and nonverbal communicative factors. This competence enables speakers to handle the situational variation of communication discussed above. Finally, strategic competence refers to knowledge of communication strategies, which are considered to be verbal and nonverbal devices that allow a speaker to compensate for deficiencies in any of the other underlying competencies of communicative competence[8]. Strategic competence can be used to cope with language-related problems of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication. In other words, strategic competence is a communication "first aid kit" that can be called into action when someone cannot remember a word, does not understand something, or when his or her mind goes temporarily blank. Although a certain level of all the other competencies is required for effective communication, a speaker can go a long way by relying primarily on strategic competence (e.g., speakers who seem to communicate fluently with only 100 words). Therefore, the development of strategic competence is assumed to have a particularly important role in contributing to one's linguistic self-confidence.

3. Research design

Willingness to communicate (WTC) was addressed by McCroskey &Richmond. At first, WTC was applied to L1, and later, MacIntyre extended it to SLA study. Since then many researchers have done numerous studies on WTC. WTC is proved to be affected by traits factors as well as state-level factors. The present study will combine quantitative and qualitative analysis. A questionnaire will be conducted to test the variable affecting WTC. Meanwhile, interviews are carried out.

Motivation is the thriving issue in SLA study. Gardner (as cited in, Jian-E Peng, 2010) has proposed a socio-educational model, in which integrative motivation was addressed. Yashima (2002) has examined the integrative motivation in Japanese EFL context. In his study, WTC is influenced by L2 learning motivation through the path to L2 communication confidence. However, integrative motivation is not suitable for the setting in China which is a monolingual and mono-cultural nation. Wen (2003) has suggested affiliation and task-orientedness explain more students' motivational tendency. Jian-E Peng and Woodrow (2020) has constructed a model of WTC in Chinese EFL classroom context. In their study, they employ

 DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v10i1.36510

Noels' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as an informative framework. Their study shows that WTC in English is connected with motivation to learn English through the indirect path to communication confidence in English. The scale of motivation in the present study is drawn from Xu Hongchen's work (2013).

Self-perceived communication competence was originally drawn from the study on reticence by Philips (as cited in, MacIntyre, 1999.).Communicators with low self-perceived communication competence are those who perceive themselves poor communicators, and thus tend to be least willing to communicate (as cited in, MacIntyre, 1999). MacIntyre (1999) also emphasized the perception of one's abilities. MacIntyre's research (1999) reveals that self-perceived communication competence strongly predict WTC. The present study is situated in an EFL classroom of a local ethnic minority college, where tradition Chinese culture has exerted a profound influence on language learners. Ellis (2005) said social context has an effect on L2 acquisition. Wen (2003) also points out Chinese language learners are under the great influence of Confucianism[9]. Many Chinese English learners would perceive themselves as poor communicators, thus they show low level of willingness to communicate. So, self-perceived communication will directly connect with WTC.

Speaking anxiety is a well-researched issue in WTC. Horwitz, et al.(1986, as cited in Wu Wensheng, 2009) developed a questionnaire which is widely used by researchers. Wu Wensheng (2009) has developed Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Self-Schema Questionnaire (FLSASQ), which is widely applied in the Chinese setting. Speaking anxiety will directly affect WTC. MacIntyre (2009) has examined the variables affecting WTC, in which communication apprehension is directly related with WTC.

3.1 Research questions and hypothesis

This study seeks to obtain data about variables affecting WTC in a local college of ethnic minority for further study. The following questions are addressed.

1. Can the three independent variables, motivation, self-perceived language proficiency and speaking anxiety, predict students WTC inside the classroom?

2. Can the combination of the three independent variables predict WTC?

H_{o1} :$\beta_{motivation}=0$ H_{11}: $\beta_{motivation} \neq 0$

H_{02}:$\beta_{self\text{-}perceived\ language\ proficiency}=0$ H_{12}:$\beta_{self\text{-}perceived\ language\ proficiency} \neq 0$

H_{03}:$\beta_{speaking\ anxiety}=0$ H_{13}:$\beta_{speaking\ anxiety} \neq 0$

H_{04}:$R^2=0$ H_{14} :$R^2 \neq 0$

These null hypotheses (Ho1 to H04) mean that the regression coefficient of each independent variable (motivation, self-perceived language proficiency and speaking anxiety) to the dependent variable (WTC) is assumed to be zero, that is, the independent variables cannot predict the dependent variable significantly. R^2 is used to measure the total amount predicted by all independent variables to dependent variable. So the null hypothesis H_{04} means that the total number of predictions of all the combinations of independent variables on the dependent variable is zero. The significance level is set as a=0.05. Then, if the test result is $p \leq 0.05$, the null hypothesis will be rejected and accept the research hypothesis. If it's $p > 0.05$, the null hypothesis will be accepted.

The prototype of the regression equation is: Y=a+ b1X-1+b2Xz+b3X3

3.2 Population and Sampling Design

The survey is conducted among 190 students (male, n=39 ; female, n=151),with 123 majoring in Chinese language and literature, and 67 majoring in media, and all of them come from researcher's instructed classes. They have learned English for almost 9 years, because English class is administered as a compulsory class from the third grade in elementary school. They all have taken the college entrance examination. Conventionally, the number of female students will outnumber male students who are in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature.

3.3 Instrumentation

In order to investigate the variables affecting WTC inside the class, the research employs quantitative method, specifically questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of two parts, with a demographic in the first section and 3 scales measuring WTC inside the class, motivation, self-perceived language competence and speaking anxiety respectively in the second part. The first part consists of two questions concerning gender and major. The second part are tentative questions to explore variables affecting WTC, including motivation, self-perceived competence, and speaking anxiety. The scales of motivation were adapted from the Xu Hongchen's scale for motivation (2013) in China, of which learning motivation is employed, covering learning motivation for grades, learning motivation for self-development, learning motivation for information media. For the scales of motivation, there are 3 items for grades, 3items measuring self-development, and 3 items for information media. For measuring self-perceived competence, 8 items are used, of which 4 items are used to test self-perceived

DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v10i1.36510

language abilities, and another 4 are for self-perceived linguistic knowledge[10]. The scales of self-perceived language competence are also adapted from Xu Hongchen's work (2013). All these items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale in the tentative study. 1= "totally disagree", 2= "disagree", 3= "uncertain", 4= "agree" and 5= "quite agree". Students are required to choose one of them according to their own situation.

For investigating speaking anxiety, the scale is drawn from Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety self-Schema Questionnaire (FLSASQ), which is designed by a Chinese scholar, Wu Wensheng(2009).FLASQ can more accurately distinguish different types of language learning emotional deficiency. 5 items are measure on a 5-point Likert scale in the study[11].

WTC in English is adapted from WTC scales in Shi Yunzhang's doctoral dissertation (2008), *A Study of Chinese English Learners' Willingness to Communicate Inside and Outside the Classroom*. 10 items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. 1= "totally disagree", 2= "disagree", 3= "uncertain", 4= "agree" and 5= "quite agree".

4. Data collection

The data is to collect through Wen Juan Xing (https://wenjuanxing.com). 208 students have participated in it. Due to the invalidity of the questionnaire, for example, the response to survey is too short, less than 90 seconds, and incomplete answers, only 177 subjects are selected, in which male=37, female=140 . Those who major in Chinese language and literature are 114 students; 63students majoring in media.

Interviews are conducted during the break time of regularly scheduled class, about 10 minutes. During the interval time, 2-3 students will be invited. The participants are chosen according to performance in English class. The chosen participants are those who are least willing to communicate in group discussion, and those ethnic minority students.

5. Data analysis and Results

Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the best linear combination of motivation, self-perceived language competence and speaking anxiety for predicting students' WTC inside the classroom[12]. The means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1. The regression method of "enter" showed that the combination of the three independent variables could predict WTC,F (3,173)=21.964, P<0.05, with all of them significantly contributing to the prediction (P<0.05) except self-perceived language competence(P>0.05)(Table 2).The Beta weights, presented in Table 3, suggested that motivation and speaking anxiety contribute most to predicting WTC. For motivation, it's represented from three subsectional scores, in which motivation for scores is not an efficient variable predicting WTC (r=0.110, β=-0.089,t=-1.120,p>0.05,df=171).The standardized regression formulation is WTC=0.569xSpeaking anxiety + 0.302 x Motivation-0.178xSelf-perceived language proficiency.

Table1 Descriptives and Correlation Coefficients of Variables (n=177)

	Variables	Descriptives		Correlation Coefficients		
	M	SD	1	2	3	
DV	WTC	2.83	0.61	0.28*	0.22*	0.4*
IV	1.Motivation	3.4	0.63	□	0.148*	0.81*
□	2.Self-perceived competence	2.42	0.74	□	□	0.79*
□	3.Speaking anxiety	2.78	0.83	□	□	□

*P<0.05

Table 2 Multiple Linear Regression: Important Statistics(n=177)

Variables		R	R2	Ajusted R2	F 3,173	Beta	t 173	Tolerance	VIF
DV	WTC	0.53	0.276	0.263	21.964*	□	□	□	□
IV	Motivation	□	□	□	□	0.302	4.615*	0.975	1.026
□	Self-perceived competence	□	□	□	□	-0.178	-1.688	0.375	2.668
□	speaking anxiety	□	□	□	□	0.569	5.428*	0.381	2.626

*p<0.05

 DOI: http://doi.org/10.12345/jetm.v10i1.36510

Two research questions are examined. The three independent variables, motivation, self-perceived communication competence and speaking anxiety can predict students WTC inside the classroom, with motivation (r=0.302) as the moderate influencing variable and speaking anxiety (r=0.569)significantly predicting WTC and self-perceived communication competence contributing little to the regression equation. Yashima (2002) has proven that "merely having motivation doesn't seem to be sufficient for an individual's being willing to communicate"(p.62) and he found a path from motivation to confidence in L2 communication was significant. Jian-E Peng (2010) measured motivation under the intrinsic and extrinsic framework, and also found there was direct path from motivation to communication confidence. Contrary to the previous study (MacIntryre & Charos, 1996), self-perceived communication competence has contributed little to WTC. In line with MacIntyre's finding (MacIntryre & Charos, 1996), apprehension, although not strong (r<0.7), has a significant influencing level. MacIntyre (1999) found apprehension exert its influence on WTC through competence.

Conclusion

The research has shown that motivation and speaking anxiety (0.3<r<0.7) have a moderate influence on WTC, and self-perceived language proficiency (r<0.3) shows low degree correlation. The combination of the three independent variables can predict WTC.

The present study has several methodological weaknesses, for example, the Multiple Linear Regression is not the best one, other approaches could be applied, like structural equation modelling and so on. The variable of self-perceived communication competence needs re-assessment. Future study could direct to actual language proficiency, which could be more accurately measured. The items on measuring motivation and speaking anxiety could be further developed. What's more, other variables affecting WTC needs to be identified in the future study, meanwhile, qualitative study should be integrated into the research.

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