An Empirical Study of Senior High School Students’ Willingness to Communicate in English in the Chinese Context

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Abstract. Willingness to communicate (WTC), which means to communicate with others using a certain kind of language, has been an important concept in explaining the first and second language communication. In order to have a deep understanding of the situation of senior high school students’ WTC in English, we made an empirical research on it. In the present study, the quantitative method and interview will be used and 304 participants are from two senior high schools in Jilin Province. From the study results, it can be seen that: Generally, senior high school students have a lower level of willingness to communicate. On the other hand, senior high school students are experiencing a high level of English classroom anxiety, which can have a significant negative influence on students’ WTC. Based on the results of this research, some feasible suggestions for schools, English teachers, students and parents are proposed.

Introduction

In recent 30 years, many researchers began to make a research on WTC. Some affective factors, especially the language anxiety was found to have impact on students’ WTC, and then it will influence the frequency and level of language communication (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). China has the largest population of English learners in the world, while in the English for Foreign Language Classroom Situations (EFLCS), English learners in China lack chance to communicate with others in English. Skehan (1989) pointed out that language learners have to talk in order to learn. MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggested that the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them. In this study, 304 students from two senior high schools are selected as an example to analyze the situation of senior high school students’ WTC in English. This study will help students and teachers to understand their WTC in English in EFLCS and the factors which can influence students’ WTC, so that they can find suitable methods to improve their oral English.

A Brief Literature Review on WTC

There are many researchers who have been devoted to studying willingness to communicate, and WTC has been defined in different ways. McCroskey and Baer (1985) defined WTC as “the probability that an individual choose to initiate communication, when free to do so.” In the field of second language acquisition, MacIntyre, Clément, Dornyei & Noels (1998) defined WTC as “the readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a second language.”

Though WTC was defined differently, some common points can be concluded as follows.

First, it was believed that most students are experiencing a lower level of WTC inside and outside classroom and they have low self-perceived communicative competence (Peng Jian-E, 2008; Wu Xudong, 2008).
Second, WTC can be influenced both by situation-specific variables and also the personality-based stable variables. Peng Jian-E (2008) found that there are totally eight factors can influence students’ WTC, and they can be classified into two types: 1) personal variables, including communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking, and learner beliefs; 2) situational variables, including classroom atmosphere, group cohesiveness, teacher support, and classroom organization.

Third, language anxiety was found which can have significant negative influence on WTC. MacIntyre et al. (2011) made an investigation on WTC. They found that students will communicate with people who they are very familiar with. Compared with teachers, students would like to be evaluated by their peers, by doing that it can decrease their anxiety from negative evaluation from teachers. They also found that the relationship between language anxiety and WTC will change moment-to-moment, and students will link one task to the preceding one. When she felt anxious, she abandoned the next difficult task.

In all, most studies mainly focus on university students’ WTC, English or non-English majors, with less attention to WTC in English of senior high school students. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the situation of students’ WTC in English and the factors which can influence WTC, so that some effective methods can be found to increase students’ WTC and communicative competence.

Research Design

This study is to address the question “What are the students’ levels of WTC?” The participants were 304 students from two senior high schools in Jilin Province. The questionnaire was based on MacIntyre et al.’s (2001) Willingness to Communicate inside the Classroom Scale. The revised scale includes 27 items as well, and it is also divided into four dimensions, consisting of comprehension (6 items, α=.81), speaking (7 items, α=.81), reading (6 items, α=.77), and writing (8 items, α=.82), and the reliability of the whole scale is .93. The whole research was carried in April, 2016. 420 students were asked to complete the questionnaire and 385 questionnaires were validly returned.

Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire data, it was found that the senior high school students were generally experiencing a lower level of willingness to communicate. Table 1 presents the research findings of students’ willingness to communicate with means and standard deviations.

Table 1. General description of senior high school students’ WTC in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>19.62</td>
<td>4.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>17.15</td>
<td>5.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>15.78</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>37.00</td>
<td>18.16</td>
<td>6.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWTC</td>
<td>36.00</td>
<td>121.49</td>
<td>70.74</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=304

TWTC: Total Scores of Willingness to Communicate

The data indicates that, in general, senior high school students were experiencing a lower level of willingness to communicate in English, for the mean score of the general WTC is $M=70.74$ ($SD=19.44$), and it is lower than the median value 81. In this thesis, the research subjects were senior high school students. Under the heavy pressure of College Entrance Examination, most of students and English teachers mainly focused on vocabulary and grammar practice. In an English class, there was a little time left for students to communicate in English. As time went on, students have become used to this kind of boring classroom, and they thought that getting higher scores in
vocabulary and grammar is more important than oral English training, because there is no oral test in English examination. Therefore, students’ willingness to communicate is decreased.

In the four different dimensions, WTC in comprehension is the highest among them, whose means value is $M=19.62$. It indicated that senior high school students were fond of listening to English in the classroom. With the development of technology, English teaching recourses are becoming more and more abundant and diverse. More importantly, listening competence will be tested in English examination. Thus, both teachers and students would pay more attention to the listening practice. Therefore, students’ WTC in comprehension was stimulated and increased.

Compared with the comprehension, students’ WTC in reading has the lowest mean value $M=15.78$. It reflected that senior high school students were not willing to read in English classes. It can be explained through the following aspects. First, the classroom teaching is conducted in certain time and limited space. In addition, most of the classroom is teacher-centered and examination-orientated. Teachers and students will pay more attention to the language knowledge which will be tested in the college entrance examination. Second, the schoolwork for students is heavy-laden and the pressure of learning is so great. Students have no time and energy to read any English books. And sometimes they don’t know which kind of book are fit them to read. Fourth, influenced by the traditional teaching method, most students focus on the accuracy of language, and they lack of the risk-taking spirit. While reading an English article, students will look up all the new words in the dictionary without trying to guess the word meaning. Due to the above reasons, senior high school students’ WTC in reading is becoming lower and lower.

It can be seen from the table above, students’ willingness to communicate in speaking is low as well, whose mean value is $M=17.15$. It indicated that senior high school students were not willing to communicate with their classmates in English classes. On the one hand, even though cultivating students’ communicative competence in English was advocated in many senior schools, under the pressure of examination, both teachers and students cared about the test scores. Thus, they would spend most of the time drilling vocabulary and grammar mechanically. On the other hand, students’ lack of willingness to communicate may be caused by some factors in the classroom, such as students’ sense of anxiety, teacher’s correction, classmates’ supports, and their self-perceptions of communicative competence, just as what students stated in the interview.

Researcher: Would you like to communicate with others using English in the classroom? Why or why not?

Student Zhang (a male student from senior one): When I began to learn English several years ago, I was very interested in talking with my classmates in English. Even though my English was not very good at that time, I liked to express myself in English even without some completed sentences. I would focus on the meaning rather than the accuracy of language. However, now I am studying in the senior high school, and the teacher cares about the correctness of the language. When I spoke English with grammatical mistakes, my teacher would stop me and correct my sentences. I don’t like being interrupted while speaking, because I don’t know what to speak next. So if I couldn’t ensure to speak correctly, I didn’t want to take risks otherwise I would get negative evaluations from the teacher. (2016/10/16)

Conclusions

Senior high school students have a lower level of willingness to communicate in English. Students’ learning in the senior high school is a critical period in their life. However, most students have to study for pass the college entrance examination. Influenced by the traditional teaching method, the English teaching and learning have paid more attention on the language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and writing. Therefore, both English teachers and students always neglect the training of willingness to communicate and communicative competence. In addition, the lower level of willingness to communicate made English classroom be more boring and dreary.

Willingness to communicate is an independent variable which includes four dimensions, such as comprehension (listening), speaking, reading and writing. In the present study, the senior high
school students had the highest mean value in comprehension and the lowest mean value in reading and speaking. It is because that listening is a process of language input for students. And listening comprehension was included in the English examination, thus students have recognized that listening was important for them. In the aspect of reading, on the one hand, there were no appropriate reading materials for students to read in the class, they were either too easy or too difficult, and sometimes they couldn’t stimulate students’ reading motivation. On the other hand, students had no enough time to read in or out of classrooms. Through the analysis of data and the classroom observation, it could be found that most senior high school students were unwilling to communicate with their classmates in English. One reason was that they had lower self-perception of communicative competence and they were afraid of being criticized by teacher. Another reason was that the classroom communication situation was not authentic, and most of the communications were mechanical drills for grammar and vocabulary.

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References