



A Study of Chinese EFL Students' and Teachers' Perceptions on Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

This study examines students' and teachers' perceptions of Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in class, as well as the impact of societal context and personality factors on WTC. Although WTC has been frequently studied in Western contexts, its dynamics within the Chinese educational setting remain unclear. This study captures the complexity of WTC using a mixed-methods approach. A thorough questionnaire was used to gather quantitative results from 350 university students. After that, three experienced teachers and four students participated in semi-structured interviews, qualitative data was collected then. The findings indicate that WTC is influenced by a combination of societal context, including group cohesiveness and teacher support, and personality factors, such as tolerance of ambiguity and risk-taking. Supportive and friendly class environments significantly enhanced students' WTC. Furthermore, students with higher tolerance for ambiguity and moderate risk-taking tendencies were more likely to engage in English communication in class. However, fear of losing face led many students to remain silent despite their language proficiency. Teachers who incorporated group activities, positive feedback, and low-stress communication opportunities effectively promoted students' WTC. This study provides new insights into WTC in Chinese EFL contexts and offers valuable implications for language teaching practices.

Keywords: *Willingness to Communicate; Societal Context; Personality Factors*

1. Introduction

In this highly globalized world, English communicative competence significantly boosts competitiveness for college students' future careers (Crystal, 2003). Even though a large population of students learn English in China, only a few can communicate fluently or are willing to communicate in English (Liu & Jackson, 2008). This gap highlights the need for a shift in English language teaching (ELT) practices, moving from a focus on linguistic knowledge to an emphasis on communicative

competence (Richards, 2005). English teaching reform in China has increasingly prioritized the development of students' ability to use English in real-life communication rather than merely acquiring grammatical knowledge (Zhang, 2009). That made many scholars furthered their studies on how to improve students' communicative competence. During the process on researching how to improve students' communicative competence, researchers realized that improving students' oral skills are not just a matter of dealing with linguistic problems; considering students' communicative willingness is also of decisive meaning.

Willingness to communication (WTC) has been introduced to the academic field for over thirty years, and research on this topic has achieved remarkable progress in the Western world. McCroskey and Baer first put forward the concept of WTC in 1985. After the first attempt, many researchers furthered their studies on this scope. They soon expanded this field to the perspective of the L2 WTC. McCroskey and Richmond (1990) suggested a highly relevant relationship between WTC and second language proficiency. With the increasing interest in this field, the development of linking L2 and WTC made good progress. MacIntyre et al. (1998) posed a heuristic model of variables influencing WTC. They explained that L2 WTC was not simply transferred from the first language WTC, and the transference might be negative. Based on MacIntyre's heuristic model, the relationship between L2 proficiency and WTC has been studied continuously in recent years.

Settle in the Chinese context, some researchers claimed that the model of L2 WTC is not that suitable for explaining Chinese EFL students' WTC (Wen & Clément, 2003; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Under this circumstance, Wen and Clément (2003) specialized a Chinese conceptualization of the WTC model (figure 1) to cope with the situation.

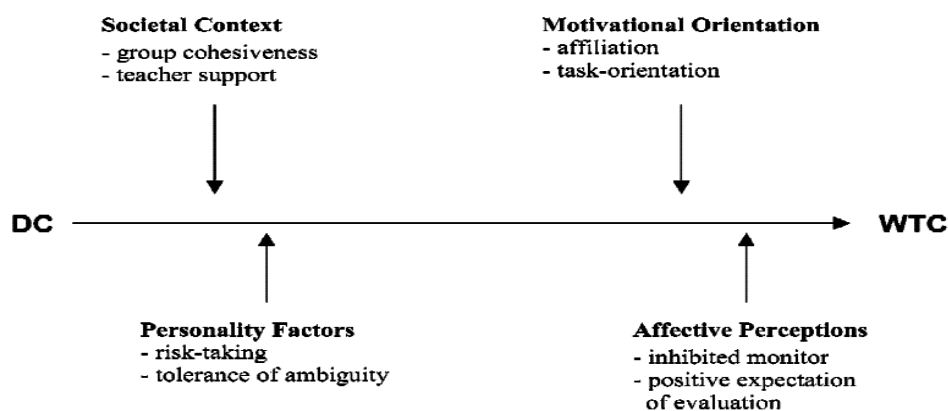


Figure1 Variables moderating the relation between DC and WTC in the Chinese EFL classroom
Source: Adapted from Wen and Clément (2003)

In Wen and Clément's model (2003), DC represents the desire to communicate. From their point of view, the desire to communicate does not simply equal to WTC; it is a complex process. According to their model (figure 2), there are four variables between the process of DC to WTC, this study focused on societal context and personality factors. Societal context consists of group cohesiveness and teacher support. Shaw (1981) suggested that high group cohesiveness can provide pleasure and relaxation and reduce anxiety, which will encourage WTC. Teacher support, such as high involvement and immediacy, are positive factors for students' learning. **Numerous empirical researches have shown that teachers' immediacy positively affects students' WTC (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). In class, teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviors, such as calling students' first names, making eye contact, and close physical distance, will increase interpersonal closeness between the teacher and students.** Personality factors refer to two dimensions: risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity. Foreign language learning can be

ambiguous, based on the fact that Chinese EFL students enjoy learning grammar; they do not prefer to communicate when facing the risk of uncertainty, and face protection orientation dominates their way of learning. **Chinese EFL students are rule-dominated. They are reluctant to communicate in and out of class if they can not ensure they are correct. Language learning requires tolerance of ambiguity (Brown, 1987). This personality trait makes students less likely to turn their desire to communicate into willingness.** Nevertheless, personality varies from the individual; we are taking the general picture into a discussion.

2. Research Objectives

In order to enhance students' WTC to cope with the social needs of communication, this study aims to identify students' and teachers' perceptions on Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate in class, and to find out the current situation of Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate and how societal context and personality factors affect it.

This study chosen Wen and Clément's (2003) Chinese conceptualization WTC model as the theoretical framework. This model directly addresses the societal context and personality factors that shape these perceptions, making it a better fit for this research. Moreover, this model has a strong theoretical connection to the Chinese EFL context, ensuring that the following findings are culturally relevant and meaningful.

3. Research Methods

To overcome the limitations of a single research method, the current study adopts a mixed method design to investigate the current situation of Chinese EFL students' WTC in a private university in China and find out how societal context and personality factors influence it. There were 350 first-year students who were chosen by convenience sampling to take part in the quantitative research; four students and three teachers were selected by purposive sampling as the qualitative research's participants to take part in the semi-structure interviews.

The instrument of this paper starts with the quantitative part, questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 32 items, partly adopted and revised from former relative research (Chen, 2006; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 2001). Students were asked to indicate their willingness to communicate in English on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 stands for the least willing or strongly disagree, and 5 stands for the most willing or strongly agree). The classification of the questionnaire is shown in table 1.

Table 1 Classification of the Questionnaire

Variables to be tested		Number of questions	Question standard
Current situation		8	1-5
Societal context	Group cohesiveness	6	1-5
	Teacher support	6	1-5
Personality factors	Risk-taking	6	1-5
	Tolerance of ambiguity	6	1-5

Moreover, interviews are used to gather qualitative data to enhance the quantitative data and provide a more detailed and reliable understanding of Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate in class. These interviews explored a further understanding of the current situation and the relationship

among students' WTC, societal context, and personality factors. There are two themes and five specific questions for students to address during interviews (1) general questions; (2) questions related to societal context and personality factors. For teachers' interviews, there are seven questions in three sections, which involve the following themes: (1) Perceptions of WTC in the EFL English class; (2) attitudes toward societal context and students' WTC in class; (3) attitudes toward personality factors and students' WTC in class.

The questionnaire data was collected through a Chinese online platform called *Wen Juan Xing*, and the semi-structure interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data from the questionnaire was analyzed by statistic description, and the data from interviews were analyzed thematically.

4. Research results

Quantitative Data

The results of the questionnaire analysis show that, although there is some fluctuation in the responses, Chinese EFL students' average willingness to communicate is relatively positive. This implies that although many students feel at least somewhat inclined to speak, individual experiences vary. The results of the questionnaire analysis are shown in table 2.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Quantitative Data

Statistic	Current Situation	Societal Context	Teacher Support	Personality Factors	
		Group Cohesiveness		Risk-Taking	Tolerance of Ambiguity
Mean	3.13	3.20	3.06	3.16	3.13
Std	0.79	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.83
Median	3.13	3.33	3.00	3.17	3.17
Mode	3.38	3.33	2.83	3.00	3.33

Table 2 revealed that the current situation of Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate WTC in the class. Based on responses from 350 valid cases, the mean score for WTC was 3.13 (SD = 0.79) on a 5-point scale, where 1 indicates "almost never willing" and 5 indicates "strongly willing." This suggests that students' overall WTC is moderately positive, leaning toward "sometimes willing" to communicate. The minimum score of 1.00 and the maximum score of 5.00 indicate a wide range of WTC levels among students, reflecting significant individual differences in their willingness to engage in communication.

Moreover, as to group cohesiveness, the descriptive statistics show that the distribution looks quite normal, with most scores clustered around the mean of 3.20. The mode is 3.33, indicating that most students think their groups are somewhat cohesive. This tendency is significant because it shows that most students see their groups as helpful, which may have a good effect on their communicative willingness. And as to teacher support, the data shows that the distribution is standard, with most scores falling into a cluster around the 3.06 mean. The mode is 2.83, indicating that most students think their teachers provide a reasonable amount of help. According to this table, most students feel that the classroom is a supportive place to learn, which may benefit their propensity to speak up.

Furthermore, the data of tolerance of Ambiguity among Chinese EFL students is also depicted in table 2. Most students scored between 2.5 and 3.5, with the a range of scores from 1.0 to 5.0. The mode is 3.33, suggesting that most students can tolerate ambiguity to a modest degree, which is necessary for managing communication uncertainties. The standard deviation of 0.83, less than that of other variables like risk-taking, indicates that students' ambiguity tolerance is more constant. This consistency suggests that most students have a similar, somewhat high tolerance for ambiguity despite considerable heterogeneity. The reduced variability in ambiguity tolerance indicates that most students can handle ambiguity in communication circumstances comfortably. And as to the score of risk-taking, the mode is 3.00, suggesting that most students have a tendency predisposition for taking risks. According to the descriptive statistics, the standard deviation of 0.94 shows moderate variation in students' risk-taking scores. This implies that people have different experiences regarding their readiness to take chances when communicating. While some students are highly willing to take risks, others are more cautious, as seen by the modest mean score and significant variability.

According to the descriptive statistics, Chinese EFL students exhibit a modest willingness to communicate, influenced by several variables. Students experience varied degrees of support and cohesiveness, and the societal context—which includes group cohesion and teacher support—plays a key influence. Students' readiness to communicate is also influenced by personality factors, such as risk-taking and ambiguity tolerance, albeit there is a noticeable range in these traits. Developing techniques to improve students' WTC in the classroom can be aided by understanding these elements.

Qualitative Data

After deciphered the students' interviews, we could tell that although students recognize certain areas that still require work, most students typically perceive their English communication skills as being at a medium level and the current situation is at a medium to high level; most of the students are willing to communicate in class, which is consistent with the questionnaire data. Some students indicated they were confident in specific skills, like reading, but needed more speaking and listening experience. According to the analysis, students are highly motivated to communicate in English based on their realization of the growing significance of globalization and their desire for chances overseas, they want to develop their English language skills to pursue academic goals and travel abroad. The excerpts also reveal that students' past learning styles and experiences were generally related to their willingness to communicate.

As to the societal context, students emphasize how their engagement is positively impacted by peer pressure and classroom unity. Responses in full highlight ideas like, *"Our class has great cohesion."* Peer dynamics have a helpful role in boosting communication as everyone is united and actively participates in events such as literary recitals. The table also looks at how teachers' supports affect students' WTC. Students explain how their teachers' involvement and encouragement influence their urge to talk in class. On the other hand, actions viewed as unprepared or distracting (such as *"teachers playing on their phone"* or lacking the necessary resources) take away from the positive learning atmosphere and make students less inclined to participate fully. Additionally, when talking about group cohesion, students also suggested that classroom activities influence their WTC. Students favor interest-driven, cooperative problem-solving or impromptu scenario-based active learning approaches. Statements such as *"I enjoy spontaneous scenarios, such as being presented with a problem to solve as a group,"* stand out in the verbatim responses. *"These exercises are fascinating,"* suggesting that interactive and captivating exercises encourage oral engagement and improve educational opportunities.

Moreover, as to personality factors, most students indicated that they are willing to answer questions even when they are unsure of the correct answer, demonstrating a moderate level of risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity. Students stress the importance of applying recently learned language abilities

in real-world situations to support learning and promote retention. Statements like *"Using new knowledge in conversations helps me remember it better"* are revealed verbatim, although they are not familiar with the newly-taught knowledge, it does not affect their willing to applying them. Interestingly, one student shared a contrasting perspective, stating that: *"I usually reluctant to respond to uncertain questions due to a lower tolerance of ambiguity. Yet, with the teacher's encouragement, I feel more willing to take the risk"*. This response highlights the significant role of teacher support in mitigating students' fear of negative outcomes associated with risk-taking.

While the student interviews highlighted certain patterns, the teachers' interviews offered a complementary perspective on their own perceptions. Teachers underlined the importance of WTC for language learning, and the significance of developing linguistic skills in a balanced manner for all-encompassing learning. Teachers report that students have varying degrees of willingness to communicate in class. WTC is typically higher among those with overall solid English learning ability. Teachers have observed a strong correlation between students' confidence levels, general language skills, majors, class dynamics and willingness to communicate.

Moreover, teachers offer insightful information regarding the effects of their assistance, the dynamics of group cohesiveness, and the problems that students have with uncertain questions and the fear of losing face. Teachers are aware of how group dynamics affect students' WTC. They emphasize the advantages of having a cohesive group, where cooperative connections and common learning objectives foster a friendly atmosphere that encourages communication. According to teachers, cohesive peer connections help students feel less nervous about speaking in front of the class, promoting a more diverse and active learning environment. The interview data revealed differing perspectives among teachers regarding the role of teacher support in enhancing students' WTC. Two teachers strongly agreed that teacher support lays a crucial role in fostering students' WTC. However, one teacher expressed a contrasting view, stating that teacher support has limited impact on students' WTC. This teacher argued that factors such as students' personality factors (e.g., risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity) and class culture are more influential in shaping students' communication behaviors.

Furthermore, teachers believed that while students are sometimes willing to communicate despite uncertainty, they often remain silent when they lack confidence in their answers. The excerpts show that: *"Students generally do not participate if they are unsure about their answers. Those who do participate are confident in their answers. Students who are not confident generally do not speak up easily"*; *"Usually, they will try to answer the question, however, sometimes they must be called by name. Many students believe saying something is better than saying nothing. That's also be a good attitude towards learning (Teacher 3)"*. Additionally, two teachers noted that students are generally reluctant to take risks in communication. They emphasized that students' fear of making mistakes significantly impacts their willingness to communicate. One teacher stated: *"Many students are afraid of giving wrong answers, so they prefer to stay silent rather than take the risk of speaking."* Another teacher echoed this sentiment, saying, *"Even when they know the answer, they often hesitate because they are worried about being judged by their peers or the teacher."* This reluctance to take risks appears to be a major barrier to students' willingness to communicate in the classroom.

By integrating teachers' and students' perspectives, the interview results provide a comprehensive understanding of the current situation of WTC among Chinese EFL students and the factors that influence it. The findings highlight the importance of both external factors (e.g., group cohesiveness, teacher support) and internal factors (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking) in shaping students' willingness to communicate. These insights offer valuable implications for developing pedagogical strategies that foster communicative competence in Chinese EFL classrooms.

5. Research Discussion

This study's major findings present a nuanced picture of WTC among Chinese EFL students. There is a general willingness to communicate, personality factors and societal context have a significant role in determining the willingness.

Both quantitative and qualitative data emphasize the importance of societal context, particularly teacher support and group cohesiveness, in enhancing WTC. These results are consistent with the larger corpus of research emphasizing how important social interactions are in learning environments. For instance, study by Cao and Philp (2006), which stressed the significance of a supportive classroom environment, are consistent with the positive impact of societal context, particularly group cohesiveness and teacher support, on WTC. Yang and Lin (2024) posted that a positive and cohesive class is one of the important antecedents of EFL students' WTC, motivating them to use English in class. Moreover, Yu (2011) illustrated that some Chinese classrooms are dominated by teachers, students are passive receivers, and this unequal relationship arises reluctance in willingness to communicate. This shows the positive impact of a supportive and equal classroom on students' WTC from the opposite side. Peng and Woodrow (2010) discovered that Chinese EFL students' WTC was greatly increased in classrooms with supportive teacher-student interactions and good peer relationships. This supports the idea that students are more likely to communicate when they feel like they belong and are supported by their teachers, which is consistent with the results of the current study.

However, the present study's observations of the heterogeneity in individual experiences imply that not every student benefits equally from these societal influences. Individual variations in self-assurance and prior communication experiences may cause this. Wen & Clément (2003) talked about how, even in a helpful classroom setting, certain students may find it difficult to fully participate in communicative activities, including the fear of looking foolish and the traditional emphasis on modesty in Chinese society. Due to personal differences, a paradox may exist where students appear open to communication on the outside but are internally held back by self-doubt and societal expectations.

Moreover, the quantitative data revealed that students perceive teacher support at a moderately positive level, with a mean score of 3.06 (SD = 0.93) on a 5-point scale. However, the mode of 2.83, was the lowest among the four factors studied, suggests that a certain portion of students perceive teacher support as relatively limited. This discrepancy between the mean and mode indicates variability in students' experiences, with some students feeling well-supported while others perceive less encouragement from their teachers. Students' perceptions of teacher support may vary based on their individual needs and expectations. Wang et al. (2024) suggested that there may be a mismatch between the type of support provided by teachers and the one necessary for enhancing WTC. Some students may require more personalized encouragement to feel supported, which not all teachers are able to provide in large classroom settings.

Therefore, the present study emphasizes the impact of societal context on WTC, and it also highlights the necessity of addressing individual differences within it since different students will react differently to other social circumstances. This necessitates a more sophisticated strategy for encouraging WTC, one that considers each student's unique requirements in addition to the needs of the group context.

Furthermore, the study clarified the importance of personality factors, specifically tolerance of ambiguity and risk-taking, in predicting Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that these factors play a significant but distinct role in shaping students' communication behaviors. The questionnaire results showed a moderate level of tolerance of ambiguity, this indicates that students can handle some degree of uncertainty but may avoid communication when tasks feel too challenging. The interviews supported this finding, with students

describing how they are willing to participate in class discussions when they feel somewhat confident but tend to remain silent when they are unsure of their answers. The results of Peng and Woodrow (2010), who claimed that Chinese students typically have a low tolerance for ambiguity and stated that this was a major barrier to enhance their WTC, are consistent with this finding. According to Peng and Woodrow's research, Chinese students' aversion to communication was caused by their desire for predictability and controlled learning settings, which allowed them to avoid unpredictable language use. The differences between the results of this study and Peng and Woodrow's could be attributed to several things. The change in English teaching in China could be one reason for this paradox. There has been a notable change in the last twenty years in EFL classrooms toward more communicative and student-centered approaches. Methods promoting interaction, problem-solving, and using English in everyday situations gradually replace traditional, teacher-centered systems, emphasizing rote memorization and grammatical accuracy. The greater tolerance for ambiguity in the current study may be explained by the fact that students are now more accustomed to handling ambiguity and uncertainty in language use. The shifting demographics of Chinese EFL students may also explain the study's higher tolerance of ambiguity. Chinese students are more likely to encounter and use English outside the classroom due to increased exposure to travel, global media, and online communication. With increased familiarity with the uncertainties included in real-world communication, students may grow more at ease with ambiguity due to this increased exposure to the language. This is in line with research by Yashima (2002), which demonstrated that exposing students to more English in social settings and through various media can improve their WTC by boosting their self-assurance and lowering their fear of the unfamiliar.

In addition, the results also indicate that risk-taking is one of the determiners of EFL students' WTC, the questionnaire results indicated a moderate level of risk-taking among students, and the interviews provided deeper insights into this variability. While some students expressed a willingness to communicate despite the possibility of making mistakes, others described significant anxiety about being judged by their peers. Teachers also noted that students' fear of losing face often outweighs their willingness to take risks, even in supportive environments. This finding aligns with previous research. For instance, Suvongse and Chanyoo (2022) illustrated that students' fear of losing face can raise communication apprehension and reduce their WTC. Similarly, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that risk-taking helps mitigate the fear of making mistakes, thereby encouraging students to engage in communication. However, the current study highlights that risk-taking is not uniformly high among Chinese EFL students, as emotional barriers (e.g., fear of judgment) and individual differences continue to play a significant role. Learners with higher beliefs about their communicative skills do not consider challenges as threats in their learning process and have learning goals rather than performance goals; therefore, they are not afraid of taking the risk to initiate interactions with their peers and teachers (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2024).

The study's findings on personality factors shed important light on how tolerance of ambiguity and risk-taking affect Chinese EFL students' WTC. Although the findings support other studies, they also refute preconceived notions about Chinese students' low threshold for ambiguity. This transition may reflect more general changes in how English is taught and exposed to different cultures, which means that teachers should keep creating surroundings that support taking risks and being at ease with uncertainty. By doing this, they can eventually improve students' WTC and general language skills by assisting them in developing their self-assurance, which is required to participate more completely in communicative activities.

6. Suggestions

While this study provides certain contributions to the field, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Several directions for future research are proposed to enhance understanding to this field. Firstly, future research should include a more representative and diverse sample of Chinese EFL students.

The results will be more broadly applicable to the Chinese EFL community if the sample is enlarged to include students from various geographic locations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational settings. Moreover, scholars may also want to look into how teaching techniques affect WTC. Examining the effects of various teaching strategies, including Cooperative Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching, or flipped classrooms, on students' openness to communication could provide educators with insightful information. It would also be beneficial to investigate the impact of technology on WTC, specifically digital tools and online learning settings. A final point to consider is to prolong the observation to see the continuing development of WTC, such as how learners' communication readiness changes as they advance through their EFL education, may offer crucial insights into the evolving nature of communicative competence. Future research can expand on the results of this study and provide more detailed knowledge of the factors impacting WTC among Chinese EFL students by looking into these areas.

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