CREATING AN ACTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS’ WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT
Learners’ using the target language for communication has been proposed by many scholars as a crucial part of language learning. However, due to different reasons, not all learners are willing to do it. For those who learn English as a foreign language, the difficulty is likely to come from their context with its human and non-human factors. This paper reports a project which aims to create an active learning environment to promote the willingness to communicate in English among English majors studying at a university in the suburb of Ho Chi Minh City. The project has been conducted with the participation of a teacher who is in charge of a Listening and Speaking 2 class and her 30 freshmen. Questionnaires and interviews with the students, and the teacher’s and students’ diaries have been employed as instruments for continual data collection. Results and findings from quantitative and qualitative data analyses have provided information for necessary adjustments of actions inside and outside the classroom to enhance the students’ willingness to communicate in English. Upon completion, this project will set out conditions for the students’ language use, which is supposed to facilitate their language development.

Keywords: environment; willingness to communicate in English; EFL; English majors.

INTRODUCTION
Being able to communicate in a foreign language plays a crucial part in today’s world of globalization and integration. In the Vietnamese context, where English has been the most popular foreign language, the Ministry of Education and Training through the National Foreign Language Project 2020 emphasized that communication should be the purposes of the learning of this language. Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, issued by the Vietnamese Prime Minister in September, 2008, required that by 2020 most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities would be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multicultural and multi-lingual environment, making foreign languages a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country.

In the meantime, while it is now widely accepted that communication is crucial for language learning, we should know that it is more than just a means of facilitating language learning, but an important goal in itself (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In other words, learners need to converse in the target language in order to acquire both language competence and communicative competence.

Unfortunately, “[EFL] students do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classroom” (Brown, 2001, p. 116). This is true with Vietnamese students majoring in English at the researchers’ university. More seriously, not to mention in the settings outside the classroom, from the researchers’ observation, many students are not enthusiastic about speaking English in class. In classroom context, while some of them take advantage of every opportunity to communicate in English, others try to avoid it.
The concern about students’ unwillingness to use the language inside and outside the classroom has inspired us to create an environment for students willing to speak English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Willingness to communicate (hereafter WTC)

WTC is a notion first introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985). Based on the concept of unwillingness to communicate by Burgoon (1976), it was originally conceptualized with reference to first or native (L1) communication as the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so (MacIntyre et al., 1998). According to McCroskey and Baer (1985), WTC was “a personality-based, trait-like predisposition, which is fairly consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers” (p.4).

Several years later, MacIntyre et al. (1998) initiated the notion of WTC in L2. They claimed that WTC in L2 is not a simple manifestation of WTC in L1. This is due to “the uncertainty inherent in L2 use that interacts in a more complex manner with those variables that influence L1 WTC” (p. 546) and the fact that “L2 use carries a number of intergroup issues, with social and political implications that are usually irrelevant to L1 use” (p.546). MacIntyre et al. (1998) then define L2 WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (p.547). WTC in L2, according to them, is a situation-based variable. Later, Kang (2005) emphasizes its dynamic emergence and fluctuation during a conversation situation. He redefines WTC as “an individual’s volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context among other potential situational variable (p.29). In another attempt to capture WTC in L2 classroom setting, Cao (2009) defined it as “observable behaviors in class, which refer to occasions on which learners initiate or engage in communication when they have the choice” (p. 10).

It can be said that stimulated by MacIntyre et al.’s (1998), much research has been carried out in different learning contexts to identify factors underlying a person’s L2/EFL WTC as well as to investigate its trait-like and situational characteristics. In spite of the rich findings of previous studies, it is noted that most of them were conducted in Western countries, particularly among Canadian Anglophone students learning French as a foreign language (e.g. Baker and MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002) or Asian overseas students learning English as a second language (e.g. Cao, 2009; Cao and Philip, 2006; Kang, 2005). Recently, there have been a number of studies investigating EFL learners’ WTC in Asian countries, like China (Peng and Woodrow, 2010; Xie, 2011; Peng, 2012); Japan (Yashima, 2002), Korea (Kim, 2004), Iran (Ghonosoo, Hosseini, & Khajavy, 2013), Thailand (Pattapong, 2010) and Turkey (Centikaya, 2005). In Vietnam, besides Bui & Phan (2016) and Huynh & Nguyen (2016), research on this topic has been scarcely reported.

WTC Variables in L2 contexts

As mentioned above, in L2 settings, MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that it should be treated as a situation-based variable, open to change across situations. WTC in L2, according to them, is affected by transient factors and enduring influences. This notion is confirmed by Dörnyei (2005) as he claims that WTC in L2 displays dual characteristics, the trait WTC and the situational WTC. The trait WTC is a stable disposition while the situational WTC bears a situated nature. There have been several empirical studies, for example Cao and Philip’s (2006), Cao’s (2009), and Xie’s (2011), carried out to shed light on this nature of L2 WTC especially in the context of classroom. They resulted with a list of trait and situational factors as follows.

A. Individual/ Internal factors

a. Personality-related factors have two most commonly-reported components to contribute to willingness to speak: shyness and self-confidence, as mentioned in Liu’s (2005), MacIntyre et al.’s (1998),
Cetinkaya’s (2005), Chu’s (2008), Zeng’s (2010), and Tong’s (2010). According to McCroskey and Richmond (1990), personality can be “the determining factor” of an individual’s communication behavior (1990, p.21). Extrovert students tend to be more sociable than others and frequently seek communication opportunities while some those who are introvert and shy prefer fewer social activities and avoid communicating with others to the extent possible. Also, some language learners are highly sensitive to the judgment of the other students on their performance and will therefore try to avoid situations that are risk-taking.

Tsui (1996) found that one of the commonly mentioned causes of reticence in the class is students’ lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes and being laughed at. Self-confidence consists of self-evaluation of L2 skills and language anxiety when using an L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Learners who have higher perceptions of their communication competence and experience lower levels of communication anxiety tend to be more willing to initiate communication.

The influence of perceived competence and communication anxiety on WTC has been supported by other researchers like Baker and MacIntyre (2000), MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Conrod (2001), Yashima (2002), Kim (2004), Cetinkaya (200), de Saint Léger and Storch (2009), et c.

b. Motivation, Attitudes and Beliefs in L2 learning: Motivation to learn a second language is defined as “the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (Gardner, 1985, p.10). Considered as one of the most important factors predicting a person’s success in second language learning (Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998; Gadner, 1985), it is closely related to L2 WTC (Peng, 2007). In ESL contexts, such close relationship has been found by Hashimoto (2002) and Peng (2007).

According to socio-education model (Gardner, 1985), motivation results from integrativeness and attitudes toward learning situation. However, Peng and Woodrow (2010) argue that learner beliefs about English learning and classroom communication were more relevant to the understanding of classroom WTC than integrative attitudes towards L2 community.

B. Situational (environmental)/ External factors:

a. Effect of Task Type is one of the major factors having an impact on learners’ degree of willingness to speak. It relates to speaking individually, in pairs, or groups. Research by Cao and Philip (2006), Riazi and Riasati (2007) and Cetinkaya (2005) have indicated that learners are more willing to speak in pairs and groups rather than individually or to their teacher or in front of a large group of people. They tend to b more willing to speak in groups with a small number of participants, ideally three or four members, since they have the opportunity to help each other and learn from each other.

b. Effect of Topic: The topic of discussion plays a vital role in making learners willing or unwilling to speak. To learners, topic familiarity, topic interest, and topic preparation are the essential features of a certain topic. Moreover, learners tend to discuss a topic that is controversial as well as a topic they feel they are more comfortable with (MacIntyre et al., 1998), or they feel the need to discuss (Kang, 2005).

c. Effect of Interlocutor: Language learners express more willingness to speak with a person they know well and hence they are more comfortable with.

d. Seating Location is found to have an influence on the learners’ degree of willingness to speak regarded where they sit in the class. Those who choose to sit in front of class are more willing to speak as this would make them more visible to other and can get more involved in classroom activities.

e. Teacher: Teachers’ role is another crucial influential factor of WTC. The teacher is a key figure that can make them willing to speak or conversely unwilling to speak. A teacher’s attitude and teaching style can dramatically influence the learners’ willingness to participate. Teachers’ strategy have been found affecting learners’ WTC in Savaşçı (2014)’s.

f. Classroom Atmosphere is another factor contributing to individuals’ WTC. Obviously, the classroom atmosphere can either facilitate or hinder learners’ participation. They tend to speak more in an environment which is friendly enough so that they feel secure and relaxed. It goes without saying that a positive, stress-free learning environment can make a classroom fun for the learners and thus a more effective and encouraging setting, which can lead to better educational achievements. Indeed, in such a
learning environment, students feel free to speak up, ask and answer questions, challenge the teacher and other classmates, and have a more active participation in class discussions.

According to Wen and Clement (2003), group cohesiveness, teacher support, and attachment to group members are factors influencing students’ WTC in the classroom. Peng & Woodrow (2010) added factor classroom atmosphere to the list.

In EFL contexts, teachers play a prominent part in learners’ use of the target language (Lee and Ng, 2010). Therefore, in order to create an active environment to encourage our English majors’ WTC, “teacher” was our focus while the other individual and situational factors related to the two contexts inside and outside the classroom were also taken into account.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was of sequential mixed-method design. Suggested by Cameron (2009), the design consists of many stages where experiment, evaluation and adjustment were conducted.

Research questions

The aim of the study is to provide the participants with an active learning environment to enhance their willingness to communicate in English through a course of Listening and Speaking. Accordingly, two research questions were formulated as follows: What problems do first-year English majors encounter in terms of willingness to communicate in English?

1. How does first-year English majors’ willingness to communicate in English change after the course?
2. How does first-year English majors’ willingness to communicate in English change after the course?

The research setting

The study was undertaken at the Faculty of Foreign Languages belonging to a university in Ho Chi Minh City. The faculty, which is in charge of training for English majors, is located on the second floor of the building consisting of two units of the Center for Foreign Studies and the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Each room on the second floor has tables and chairs nailed down to each other. The rooms were full of tables and chairs, leaving a small space at the front for the teacher to lecture and a narrow aisle enough for one or two people to move. Each room can hold 30 for small rooms to 45 students for large rooms. There are a chalk board and an overhead projector with a screen which, when pulled down for use, obscure most of the board. There are 3 fans in each room, which do not seem to be able to create a comfortable atmosphere while hot weather is popular in this area.

The subject

The study was conducted in semester 2 of the school year with the participation of a group of 30 out of 40 students who enrolled in a 3-credit Listening and Speaking 2 course. The participants were mostly from Bien Hoa City, which belongs to Dong Nai Province, about 30 km from Ho Chi Minh City. The class was chosen for convenience purpose because it was taught by one of the researchers. As revealed from a questionnaire at the beginning of the course, their levels of communication confidence, their WTC inside the classroom, and their WTC outside the classroom was not higher than average, with the mean scores of 3.03; 3.10; and 2.8 on a 6-point likert scale.

This group was selected because they were at the lowest level of study available in the faculty at that time and they had left high school not long before where most of them had very few opportunities to practice making conversations in English. As this group of students were the most challenging to change in terms of WTC, we hope if the environment worked for the participants, and then it works for the older groups.
Research instruments

Questionnaires, interviews, and class diary of students and teacher were used to collect data. They worked together and give useful information about students’ WTC and for necessary adjustments.

- The diary: to capture students’ WTC for each type of activities and the teacher’s teaching strategies in class. It also helped give information about the students’ WTC outside the classroom. Diary was also used to get the teacher’s reflection on her teaching. Diary were collected every week after the lesson.

- The interviews: to triangulate the information provided by the students through questionnaire and diary and to enrich information on the reasons for their level of WTC in class and out of class. It was conducted two times – at week 3 (focus group) and the last week of the semester (with 11 students who were observed by the teachers as making either much improvement in WTC or very little improvement in WTC).

- The questionnaires: one is to explore students’ WTC and related factors; one is to get feedback about the course.

Procedure

In order to create an active environment to facilitate English majors’ WTC, actions were carried out based on the theoretical background of WTC, reflection and feedback from the students and teachers as well scholars’ suggestions for arising problems. Specifically, as the one who can somehow control the situational factors, the teacher selected communicative tasks and make the topics appropriate to the students’ interest. She treated them in a friendly way and made them feel comfortable. She employed pair and group work to increase the opportunities to speak and the facilitating environment. She also took their needs and suggestions related to WCT influential factors into consideration. Most importantly, she often listened to the students so that her adjustments were made accordingly.

In terms of interaction outside the classroom, activities were extended beyond classroom. The teacher organized an English speaking club at her house in the same area with our school campus and encouraged the students to come. “The club provides an opportunity for English language learners to practise using English in a relaxing and friendly setting” (TeachingEnglish, n.d.). Additionally, with the help of technology, she created a platform (first Moodle and then Facebook) where students could interact with each other when they were outside the classroom. Furthermore, students were required to go out to interact in English with foreigners in real situation for real purpose, film it and post it on Facebook to have comments from the teacher and classmates. Interestingly, a cultural exchange event was held. Thanks to that event, students had a chance to talk to French students on internship from another faculty.

As regards the individual factors, which have been found prominent to WTC, the teacher created a supportive and collaborative environment classroom community suggested by many scholars, such as Brophy (2004) and Dornyei (2001). This was done with the hope to minimize students’ fear in speaking English and encourage shy students to gain more confidence so that they became more willing to participate in speaking activities.

All of these actions followed the stages of the diagram.
FINDINGS

In an effort to create an active environment for undergraduate students who are English majors, some findings obtained from the teacher’s and students’ diaries, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews should be noted.

Quantitative findings

The quantitative data of students’ self-reported communication confidence, WTC inside and outside the classroom context are presented in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Number of participants (N)</th>
<th>Mean scores (X)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At the beginning of the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication confidence</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC inside the classroom class</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC outside the classroom</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though it was impossible for the researchers to conduct a paired sample T-test because the data were collected through questionnaires, the increase level of the mean scores shows us the course has positive impacts on the students’ WTC.

Qualitative findings

Students’ problems hindering their WTC

Internal factors

The data generated from the teacher’s and students’ diaries revealed that most of the participants were reluctant to speak English either inside or outside the classroom because of their inferiority complex. The teacher reported, “My students are likely to be afraid of looking at me when I asked some questions. Perhaps, they felt nervous at that time.” In a similar vein, one participant [SD12] wrote in her diary that she was afraid of making mistakes, and her friends might laugh at her and look down on her if she gave a wrong answer. That is why she decided to ignore the teacher when she asked questions in class. Outside the classroom, moreover, some participants felt shy and some felt unconfident when they carried out an extracurricular task (i.e., they were required to interview foreigners about happiness). For example, the participants only made questions and listened to their answers with little feedback (e.g., yes, thanks, ok, right, etc.). This means that the participants’ personal factors to some extent hinder them from
communicating in English confidently. It is quite consistent with findings from other studies in EFL context.

Furthermore, their language proficiency is another influential factor. They admitted that their English ability was not good enough for communication. They explained that they had few opportunities to practice English speaking skill at high school. They predominantly tried to master English grammar and vocabulary to deal with the examinations at school. Their high school teacher appeared to underestimate communicative skills.

**External factors**

Besides the internal factors, some external factors (e.g., fixed setting, limited partners, and uninteresting forum). As mentioned earlier, the room with unmovable tables and chairs somehow influenced the participation of the students in class. In particular, when the teacher asked them go around to interview their classmates, they found it hard to approach as many partners as expected. They needed to go around to come to their partners although they were not in the distance. As far as the partners are concerned, the majority of participants complained that they lived quite far from each other, so they only met one another in class. That is, they did not have much chance to practice with their friends. Concerning the forum (e.g., Moodle) they used to communicate with their teacher and classmates, two-thirds of the participants revealed that they did not use Moodle much as it was inconvenient. They explained that they needed to have a computer to work on Moodle, they sometimes had internet problems, and they were not close to each other to complete group exercise on Moodle. There is a contradiction between the teacher’s and students’ perceptions of the use of Moodle. While the teacher believed that Moodle was a useful teaching tool for language teachers, it seems not to work for the participants. In brief, the learning setting, the partners, and the learning forum are factors influencing the participants’ WTC.

**The positive change of students’ attitudes towards WTC**

In spite of the aforementioned personality-related problems, the teacher reported seeing the positive change in the participants’ WTC. In other words, a big number of participants indicated that they enthusiastically participated in the class activities. Particularly, a few participants revealed that some exciting activities (e.g., group discussion, mind map, presentation, role-play, etc.) helped them use English naturally and confidently. They were so eager to discuss with their partners to do a task that they did not remember their fear. One participant [SI15] stated, “it seems to me that there are no language barriers between us”.

In order to help the participants feel confident in communication, the role of the teacher is fundamental. In fact, all of the students agreed that the teacher created a comfortable, collaborative and friendly atmosphere. They really loved the homework where she asked them to go out and interview foreign tourists because it helped them break the barrier of fear and lack of confidence about their speaking ability. They also appreciated her bringing an experienced student to class to share his opinions of learning English effectively. What is more, they enjoyed the cultural exchange because it was real communication with foreigners. Last but not least, they liked posting their performance on Facebook and received comments from their friends and teacher. One student even said that thanks to the course, now she started speaking English to her roommates and encouraged them to speak English.

**Reported suggestions for improvement**

With the aims to improve the course, some improvements were recommended by the participants. The teacher was nice, friendly and supportive, but sometimes her questions were not interesting. Besides, she needed to be tougher for the first few days in forcing the students to speak. For example she should have asked them to make presentation in front of class so that they were more familiar with the action. In addition, a few said it would be better if the seats and desks were movable, so the class could be organized for group discussion easily. Finally, cool atmosphere may motivate their learning, so two of them asked for an air-conditioner.
CONCLUSION

The project has pulled out accessible resources in order to create an environment for WTC of EFL first-year English majors at a university far from the city center. The research result is in line with those found from previous studies (e.g. Peng & Woodrow, 2010) that in EFL contexts, the teacher’s support has a strong impact on students’ WTC and its related factors. Her choice of task and classroom activities and her teaching strategies have changed the students’ attitudes about speaking English, making them more confident and willing to use the language to communicate. The results of the current study shows that individual traits, namely motivation and personal-related factors still remain the biggest obstacles in creating an environment to facilitate WTC in EFL contexts; therefore, these factors should be the focal point of further research which has similar purpose: turning both the inside and outside classroom settings into an environment that promotes students’ WTC in the target language.

REFERENCES


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