

## Route to Develop International Academic Communication-Oriented Willingness to Communicate in English for Graduates

LI Zhen<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou Jiangxi, China.

\*Corresponding author.

**Supported by** 2018 Degree and postgraduate teaching reform research project in Gannan Normal University (Project No. YJG-2018-05).

Received 21 June 2020; accepted 22 August 2020  
Published online 26 September 2020

### Abstract

The ultimate goal for language instruction is to develop learners' willingness to communicate. Globalized economy needs internationalized talents. The upgrade of graduates' WTC contributes to language learning and international communication level reflects talents cultivation quality. Graduate education bears the task of boosting innovation and creation and serves as a cornerstone of China's development and social progress. English for graduates is an inseparable part of graduate courses and shoulders the responsibility of fostering virtue through education. To improve graduates' English WTC in class is key to develop international academic communication competence. To stimulate students' willingness to communicate in class is top priority for teachers to improve education quality. Graduates can be divided into groups with similar discipline in speaking tasks. Teachers should create a conversation-friendly atmosphere in class and integrate course contents to develop graduates' WTC in English.

**Key words:** Willingness to communicate; Communication competence; Language instruction

Li, Z. (2020). Route to Develop International Academic Communication-Oriented Willingness to Communicate in English for Graduates. *Canadian Social Science*, 16(9), 7-11. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/11860>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11860>

### INTRODUCTION

China has integrated into global economy. With the fierce international competition, more graduates with international competitiveness and discourse power in their own fields are in need for development of the Belt and Road Initiative and Double First Class University Plan. English as an international language is playing a more and more important role in international communication. English for postgraduate students is a vital component in postgraduate courses and has practical significance and long range effect for students' future development. As is pointed out in *Guidance of the Ministry of Education on Improving and Strengthening the Construction of Postgraduate Courses*, graduates' ability and future development should be taken into consideration in the course construction and the content of the courses should be regulated and encapsulated promptly for the talents demand. Nevertheless, the current situation for postgraduates to use English to communicate in class is still unsatisfactory. Meanwhile, English for postgraduates is considered as a simple repetition of English for undergraduates. Why do some students seize every chance to speak English in class while many others just avoid using the language? And as language teachers, we have encountered students with high linguistic competence are still reluctant to use their L2 to communicate while some other students with only limited linguistic knowledge are active in using English in class. Some learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) varies over time and across situations to a great extent as observed by some researches. The ultimate goal for language instruction is to develop willingness to communicate (Dornyei, 2005) and the upgrade of WTC contributes to language learning. Hence, how to cultivate interdisciplinary talents of profession + English with international academic communication and improve English teaching quality for postgraduates has been a hot topic of wide concern. Our aim in this article to offer the route to improve students'

willingness to communicate in English via related studies and analysis of variables affecting the WTC.

## 1. CURRENT ENGLISH TEACHING FOR GRADUATES IN CHINA

With the shift of focus from talents cultivation in academy to application, higher requirement is demanded in the practical application ability for graduates. The occupational division of labor is refining, and international communication is more frequent, multitudinous high-level professional talents with good command of international communication competence are needed. The setting of English courses for graduates should integrate internationalized talent cultivation goal of higher education and fasten the pace of course adaptation to explore the route to practice what they learn. We should give more consideration to graduates' practice ability.

Needs analysis should be accounted for while setting English courses and designing classroom activities for graduates. The learner's need for English language teaching and weakness in their learning and be found through this analysis. The problems in teaching and learning can be confirmed and solved with this method. Learners' need is goal-oriented which results in the future application after graduation. Communicative competence is considered to be the necessary content in language learning within the social context. English for graduates is not merely the extension of English for college students. Graduates' need can not be met when the courses are set in the traditional way of thinking. College English reform has been carried out for many years and attracted the attention of people from all circles of life. As an inseparable part of graduate courses, the class hours for graduate English is shrinking which is not good for the development of international talents.

Internationalized talent cultivation needs students with high-level English. Internationalized talent refers to the high-level talents who has internationalized consciousness and mind and world-leading knowledge structure and are good at seizing opportunities and challenges and take the initiative in the global competition. One of graduates' English learning motivation is to have effective transcultural communication. A good command of communication competence is key to transcultural communication. To develop students' willingness to communicate is the primary goal in language learning class.

## 2. WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (WTC) AND RELATED STUDIES

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a hot topic in second language acquisition field which is relatively new to individual differences research. WTC is originally investigated in first language communication research. The concept was first proposed by McCroskey & Baer

(1985) to explain the huge difference among people's language behavior in interpersonal communication. Related studies during the latest twenty years have transcended its original theories and are widely used in social psychology, second language acquisition and communication. (Yin & Wu, 2008) In SLA, it refers to the predisposition towards talkativeness that learners have in the classroom and also potentially outside the classroom; as such it is the behavioral intent that can result in actual communicative behavior (MacIntyre, et al, 1998). In 2002, MacIntyre et al. redefined WTC as an underlying continuum representing the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice. (MacIntyre, et al, 1998) Or, put it briefly, "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (MacIntyre et al., 2001). Willingness to communicate is viewed as rather important on the basis of present emphasis on interaction in the classroom. If learners are unwilling to communicate in class, then some of the prime benefits of L2 instruction will be ignored, according to recent interactionist approaches to instructed second language acquisition.

Earlier L2(second language) WTC researches were dominated by quantitative inquiries with instruments adapted by personality and social psychology. Individual integrated personality affects one's WTC. L2 WTC is not the simple reflection of L1 (first language) WTC. Charos (1994) finds evidence of negative correlation between L1 and L2 for language learning beginners. WTC is a situation variable which has simultaneously temporary and long-lasting influence. (MacIntyre,1998) The conceptualization of WTC as a pyramid reflects the anticipated interrelationship among those concepts, which amounts from bottom to top as social and individual context, affective-cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, behavioral intention and communication behavior. There is a distance between behavioral intention and communication behavior, which means willingness to communicate does not necessarily lead to L2 use. This model conceptualized the interaction between stable quality and context variables. Yashima (2002) also finds indirect and direct relationship between WTC and other individual differences variables (such as international situation, motivation, and communication confidence) and language competency with the application of structural equation model.

Later researches divert to more qualitative inquiries of context variables. For example, learners' WTC may be affected by the classroom interactional patterns, their interlocutors, as well as task type and topic (Cao, 2011). The interaction between psychological elements such as excitement, responsibility and security and context variables as topic, interlocutor and interlocution context may affect the degree of L2 WTC. (Kang, 2005) Dornyei and Kormos (2000) finds evidence of WTC in class affected by students' attitude towards teaching tasks. Characteristics as self-confidence, personality, emotion and exchange opportunities and classroom context as topic, task, interlocutor, teacher and group size may influence WTC. (Cao, 2011) Chinese students' English

WTC structural equation model is designed with statistical tool by Xie (2011). Teacher's attitude, support and teaching style may also affect learners' WTC. Teacher's waiting time, error correction and topic selection has influence on students' WTC. (Zarrinabadi, 2013) WTC appears to be dynamic. Students' WTC is unstable and varies according to topic, preparation time, cooperation, familiarity with interlocutor and chance to express. (Pawlak, 2015) Teacher's pressure, involvement and approval or encouragement has strong correlation with students' WTC. (Wu, 2016)

The above studies show, WTC is a dynamic, complicated individual differences of learners and is affected by both internal variables (such as learners themselves) and external variables such as teacher, topic and instruction context. WTC influences communication behavior and thus influence learners' language learning. With more and more researches on SLA, WTC has received more and more attention. However, this research on this field is still at the beginning period.

### **3. WTC AND POSTGRADUATES COURSES**

#### **3.1 Graduate Education Is Responsible for the Innovation and Economic and Social Development**

The national conference on graduate education held in July, 2020 stressed the important role of graduate education in boosting innovation, catering for economic and social development as well as modernizing the system and capacity for governance in China. A great number of high-level talents are urgently needed for the cause of the Party and the country. Party committees and governments at all levels should focus on improving graduate education to cultivate more high-level talent urgently needed by the country. Graduate education bears the task of boosting innovation and creation and serves as a cornerstone of China's development and social progress.

#### **3.2 Connotative Development Needs High-Level Talents**

High-level talents training system is needed for the connotative development in higher education. President Xi points out in the forum with Peking University teachers and students that, higher education is the important symbol of a nation's development level and potential. Talents are in great need for the development of the Party and nation's career. What the students learn and what they can learn as well as how they learn are closely related to the talent training system in the colleges and universities.

#### **3.3 Globalized Economy Needs Internationalized Talents**

Globalized economy needs internationalized talents and international communication level reflects talents cultivation quality. Outline of the National Medium- and

Long-term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010 -- 2020) states to improve talents training quality and strengthen international competitive force of higher education. There is a growing demand from all walks of life for international talents who have an international perspective and are familiar with international rules and can participate in international affairs and competition. The quality of talent cultivation is an important reflection of international competition. To cultivate talents with international communication willingness and capacity is an important measure to improve the competitiveness of the country and universities.

#### **3.4 The Upgrade of WTC Contributes the Cultivation of Internationalized Talents**

Familiarity with English is needed for international communication and the upgrade of willingness to communicate contributes to English learning. English is the important tool for international exchanges and exchanges in science, technology and culture. To improve English WTC and acquire initiative language practicing chances can help classroom learning. With the learning and applying English language, students can have immediate access to the frontiers of scientific and technological development, management experience and thoughts and ideas abroad. They can learn splendid culture in the world and effectively disseminate Chinese culture and enhance China's soft power.

### **4. VARIABLES THAT AFFECT LEARNERS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE**

Willingness to communicate involves multiple dimensions of learners' experiences, including psychological, linguistic, educational and communicative. (Loewen, 2015)

#### **4.1 Willingness to Communicate in First Language**

First language (L1) communication is referred to by McCrosky and Baer (1985) built on the Burgoon (1976) and others' earlier work. McCrosky defined WTC as the possibility of involving in communication when there is a choice to do so. It is observed as a stable inclination to speak in different situation and is regarded as a personality trait despite the fact that situation may influence one's level of WTC. MacIntyre would treat it as a situational variable which may change in a short time or last for a long time as well. The interrelationship among several individual difference variables are described in MacIntyre (1994) model. Communication apprehension and communication competence influence one's WTC most directly. Communication apprehension and competence were thought to be resulted from introversion and self-esteem. Variables such as the relationship between interlocutors, the number of interlocutors present, the



formality of the situation and the topic may influence one's WTC.

## 4.2 Willingness to Communicate in Second Language

WTC in L1 does not necessarily manifest to be the same in L2. WTC in L2 appears to be more complicated. Charos (1994) finds a negative correlation between WTC in L1 and L2 for language learning beginners.

MacIntyre (1998) presented a figure of heuristic model of variables that influence WTC. In this model, different variables that are presumed to affect WTC are displayed in a pyramid shape. Social and individual context such as intergroup climate and personality serve as the foundation of the pyramid. In this model, elements are divided into enduring and situational. Enduring elements are stable and long-term properties that fit into almost any situation. And situational elements are inclined to change and subject to specific context that the speaker is in. Layer I to III are situational influences on WTC and Layer IV to VI are enduring ones. (MacIntyre, et al, 1998)

Communication behavior is the result of a series of complicated interrelated factors. Communication behavior includes not only speaking up in class but also other activities such as reading L2 newspapers and articles, watching L2 programs or using L2 in one's job. In a language class, our purpose is to evoke students' willingness to communicate. That is what Dornyei refers to as the ultimate goal of language instruction. A language class is a failure if most of the students are unwilling to use the language. Sometimes this kind of class is called "silent class" which is the least desirable to anticipate for the teacher as well as the students. In this class, the teacher keeps talking without any interaction between teacher and students. The students have no response when the teacher poses a question or propose a discussion. One minute seems to be ten minutes which is totally unbearable.

Willingness to communicate is the second layer, which indicates behavioral intention. MacIntyre defines it as readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2. Here the "readiness" suggests the showing of the desire to express but not just the communication behavior such as speaking up in class. Hand-raising is considered to be a communication event which shows hand-raiser's willingness to express him or herself. The hand-raiser may be self-confident with both the answer posed by the teacher and the language to be used when answering the question. He or she is motivated by the language learning possibly with pleasant language learning experience.

In this figure, Layer III is situated antecedents of communication with two elements, the desire to communicate with specific person and state self-confidence. The desire to communicate with a specific person may be influenced by the interrelationship between individuals or groups. Lippa (1994) finds evidence in

social psychology of the sort of person to be addressed most are those physically nearby, having frequent encounter, attractive and similar to us in many ways. You know the person met frequently and are easy to find topics to start talking. Perceived competence and a lack of anxiety build up a person's self-confidence. (Clement, 1980,1986) State self-confidence is transient within a given situation.

Culture and social environment play an important role in students' WTC. Based on MacIntyre et al.'s heuristic model, Wen and Clement (2003) interpret some of the variables from a Chinese perspective by changing some structural relationships between constructs in this model. Evidence found that Confucianism cultural values are the dominant force shaping the individual's perception and ways of learning, which are manifested in L2 communication. (Wen & Clement, 2003) Chinese students' unwillingness to communicate in public does not only occur in English learning. This behavior has deep root in Chinese philosophy and culture.

## 5. DEVELOP GRADUATES' WTC IN CLASS

### 5.1 Divide the Graduates Into Groups With Same or Similar Disciplines

Speaking tasks are generally carried out in the form of groups in class. Generally there are 50 to 60 graduates in an English class and the graduates in English class are different majors. Group members are difficult to understand issues related to different majors. Therefore, topics can not be discussed thoroughly based on their majors. They can only share something common knowledge and gradually lose interest in discussion. Students' WTC is influenced by situated antecedents of communication. When students with same or similar disciplines are divided into a group, they share a lot in common with each other in what they have learned in their major. They know the research tendency, focus, innovation and focus. Research in social psychology points out that affiliation often occurs with persons who are similar to us in a variety of ways. (Lippa, 1994) When a task is given in class, they can quickly concentrate on the topic and discuss from the perspective of their major and other members can understand what is going on without too much explanation. Topic familiarity is listed as No. 26 among the 43 research focuses from 2000 to 2009 based on the corpus of four internationally renowned SLA academic journals. (Wang & Jiang, 2012) They can search the related documents in English and use English to discuss issues in their major. The affiliation is established with the group members. In this way, language learning is combined with discipline which benefits the cultivation of interdisciplinary talents of profession + English with international academic communication.

## 5.2 Create a Conversation-Friendly Atmosphere in Class

WTC is situation-affected. English is mainly used in class for the graduates in most of the Chinese class. Classroom is still the main place for the graduates to practice their spoken English. Communication situation is composed of the familiarity of both sides, the number of interlocutors, the formality of the communication situation and the possibility of the speaker being evaluated. All these factors are to be considered by the teacher in class. When the students are divided into groups based on their disciplines, the familiarity among them is higher than students with different majors. The number of students in a group should not exceed 5. One student could be the group leader to organize the task. The other four students could fall into two sides of positive and negative when debate is assigned. The teacher should be friendly to the class and any negative emotion should be left outside the classroom. At the beginning stage, the conversation could be informal as students could express themselves freely. And when they have accommodated such a situation and accumulated enough self-confidence and communication competence, the conversation could be formal than before. The teacher can walk around during the discussion. But always remember the purpose of walking around is not just to find the problems and blame the students. Whether there is evaluation and how learners are evaluated may affect the participants in speaking tasks. Your encouragement is always the best for the language learners.

## 5.3 Integrate English Course Content to Develop Graduates' WTC

The purpose of English teaching for graduates is to help students carry out their professional studies, research and international communication and serve for our socialism construction with the mastering of the tool of English language. When the course designer, teacher and learners themselves can clearly understand the reason for learning the English language, it may help either side to realize what kind of content is reasonable and everyone's potential can be developed and utilized. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1989) The idea to teach students in accordance of their aptitude is proposed by Confucius in ancient China more than two thousand years ago. This is still an important teaching method and principle to be observed in education. The teacher should choose methods to carry out pertinent teaching based on students' different cognitive levels, learning competence and quality. In this way, students' advantage can be given play and their weakness can be avoided. Graduates have finished undergraduate English learning and their needs and competence are much different from undergraduate. The teaching method and content should be varied accordingly. Unlike undergraduates, postgraduates have mastered

more English vocabulary and more language learning experience. The teacher's task is to encourage them to use the language in their discipline learning and research.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

Willingness to communicate is the primary goal of language instruction. (MacIntyre, 1998) Language instruction can promote the social significance of the communication between various culture and nations with increasing WTC in L2 of the learners. As mentioned above, WTC is influenced by situational factors such as the purpose of the communication and the interlocutor and the emotion of both sides. The familiarity of interlocutors, number of present persons, the formality of the situation and likelihood of being evaluated and the topic as well may all affect WTC. Culture and social environment also play a part in their performance. WTC is an important factor affecting language use. English teachers are the designers of class activities. All the pedagogical practices should center on improving student's competence. Graduate education bears the task of boosting innovation and creation and is responsible for international talents cultivation and China's development and social progress. The study of WTC has practical significance in promoting the understanding of communication behavior and language use and learning. More psychological researches should be referred to investigate the WTC difference among individuals in various social context.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Dornyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. New York: Routledge.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1989). *English for specific purpose: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loewen, S. (2015). *Instructed Second Language Acquisition* (pp.165-166). New York: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Clement, R., Dornyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal*, 82, 545-562
- Wang, L. F., & Jiang, J. L. (2012). Quantitative analysis on the ten-year research focuses and trends of international SLA (2000-2009). *Foreign Language World*, (06), 2-9.
- Wen, W. P., & Clement, R. (2003). A Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate in ESL. *Language Culture and Curriculum*, (16), 18-38.
- Yin, X. M., & Wu, Z. (2008). Review of researches on WTC over twenty years. *Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 32, 154-156