



Understanding Chinese learners' willingness to communicate in a New Zealand ESL classroom: A multiple case study drawing on the theory of planned behavior

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Abstract

Current approaches to second language teaching place a great emphasis on the development of learners' communicative competence. However, teachers are frequently bewildered by some learners' reluctance to communicate and wonder what impedes their oral participation. To understand this phenomenon better, I conducted a naturalistic inquiry to investigate five Chinese immigrant learners' willingness to communicate in both teacher-led and collaborative learning situations in L2 classrooms. In the study, a number of instruments (in-depth interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, learning logs) were used to collect data about the learners' oral participation over eighteen weeks. The results revealed that the participants' WTC was context-dependent and varied in two different classroom situations. Drawing on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, the variations were accounted for in each context. While their WTC in the collaborative context was related to different attitudes toward working collaboratively, four factors, linguistic factors, socio-cultural factors, self-efficacy, learner beliefs, had joint effects on their WTC in the teacher-led context. Based on these findings, I propose a model that aims to capture the pertinent factors mediating learners' oral communication in classrooms. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Current approaches to second language instruction emphasize the significance of developing learners' communicative competence and of promoting their active use of L2. These approaches are embraced by educators and are also supported by some widely accepted theories of second language acquisition, e.g. Long's (1996) interactive hypothesis and Swain's (2000) pushed output. However, second language classroom research studies have yielded consistent results suggesting that learners, particularly Asian learners, are unwilling to participate orally (e.g. Peng, 2012; Jackson, 2002). Learners' unwillingness to communicate has concerned researchers and educators alike. Considerable efforts have been undertaken to explore the pertinent factors for learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in order to understand and help predict learners' communicative behavior. However, most studies have treated WTC as a static trait and have largely neglected its dynamic nature. Little is known how learners' WTC fluctuates in

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different situations in L2 classrooms and what attributes to variations. Furthermore, most previous studies focus on learners at university (e.g. Jackson, 2002; Kang, 2005; Peng, 2012); low-level L2 learners' WTC is under researched. To address these gaps in literature, this study investigates five low-proficiency L2 learners' situational WTC in a New Zealand ESL classroom. Drawing on Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior, it explores factors affecting their WTC in different situations in L2 classrooms. I chose the theory of planned behavior because it is well supported by empirical evidence and "it has emerged as one of the most influential and popular conceptual frameworks for the study of human action" (Ajzen, 2002, p. 665). In line with the theory, this study defines WTC as learners' intention to participate in a discourse using an L2 in L2 classrooms. To avoid lexical repetition, this paper uses oral participation and oral communication synonymously.

In the following sections, I first explain how I operationalized Ajzen's theory of planned behavior as the theoretical framework for the inquiry before I present a review of previous studies.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

2.1. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior

Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior (TPB) aims to identify the determinants of behavior and understand why people do what they do. According to the theory of planned behavior, human behavior is shaped by behavioral, normative and control beliefs. Behavioral beliefs are personal in nature and reflect an individual's subjective beliefs about the consequences of a particular behavior. Based on an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing a particular behavior, individuals have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior. Normative beliefs reflect the social influence on an individual's perception about a particular behavior. In other words, the judgment and perceptions of significant others, e.g. parents, spouse, friends, teachers, society etc. impose social pressure on the person and influence whether he or she should or should not perform such behavior. Normative beliefs result in subjective norms. Control beliefs concern an individual's sense of self-efficacy which is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce given levels of attainments" (Bandura, 1998, p. 624). Ajzen (2005) posits an individual's control beliefs lead to perceived behavioral control which is presumed to affect actual behavior, both directly and indirectly, through behavioral intention.

As can be seen from the above discussion, people's intentions to perform a given behavior are central in Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. Ajzen (1991) believes "the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm with respect to a behavior, and the greater the perceived behavioral control, the stronger should be an individual's intention to perform the behavior under consideration" (p. 286).

As the theory of planned behavior is claimed to be a very powerful and predictive model for explaining a wide range of human behavior (Ajzen, 1991), its application in explaining learners' WTC will be promising.

2.2. Previous studies

WTC, a concept originated from L1 communication studies, was first defined as the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so and was conceptualized as a personality trait, fairly stable over time and across situations (McCroskey and Baer, 1985; McCroskey and Richmond, 1991). Based on this conceptualization, early studies in SLA perceived WTC as being predictable from two variables: learners' perceived communication competence and communication anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002, 2009). That is, high levels of perceived competence combined with low levels of anxiety would lead to greater WTC which would in turn generate more frequent communication in L2. Other individual factors have also been found to be correlated with or affect L2 WTC, including motivation (Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002), gender and age (MacIntyre et al., 2002), attitude toward the international community (Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004), and personality (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996).

However, trait-like WTC may not be sufficient to capture L2 communication. Some learners may be competent and yet unwilling to communicate while others seek out every opportunity to communicate with their limited linguistic resources. L2 learners' WTC may fluctuate as situations change. To reflect this perspective, MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC as a learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547) and proposed a multi-layered pyramid model of WTC. According to this model, WTC is affected by stable, more enduring factors as well as situation-specific factors. While the former includes interpersonal

motivation, intergroup motivation, self-confidence, intergroup attitudes, social conditions, communicative competence, intergroup climate and personality, the latter consists of the desire to communicate with a specific person and the state of communicative self-confidence. Therefore, such factors as the degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation and the topic of discussion may all influence learners' willingness to communicate.

A handful of studies have examined this dynamic nature of WTC. MacIntyre et al. (2001), for instance, found that social support, particularly from friends, influenced WTC outside the classroom. In their study, Clément et al. (2003) found that the frequency and quality of L2 contact influenced L2 WTC through the mediation of L2 confidence. While these earlier studies relied mostly on quantitative data, more recent studies employed qualitative methods to explore the situational nature of WTC. In her qualitative study of four Korean L2 learners, Kang (2005) used a number of methods (class observations, interviews and stimulated recall) to collect data. Inductive analysis of data revealed that three psychological conditions (excitement, responsibility, and security) interacting with situational variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context determined learners' situational WTC. Using similar methods, Cao and Philp (2006) found a number of factors influenced learners' WTC behavior in classrooms including group size, familiarity with interlocutor(s) and topics under discussion, self-confidence, medium of communication and cultural background. In her more recent multiple case study, Cao (2011) reported that three dimensions, individual, linguistic and environmental, had joint effects on the situational WTC in L2 classrooms. Adopting an ecological perspective, Peng (2012) identified six factors underlying classroom WTC: learner beliefs, motivation, cognitive factors, linguistic factors, affective factors, and classroom environment. The findings from these studies have shed some light on the situational WTC. However, more studies of this nature are needed in order to advance our understanding of the conditions and factors for changes in learners' WTC.

This inquiry, which is a part of a broader study (Zhong, 2012), aims to capture the dynamic nature of WTC and addresses the following questions:

- 1) What is the participants' WTC in L2 classroom situations?
- 2) What are the factors affecting their WTC in each situation?

3. Method

3.1. Setting and participants

The present study was conducted on the Certificate Programme of a language school in a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The research site was chosen because it represented a typical instructional English learning environment in New Zealand. Chinese learners were identified as the participants for this study. This was because Chinese learners constituted the majority of student population at the language school. Understanding this learner group was significant for the school and the findings could be also useful for other contexts which have similar learners. Language proficiency was another reason. Because this study focused on low-level learners' WTC, it was necessary to conduct all the interviews in their L1 in order to get meaningful data.

Ethics procedures were strictly followed where the potential participants were first approached by the administrators. The participants were contacted by the researcher after they had agreed to participate in the project and were reassured that their identity would remain confidential. Having received full information about the study, seven learners voluntarily participated. However, two learners withdrew from the study in the eighth week of the project due to their family commitments. Five learners continued until the research was complete. All the participants were full-time students: two were from the elementary level and three from the pre-intermediate level. Table 1 gives a summary of the participants' profiles.

3.2. Procedures and instruments

Because the purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of learners' WTC in classrooms, the study was conducted within an interpretative paradigm employing a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Data were collected over an 18-week period. To ensure the dependability and trustworthiness of the study, data were gathered by using a number of instruments for triangulation:

Table 1
Participants' profiles.

Name	Fei	Shan	Ding	Peng	Bing
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	28	41	21	25	35
Educational background	University graduate	University graduate	High school graduate	University graduate	Art academy graduate
Length of time learning in N.Z.	2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	6 months
Length of time living in N.Z.	6 months	18 months	12 months	10 months	6 years
First time learning English	Junior high school	High school	Primary school	Primary school	A few months before coming to N.Z. from a private tutor.
English proficiency	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	Elementary II	Elementary II

- (1) Semi-structured in-depth interviews: I conducted two in-depth interviews, one at the beginning and another at the end of the study. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Participants were provided with opportunities to articulate their thoughts on a set of questions tapping into their general beliefs about language learning. For example, one of the questions I asked was “in your view, what is the most important aspect of language learning?”
- (2) Learning logs: I asked the participants to write one or two journal entries each week, relating anything about their learning and learning activities, e.g. their class activities, the role of teachers, their learning strategies etc.
- (3) Classroom observations: to collect data on their classroom oral participation, I observed them in their intact classrooms twice (one in week 5 and one in week 10), with each observation lasting 120 min. For each observation, I kept field notes and collected all the materials (e.g. handouts, worksheets) that were used in class. Both observations were video-recorded with permission from the teachers and learners who were involved.
- (4) Stimulated recall interviews: two stimulated recall interviews were conducted within a week following the class observations whilst their memory was still fresh (Gass and Mackey, 2000). During the process, I first debriefed the classroom observations. Class materials I collected during the observations were used to help refresh their memory. Then the learners watched pre-selected video clips and were asked to comment on what was happening in the classroom, what he or she was doing at that time and why.

3.3. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was used to answer research question one. To measure the learners' oral communication, I watched the videos and read the field notes from the class observations repeatedly. I then identified and tallied each event of the learners' oral communication, focusing on the number of speech acts that the learners engaged in, e.g. the number of times the learners volunteered answers, initiated questions and responded to questions. Any speech acts in class were counted as a communication. They might be a single word or several sentences in a discourse. A descriptive frequency table was generated based on these.

Qualitative methods were employed to answer research question two. Following the inductive process, factors affecting learners' WTC in different situations emerged from the data. Before the data analysis commenced, I first transcribed verbatim all the data gathered from the two in-depth interviews and the two simulated recall interviews. Then I read repeatedly all the transcripts and diary entries while jotting down notes in the margins. After several readings, I started to establish the unit for the study which could be single words, short phrases, complete sentences, utterances or extended discourse. They expressed the learners' views on class activities, language learning and their own behaviors in classrooms. Each unit was identified by source, participant, and particular data collection episode. During the line-by-line scrutiny of the data, codes were affixed to the units of analysis. Data reduction followed after that. Similar themes were grouped into one category. Finally, these categories and themes were refined and substantiated by the use of Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior. It was a process of recursive analysis where data were read repeatedly; new codes were added until saturation was reached, i.e. no new themes were found, and salient themes, categories or recurring patterns began to emerge. During this process, research questions and Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior were frequently referred to; literature was revisited. Negative evidence and contradictions were watched for and accommodated.

4. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 compares the participants' oral communication in two different activities in L2 classrooms: teacher-led versus collaborative. It is evident that the learners participate more actively in the collaborative context as opposed to the teacher-led context. The following section presents and discusses findings in each context respectively.

4.1. The learners' WTC in the teacher-fronted situations and perceived factors

The two class observations revealed that the learners' oral participation in the teacher-fronted situations varied. Table 2 summarizes the number of times the learners volunteered an answer to a teacher-elicited question and the number of times the learners initiated questions.

The table indicates that the learners were different in terms of their oral participation. They split into two groups, one of which I named as scant communicators consisting of Peng, Bing, Ding and the other, moderate communicators including Fei and Shan. The former refers to those learners who barely communicated in class (between 0 and 5 times) whilst the latter includes those learners who were moderately active (between 6 and 10 times).

What makes one group willing to speak up and another reluctant to do so? According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2005), behavioral intention is an immediate antecedent of behavior and it indicates an individual's readiness to perform a given behavior. Behavioral intention, in return, is a function of three factors: (a) an individual's attitude toward performing the behavior, (b) a general subjective norm concerning the performance of the behavior, and (c) the perceived control over the behavior. In light of this, in order to participate orally and voluntarily, not only should learners hold favourable attitudes toward participating orally but they are also encouraged by society and people close to them. Furthermore, they need to have the perceptions that they are capable of doing so. The data from the in-depth interviews, learning logs and stimulated recall interviews gave some insight into the perceived factors promoting or hindering their oral participation from the learners' perspectives. These relate to their concerns for accuracy, perceived self-efficacy, fear of losing face and avoidance of being considered as a show-off.

4.1.1. Concerns for accuracy

Concerns for accuracy emerged to be the most influential factor that hindered the scant communicators from participating:

When you speak out, you have to be 100% sure.... When you [the researcher] came to observe us the other day, I didn't volunteer when the teacher checked the answers. That was because I wasn't sure if my answers were correct or not. If I'm not certain, I normally don't speak up.—(Bing, S.R. II)

Drawing on Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior, this concern for accuracy seemed to be related to their behavioral beliefs. In the view of these learners, accuracy was paramount. Thus the primary goal of learning a

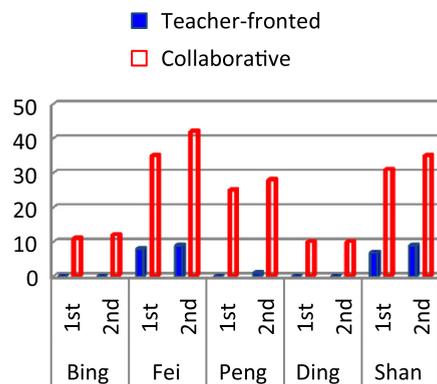


Fig. 1. Comparison of the learners' oral communication in different classroom activities.

Table 2
The learners' oral communication in the teacher-led situations.

		Bing	Peng	Ding	Fei	Shan
1st observation	Volunteering answers	0	0	0	4	3
	Initiated interactions	0	0	0	4	4
	Total interactions	0	0	0	8	7
2nd observation	Volunteering answers	0	1	0	5	5
	Initiated interactions	0	0	0	4	4
	Total communications	0	1	0	9	9

second language was to learn formal properties of the language, e.g. grammatical rules, in order to produce error-free English. According to Ding,

I hope to learn more formally and traditionally. I didn't want my sentences to leave out some words.—(Ding, Diary 28-Jul)

I want to speak correct English first. Then I have to attend to many other things. For example, you have to memorize new words and think about special usage.—(Ding, Int I)

Learners like Ding did not hold a favourable attitude toward speaking up, particularly when there were errors in their English.

In contrast, for those moderate communicators (Fei and Shan), meaning and fluency were regarded as overriding in their language learning. Both learners considered classrooms to be a safe haven where they could practise using English without fear of making mistakes. To the contrary, errors were perceived as an opportunity to learn:

I am not afraid of making mistakes in the classroom. I come here to learn. If I make mistakes, teachers can correct me. I will learn more in this way... The classroom is the only place where I can use English. I made the most out of the class activities and grabbed the opportunity to speak. If I keep doing this, I believe my speaking and listening will be improved.—(Shan, S.R.II)

Shaped by this favourable attitude toward speaking up, both learners were observed to be more active and more willing to communicate and participate in class.

These data extracts confirm that behavioral beliefs are personal in nature (Ajzen, 1991, 2005). The learners varied in accordance with their positive or negative evaluation of speaking up in public. Fei and Shan believed active participation in class offered them an opportunity to achieve the goal of improving fluency. They were so keen that they were willing to exert more effort and participate actively. The opposite was true of the other three learners.

4.1.2. Self-efficacy

Learners' perceived self-efficacy is another factor affecting the learners' WTC in the teacher-led context. As aforementioned, self-efficacy is the measure of one's own ability to execute a behavior or a task (Bandura, 1997, 1998). Ajzen (2005) refers self-efficacy to control beliefs in his theory of planned behavior which is presumed to affect actual behaviors both directly and indirectly through intention.

In this study, the scant communicators appeared to be lacking in perceived confidence or perceived behavioral control. In other words, they did not perceive themselves as having the competence to speak up with ease in front of others. The low self-efficacy was associated with their low language proficiency and the demand for on-line processing which required them to think on the spot in L2. Their linguistic deficiency did not match the high demand from speaking up, and consequently impeded their participation:

When I was thinking about answers to teachers' questions by myself, if I didn't know a word, I could think in Chinese or skip the word. But if I volunteered and I didn't know the word, I would get stuck with it. Everything would be out of control. My mind went blank and I couldn't think of anything. The teacher wouldn't know what

I wanted to say and I couldn't speak in Chinese. I didn't want to put myself in this awkward and embarrassing situation. I don't want to experience the moment that I can't express myself.—(Ding, S.R. I)

It is evident that low self-efficacy was related to deficiency in language proficiency which discouraged the learners from class participation and also brought about debilitating anxiety.

On the contrary, the two moderate communicators were confident about themselves, knowing that they had the ability to contribute to classroom interactions. Fei commented,

The questions that teachers asked were normally related to what we were learning. I normally previewed before class and revised after class, so they were easy for me. My problem is fluency. I need to participate in order to have more opportunity to practise.—(Fei, S.R. II)

Learners' need for longer think time was also accountable. For those scant communicators, their low language proficiency meant they had to resort to their L1 to formulate their answers first. They needed more processing lag time to restructure their ideas in English and search for appropriate English words. By the time they completed the translation process and gathered courage to speak up, it was too late either because someone else had supplied answers or because the conversation had moved on:

When the teacher asked questions, I had to think about answers in my head in Chinese first. But before I finished organizing my answers, they [his classmates] had supplied them. It took me longer to formulate answers because I didn't have enough vocabulary.—(Bing, S.R.I)

In their study, Lèger and Storch (2009) also reported that less proficient students felt that they could not participate.

4.1.3. Fear of losing face

"Face" concerns "the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct" (Ho, 1976, p. 883). All the scant communicators in the study expressed their desire to be regarded as "well-educated" (Peng) and "prestigious" (Bing) and "respectful" (Ding). According to Bing,

When you supply or volunteer answers in class, you have to be 100% sure. Otherwise, it will be a loss of face. People all have self-esteem. When teachers nominate you to speak up, you can't afford to have people say that you are not good in your grammar, messy in your speaking or you haven't got enough vocabulary. Neither can you afford to have people look down upon you.—(Bing, S.R. I)

In their view, the way to gain "face" was through using accurate and correct English. Speaking up in front of others with errors in their English was regarded as running the risk of being judged negatively by their peers and losing face. Inaccurate English will tarnish their reputations and put them to shame. This fear of making mistakes and losing face meant they did not have the intention to speak up but chose to remain silent in class.

In light of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2005), one of the determinants affecting the performance of a particular behavior is normative beliefs which reflect the social influence on an individual's perception about the behavior. This social pressure will determine if an individual should or should not perform such behavior. The learners in this study were particularly concerned about their public image and how they were judged by their peers. They were clearly under social pressure and tended to hold back in order to avoid losing face. This finding supports other studies reporting that the fear of high-exposure and risk of self-esteem are associated with low classroom participation and low motivation (e.g. Lèger and Storch, 2009; Morita, 2004).

4.1.4. Showing off

While low proficiency is associated with low participation, the interview data also revealed that the learners may be proficient and self-efficacious and yet they may not be willing to communicate. For example, Fei admitted that she had not volunteered as much as she would have liked to due to her wish not to be perceived as "showing off", i.e. over-ready to contribute, by other students:

I should've volunteered more but I thought I'd better give other students more opportunities to participate. Otherwise I would've ended up dominating class time and other students may think I am showing off and feel

resentful. So I only volunteered those challenging questions or questions that no one was ready to answer.—(Fei, S.R. II)

Like the aforementioned factor (i.e. fear of losing face), showing off is also related to normative beliefs in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2005). As volunteering an answer frequently in classrooms is not perceived positively in Chinese society, Fei was apparently under the social influence and did not wish to appear over-ready to contribute. Similar results were also reported in Jackson's (2002) ethnographic study of Chinese students in four sections of an English-medium undergraduate business course in Hong Kong. She revealed that some Chinese students did not volunteer as they were concerned about "how their peers would regard them if they spoke up frequently in class or had lengthy responses" and "they did not want to be labeled as a 'show-off'" by their classmates (p. 77).

To sum up, the learners varied in terms of their classroom oral participation in the teacher-led context. Two learners were more willing to participate whereas three learners were very reticent. Different factors were accountable. Some were socio-cultural (e.g. face value; showing off) while others were related to individual learner factors (e.g. beliefs, self-efficacy, language proficiency). These factors had joint effects on the degree to which the learners participate orally in teacher-fronted situations.

4.2. The learners' WTC in the collaborative learning context and perceived factors

Table 3 provides a summary of the learners' oral participation in the collaborative learning context.

The table shows that compared to the teacher-led context, all the learners' oral participation improved in the collaborative learning context. The most noticeable improvement of them all came from Peng. Like the teacher-led context, the learners again split into two distinct groups. I categorized them high and low communicators respectively. However, the number of high communicators had increased to three learners (Fei, Shan and Peng) while the low communicators were reduced to two (Bing and Ding).

The data suggested the variations in the collaborative context were closely related to their attitudes toward working collaboratively. With reference to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2005), an individual's attitude toward a behavior is determined by his or her behavioral beliefs and it reflects their overall evaluation of performing the act. If an individual possesses a favorable attitude toward a behavior, he or she may be more likely to engage in such a behavior. On the contrary, if an individual possesses an unfavorable attitude, he or she may be less likely to undertake that behavior. The data revealed that all the high communicators held positive attitudes toward working collaboratively in pairs/groups. Hence, they were more willing to get involved in interacting with their fellow students. For Peng, Shan, Fei, pair/group work was primarily perceived as a learning and social opportunity:

I like pair/group work because if I learn by myself, I will easily get bored. If we do some activities with partners, we can discuss the questions, think of answers and form an agreed solution...some of them may have larger vocabulary than me. I may not know the meaning of some words and they can teach me.—(Peng, Diary 17 Sept)

They did not perceive learning as an individual activity but as a process of sharing with other persons through collaboration, joint scaffolding and co-construction. During the process of collaborative dialoguing (Swain, 2000), Peng found himself assisting (e.g. 'discuss questions', 'think of answers') and being assisted (e.g. 'teach' each other) to achieve a goal (e.g. 'form an agreed solution') which he was not able to perform independently. In this sense, working with peers may have helped him cognitively (e.g. building his vocabulary knowledge) as well as socially and affectively (e.g. increasing enjoyment and social integration).

Table 3
Learners' oral participation in the collaborative learning situations.

		Bing	Peng	Ding	Fei	Shan
1st observation	Responding to questions	8	15	7	20	17
	Initiating questions	3	10	3	15	14
	Total communications	11	25	10	35	31
2nd observation	Responding to questions	7	17	7	22	19
	Initiating questions	3	11	3	20	16
	Total communications	10	28	10	42	35

These learners also viewed working in pairs and groups as a practice opportunity where they could use what they had learned in class and focus on form. According to Fei,

It [pair and group work] can help me consolidate what I learned. Especially when we did those grammar focused speaking activities in pairs, I forced myself to pay attention to my accuracy. It is really good.—(Fei, S.R. I)

Fei's comments have lent support to the argument that pair and group work can provide learners with opportunities to focus on form and produce pushed output (Swain, 2000). In his study of learners' participation in a Thai context, McDonough (2004) reported that learners who participated more during pair and small group activities demonstrated improved production of the target form.

Finally, the three learners all regarded pair/group work as a communication opportunity which they were keen to make full use of. As indicated in the demographic information, all the learners in the study were immigrants in New Zealand, so they were all eager to achieve communicative competence in order to get a job and to settle down in their adopted country. However, they all reported living exclusively in the high enclosure Chinese community, which is very self-sufficient as far as its social facilities are concerned. For instance, the community has its own supermarkets, law firms, churches, TV and radio stations and travel agencies etc. When it comes down to the shared social facilities, e.g. banks, libraries, hospitals, a person of Chinese origin can easily access a Chinese speaking staff member to assist. All the learners commented that they did not have much contact with the target language group in New Zealand. To fill the gap between their needs for language use and their lack of opportunities outside the classroom, they regarded classrooms as an important platform where they could practice using the language for communication. In this regard, they preferred to work with people from other countries because they believed it could "force [them] to use English":

If you work with someone from China and you don't know how to communicate in English, you tend to use Chinese. But if your partner is from other countries, even when you don't know how to explain in English, you have to force yourself to communicate in English. Therefore, you increase your opportunity to use English.—(Peng, S.R. I)

Kang (2005) and Léger and Storch (2009) found similar results. In both studies, the participants did not want to interact with their fellow L1 students because they felt "weird", like "wearing a mask" (Kang, 2005, p. 284) and "pretentious" (Léger and Storch, 2009, p. 279).

These positive attitudes saw the three learners participate actively and enthusiastically in collaborative learning context, specially the shift in Peng's communication behavior.

However, the views of the other two participants (Bing and Ding) were more negative. While appreciating the less threatening speaking opportunities that pair/group work offered, these two learners also expressed their concerns about their fellow students' ability to correct them:

Teachers asked us to work with our partners. But we are at a similar level. If we have problems, we can't correct each other. If we are both wrong, we can't find each other's problems. Yes, we can use the language to communicate but we don't know if our English is correct or not.—(Bing, S.R.I)

In Ding's view, the product of learning (i.e. what she learned and her accuracy) mattered more than its process (i.e. how she learned):

I came here to learn. Whether it is interesting or not, it depends on whether what is going on helps me learn...I'd rather teachers asked us to make sentences by using new words than work in pairs... There is no point speaking because what we said was wrong anyway.—(Ding, S.R.II)

Consequently, they both questioned the effectiveness of collaborative learning, particularly group work when no one took responsibility and the turn distributions were not even:

When we worked in groups, it might be worse. There were too many people. Everyone relied on others and no one was responsible. Everyone wrote and no one initiated talking... Group work was not as effective as pair work. However, if two worked together to use the target structures, it was not as good as working individually to make sentences.—(Ding, S.R.II)

Group work is good for some but not appropriate for others. For the weaker students, they were not able to say anything but for the stronger students, the activities was not challenging because there were no competitions and they dominated the discussions.—(Bing, S.R. II)

Underpinned by these negative attitudes, both learners were observed reluctant to get involved in pair/group work in class. Neither were they keen to contribute to and communicate in group activities. They were observed either to look up new words in their dictionaries or check notes frequently during pair/group work.

This study confirms the findings in Léger and Storch's (2009) research that the learners' views about working in pairs/groups were not straightforward and uniform. The differences in their behavioral beliefs about participating in collaborative learning seem to be related to their beliefs about other aspects of language learning. Those learners who held positive behavioral views regarded meaning as paramount in their learning. The process of negotiating and interacting with peers was regarded as important for learning. They all benefited from the interactional opportunities. The opposite is true of the other two learners. They equated learning with accuracy. Therefore, they believed they could only learn from experts or teachers, not from their fellow students. They were more conscious of the end product of an activity. That is, they focused on whether they got the right answers but missed out on opportunities for language use. It is apparent that the different behavioral beliefs they held about collaborative learning affected their WTC which either assisted or impeded their oral participation in collaborative learning activities.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

This study reveals that the learners' WTC and oral communication varied in different situations in L2 classrooms, supporting the argument that WTC is context-dependent and situational. It is evident that all the participants became more involved in communicating with each other in collaborative learning situations. However, the factors accounting for the variations in each situation were complex. Their reticence or unwillingness to participate in the teacher-fronted situation was related to a mixture of linguistic, affective and socio-cultural factors as shown in other previous studies (e.g. Cao, 2011; Peng, 2012). In comparison, their WTC and oral communication in the collaborative learning situations were found to be only associated with the behavioral beliefs they held which resulted in different attitudes toward working collaboratively. Future studies could investigate further how other beliefs (e.g. normative beliefs, control beliefs) affect learners' WTC during collaborative learning activities.

Drawing on Ajzen's (1991, 2005) theory of planned behavior, I propose a model aiming to capture factors affecting learners' oral communication in L2 classrooms (Fig. 2).

The model shows that three beliefs, behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs and control/self-efficacy beliefs, jointly influence learners' willingness to communicate which in turn determines their actual oral communication. Behavioral beliefs deal with learners' beliefs about the behavior under discussion, e.g. communicating in teacher-led situations and in groups/pairs. Normative beliefs concern the influence from learners' past experience, society and significant others; and control/self-efficacy beliefs refer to learners' own confidence in their capacity to execute an action, e.g. speaking up in public and/or in groups/pairs.

This study highlights the importance for language teachers to identify various factors affecting learners' WTC and understand their effects on learner's oral participation in different situations in classrooms. It suggests that there is no single factor that determines learners' WTC. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to take into account all these factors when planning and deciding class activities. Furthermore, the results of this study lend support to the argument that pair/group work is an effective instructional technique to get learners involved in oral

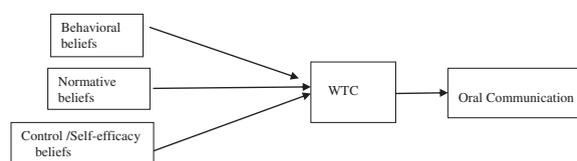


Fig. 2. Model for understanding L2 oral communication.

communication and help them develop communicative competence. When preparing for lessons, teachers should allocate more class time to collaborative learning and identify strategies for establishing a supportive, friendly and non-threatening learning environment to optimize learning through scaffolded instruction and providing peer or tailored support.

6. Notes

1. The broader study was a multiple case study. The research had a number of aims:
 - 1) To examine the evolution of learner beliefs over the observed period
 - 2) To investigate the changes in learner strategy use
 - 3) To examine the relationships between beliefs, learner strategy use and their effects on second language acquisition.

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