An Exploration of Chinese Second Language Learners' Willingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Anxiety in EAP Classes

Bicen Luo[1,a,*], Han Wang[1,b]

[1]School of Languages, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 111 Ren'ai Road, Suzhou, Jiangsu, China
[a]bicen.luo@xjtlu.edu.cn, [b]han.wang@xjtlu.edu.cn
**Corresponding author*

Abstract: This study investigated first year university students' willingness and anxiety levels in speaking English in EAP classrooms. UCS and FLCAS were employed to create a questionnaire and collect 31 participants' responses. The major findings are as follows: a) participants demonstrated a higher than average WTC in a broad sense; b) only one third of them reported feeling anxious about speaking English in EAP classes; c) the fear of being negatively commented on, getting involved in communicative scenarios, and making English speeches are the three main anxiety sources that negatively correlate with WTC, with only negative evaluation as the negative predictor.

1. Introduction

In many transnational universities in China, EAP classes with English-medium instructions (EMI) are run as a supporting tool for students to learn subject-based content. Language teaching methodology has been internationalized by incorporating global pedagogical research findings into English classrooms in China [1]. Two themes of language teaching researches, namely Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), among Chinese TNE students are addressed in this paper.

1.1 WTC in Second Language Teaching

Since 1970s, the idea that English language classes should serve communicative purposes has been dominating pedagogical research [2]. Later, Burgoon in 1976 proposes that unwillingness to communicate may be inferred from sociological and psychological variables, which devaluates the functions of oral communication in language classes [3].

Studies into communication willingness have been further conducted by introducing the predisposition of WTC as a personality-based construct, which remains stable in various L1 contexts [4]. Research into L2 teaching, however, has reported a negative correlation between students WTC in L1 and that in L2 [5].

In L2, it has been suggested that the WTC construct can be generalized as a variable changing with

situations and contexts for an individual L2 learner [6]. Specific contextual factors, such as interactional context including, group size and interlocutor's involvement, influence students' L2 WTC [7].

1.2 FLCA in Pedagogical Research

FLCA is often regarded as a factor that "impedes students' ability to perform successfully in a foreign language" [9]. For a long time, anxiety associated with second language learning had not been explicitly defined. Horwitz, et al. identified factors of speech anxiety and performance anxiety in the academic context of second language acquisition in 1986 [9]. On this basis, an FLCA scale was designed to measure students' anxiety in L2 classes.

A more specific research into the anxiety level of students with different language proficiency and in different classroom activities was conducted by Liu in 2006 at Tsinghua University indicating that approximately one third felt average-anxious in L2 classes [10]. In other Asian countries, FLCA studies in EFL classrooms have also been flourishing. A research targeted at Iranian students reported that students learning English as the second language did not show a high level of FLCA [8]. However, this study was quite general, with no specific aspects of FLCA being analyzed.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

In previous studies, it was found that over half of those students are highly willing to communicate in the target language, and approximately 30% of them felt anxious [11]. The two factors negatively correlated with one another, with subcomponents showing different degrees of influence [11].

However, few studies have addressed student groups in Chinese TNE about their WTC and FLA in EAP classes. Both researchers are English lecturers for a Sino-UK university, eager to explore whether students are willing to speak and feel anxiety in learning English. Therefore, the following research questions were designed for students in this university:

1) To what extent are students willing to speak English in EAP classes?
2) To what extent are students anxious about speaking English in EAP classes?
3) What is the relationship between students' foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) level and their willingness to communicate (WTC) in English?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This research included 31 Year 1 participants (14 male and 17 female) across a spectrum of English language proficiency ranging from CEFR A1 to CEFR B2. These participants were enrolled separately in three Year 1 EAP courses targeted at students of distinct language levels based on their placement test results prior to registry. All three Y1 EAP modules were planned as practice-intensive for both receptive and productive skills, with four participants (12.9%) studying in the Foundation Pathway, 21 participants (67.7%) in the Core Pathway, and six participants (19.4%) in the Advanced Pathway.

2.2 Instruments

In this research, participants completed two scales on an online questionnaire. These two scales were Willingness to Communicate Scale (UCS) adapted from that by McCroskey in 1992 as measurement of the level of communicative willingness, and the Foreign Language Classroom

Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which manifested anxiety levels when speaking English as a foreign language [12].

2.2.1 The Willingness to Communicate Scale (UCS)

This scale is a 22-item scale adapted from McCroskey's model in 1992 [12] based on situations in EAP classes at this university. Statements irrelevant to EAP contexts were removed, yet some others were included in accordance with the activities or learning experience in EAP lessons. This scale was designed as a 10-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "the least willing to speak" and 10 representing "the most willing to speak".

2.2.2. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

This simplified 25-item FLCAS was adapted from the 33-item version produced by Horwitz, et al. in 1986 [9]. Variations were made on the original version for the appropriateness in the description of EAP classes in this university with changes in wording and removal of irrelevant or repetitive items. This 7-point Likert scale demonstrating students' levels of anxiety included 10 statements (1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 19, 20, 23) describing communication apprehension, three (2, 12, 14) on test anxiety and eight (3, 5, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 22) concerning negative evaluation.

2.3 Procedure

The 31 participants completed the online bilingual questionnaire comprising of WCS and FLCAS upon completion of EAP classes in Year 1 Semester 1 when a variety of activity types, group dynamics, and scenarios had been experienced. Each participant spent approximately 15 minutes on finishing the questionnaire.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Willingness to Communicate in English in EAP Classrooms

Participants' responses were found to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.78$) and represented the extent to which students were willing to communicate in English in language classes. Table 1 summarizes the general level of students' WTC. The mean of all students' average scores for all questionnaire questions is 6.62. On a 10-point Likert scale, where higher scores reflect greater willingness, this finding indicates a more than moderate willingness to communicate in English for EAP lessons among participants, echoing the research findings from Iranian English learners [8].

Table 1: General statistics of students' average scores in WTC

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	Std.D
31	3.86	9.54	6.62	6.55	6.55	1.20

Mean scores for all questions were above 5, indicating a more than moderate willingness to communicate in English among participants. The top three lowest mean scores fall on Question 8 (trying to talk rather than listen during a conversation), Question 19 (speaking about a controversial topic), and Question 10 (speaking to a classmate of the opposite sex), while the two highest were obtained with Question 14 (speaking about a topic when I am prepared) and Question 22 (speaking when I am sure that my answer is correct).

3.2 Anxiety Levels When Speaking English in EAP Classes

The reliability test of the FLCAS found that the results were highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.92$). Compared

with other questions where a higher rating on the scale indicated greater anxiety, the description of Question 2 represented the opposite tendency. Therefore, when the data collected from the FLCAS were computed, the values for the alternatives of Question 2 were reversed.

The full score of the 25-item FLCAS (7-point Likert scale) is 175. Scores of over 140 indicate participants' high anxiety in foreign language classrooms. Those between 105 and 140 signify moderate anxiety, whereas scores below 105 imply little anxiety. As is shown in Table 2, the vast majority of students (67.742%) experience little anxiety when speaking English in EAP classrooms. Conversely, students undergoing high levels of anxiety only account for 3.226%, with the rest (29.032%) reporting moderate anxiety in EAP classes.

Table 2: General statistics of students' total score of FLCAS

N	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mode	Std.D	< 105	105-140	> 140
31	42	164	98	59	24.03	67.742%	29.032%	3.226%

3.3 Relationship between Students' Levels of WTC and FLCA in EAP Classrooms

The average scores of each participant's WTC and FLCA, along with its subcomponents, undergo a Pearson correlation analysis to reveal whether correlations exist among these variables. In Table 3, FLCA1 indicates communication apprehension, FLCA2 means test anxiety, FLCA3 demonstrates negative evaluation, and FLCA4 refers to speech anxiety. The data in Table 3 suggest that WTC is negatively correlated with FLCA and its subscales, implying that an increase in WTC tends to be connected to a decrease in levels of FLCA and its subcomponents. WTC shows a robust negative correlation with the inclusive FLCA ($r = -0.615$, $p < 0.01$). The strength of the inverse association between WTC and subscales of FLCA ranks as the following from strongest to the weakest: FLCA 3 ($r = -0.643$, $p < 0.01$); FLCA 1 ($r = -0.544$, $p < 0.01$); FLCA4 ($r = -0.521$, $p < 0.01$); and FLCA 2 ($r = -0.442$, $p < 0.05$).

It may be inferred that, to a significant extent, negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and speech anxiety have an impact on students' WTC. The more negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and speech anxiety that a student experiences, the lower the willingness will be for the student to communicate in English during EAP classes. However, the anxiety towards test only moderately influences WTC.

Table 3: Correlation between WTC and FLCA and its subcomponents

	WTC
FLCA	-0.615(0.000***)
FLCA1	-0.544(0.002***)
FLCA2	-0.442(0.013**)
FLCA3	-0.643(0.000***)
FLCA4	-0.521(0.003***)

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$

To explore how each subcomponent of FLCA affects WTC, a multiple regression analysis was employed. Based on the observation from Table 4, among the four subcomponents, only the variable of FLCA3 served as a negative predictor of WTC in a regression model at significance ($\beta = -0.64$, $t = -2.13$, $p < 0.05$), while FLCA1 ($\beta = -0.03$, $t = -0.08$, $p > 0.1$), FLCA2 ($\beta = 0.02$, $t = 0.09$, $p > 0.1$) and FLCA4 ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = -0.33$, $p > 0.1$) demonstrate relationships with students' WTC level in linear regression. Therefore, it may be concluded that, in an EAP class, negative evaluation functions more significantly as a negative factor than other anxiety variables on students' willingness to communicate.

Table 4: Regression coefficients between WTC in English and FLA subcomponents

	WCT					
	β	t	p	VIF	R²	F
FLCA1	-0.03	-0.08	0.94	4.39		
FLCA2	0.02	0.09	0.93	2.08	0.42	F=4.675 p=0.006***
FLCA3	-0.64	-2.13	0.043**	3.18		
FLCA4	-0.09	-0.33	0.75	3.48		

** $p < 0.05$

4. Conclusions and Limitations

Several conclusions on Y1 students' willingness to communicate in English and their language anxiety in EAP classes may be drawn. The first key conclusion is that students' level of willingness to communicate in English is more than moderate. Secondly, approximately a third of the investigated student group expressed anxiety towards speaking English in EAP classes, which echoes the results of two other studies on Chinese English speakers [13]. The third conclusion exhibits relevance between students' WTC and FLCA in EAP classrooms. Generally, being anxious about receiving poor comments, participating in communicative activities, and speaking the English language negatively influence students' willingness to communicate in class at significance. Moreover, negative evaluation is a qualified negative predictor of students' willingness to speak.

As such, EAP lecturers are suggested to offer more speaking opportunities for students in conversation and give them more time to prepare for safer responses. It is also advisable to clarify that the fear of being devalued for language competence is a common concern for most students. Giving positive feedback to their responses even if they are not completely satisfactory is also encouraged.

This research project also has a number of limitations. The most prominent weakness of this study is the restricted scope of target respondents across Year 1 students. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether year of study is an influential factor for students' WTC and FLAC. In future studies, year of study and some other potential variables such as gender and language proficiency level may be taken into consideration in data analysis to reach a more comprehensive conclusion as a reference for language instructors.

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