Chapter 5

Willingness to Communicate:
English Language Learners From China in Australian EAP Programs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines factors impacting L2 WTC among Chinese ELLs studying in an EAP program in Australia. Adopting both quantitative and qualitative methods, three questionnaires were used to measure L2 WTC, English learning motivation, and self-rated English proficiency; and semi-structured interviews were used to triangulate and complement questionnaire data. The main results were (1) L2 WTC with friends was higher than L2 WTC with acquaintance and with strangers and (2) L2 WTC with strangers and acquaintances were positively related to integrativeness and attitude toward the learning situation, but not with motivation intensity. L2 WTC with friends did not correlate with any of the scales in the English learning motivation; thus, (3) L2 WTC with strangers and acquaintances but not with friends had positive association with self-rated English proficiency, and (4) factors such as teaching methods, teachers’ attitude, learning style, and personality all impacted on L2 WTC. The results are discussed and practical implications are articulated.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Ministry of Education in China, it is compulsory for Chinese students to learn English as a school subject from Grade 3 to the end of 2nd-Year undergraduate studies at university. In reality, many Chinese students commence learning English prior to Grade 3. For Chinese students, English plays a vital role both academically and practically. Academically, English is listed as one of the three compulsory test subjects apart from Chinese and mathematics in the National Higher Education Entrance Exam (known as GaoKao) for all students no matter they major in social-science-oriented studies or natural-science-oriented studies. Hence, English is well-known for its gate-keeping role for Chinese students. Practically, having good English proficiency increases opportunities for Chinese students to hunt decent jobs in multi-national companies or to work overseas after completion of Higher Education (HE). Due to the prominent status of English in Chinese students’ life, a large number of Chinese students choose to study abroad either in short-term English language intensive learning programs to improve their English proficiency or in long-term vocational and HE programs to obtain an academic degree in English-speaking countries. Among the English-speaking countries, Australia remains as one of popular choices for Chinese students to seek overseas studies. The latest figures from Department of Education and Training of Australia (2015), reveal that of international students from different nationalities, Chinese students are among the top, accounting for almost 30% of the total.

In learning English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs, it is observed that some Chinese students seize every opportunity to speak English, whereas others try to avoid using English as much as possible. What factors impact Chinese students’ Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English as a Second Language (L2 WTC) among Chinese English language learners (ELLs) studying in Australia? Is their L2 WTC affected by people they communicate with? Does L2 WTC relate to English learning motivation? Does English language proficiency influence their L2 WTC? These questions are the foci of this chapter.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Conceptualization of L2 WTC

The concept of WTC was introduced in 1987 in a first language (L1) communication study based on the construct of Burgoon’s (1976) ‘Unwillingness to Communicate’. It is defined as ‘a presumed trait-like predisposition toward communication’ when the opportunity is presented (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, p. 134). McCroskey
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