

The Relationship Between Willingness to Communicate and Chinese Academic Culture and in English among Chinese College Student

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Abstract

This study investigates Chinese college students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English within classroom settings and its correlation with Chinese academic culture. A mixed-methods approach was used to address three research objectives: examining students' levels of WTC in English, exploring the relationship between Chinese academic culture and WTC, and analyzing the perspectives of students with varying WTC levels on Chinese academic culture. As for data collection, a group of undergraduate non-English majors ($n = 120$) completed a questionnaire tapping into their levels of WTC and Chinese academic culture: communication anxiety, learner beliefs, motivation, and classroom environment. Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the level of WTC, and correlations were examined between WTC and the four cultural aspects. For qualitative data, eight students, representing both high and low WTC levels, volunteered for semi-structured interviews to provide in-depth insights. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis based on Boyatzis (1998), revealing four main themes: academic expectations and pressures, instructional strategies and learning environments, classroom culture and interactions, and extracurricular engagement's impact on WTC. Results indicated a moderate WTC level in English (Mean=3.71, SD=1.21). Positive correlations were found between WTC and classroom environment, learner beliefs, and motivation, while communication anxiety was negatively correlated with WTC. These findings have educational implications for teaching practitioners and policymakers, suggesting a need for supportive classroom environments that enhance students' English communication abilities.

Keywords : *WTC in English; Communication Anxiety; Learner Belief; Motivation; Classroom Environment; Chinese Academic Culture.*

1. Introduction

China has a strong tradition of valuing education, and English has become an essential part of the curriculum, with government policies mandating English instruction

starting in early primary school. However, traditional teacher-centered methods and cultural factors rooted in Confucianism, such as respect for authority and collectivism, often limit student participation and willingness to communicate (WTC) in English (Wen & Clément, 2003). The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) and Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) support the need for active communication in language learning, with WTC being crucial for effective second-language (L2) acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 1998). However, Chinese students may avoid speaking up due to cultural norms, fearing they may appear boastful or disrupt group harmony. This study seeks to explore the impact of Chinese academic culture on college students' WTC in English, aiming to provide insights for instructors to enhance students' WTC and improve English proficiency. Although previous studies have examined factors like personality and motivation influencing WTC, limited research exists on academic culture's role in WTC, especially in China (Zulkepli, 2020; Dörnyei, 2014). The findings of this research could benefit educators and policymakers by highlighting the relevance of Chinese academic culture in EFL teaching. It may guide teachers in using cultural insights to foster more active communication in English classes, while also informing institutional policies to support English language development by respecting cultural context. The study has two objectives: 1. To assess Chinese college students' WTC in English. 2. To examine how Chinese academic culture affects their WTC. The research addresses the following questions: 1. What is the level of WTC in English among Chinese college students? 2. How does Chinese academic culture influence students' WTC in English? 3. How do students with high and low WTC perceive Chinese academic culture?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Willingness to Communicate in English

The notion of willingness to communicate (WTC) was initially introduced by (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) as a characteristic of language learners, reflecting their inclination to interact with others using their native language. This trait-like aspect of WTC suggests that it is a stable personality feature that remains constant across different situations and contexts. (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990) posit that learners' self-perceived communicative competence and low level of anxiety are two critical prerequisites for WTC. In other words, learners are more willing to engage in communicative activities when they believe they can communicate effectively and feel less anxious.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) incorporated WTC into the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and defined it as the preparedness to engage in discourse at a specific moment with a specific individual or persons using an L2. They proposed a six-level pyramid model of L2 WTC to illustrate learners' communicative behaviors (see Figure 1).

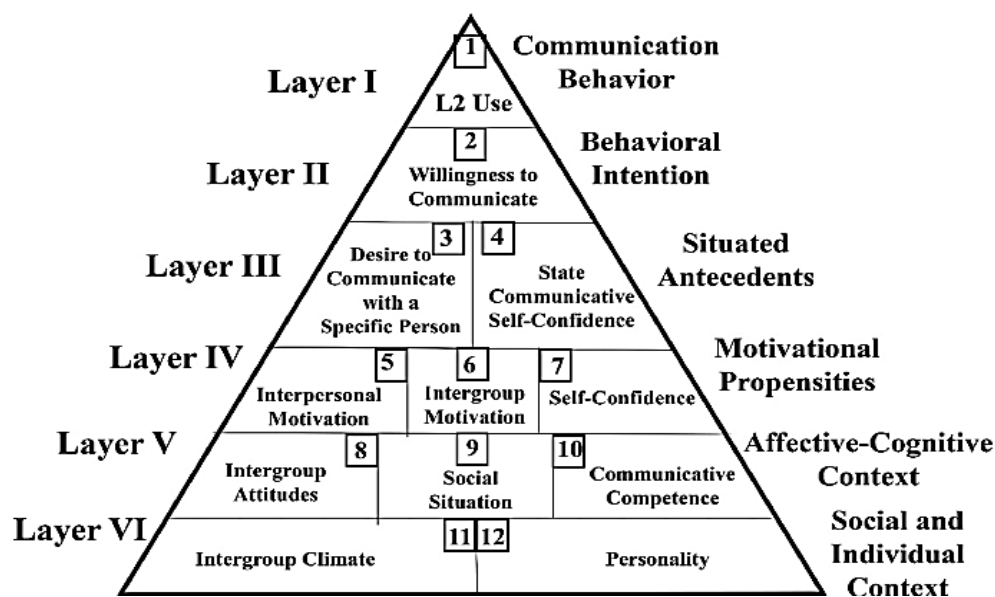


Figure 1: Willingness to communicate in English (MacIntyre, 1998).

The model consists of communication behavior at the top layer and behavioral intention, situated antecedents, motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context, and social and individual context in the following five layers. The variables in each layer are influenced by the variables in the lower layers, while the variables in each layer have the most direct impact on the layer above it. In other words, WTC has a direct impact on L2 use and is the decisive factor in determining whether learners will eventually participate in L2 communication. Therefore, increasing EFL learners' WTC can be an effective strategy to encourage them to communicate more in English and overcome the fear of communicating in a foreign language.

2.2 Chinese Academic Culture and WTC in the Chinese Context

According to Keesing (1974), culture implicitly guides individuals on how to act and interpret others' actions in various contexts. Rooted in Confucianism, Chinese culture has shaped distinctive academic practices, leading to what Wen and Clément (2003) identify as a culture characterized by an "other-directed self" and a submissive learning style. In Chinese academic culture, collectivist values prioritize social harmony, with students often refraining from speaking out to avoid appearing self-centered or in conflict with the group.

Collectivism, influenced by Confucian ideals such as Jen (meaning "two" and "man" in harmony), strongly shapes Chinese students' social identity and interpersonal interactions (Yang, 1981). This "other-directed" mindset fosters a high degree of self-consciousness about linguistic ability, making students reluctant to participate in class discussions, which can impede the development of L2 speaking skills (Williams & Burden, 1997). Furthermore, the Chinese inclination toward group identity and distinction between ingroups and outgroups may create a social and psychological distance from

foreign cultural elements, resulting in discomfort and avoidance when using the L2 (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000).

The teacher-centered hierarchy common in Chinese classrooms reflects a Confucian respect for authority, where students are expected to passively absorb and reproduce knowledge without challenging it (Ting, 1987). This emphasis on obedience and memorization over interaction has led to a strong focus on accuracy and grammar, which may impede students' willingness to communicate freely due to a fear of errors and subsequent loss of "face" (Biggs, 1996). Consequently, students may engage in meticulous self-monitoring and hesitate to communicate, limiting their language practice.

Additionally, the concept of "face," or social self-worth, profoundly impacts Chinese students' communicative behaviors. Rooted in the importance of maintaining a positive social image, "face" compels students to avoid public mistakes that could attract negative evaluations (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In large, impersonal classroom settings, this sensitivity to judgment can reduce students' willingness to interact, as crowded environments inhibit the formation of close connections and a sense of security. By contrast, cohesive, smaller groups with engaged teachers tend to enhance students' emotional stability and participation, positively impacting WTC (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Wen and Clément's (2003) model proposes that cultural values significantly influence WTC, suggesting that students' readiness to communicate in English is contingent on their sense of security and freedom from social embarrassment. Although individual traits like extraversion or sociability may increase risk-taking in communication for some students, the overarching cultural importance of "face" consistently shapes classroom behaviors. This study aims to investigate the relationship between Chinese academic culture and WTC, contributing empirical data to validate or challenge the theoretical framework proposed by Wen and Clément.

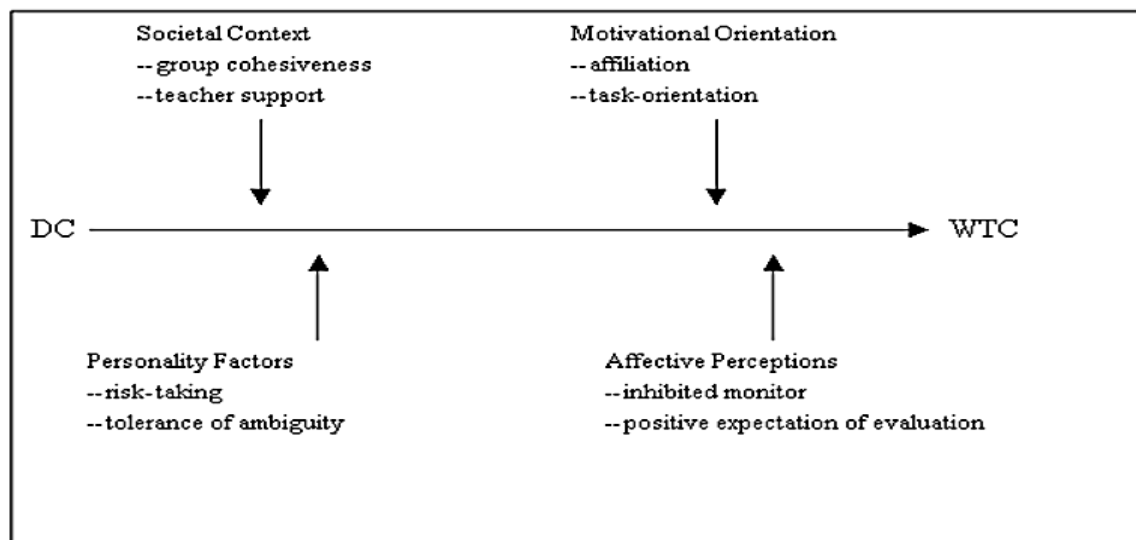


Figure 2: A schematic representation of the impact of Chinese cultural values on WTC (Wen and Clément, 2003, p.25)

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Based on the above review, WTC could be influenced by Chinese academic culture, which includes multiple facets. In order to explore the possible correlations between the two variable, factors which may contribute to the Chinese academic culture and in turn affect the way students engage in the communication in English were observed (see Figure 3).

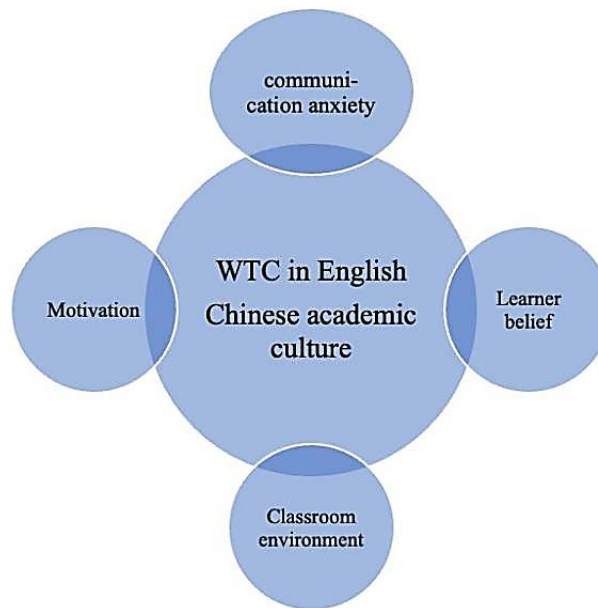


Figure 3:Theoretical Framework

2.4 Research Conceptual Framework

This study sought to ascertain Chinese students' levels of WTC in English and the relations between WTC in English and Chinese academic culture (see Figure 4).

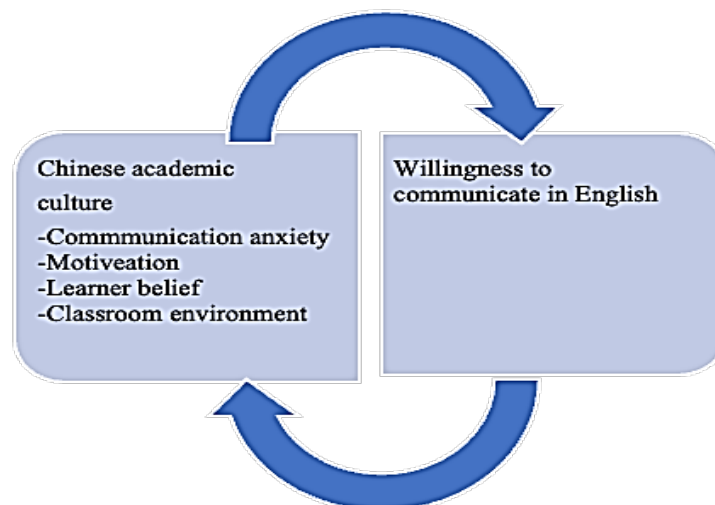


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

From the above, the two factors, i.e., Chinese academic culture and willingness to communicate in English, are closely related. Chinese academic culture consists of four elements, namely communication anxiety in language classroom, motivation to learn English, learner belief about English learning, and classroom environment. These four elements could exert either positive or negative impact on WTC in English, which could in turn influence Chinese academic culture. The current study was based on the above assumption and tried to find out the possible relationships between the two factors.

3. Research Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design, gathering both quantitative and qualitative information. It focused on identifying the possible correlations between students' WTC in English classroom and the Chinese academic culture. By integrating the findings with insights from semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to uncover the predictive effect of Chinese academic culture on participants' willingness to communicate in English.

3.1 Population and Sample

The study recruited first-year, non-English major undergraduates from a university in a southwestern province of China, where English courses are mandatory for all freshmen. Approximately 5,700 non-English major freshmen enroll each year, while English majors were excluded due to their higher motivation and propensity to communicate in English.

With university admissions based solely on Gaokao scores, participants had comparable levels of English proficiency. From this population, a random sample of 120 students, comprising 30 students from each of four majors, completed the questionnaire. Consistent with Saunders et al. (2018), who advocate for achieving information saturation in qualitative research, 8 students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to examine the influence of Chinese academic culture on willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. This group included 4 students with high WTC scores (3.50–5.00) and 4 with low WTC scores (1.00–2.49).

3.2 Research Instruments

This study focused on the speaking component of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English within the classroom, examining students' readiness to ask questions, respond to teachers and classmates, and participate in presentations. WTC was measured using a questionnaire based on J. E. Peng's (2009) framework, specifically adapted to assess students' inclination to engage in various communicative scenarios. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater WTC. To standardize the instrument, the original 6-point and 100-point scales were converted to a 5-point scale. Before administration, the researcher clarified the purpose and instructions to participants, and small financial incentives were provided in appreciation of their time. The questionnaire was presented in Chinese to minimize any language-related misunderstandings, with both English and Chinese versions provided in Appendices A-1

and A-2. A pilot study was conducted to refine the questionnaire, resulting in the removal of some items and the compilation of a revised version. All 120 participants completed the revised questionnaire, which formed the primary data set for this study. Following the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students selected based on their WTC scores (four with the highest scores and four with the lowest). The interviews, adapted from J. E. Peng's (2009) items, were held in Chinese to facilitate ease of expression. The responses were later transcribed and analyzed in English. A preliminary pilot study refined the interview questions, eliminating and adding items as needed. The final interview questions were used in a single round of interviews due to time constraints.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Instruments

To ensure validity, content validity was assessed by having three experts in English language education evaluate the questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index, introduced by Rovinelli and Hambleton (1976). This method allows for a quantitative evaluation of item alignment with research objectives. Each expert rated items from -1 to +1, where +1 indicates strong alignment, 0 suggests uncertainty, and -1 indicates misalignment. An IOC score exceeding 0.67 confirmed an item's alignment with measurement objectives. Experts provided feedback for each item, and necessary revisions were implemented before data collection.

For reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess internal consistency across five dimensions (WTC in language classroom, communication anxiety, motivation to learn English, learner beliefs, and classroom environment). A coefficient above 0.9 indicated excellent reliability; 0.8–0.9 indicated acceptable reliability, while values below 0.7 suggested items should be revised or removed. Due to modifications to Peng's (2009) instrument, a pilot study was conducted with 30 volunteers from a comparable university. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.81, confirming acceptable reliability. Participant feedback led to the removal of 12 unclear or irrelevant items and the addition of three questions to the semi-structured interview. Subsequent revisions were based on feedback from both participants and IOC experts.

The refined questionnaire demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.928 overall) with subscale reliability values of 0.897 for WTC, 0.900 for communication anxiety, 0.907 for motivation, 0.789 for learner beliefs, and 0.958 for classroom environment. To establish the reliability of qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, inter-coder reliability was tested. The researcher and a trained instructor independently analyzed the interview data through thematic analysis, resulting in an inter-coder reliability of 0.921, indicating a high and acceptable level of agreement.

3.3 Data Collection

The data gathering process was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the researcher gathered questionnaire data to answer the first and second research questions. A week later, in the second stage, the researcher selectively interviewed 8 students in accordance with their questionnaire responses. The primary aim of these interviews was to explore deeper into the possible predicative effect of the Chinese academic culture on students' WTC in English.

3.4 Data Analysis

Upon concluding data collection, the gathered data were subjected to rigorous descriptive statistical analysis. The first research question was addressed by employing SPSS software to compute the means, standard deviation of the administered questionnaires. Subsequently, the second research question was explored through correlation analysis to find out whether Chinese academic culture exerts a predictive influence on individuals' willingness to communicate in English. finally, the third research question was investigated through content analysis of the semi-structured interviews on 8 selected students.

Table 1: Data Analysis Scale

Research question	Research instrument	Type of the data collection	Data analysis / interpretation
1. What is the level of Chinese college students' Willingness to Communicate in English?	Questionnaire	Quantitative data	Descriptive analysis for quantitative data to identify the level of students' WTC in English. The interpretation of WTC Likert Scale criteria was set as follows: Lower 1.00-1.49; Low 1.50-2.49; Moderate 2.50-3.49; High 3.50-4.49; Very high 4.50-5.00.
2. Is there any relationship between Chinese academic culture influence Chinese student willingness to communicate in English?	Questionnaire	Quantitative data	The correlation analysis between WTC and other four aspects.
3. What are the opinions of students with high WTC and low WTC towards Chinese academic culture?	Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative data	Content analysis for qualitative data to explore the relations between Chinese academic culture and WTC in English. Content analysis was coded and analyzed using thematic analysis by Boyatzis (1998).

4. Research Findings

4.1 Findings for Research Question 1

To answer the first research question, "What is the level of Chinese college students' willingness to communicate in English?", a questionnaire was completed by all the 120 participants and descriptive data were collected. First, mean scores and standard deviation values were calculated and interpreted (see Table 2). Then, the level of each dimension was analyzed based on the criteria set.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics — willingness to communicate in English

WTC in English	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1. I am willing to do a role-play in English at my desk, with my peer (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant).	1	5	3.61	1.17	High Level
2. I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn't understand.	1	5	4.18	1.02	High Level
3. I am willing to give a short speech in English to the class about my hometown with notes.	1	5	3.36	1.33	Moderate Level
4. I am willing to ask my peer next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thoughts in my mind.	1	5	3.67	1.24	High Level
5. I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of a word I do not know.	1	5	3.85	1.18	High Level
6. I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Chinese into English in my group.	1	5	3.60	1.18	High Level
Total (WTC in English)	1	5	3.71	1.21	High Level

It was found that the overall mean score of willingness to communicate in English within the language classroom was 3.71, suggesting a very high level of willingness among the participants (see the criteria and the interpretation in Table 1). The standard deviation for the overall data was 1.21, indicating that there was a modest spread in the responses. This suggests some variability in students' willingness to communicate in English. Different students potentially experienced varying levels of comfort or readiness to engage in the English-speaking activities described.

4.2 Findings for research question 2

To answer the second research question: "Is there any relationship between Chinese academic culture influence Chinese student willingness to communicate in English?", descriptive analysis are presented for all the dimensions of Chinese academic culture

with all its sub-dimensions: communication anxiety in language classroom, motivation to learn English, learner belief about English learning, and classroom environment. Then, the collrelational study is presented to respond to this research question.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics — Communication Anxiety in Language Classroom

Communication Anxiety in Language Classroom	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
7.The level of anxiety I feel when speaking informally to my English teacher during classroom activities.	1	4	2.02	1.14	Low Level
8. The level of anxiety I feel When asked to contribute to a formal discussion in class.	1	4	2.17	1.12	Low Level
9. The level of anxiety I feel when giving an oral presentation to the rest of the class.	1	4	2.44	1.24	Low Level
10. The level of anxiety I feel when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	1	5	3.14	1.29	Moderate Level
Total (Communication Anxiety in Language Classroom)	1	5	2.44	1.24	Low Level

Table 3 shows that the second dimension, "communication anxiety," comprising Questions 7–10, yielded an overall mean score of 2.44, indicating low anxiety levels among students when communicating in English in the classroom. The standard deviation across these items was 1.24, showing a moderate spread in responses. Question 10 had the highest mean score (3.14) with a standard deviation of 1.29, suggesting that students experienced the most anxiety when required to speak without preparation, with notable variability in responses. This implies that unprepared speaking engagements are particularly anxiety-inducing for students.

Conversely, Question 7, with the lowest mean score (2.02) and a standard deviation of 1.14, indicates that informal interactions with the English teacher during activities generated the least anxiety. This could be due to the lower perceived stakes in informal exchanges or a more relaxed teacher-student rapport.

The findings suggest that spontaneous communication tasks heighten anxiety, emphasizing the need for instructional strategies that gradually build students' confidence in impromptu speaking. Structured teacher-led interactions, which elicited lower anxiety, could serve as a foundation for progressively more challenging communicative activities, thereby reducing anxiety and enhancing willingness to communicate in English.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics — Motivation to Learn English

Motivation to Learn English	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
11. I am learning English in order to increase my chances of winning scholarship or prize in my university.	1	5	2.20	1.09	Low Level

Motivation to Learn English	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
12. I am learning English in order to get a more prestigious job later on.	1	5	2.27	1.16	Low Level
13. I am learning English in order to have a better salary later on.	1	5	2.83	1.18	Moderate Level
14. I am learning English in order to prepare myself for the application to overseas universities in the near future.	1	5	1.88	1.17	Low Level
15. I am learning English because I choose to be the kind of person who can speak more than one language.	1	5	2.60	1.22	Moderate Level
16. I am learning English because I think it is good for my personal development.	1	5	3.29	1.17	Moderate Level
17. I am learning English for the satisfied feeling I get in finding out new things.	1	5	2.83	1.19	Moderate Level
18. I am learning English because I enjoy the feeling of acquiring knowledge about the English-speaking community and their way of life.	1	5	2.75	1.30	Moderate Level
19. I am learning English for the pleasure I experience when surpassing myself in my English studies.		5	2.77	1.29	Moderate Level
20. I am learning English for the "high" I feel when hearing English spoken	1	5	2.43	1.28	Low Level
Total (Motivation to Learn English)	1	5	2.63	1.26	Low Level

Table 4, covering the third dimension "motivation to learn English" (Questions 11–20), shows an overall mean score of 2.63, indicating a moderate motivation level among students. The standard deviation of 1.26 suggests variability in motivational levels. Question 16, with the highest mean score of 3.29 and a standard deviation of 1.17, indicates that students primarily view English learning as beneficial for personal development, showing consistency in this belief. In contrast, Question 14 had the lowest mean score (1.88) and a standard deviation of 1.17, suggesting that only a small number of students were motivated by the prospect of applying to overseas universities. This lower score implies that studying abroad is not a significant motivator for most students, likely due to varied career goals, alternative priorities, or a limited interest in international study. Overall, these findings emphasize personal development as a key motivating factor for English learning, with instrumental motives, such as overseas study, playing a lesser role among Chinese college students.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics —Learner Belief about English Learning

Learner Belief about English Learning	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
21. You should not say anything in English until you can speak it correctly.	1	4	2.91	1.16
22. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules.	1	4	2.38	1.07

Learner Belief about English Learning	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
23. To understand English, it must be translated into Chinese.	1	4	2.92	1.17
24. The student who always speaks out in class is showing off his/her English proficiency	1	5	1.63	1.04
25. The student who always speaks up in class will be loathed by other classmates.	1	5	1.77	1.13
26. Students should not speak up without being invited by the teacher.	1	5	2.29	1.34
Total (Learner Belief about English Learning)	1	5	2.32	1.25

From Table 5, the fourth dimension, encompassing Questions 21-26, shows an overall mean score of 2.32, indicating a general disagreement with the belief statements, suggesting a preference for a progressive or communicative approach to learning English over a traditional one focused on correctness and formality. The standard deviation was 1.25, reflecting moderate variability in student beliefs. Question 23 had the highest mean score of 2.92, indicating a slight inclination toward the belief that translation is necessary for understanding English, with a standard deviation of 1.17, suggesting some division among students. This reflects a reliance on the native language for comprehension during the learning process. Conversely, Question 24 had the lowest mean score of 1.63, showing that few students believed speaking out in class was a show-off of English proficiency, with a standard deviation of 1.04, indicating most students disagreed with this idea.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics — Classroom Environment

Classroom Environment	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
27. The teacher asks questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions.	1	4	3.78	0.69
28. The teacher provides a timely response to students.	1	4	4.05	0.98
29. I make friends among students in this class.	1	4	3.06	0.92
30. I am friendly to members of this class.	1	5	3.92	0.29
31. I work well with other class members.	1	5	3.78	0.90
32. I help other class members who are having trouble with their work	1	5	3.85	0.88
33. Tasks designed in this class are attracting.	1	5	3.76	0.99
34. Tasks designed in this class are useful	1	5	3.73	1.05
35. Activities in this class are clearly and carefully planned.	1	5	3.78	0.93
36. Class assignments are clear so everyone knows what to do.	1	5	3.90	0.91
Total (Classroom Environment)	1	5	3.81	0.95

From Table 6, the last dimension covered Questions 27-36 that evaluated the classroom environment. The overall mean score was 3.81, indicating a generally positive perception among students while a standard deviation of 0.95 suggests strong consensus. Question 28, with the highest mean score of 4.05 and a standard deviation of 0.98, showed that students highly valued the teacher's timely responses, which positively impacted their willingness to communicate in English. Question 29, with the lowest mean score of 3.60 and a standard deviation of 0.92, indicated that while students felt they could make friends

in class, this social aspect was less significant compared to the importance of teacher responsiveness.

Table 7: Correlations between WTC in English and Other Dimensions

	Communication Anxiety	Motivation	Leaner Beliefs	Classroom Environment
WTC in English	-0.334	0.245	0.146	0.486

Table 7 shows the correlations between WTC and Chinese academic culture. For the relationship between the first two dimensions (WTC in English and communication anxiety), a negative relation was found. The average correlation across all questions was approximately -0.334, indicating a moderate inverse relationship between WTC and communication anxiety. This means that as willingness to communicate (WTC) in the language classroom increases, communication anxiety in the language classroom tends to decrease, and vice versa. An average correlation across all questions of approximately 0.245 indicated that there was a positive correlation between the first dimension of WTC in English and the third dimension of motivation to learn English across the corresponding items. This suggests that as students' motivation to learn English increased, so did their willingness to communicate in English. An average correlation across items of 0.146 indicated a generally weak positive relationship between students' beliefs about English learning and their willingness to communicate in English. The strongest correlation appeared in the first question in this dimension, suggesting that beliefs closely related to the correctness of language usage and the importance of speaking accurately may have more impact on a student's willingness to communicate. However, the overall weak correlations suggested that while learner beliefs did play a role in influencing willingness to communicate, they were not the sole or most dominant factor. An average correlation across all items of approximately 0.486 indicated a moderate to strong positive relationship between WTC in English and classroom environment. This suggested that a positive classroom environment was closely associated with a higher willingness to communicate. This might be due to factors like feeling comfortable, supported, and engaged in the classroom setting. An environment like this could lessen students' nervousness about communicating and boost their motivation and chances to use English, ultimately improving their ability to communicate effectively. To sum up, the correlation analysis suggests that the classroom environment, learner belief, and motivation were positively related to WTC in English while communication anxiety negatively influenced WTC in English.

4.3 Findings for Research Question 3

To answer the third research question, "What are the opinions of students with high WTC and low WTC towards Chinese academic culture?", a content analysis of semi-structured interviews with four high WTC and four low WTC students was conducted.

Both high and low WTC students recognized external pressures as motivating but had different preferences for their intensity. High WTC students viewed these pressures positively, seeing them as necessary for excellence and accountability. In contrast, low WTC students preferred a more relaxed environment, although they acknowledged exams as helpful motivators. Students from both groups were highly motivated to improve their English proficiency, recognizing its importance for career and personal development. High WTC students emphasized English as crucial for career prospects and academic success, while low WTC students saw it as important for general communication and development. Personal interests and career goals influenced students' engagement in English learning. High WTC students were motivated by personal missions and future career prospects, while low WTC students were more affected by external pressures. Students used various methods to learn English, with high WTC students favoring structured, interactive practices and technology-based tools, and low WTC students preferring more passive methods like watching movies and reading. All students agreed on the importance of oral communication for improving speaking skills and building confidence, though low WTC students experienced significant anxiety. Respectful behavior in class was universally valued, with high WTC students emphasizing authority and order, while low WTC students focused on general decorum. Both groups were willing to express differing opinions respectfully, but high WTC students were more confident in fostering constructive dialogue. High WTC students were more engaged in extracurricular activities and recognized their benefits for language learning, while low WTC students cited busy schedules as a barrier to participation. The correlation analysis indicated a positive relationship between learner beliefs and WTC in English. Traditional beliefs about correctness and precision in language use persisted, potentially hindering WTC due to fear of making mistakes. However, there was also evidence of a cultural shift towards valuing individual expression and communicative participation in the classroom.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Discussion

This study investigated Chinese college students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English, examining the influence of Chinese academic culture. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study yielded insights into key factors shaping students' communication behaviors. The findings reveal that students generally demonstrate a moderate to high WTC in English, indicating both confidence and interest in English communication. Quantitative data showed students' willingness to engage, particularly in activities like seeking clarification, though they showed less enthusiasm for public speaking. This trend aligns with studies by Wen and Clément (2003), while contradicting Fu et al. (2012), who found that collectivism tended to suppress WTC. However, this shift is consistent with Littlewood (2010) and Shi (2006), who observed greater receptivity among modern Chinese students toward communication-oriented pedagogy. Educators can leverage this willingness by incorporating more interactive methods to enhance engagement.

The second objective examined the relationship between WTC and Chinese academic culture, identifying four primary factors: communication anxiety, motivation, learner beliefs, and classroom environment. Consistent with Peng's (2007) findings, the study shows that a supportive classroom environment fosters WTC, highlighting the educator's role in creating a conducive atmosphere. Anxiety emerged as a significant barrier, exacerbated by an exam-focused educational culture. Traditional emphasis on accuracy and high-stakes testing (Liu & Jackson, 2008) appears to heighten this anxiety. Educators can help reduce anxiety by fostering a low-pressure environment, using positive reinforcement, and promoting collaborative, low-stakes speaking activities.

Motivation, especially for personal development, was another critical factor, influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. This aligns with Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, indicating that educators can enhance WTC by tailoring curriculum and activities to students' interests and career goals. Learner beliefs, deeply rooted in cultural norms, emphasized accuracy and respect for authority, affecting students' attitudes towards language learning. These findings underscore the importance of a balanced approach, where educators encourage fluency over perfection and promote a growth mindset (Horwitz, 1988).

The study also underscores the importance of a positive classroom environment, which can significantly enhance WTC (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Key elements include clear norms, respectful interactions, and structured activities, fostering a supportive atmosphere conducive to English communication. Students expressed mixed feelings towards Chinese academic culture, acknowledging its emphasis on academic excellence and authority while also noting the pressures it imposes. This dual impact highlights the need for a balanced approach. Educators should maintain high standards while reducing undue pressure, achievable through stress-relief practices, constructive feedback, and fostering open dialogue in the classroom.

5.2 Implications

First, educators could tailor their instruction and support mechanisms to enhance communication willingness in English language classrooms in the following ways: first, create a supportive learning environment that gradually builds students' confidence in speaking English, starting with structured and prepared activities and progressing towards more spontaneous communication tasks; second, provide ample preparation time before speaking tasks, and introduce gradual exposure to more challenging communicative activities; third, focus on enhancing intrinsic motivation to learn English by connecting language learning with personal growth and self-improvement. Second, teachers could be trained to equip themselves with cultural sensitivities and communication strategies that are effective in the Chinese academic context. This includes understanding the distinctions of Chinese students' reluctance or eagerness to communicate in a second language. Third, university administrators could tap into Chinese academic culture and set up courses in line with cultural norms, thus promoting students' WTC in English.

5.3 Limitations

First, the sample size was relatively small (N=120) and not sufficiently diverse (only 4 majors included). Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all non-English major students in China. Second, while semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth exploration of individual experiences, they might not always capture broader societal and institutional influences unless explicitly targeted. Conversely, questionnaires may fail to explore deeply into the personal and subtle reasons behind students' WTC. Third, external factors such as recent educational reforms, global events, or changes in societal attitudes towards English communication in China might not be adequately accounted for but could significantly affect students' WTC. For example, the increasing emphasis on students' Chinese proficiency may influence students' attitudes towards English.

5.4 Conclusion

This study employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to find out Chinese non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English and the effects of Chinese academic culture on students' WTC in English. Students were found to have a moderate to high level of WTC in English, which was influenced by factors such as communication anxiety, motivation to learn English, learner belief about English learning, and classroom environment. Furthermore, certain elements of Chinese academic culture were found to promote WTC in English, such as a classroom environment that encourages active engagement and mutual support. Conversely, other cultural factors, including high academic pressure and rigid hierarchical structures within teacher-student interactions, were found to inhibit WTC.

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