Factors Affecting Willingness to Communicate in English among Chinese Students in an International Academic Setting in Thailand

Jian Jun Zhao

showme0801@gmail.com

Regents International School Bangkok

Rachanee Dersingh*

rachanee.der@kmutt.ac.th

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand

*corresponding author

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is the construct of a language learner's readiness to communicate with a specific person using the target language at a particular time (MacIntyre et al, 1998). This study aimed to investigate Chinese English learners' WTC in an international school in Thailand. The study used semi-structured interviews to identify the possible factors that could impact Chinese students' WTC in the international school context and how a different language environment (China vs Thailand) affected their WTC. Findings showed that the factors influencing the participants' WTC could be categorized according to cognitive, affective, motivational, sociocultural, and contextual variables. The study suggested that an L2-supportive learning environment can help increase the participants' self-confidence and self-esteem, which are very important factors affecting their WTC in English.

Keywords: Chinese students' context, international school, willingness to communicate

Introduction

English has become an international language of communication in various countries and cultures (Alptekin, 2002). English seems to be playing such a crucial role that the purpose of English teaching and learning has changed from enabling students to master the linguistic structure to establishing the overall competence of using the language for oral communicative purposes (Zeng, 2010). In recent years, many Chinese parents living in Thailand decided to send their children to international schools in Thailand to learn English (Ying, 2017). This is because teachers in the international schools in Thailand are all English native-speaking teachers with teaching qualifications, and the tuition fees are lower than schools in European countries, America, and Canada. Being overseas,

the willingness to communicate in English is essential for Chinese students who pursue studies either for better education or career advancement.

In teaching language context, language communication is one of the crucial stages in the language learner's experiences because of the different variables that act on the learner's communication. Thus, considerable attention is needed to facilitate effective language learning by enhancing students' willingness to communicate. Yang (2015) stated that Chinese students who graduated from universities commonly have more than 10 years' English learning experience. However, a few of them can have a natural conversation with native English speakers, although they have learned enough vocabularies and sentence structures. Moreover, certain students are different in their communication in English. Some students are language competent but unwilling to communicate, whereas other students with minimal language knowledge attempt to communicate if possible. It is also challenging for students to apply their English knowledge in everyday situations. Several variables affect how students communicate in different situations. Hence, it is essential to know the factors that influence their willingness or unwillingness to communicate in English. Recent research among Chinese students in Canada (Zeng, 2010) revealed some variables such as the topic, interlocutors, context, and personality, among others, influence the willingness to use English. In addition, most of the previous research (i.e., Wang & Liu, 2017; Yang, 2015; Zeng, 2010) was conducted in European countries, Japan, China, and Iran, where English is used as a foreign language, and very few studies were done in international school settings. Thus, this study aimed to investigate factors affecting WTC in English among Chinese students in an international school in Thailand where English is used as a teaching medium by English-speaking teachers. The research question is as follows:

1. What are the factors affecting willingness to communicate in English among Chinese students in an international school in Thailand?

Literature Review

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is the construct of a language learner's readiness to communicate with a specific person using the target language at a particular time (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The concept was first developed in L1 communication by McCroskey and his associates (McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), and it was applied to L2 communication by MacIntyre and Charos (1996). A pyramid model of WTC was conceptualized by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and it explains the WTC construct in second language acquisition, that integrates psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables in explaining second language communication.

Figure 1

A Pyramid Model of WTC
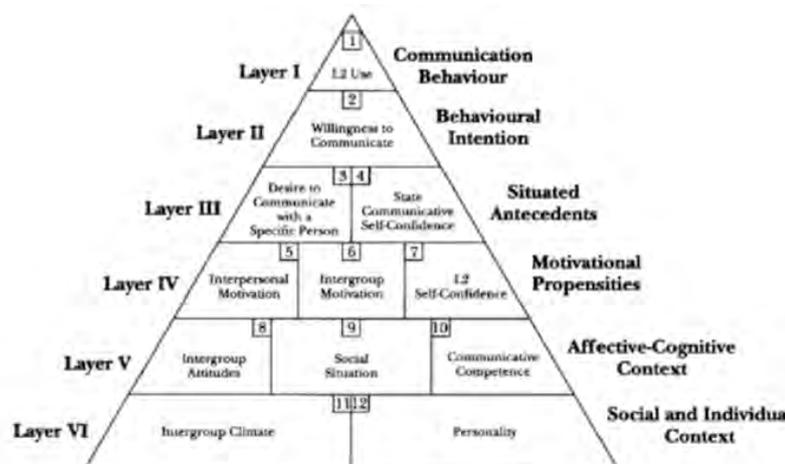
Note. From MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal, 82*(4), 545–562.

There are six layers that describe the construct of WTC in L2 and explain the complex interrelationship of the variables affecting WTC in L2 (see Figure 1). The first three layers—(I) communication behavior, (II) behavioral intention, and (III) situated antecedents—are said to have a temporary influence on WTC as situational factors which are changeable. On the other hand, the other three categories—(IV) motivational propensities, (V) affective-cognitive context, and (VI) social and individual context—are layers that are more trait-like and can have a permanent influence on WTC. Furthermore, variables under social and individual context (personality and intergroup climate) and variables under affective-cognitive context (communicative competence, social situation, and intergroup attitudes) have an indirect influence on WTC, while the variables under motivational propensities (L2 self-confidence, intergroup motivation, and interpersonal motivation) have a direct effect on WTC in an L2.

Kang (2005) defined WTC as one's tendency to communicate in a particular situation depending on certain situational variables such as interlocutors, topic, and conversational context. He proposed that situational variables have an influence on the WTC in L2 at a particular time, rather than a trait-like predisposition.

WTC in English: A Trait-like or Situational Phenomenon

It is debatable whether WTC in English is a trait-like or situational phenomena. The WTC construct evolved from the earlier work of Burgoon (1976) on unwillingness to communicate; Mortensen et al., (1977) on predispositions toward verbal behavior; and McCroskey and Richmond (1982) on behavioral approach toward shyness. All these theorists seem to concur on the trait-like predisposition toward communication (Cao & Philp, 2006).

McCroskey and Richmond (1991) supported the notion that WTC could be "a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts" (p. 23). Kim (2004) collected data from 191 Korean university students and examined their nature of willingness to communicate. The study concluded that WTC in English is more likely to be trait-like than situational.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that WTC in L2 should be treated as a situational phenomenon with both transient and enduring influences rather than strictly as a personality trait. Affective variables such as the degree of familiarity with the topic discussed, the degree of the formality of the communication context, and the degree of the speaker's perception of others' evaluations may result in a differentiated level of WTC in English. For example, it is likely that a foreign language learner's level of WTC in English in a small group may be different when that learner is with a stranger or in a large meeting. Given the situational characteristics of WTC in English, an L2 student's level of WTC in English in a communicative circumstance is, therefore, difficult to predict and most likely dependent on other factors involved in that context (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005).

Cognitive Aspect of WTC in English

In accordance with the theory of reasoned action, verbal communication is primarily believed to be a volitional act. People may choose whether to communicate, which points to the essentially cognitive nature of human communication. Although it can be argued that some choices are made so consistently that communication behavior becomes habituated, and little cognitive involvement is required unless some intervening situations occur, in cognitive theory, people are believed to make conscious choices about communication behavior (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2002). McCroskey and Richmond (1991) argued that although everyone participates in this kind of communication in daily life, this type of ritualized behavior is also subject to volitional control and modification.

Affective Aspect of WTC in English

In the late 1990s, certain studies indicated that two of the strongest predictors of WTC in English are communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2001). Communication apprehension (CA) is the anxiety one experiences while communicating in a foreign language. It represents an individual's fear of or wish to avoid communicating with others (Jung & McCroskey, 2004), and is based on how a person feels about communication, rather than how they communicate (Burroughs et al., 2003). A consistent significant correlation between CA and WTC in English was found (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000), indicating that CA has an influence on communication skills.

McCroskey (1997) proposed that there is a strong relationship between self-perception of communication competence and WTC in English (see also Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Kim, 2004; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004). Furthermore, a large amount of evidence has demonstrated that

students' perceived language competence (instead of their actual competence) combined with communication anxiety has directly impacted WTC in English (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Clément et al., 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002). Among others, McCroskey and McCroskey (2002) found that many second language learners were not prepared to communicate broadly due to L2 communication apprehension and perceived lack of L2 competence, even though they desired to interact. WTC in English is, therefore, based on a combination of greater perceived communication competence and a lower level of communication apprehension (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005).

Motivational Aspect of WTC in English

Since the 1960s, Gardner and Lambert's social-psychological framework has informed motivational studies in second language learning (Dörnyei, 2003; Gardner et al., 1985; Gardner & Tremblay, 1994). Motivation is defined as the learner's orientation as regards the goal of learning a second language. According to Gardner (2001), learning a second language requires learners to familiarize themselves with the characteristics of other cultures, and the success of the learner somewhat depends on his or her attitude toward other cultures. Favorable attitudes towards another culture may positively influence the frequency of the L2 use, which in turn affects second language proficiency. It has been widely recognized that students' motivation is related to WTC in English (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Peng, 2007; Yashima, 2002).

Yashima's (2002) findings implied that to encourage students to be more willing to communicate in English, English language lessons should be designed to enhance students' interest in different cultures and international affairs and activities; as well, such activities would help reduce anxiety and build confidence in communication (Yang, 2015). Furthermore, Yashima (2002) added that international posture, "interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures" (p. 57) should be fostered through the process of learning a foreign language, either with the materials students are taught or through life experience.

Sociocultural Aspect of WTC in English

People learn to think, feel, believe, and communicate in different ways because of the diversity of cultures (Yang, 2015). Specific norms regulate communication behaviors within a given culture (Chen, 2008; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Christensen et al., 2004). In North American culture, interpersonal communication is highly valued, and in most instances, people who communicate well typically are evaluated more positively than people who do not (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). In school settings, students with high WTC are looked upon favorably; teacher expectations of their performances are high; consequently, they are usually high academic achievers. That is, teachers have positive expectations for students who are highly willing to communicate compared to the expectations of those who are less willing to communicate. Strohmaier (1998) found that instructors were quick to label

students as communicatively apprehensive or unwilling to communicate and treated them differently based on these labels. Also, students who were less willing to communicate were most often seen in negative ways by their peers.

The recent theories of WTC in English draw upon cognitive, affective, motivational, and sociocultural variables to essentially explain language learners' WTC in English (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2002). In addition to looking into the roles of affective variables such as communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence, research has shifted focus to social and cultural dimensions of WTC in English. So far, a limited number of studies have been conducted with students learning English as a second language (Clément et al., 2003; Hashimoto, 2002) or as a foreign language (Cetinkaya, 2005; Kim, 2004; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004), with slight variances.

Previous Research in WTC of Chinese Students

Communication apprehension is an individuals' fear or anxiety when speaking in public (McCroskey & Richmond, 1977). Howitz (1995) pointed out that these feelings occurred among some students when they used a target language in public, although such stress was not observed in other areas of language learning. Liu and Jackson (2008) conducted a quantitative study on Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate in the foreign language and found a significant correlation between unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. Shao et al.'s study (2013) showed that more than one-third of participants continued to experience anxiety in English classes even after more than 12 years of English studying. Another factor is L2 personal motivation. Motivation is one of the most common terms that language teachers use to describe successful and unsuccessful learners (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010). Based on the previous research, Dörnyei (2009) put forward the new framework of L2 motivation, which is called the "L2 motivational self-system". Li's (2014) study compared Chinese learners' motivational differences in EFL and ESL learning contexts. The results showed remarkable differences in terms of Chinese learners' motivation in different learning contexts; that is the ESL learners appeared more motivated to learn English than EFL learners since ESL learners had planned to put in more time and effort in the learning than their EFL counterparts. The third factor is self-perceived in communication competence.

Self-perceived communication competence might strongly influence individuals' WTC (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Larson et al. (1978) described perceived communication competence as the individual's ability to communicate appropriately under each circumstance. In Liu and Jackson's (2008) study, the result showed that Chinese students' unwillingness to communicate and their foreign language anxiety were significantly correlated to their self-rated English proficiency and access to English. Yu's (2008) study found a positive correlation between Chinese students' self-perceived communication competence and willingness to communicate. A student's willingness to communicate was more likely when the student perceived himself/herself as competent. Furthermore, Peng and

Woodrow's study (2010) examined WTC in EFL context using a questionnaire with 578 university students and the result showed that Chinese students were more willing to communicate when they had less anxiety and evaluated themselves as having higher L2 competence. The last factor is the Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate.

Wen and Clément (2003) presented a model of Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate in an English classroom setting. They found two aspects governing interpersonal skills that correlated with Chinese students' unwillingness to communicate; namely, an other-directed self and a submissive way of learning (p. 19). "In Chinese culture, the social and moral process of 'conducting oneself' is to be aware of one's relations with others," and "the Chinese care very much about the evaluation of the significant others" (p. 20).

Submission to authority, a recognized tendency in Chinese culture, provides another way to look at Chinese students' reluctance to participate in classroom communication (Yang, 2015). In Chinese classrooms, teachers played an authoritative role; the atmosphere was formal, distinguishing between the teacher and the students (Yang, 2015). As a result, the communication between teachers and students in the classroom tended to be like answering teachers' questions instead of actual communication (Yang, 2015).

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were five Chinese students from an international school in Bangkok, Thailand. They were in secondary level, which was between year 7 and year 11, and their age range was between 11 and 15. The criteria used to select participants were the scores of their English proficiency and being a newcomer. The English proficiency's scores were from the placement test that the students had to take after the enrollment. Those who received the scores of lower than 30 out of 100 had to take English Language Developing (ELD) class. To be identified as a newcomer, the length of time studying at this school was between five and nine months. From my personal observation, the newcomers still had to adjust themselves to the new learning environment and they tended to have low engagement and/or unwillingness to speak English. Therefore, five participants were selected based on the above criteria.

Research instruments and research procedure

Qualitative data.

In this study, a semi-structured interview was used to collect the data. Ten questions about WTC based on previous studies were used (Dörnyei, 2001; Hashimoto, 2002; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). Some of the questions were related to their communication in English with friends or teachers

in the classroom, the support extended by the teacher, and their motivation in using English, among others (see Appendix A). The questions were submitted to an expert for validation. In the end, all questions were approved as they are related to WTC.

All five participants and their parents signed the consent form. Online interviews were used to gain in-depth insights into the willingness to communicate in English among Chinese students. The interview took around 30-40 minutes per participant to provide the data regarding their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about their willingness to communicate. The language of the interview was in Chinese as it was the L1 between the researcher and participants. The participants offered more profound insights into the research topic by using the L1 for the interview. The interview was conducted based on the students' learning experiences both in English class and other subjects.

Data analysis.

To know the factors of WTC, the data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed qualitatively. All the recordings were first transcribed into Chinese and later translated into English. After studying the data, codes were identified, and further categorized into themes. This followed the steps in the thematic analysis for the interview including 1) familiarizing with the data, 2) generating initial codes 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Findings

The research question of this study aimed to identify different variables that impact WTC of Chinese students in an academic setting in Thailand. Findings from the semi-structured interviews showed nine factors which were categorized into five variables or themes: namely, cognitive variables, affective variables, motivational variables, sociocultural variables, and contextual variables.

Cognitive Variable Including One Factor

Communication apprehension.

Communication apprehension is the level of anxiety triggered by the natural or anticipated communication act, according to McCroskey and Beatty (1986). It is one of the most critical factors that impact learners' WTC. Three participants have experienced anxiety in the class. Their concern was that they were afraid of making mistakes, and other students did not understand what they said. For example, S2 and S5 stated the following:

> *S2: If the teacher selects me to answer questions, I feel that my heartbeat is speeding up, but I am not very scared, just afraid of making a mistake. Moreover, I am afraid of saying the wrong thing because I have no confidence.*

S5: I am embarrassed to answer in English. Similarly, even if I try to express myself sometimes, then they do not understand me very well. Sometimes if I am unsure, I may be embarrassed to answer in English, fearing that the answer might be wrong. I am afraid of being teased in class.

The participants expressed their anxiety in using English in the classroom. They were afraid to make mistakes, and they did not want to feel embarrassed in the classroom. Participants were worried when they spoke English because they thought their English language proficiency was low, so they felt embarrassed to make mistakes or stayed silent and let other students answer the questions. This anxiety led to another issue which was about face. They were afraid of losing face in front of others. This issue is closely related to Chinese culture and affects Chinese students' WTC. As Wen and Clément (2003) claimed, "Chinese care about other people's opinion" (p. 18).

Affective Variables Including Two Factors

Self-confidence.

As another critical factor that affects L2 WTC is how participants evaluated their own confidence influenced their WTC. Language proficiency is the ability of an individual to use language with a level of accuracy that transfers meaning in producing and comprehending (Lo-Philip, 2010). The reason is that participants' English proficiency was relatively low which led to a sense of inferiority. In other words, they compared their language proficiency with other students. This phenomenon led some participants to talk less. As all the participants stated:

S1: I will not answer the questions. For now, the tricky thing for me is vocabulary because that kind of academic vocabulary is really difficult to understand. Moreover, sometimes I prefer to let others answer because I am not very good at grammar in English. I am afraid the teacher may not understand it after I give the answer.

S2: In my case, I feel that my English is not very good, and sometimes I cannot speak it.

S3: My English was very poor and had zero foundation. I cannot even say a word or sentence to introduce my name.

S4: I feel a little bit unable to keep up with the more challenging English class.

S5: Words are very difficult for me because a word has several meanings. When I have enough knowledge, I will definitely be confident.

Self-esteem.

Arnold (2011) observed that one's self-esteem is highly enhanced when one's experiences using the target language to communicate successfully could enhance self-esteem of language learners. Some participants believed that their ability to speak English would eventually improve if they tried hard. As S1, S2, and S4 stated:

S1: It is impossible to blow my enthusiasm if I cannot answer the question in the class. I will not feel embarrassed when I give the wrong answer, and my mental quality is still very good.

S2: My accent has problems, but I think it can be corrected slowly. I have to use English every day, after a long time, it should be better. Now, the academic words are really difficult, but it will not happen if I reencounter them when I remember them.

S4: Do not be embarrassed to make a mistake in the class; none of classmates will laugh at you because everyone has experienced it.

Motivational Variables Including Two Factors

Intrinsic factors.

All five participants expressed their desire to learn English since they came to the international school. They mentioned that being a good user of English would be beneficial for their life. The following extracts illustrate this point:

S2: I think English is good for the future. For example, I can have more friends and meet more foreigners.

S4: Learning English well gives me more choices and broadens my horizons. If you want to travel around the world, it will definitely have an impact, because English is the world language.

S5: English is an international language. I want to improve myself to get a college degree to work. If I travel, I do not have to worry about language problems. I can use English wherever I want.

According to Dörnyei (2009), the L2 motivational self-system includes the ideal L2 self and ought to L2 self. The ideal L2 self refers to the L2-specific facets of one's ideal self, which means the learners desire to learn English by themselves, as some participants said, "Like English, good for the

future, give me more choices and broaden my horizons." All the participants' comments showed that they had a deeper understanding of the benefits of learning English. They had a stronger idealized self-image to learn English as stated by S1 and S4 below:

S1: In the class, when I see other students able to answer the difficult questions, I feel a little envious of that knowledge, and then in private, I learn it by myself. Moreover, I will not feel embarrassed when I give the wrong answer in the class now because I have a better attitude towards English, and I am very confident that I can graduate from the English language development (ELD) class.

S4: In the class, I do not want to be embarrassed to ask and answer questions, and none of my classmates will laugh at me because everyone has experienced it.

Extrinsic factors.

Two participants mentioned being rewarded in the classroom. Rewarding could provide a motivating classroom environment in learning. Like S4 and S5 stated:

S4: School's bonus system will affect my enthusiasm in the class because if I answer a difficult question, I will get the point.

S5: The teacher said that if you can answer the question, the teacher will give you extra points, which is very motivating rather than punishment because answering questions should be encouraged.

Sociocultural Variable Including One Factor

Self-image protection.

"Face" is such an important concept in Chinese culture (Yang, 2015). They do not want to make mistakes in public to protect their self-image. They were generally considered low risk-takers, which was similar to Krashen's (1982) point of view that they over-emphasized on correctness rather than communicating with wrong grammar. In MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model, risk-taking seems more effectively related and culturally significant when taking into consideration the collectivistic outlook of the Chinese. All five participants addressed this issue in a similar manner as illustrated in the following extracts.

S2: I only answer the question when I know it. Sometimes I use Google to translate if I do not know, and sometimes I ask the teacher after the class. For simple questions, I try my best to answer as it is easy, and I think I can answer it right.

S3: As long as I can, I should be able to answer the question.

S4: I will answer some questions that I know. And I will answer the questions actively, as long as I know the answers.

As Wen and Clément (2003) said: "All the students would minimize the risk of losing face. In a communication setting, not all students are willing to take risks" (p. 29). Chinese students, "in their understanding of themselves, build sets of defenses to protect the ego" (Brown, 1987, p. 103).

Contextual Variables Including Three Factors

School environment.

In the school, teachers exert a significant and determining socio-cultural influence on student engagement (Reeve, 1996). A teacher's attitude, involvement, immediacy, and teaching style always play an essential part in affecting student learning. Teachers who are helpful and fair-minded are highly encouraging students to be involved in the class and build a tremendous interpersonal relationship between a teacher and his or her students and the students' willingness to communicate in the class. The following extracts illustrate this point:

S1: The English language development (ELD) teacher gives all students the same opportunity.

S3: If you have any questions, as long as you are willing to find a teacher, they will help you and give the answer and a detailed explanation.

S4: Definitely, the teacher knows that you are a newcomer, they will give the answer and explanation, and they will try their best to help you improve your English. Moreover, the students, who are in the ELD class, are not good at English. The teacher will start to teach from scratch. Without the ELD class, I might still be confused in all the classes.

From the S1 and S3 statements below, teachers who were kind, patient, calm, and supportive changed students' perspectives in willingness to communicate. In addition, teachers' personalities helped students to engage in their learning.

S1: I took a foreign teacher's class when I was in the third grade in China. I think the foreign teacher was really good. Then, I became interested in English at that time. In this school, the teachers are very patient and willing to help you without any blame.

S3: Teachers' tone is calm; they will always give me some good suggestions when they correct my pronunciation or some of my answers. In China, some teachers will be very strict when I make a mistake, but there is less pressure on learning, and you can be more confident to be yourself.

From the interview, the participants also indicated that their classmates were helpful and supportive. Classmates' support was positively associated with feelings, friendship, and communication abilities. When classmates' support was evident, it led individuals to believe that they were cared for and loved, esteemed, and valued, or belonged to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Torsheim et al., 2000). S1 and S5 stated the following:

S1: The most helpful thing is that if I do not understand the lesson, my classmates are happy to help me. It can promote our friendship, feelings and improve our communication abilities. The students in this school are from various countries. I like to make friends with them, because I would like to ask about their festivals or culture. We also can talk about some of the things that are appropriate for us in life.

S5: I have to communicate with my classmates, otherwise, there will be no friends, and it will be very boring. Sometimes, when there is a problem, I have to solve it. I would like them to help.

Additionally, classmate support might refer to emotional support and caring behaviors students showed during a presentation. As S5 further stated, "Even though my classmates will laugh at me sometimes, I know it is just a joke between friends, and it is for fun and relaxation, not about arguing deliberately".

School curriculum.

The school was the most important place for L2 learners to study English. Therefore, the school environment and teacher's teaching method influenced their L2 WTC. The result described all participants' WTC significantly in different classrooms in China and in the international school in Thailand. Firstly, it was the teacher's teaching method. Participants indicated that the Chinese language was used as a tool for teaching English in English classes in China. Moreover, English classes in China

focused only on vocabulary, exams, and grammar. On the contrary, the teaching at the international school in Thailand was different and more flexible. The examples are shown as follows:

> *S4: In China, in English class, the teacher will only teach the meaning of the keywords first, for example, what word "run" is and what word "play" is, and then teach how to put "run" and "play" in a sentence. However, in this school, the teacher will teach the same meaning vocabulary as "play" and how to use "play" in many different sentences. The goal is to enable you to communicate and understand.*

> *S5: For using English, the teacher's teaching focus is different and flexible, but in China, it is used for exams. In this school, as long as you can express yourself clearly, everyone knows what you mean. But in China, we need to know the subject, predicate, and object before we talk and make sure the grammar is correct.*

Wen and Clément (2003) stated that Chinese students were perceived as quiet learners and lacking in willingness to communicate. It implies that WTC is situational. After all the participants enrolled in the international school, they were more motivated and willing to communicate in English in the class, whereas they talked less in China due to the exam-orientated teaching approach. The results showed that the opportunity affected their oral proficiency, and their English communication was improved remarkably since they came to this school, as the participants explained as follows:

> *S2: No one speaks English outside of the classroom in China, and there was a lot of spoken English that I could not learn. In this school, I can communicate in English every day. The English language environment will be of great help to my English communication. Communication, as the first step, is more important because when you talk with someone, you should let them understand, then the grammar will be the next step closer to learning. My English is not good, so I feel that I need to get the first step well, so that I can do the next step. Otherwise, I feel that it is not working.*

> *S3: The situation of learning English is completely different because this is an international school, so the entire language environment is English, and the school stipulates that everyone must use English in the school. I do not dare to make mistakes. As far as the teachers are British or native English-speakers, it is like studying in a foreign country. I feel very comfortable, and there is not too much pressure of study, not as big as in China.*

Parents' expectation and support.

As we know, the ought-to L2 self is related to "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). The learners wanted to study English for practical reasons, such as "parents want me to learn English and parents feel at a loss, and they encourage me to learn as fast as I can, otherwise, they feel like they lose a lot of money and time." Four participants mentioned their parents as a factor influencing them to communicate. The excerpts for this point are stated as follows:

S3: Half of the reason is that I want to learn English, and the other half is that my mother wants to help me widen my horizons and get more knowledge.

S4: There is encouragement because I have to pay more for the ELD class apart from the tuition fee. My parents feel like they are losing money and time, so they ask me to hurry up to finish the course and buy toys for me as a reward. It is really great motivation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current qualitative interview study was conducted with the objective to investigate the willingness to communicate in English among Chinese students in an international setting. The results from five participants show that different variables affect L2 WTC. Some key points were found in this study. First, the responses from most of the participants suggest that L2 WTC is trait-like, and several variables affect WTC. Motivation, according to Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self-system, states that most of the participants' motivation in this study was "ideal of L2 self" when they came to study in Thailand. They had a strong image of "self-motivation," and they all realized that English is essential for their future. Since there is a lack of opportunity to use English in China, most participants were more motivated to study English in an international program in Thailand. As most participants stated, English is an international language, and they see its importance in their lives. Interestingly, one participant suggested that L2 WTC is not stable but situational. In fact, he stated that he came to learn English because of his parents, but after he enrolled in the international school, he realized how English was important for him.

In addition, cultural differences, such as, communication apprehension could be the main explanation of this finding. All the English teachers in their international school are from the U.K. They, therefore, tend to have a Eurocentric communication style that values explicit and direct verbal expressions. They expect the students to communicate in the same manner. On the contrary, Chinese students tend to be quiet and more concerned about group harmony as they lean towards being Asia-centric (Lu & Hsu, 2008). The key factor found was the idea of "losing face" because students were worried about being disgraced in front of others. This is closely related to Chinese culture and appears to affect Chinese students' WTC. Wen and Clément (2003) presented that "Chinese care very much

about the evaluation of significant others." The study showed that the fear of losing face had an influence on students' WTC. It also reveals that Chinese students in an international school in Thailand were more willing to communicate in the class, relative to when they were in China. Besides, immersion in the school environment and curriculum was positively related to WTC among Chinese students. As previous studies mentioned, immersion experiences in a different culture have a positive influence on WTC (Lu & Hsu, 2008. p. 85). The fact that most teachers at this school are native English speakers could create the L2 learning environment. As pointed out by MacIntyre et al. (2003), people who live abroad usually hold a more positive attitude towards intercultural interactions than those without immersion experiences. Moreover, Clément et al. (1994) suggested that a good classroom environment should have two components: reducing students' anxiety and promoting students' self-confidence. Similarly, in this study, all the participants were more willing to communicate in this international school once they could learn in a more relaxed environment and get more opportunities to interact both with their teachers and classmates.

Learning English in China is significantly different from learning English at this international school. In China, L1 is mainly used to teach an English class. Moreover, English classes in China focus only on vocabulary, exams, and grammar. In contrast, the teaching methods at this international school in Thailand were more flexible. English is used as a medium in class and in everyday conversations with teachers and peers. The communicative approach, which encourages the students to communicate in English, could motivate the students to be more willing to speak English both inside and outside the classroom.

In conclusion, the L2 learning environment is an important factor for Chinese students' WTC. Their ability to adapt to a new environment is better for the new generation of young Chinese students. Most participants came to this international school at a relatively young age. They were exposed to an environment where teachers and classmates were friendly, and they had more opportunities to use English in daily communication. This was different from the people in China who are characterized as being more reserved in communicating with strangers (Wen & Clément, 2003). In addition, most participants also mentioned that they are likely to spend most of their time with foreign friends outside of the classroom. Therefore, they have more opportunities to talk to and be friends with a foreigner or native English speaker, which might change Chinese students' attitudes towards learning English.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Some limitations of the present study must be addressed. First, the sample size was relatively small. There was a total of five students who participated in the semi-structured interview. The data is limited to presenting one group of students with low proficiency level. Variables affecting one's WTC may vary with different level of proficiency. Secondly, all participants were from only one international school in Thailand. Consequently, the finding cannot be generalized to the other Chinese students in the international school in Thailand. Finally, now all the teachers and learners are facing a "New

Normal" in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and teachers mostly engage in teaching in virtual classrooms. For the learners, they are facing a "new challenge" in willingness to communicate as well. Further research may be conducted to investigate the factors affecting the willingness to communicate through technology in a virtual classroom.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions

1. Do you like to talk or interact with people? Why or why not?
2. How was your English class in China?
3. Do you normally volunteer to speak in the classroom?
4. Do you usually get enough support from teachers?
5. What makes you take risks in the classroom?
6. When you answer questions, have you worried about others judging or thinking of you?
7. What prompts you to start speaking English inside/outside the classroom?
8. What kind of classroom activities do you like?
9. When you started learning English, have you tried to communicate with your friends or teachers by using English? If not, why?
10. Are the classroom environments important to you? Why or why not?

About the Authors

Jian Jun Zhao completed his MA in Applied Linguistics at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. He is a Chinese teacher at Regents International School Bangkok.

Rachanee Dersingh, the corresponding author of this paper**,** is a lecturer at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Her research interests include linguistic landscape, multilingualism, and language and identity.