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An examination of the dynamic feature of WTC through dyadic group interaction

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A B S T R A C T

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is a construct which has been consistently conceived as under the convergent influences of psychological, personal, and social, as well as communicative variables. However, few studies have considered WTC's dynamic feature in a situated language learning context. The present study does so by examining how the fluctuation of WTC influences language learners' actual language use when the interlocutor set-ups are altered based on their matched or mismatched WTC level. The language learners' language use is quantified as their actual language output in communication tasks, including the number of words and the amount of turn-taking produced in the discourse. It was found that the communication output of language learners with low WTC did not improve when they were paired up with peers of higher WTC. The changes in communication behaviors of low WTC individuals when they worked together with interlocutors of different WTC levels suggest that WTC is dynamic, and is jointly constructed by the interlocutors during a communication task.

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1. Introduction

A long standing position in second and foreign language teaching and learning is that language ought to be learned through meaningful interactive communication, which is both a cognitive and social activity (Gass, 1997; Hatch, 1978; Lantolf, 2000; Long, 1983; Moscovici, 1976; Pica, 1994; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2002). Therefore, it is important for researchers and language teachers to understand the influences that restrain and enhance language learners' communication behaviors, and concomitantly, their language learning processes. One such influence might be an individual's desire, either generally or at a given moment, to engage in communication in an L2.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is defined as an individual's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547). Following this definition, MacIntyre et al. propose that WTC is the most immediate behavioral intention before an individual actually engages in communication. Intensive studies on WTC have since appeared in the fields of both social psychology and second language acquisition, mostly addressing the interrelationship between WTC and its antecedents by proposing conceptual models involving diverse variables. However, a feature of WTC that has hitherto been underexplored is its dynamic aspect in actual communication behavior. In this paper, following a review of the relevant literature, I present a study of WTC of foreign language learners in a Chinese university setting, which shows that fluctuation in WTC is related to different interlocutor set-ups of dyadic groups.

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2. Literature review

The concept of WTC was initially conceptualized in the context of first or native language (L1) verbal communication as an individual's general orientation towards talking, which was usually a stable predisposition (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). However, in the model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) in L2 communication, WTC was rather a construct under the convergent influences of psychological, personal, social, and communicative variables. The interpretation of WTC in the context of second/foreign language learning has fostered numerous studies on the WTC construct, focusing on the chains of causality among variables, the predictive power of antecedents on WTC and reported (not actual) communication behavior (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Matsuoka, 2005; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002), trait or state WTC (e.g., MacIntyre, Babin, & Clément, 1999), and the nature of WTC in diverse cultural, linguistic, and communicational situations (e.g., Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; Burroughs, Marie, & McCroskey, 2003; Kim, 2004; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2003; Tiu, 2011).

As a recent extension of motivation research, the direction of WTC studies has been largely influenced by theoretical developments and empirical studies related to L2 motivation. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) initiated a warning in motivation research and called for a broader research agenda in the study of L2 motivation. Since the 1990s, the direction of motivation research has shifted from a macro perspective, which referred to the general motivational pattern of whole learning communities or overall motivational disposition of learners from a social psychological point of view, to a micro perspective, which favored situated examination of the motivational impact of individual language learners in classroom events from the standpoint of instructed second language acquisition (SLA) (Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei, 2003; Julkunen, 2001; McGroarty, 2001; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001). As a more situated direction of motivation research, the study of WTC has also adopted this micro perspective and has oriented the research focus toward a more fine-tuned analysis of communicative behaviors in language classrooms, especially from a dynamic perspective.

Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) called for an emphasis on the dynamic feature of L2 motivation, which extended its influence to WTC research. MacIntyre (2007) proposed that WTC was highly dynamic and subject to moment-to-moment processes that either lead to or prevent the initiation of communication. He then advocated a new approach in WTC research to "focus on dynamic changes in the processes that underlie communication at a particular moment" (p. 573). The recent shift toward investigation of dynamic WTC is a prominent trend, which follows the same tide of the new paradigm of dynamic principles in the field of SLA in the past two decades (De bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015; Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Following MacIntyre's (2007) conceptual study on the dynamic feature of WTC, a growing body of empirical studies has explored dynamic WTC in actual communication behaviors connected to the language learning process (Cao, 2006; Cao, 2011; Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011). Kang (2005) employed qualitative research methods to examine the situational WTC of four L2 learners, and found that three psychological antecedents, security, excitement, and responsibility, could result in fluctuations in situational WTC, conceiving WTC as a dynamic situational concept. Cao and Philp (2006) examined L2 WTC behaviors within the contexts of whole class, small group, and dyadic interactions. They identified significant differences in WTC behaviors in the three interactional contexts and suggested that situational WTC could dynamically emerge through contextual variations and fluctuate moment-to-moment. To further examine moment-to-moment changes in WTC, MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) utilized an "idiodynamic" methodology to investigate variation in WTC. The results demonstrated a charted moment-to-moment change of each individual participant's WTC, which explicitly demonstrated WTC's dynamic property.

Although the limited empirical studies addressing dynamic WTC have endeavored to examine the changeability of WTC in a situated SLA setting, none of them have investigated how the fluctuation of WTC would influence language learners' actual language use. However, Dörnyei (2002) explored how language use could be affected by changes in the interlocutor's task attitude. Dörnyei's study paired up participants with high-task-attitude and low-task-attitude (Lows) and then examined the impact of the ensuing group dynamics on the Lows' language output. The findings indicated a consistent trend where, if an individual "with low task attitude is matched up with a more motivated peer, the chances are that the person's performance will improve" (p.152). Therefore, Dörnyei suggested that task motivation is "co-constructed" by the task participants, with "the interlocutor either pulling 'up' or 'down' the speaker" (p. 153).

The current study is motivated by Dörnyei's (2002) assumption that a change in an interlocutor's task motivation in communicative interaction affects their language output. In addition, task-based interaction studies indicate that task dimensions, such as participatory structure, will also affect interaction. Therefore, by manipulating participatory structure, it is believed that one could encourage a certain type of interaction (Robinson, 2001). The study to be reported aims to understand WTC's dynamic feature by investigating whether language learners' actual language use changes when the dynamics of interlocutor set-ups are altered based on their matched or mismatched WTC level. It is hypothesized that, first, an interlocutor's WTC level would affect his/her own communication behavior; second, an individual's language use behavior is subject to change when he/she is involved in communication with interlocutors of different WTC levels; third, the communication output of an individual with low WTC would be improved when he/she is paired up with interlocutors with higher WTC; and finally, the higher the WTC is, the larger the pull-up power will be. The study seeks to address two research questions: