

Investigating the Influence of L2 Motivational Self-System on Willingness to Communicate in English: A Study of Chinese Non-English Major Students in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract—This study aims to explore the relationship between the second language motivational self-system (L2MSS) and the willingness to communicate (WTC) among Chinese non-English major students in order to provide pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Chinese universities. By employing a mixed methods approach, we involved 103 Chinese non-English major students from a typical university in China, conducted questionnaire survey to measure their levels of L2WTC and L2MSS level, and then analyzed the correlation between the two above mentioned variables. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants to provide a deeper understanding and explanation of the questionnaire data. Findings show that 1) Chinese non-English major students' ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience could positively predict their L2 WTC in EFL class; 2) Chinese non-English major students' ought-to L2 self might have no significant impact on their L2 WTC in EFL class; and 3) self-confidence might be another main factor that will influence Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC in EFL class. These findings might shed light on the second language acquisition field and provide pedagogical recommendations for pre-service as well as in-service EFL teachers.

Keywords—Chinese non-English major students, L2 Motivation, L2 willingness to communicate, self-confidence.

I. INTRODUCTION

CHINESE learners of English have been portrayed as reticent and quiet in EFL classrooms. Thus, a concept to exam students' willingness to actively initiate or participate in communicative activities in second language learning, L2 willingness to communicate (L2 WTC), has aroused people's attention among both academia and frontline educational professionals [1]-[3]. As a dynamic, fluctuating and situational concept, recent studies have tended to investigate how the cultural background [4], [5], individual characteristics [6], trait-like variables (e.g. motivation, emotion) [7] and dynamic contextual state-like factors (e.g. classroom environment) [8], [9] influence individual's L2 WTC based on the MacIntyre et al.'s model [2] in Chinese context [10], [11].

However, motivation is seen as the primary influencing element among all of these possible variables due to its psychological propensity to control learning behavior [12]-[15].

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Dörnyei [3], [16] proposed a more integrative and general framework for the research into the relationship between the L2 WTC and language learning motivation in various contexts, named the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) framework, which includes the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience. And this study aims to gain a thorough knowledge of the connections between each component of L2MSS and L2 WTC by conducting mixed methods on Chinese non-English major students in EFL class. The findings of this study may offer pedagogical implications to frontline educational professionals and help provide strategies on improving Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC in EFL classes.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. L2 Willingness to Communicate

Elaborating on the concept of WTC for first language communication, MacIntyre et al. [2] present the heuristic model of L2 WTC to explain that the reasons why one speaker would decide to initiate or avoid L2 communication could be contributed to both individual trait-like internal factors (i.e. stable personality factors) and contextual state-like external factors (i.e. situational factors) [17]. After that, a lot of scholars have adopted a series of methods including questionnaire survey, interview, observation, etc. to further validate the link between Chinese EFL learners' L2 WTC and variables in the heuristic L2 WTC models extended by MacIntyre et al.'s model including motivation [7], [11] language anxiety [18], [19], self-confidence [20], [21], emotions and personality traits [6], [22], affective variables [9], classroom environment [8], [10], [23], task orientation [24], classroom enjoyment [25], [26], and community volunteerism [27]. Among the variables leading to L2 WTC, L2 motivation has been identified as a critical predictor of L2 WTC [2], [14], [15], [21].

B. L2 Motivational Self System

From the psychological perspective, L2 motivation is seen as a critical emotional factor impacting language learners' learning passion, dominating learning behavior, and determining the outcome of second language learning [3], [28]. Based on the social nature of language, Gardner and Lambert [29] firstly propose the social-psychological approach that L2 motivation could be divided into "integrative" motive (i.e., the

learners' interest in the target language and desire to become involved in/closer to the second language community) and "instrumental" motive (i.e., the actual benefits learners can gain from learning the second language). Dörnyei [3], [16] proposes a new motivation model, L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) for more general EFL/ESL learning situations by conceptualizing the integrative motive based on Gardner and Lambert's [29] theory and including contextual variables. The construct of the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) includes three major components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self refers to one's expectation on the future prospects (e.g., being the target language user in future, studying abroad). It seems that the ideal L2 self represents that one's tendency level in being the component L2 user and gaining positive outcomes in the future [30]. The ought-to L2 self, on the other hand, refers to the 'representation of attributes that one believes one ought to possess' [16], which suggests that the learner might feel obligated to learn L2 in order to fulfil the expectations of others and to avoid negative outcomes (e.g., negative feedback, failure in the exam) [30]. The L2 learning experience is concerned with attitudes and evaluations of the present learning environment rather than a future-oriented self-guide.

The L2 motivational self-system has been verified as the suitable motivational framework in the study of the relation between L2 motivation and L2 learning behavior so that a lot of research has investigated the relationship between the L2MSS and L2 WTC in different contexts. For instance, current research claims that the rate of the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self would predict learners' WTC among Korean students [31]. In the Chinese context, Peng [7], [12] and Shen et al. [11] corroborated that Chinese EFL learners' L2 WTC in EFL classes would be affected by the ideal self and the ought-to self. In addition, the ideal L2 self might play a more significant positive role in L2 WTC than the ought-to L2 self in L2 WTC in Asian contexts, particularly in China [11], [12], [14], [22], [32], [33].

However, although there are previous research exploring the relationship between L2 WTC and the L2 learning experience in Chinese non-English major learners' context, most researchers adopted questionnaire survey such as Peng [7], [12]. There is a paucity of research in the implementation of the interview to attain in-depth perception and explanation from learners' perspective. Meanwhile, according to Ushioda [13] and Dörnyei [16], the L2 learning experience, as a context-specific variable, is related to the immediate learning environment and experiences, which indicates that the relation between the L2 WTC and the L2 learning experience might be hard to measure by quantitative methods because it is dynamic and individual-specific. Beyond that, very little work has been done to clarify the role of such executive motives or the mechanisms that 'underlie their causal effect, making it the least theorized construct in the L2MSS' [34]. To realize our research aim, the following specific research questions will be answered in this study:

1. To what extent are Chinese non-English major EFL learners willing to communicate in an English classroom?

2. To what extent are Chinese non-English major EFL learners motivated to learn English?
3. To what extent are the L2 motivation and the WTC of Chinese non-English major students associated?
4. What other factors might also influence Chinese non-English major EFL learners L2 WTC?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants and Context

Jimei University (JMU), a prestigious higher education institution in China, was chosen as a case study, from which 103 (32 male, 71 female) non-English major university students ranging from year 1 to year 4 are involved in this study. The participants' English language proficiency levels were determined based on their self-reported exam results in IELTS and College English Test Band 4 and Band 6, ranging from B2 to C1 according to the Council of Europe's proficiency scale [35]. In the context of JMU, non-English major students are required to take a two-year college English teaching course as a compulsory subject.

B. Research Philosophy

The philosophical stance of this study follows pragmatism, which believes that each research approach does have its specific advantage. Therefore, the research under pragmatism would combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis to obtain different assumptions and worldviews [36], [37]. Since the aim of this study is to explore the relationship between Chinese non-English major students' L2 motivational self-system and their L2 WTC, the quantitative approach (questionnaire survey) is appropriate to get enough data for the analysis of correlations between different variables. Additionally, the qualitative approach (semi-structured interview) is a better tool to gain participants' deeper perceptions and to help interpret each individual variable of L2 WTC.

C. Data Collection

In this study, an explanatory sequential design was used to examine the relationship between L2MSS and L2 WTC. The primary dataset was collected through questionnaire surveys. The anonymous questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on L2 motivational self-system and L2 WTC [38], [39]. It consisted of four parts including participants' demographic information, and scales to assess L2WTC in the EFL classroom, the ideal L2 self, and the ought-to L2 self. L2 WTC in the classroom scale containing five items were adopted from the research of Lee [38] and Peng [40], which have been used in East Asian context to measure students' WTC in EFL class. And L2 motivational self-system scales containing 6 items to measure ideal L2 self and 5 items to measure ought-to L2 self were adopted from Taguchi et al.'s [41] research which have been validated in empirical studies on the assessment of motivational variables of East Asian students [22], [31], [38]. All the scales used a five-point Likert scale. And the WTC is followed by one open-ended question on "Besides the variables mentioned above, what other factors would influence your

WTC in English class in the university” as a supplement for participants to answer. The questionnaires were distributed through commonly used social Apps in China (e.g., WeChat and QQ) in July 2022. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select participants for this study. Convenience sampling was utilized to select participants based on their availability and accessibility while snowball sampling aims to expand the participant pool. By combining two sampling methods, this study aimed to gather data from a diverse range of non-English major students and finally had 103 valid questionnaires collected.

Based on the questionnaire survey, eight students (four females, four males) among those who have taken the questionnaire are further selected to participate in the online semi-structured interview to provide deeper insights and supporting details for previous quantitative findings. The basic outline of the interview questions is as follows:

1. How will you describe your level of WTC in English in EFL class?
2. How will you describe your English learning motivation?
3. How will you describe your ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience?
4. Have you seen any relation between your willingness to communicate in EFL class and your ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience?
5. Which one do you think motivates you more in WTC, ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self or L2 learning experience?
6. What other factors might influence you most in your L2 WTC in EFL class?

Interview was chosen to complement and fill the research gap, allowing participants to express their motivations and perceptions more comprehensively. The qualitative data from the interviews served as corroboration [42] for the quantitative data. By employing mixed methods, the study aimed to obtain more accurate and comprehensive data on the relationship between these dynamic variables.

D. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS version 24.0 to analyze the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire survey. Measures such as mean (M), standard deviation (SD), frequency, skewness, and kurtosis were examined to provide a summary of the data and assess its distribution. To explore the relationship between the L2 motivational self-system and the L2 WTC, Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to allow for an examination of the degree of correlation between the L2 motivational self-system and the L2 WTC variables, providing insights into the potential connections between these constructs.

As for the qualitative data collected from the interview, we first transcribe the interview recordings into texts and then translate the transcripts from Chinese to English ensuring accuracy. Furthermore, based on the transcription and codes of the interview, thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting useful and significant patterns within qualitative data, was applied to classify participants'

perceptions of the L2 motivational self-system and other factors that influence their L2 WTC [43]. In this part, the researcher would read through the answers from the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire and the transcripts of interviews to get familiar with the data. After that, purposive sampling was applied to select information-rich key words and phrases which are relevant to our research questions. The researcher would create succinct labels (codes) that identify key features of the data and review the codes to compile related ones into broader themes. To ensure the theoretical saturation, the answers from the open-ended questions were firstly coded. This stage revealed several categories and themes. The information and answers from the interviewees were then coded and classified to determine whether they could form new categories and themes. The preliminary themes were revised and altered in the next step to make sure they already contain all the necessary information and do not overlap.

IV. FINDINGS

Research Question 1: To What Extent Are Chinese Non-English Major EFL Learners Willing to Communicate in English Classrooms?

According to Yaikhong and Usaha's [44] classification of questionnaire scores in their study, scores greater than 15 were regarded as high L2 WTC, while scores between 10-15 as medium L2 WTC and lower than 7.5 as low L2 WTC. Nearly 64.1% of the participants were in the medium and high score range (between 40 and 100% of the total score: 25).

It could be said that most participants in this context are willing or probably willing to participate in the communication in English in EFL class despite the fact that the students' L2WTC levels are distributed in high, medium and low levels.

Research Question 2: To What Extent Are Chinese Non-English Major EFL Learners Motivated to Learn English?

Chinese non-English major students do obtain the ideal L2 self (M = 3.57, SD = .95) and the ought-to L2 self (M = 3.50, SD = .94) in EFL learning motivation.

When asked about their L2 learning experience, students' responses all tended to center on how much fun they had in class. Amos holds that the positive activities and atmosphere in the EFL class would have effect on his L2 learning experience, he emphasizes: 'I find it interesting to learn English if there is a lot of interesting content in the classroom, and everyone is very involved in the classroom activities.' Ashley also mentions the importance of the classroom enjoyment and her own feeling in EFL class. It could be said that according to the responses of interviewees, students' motives for the L2 learning experience could be classified into two themes: classroom enjoyment and teacher.

Research Question 3: To What Extent Are the L2 Motivation and the Willingness to Communicate of Chinese non-English Major Students Associated?

According to Table I, the regression coefficient of the ideal L2 self for Chinese non-English major students was 0.472 (t =

4.073, $p < .05$), indicating that the ideal L2 self has a beneficial impact on Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC inside the classroom. The regression coefficient value of ought-to L2 self was 0.099 ($t = 0.855$, $p = 0.397 > 0.05$), indicating that the factor of the ought-to L2 self might not influence Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC in EFL class. The reasons for the research have been further explored in the qualitative data.

TABLE I
COEFFICIENTS

Predictor variable	Standardized Coefficients		
	β	t	P
the ideal L2 self	0.442	4.073	0.000
ought-to L2 self	0.092	0.850	0.397

Note: Dependent variable: L2 WTC, $t = t$ -test

In accordance with data collected from the questionnaire 'Besides the ideal L2 self and the ought-to self, what other factors might directly influence the EFL class the most? (At least two answers)' and the interview question 'How do you describe the effect of your L2 learning experience on your L2 WTC in EFL class', three themes in L2 learning experience: interlocutor, teacher support and task types and topics were selected and classified to show that most Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC in EFL class would be influenced by situated variables: L2 learning experience.

Research Question 4: What Other Factors Might also Influence Chinese non-English Major EFL Learners L2 WTC?

Typically, around 95% ($N = 98$) of participants view their confidence level of themselves as the influence factor.

V. DISCUSSION

With respect to the first research question, most participants (around 64%) show a relatively medium or even high desire to communicate in the EFL class, which seems to question the previous ideas mentioned in the literature review that Chinese students are unwilling to participate in the communication activities in English and keep reticence in EFL class [19], [45]. The possible reason for the high desire is that different from high school, English is used as a test. College English, especially for non-English major students, is mostly a tool for classroom communication, or a way to improve themselves. Therefore, the non-English major students at a tertiary level might suffer less washback of English exam and treat the English as a communication tool in English learning rather than a test-oriented subject [38], [46].

In regard to the second research question, the results of the questionnaire and interview data show that Chinese non-English major students' English learning is highly motivated by their ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience, which are in line with Yang and Kim [47], Li [48], Magid [49] who found that English learning of Chinese students would be influenced by their L2 motivational self-system. This is largely because the English serves as a communication medium to encourage economic, social, and cultural exchanges with the rest of the world in China as a result of globalization and internationalization. As a result, for Chinese non-English major

students who are about to enter the society, the mastery of English language skills can help their future development to a certain extent, thus making them recognize how important English is, which in turn makes them more likely to be motivated to learn English [50], [51]. As interviewees mentioned in the findings section, 'I tend to work in the financial sector in the future. ... we need to cooperate with many institutions out of China. It can help you to better understand documents, statements, etc..' Furthermore, the L2 learning experience including teacher roles, teacher behavior and classroom enjoyment was corroborated by the findings of this study. According to the respondents, classroom activities, discussions, and teacher support would influence how they felt about learning English. This aligns with other research into the positive effect of immediate learning settings on the English learning settings on the language learning motivation [28], [52]. They all finds that the in-class experience would affect students' L2 learning experience and language learning motivation.

To response to research question 3, the questionnaire data show the statistically positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and L2 WTC in EFL class among Chinese non-English major students in this study, consistent with the findings in other studies in and outside Chinese EFL contexts [11], [12], [22], [33], [38], [53]. Qualitative data further explain that the ideal L2 self, such as study abroad, native-like speaker and the desire to use English in the future workplace would energize their willingness to communicate in English in EFL class. As founded in [49], [16], [47] and [41], this result might be largely because their future expectation would positively motivate their learning behavior to 'lessen the discrepancy between who they are now and who they wish to become in the future', as reported by Lee & Lee [38]. Meanwhile, participants in this study hold the positive view on the relationship between the L2 WTC in EFL class and the L2 learning experience. This aligns with other research into the situational classroom-related variables of L2 WTC in Chinese context, such as interlocutor, teacher support, task type, task topic [8], [10], [23], [25], [45]. According to Peng and Woodrow [21], university students' L2WTC is impacted by their L2 learning experience because they evaluate the value of the classroom and their learning behavior in class by determining how important the lesson is and whether or not the teacher could support or activate their interest in learning.

Another intriguing finding is that the ought-to L2 self component might not be significantly associated with the L2 WTC in EFL class of the Chinese non-English major students in this study. This result is not quite the same as the previous study in East Asian context that learners' ought-to L2 self would have positive or negative impact on the L2 WTC [7], [11], [12], [38], [41], [54]. This result might be partly because that Chinese non-English major students' L2 WTC, as a state and immediate WTC, is more likely to be influenced by class environment (e.g. teacher support, topic, task) and individual characteristics (e.g. emotion, motivation, anxiety, self-confidence) [10], [55]. As the interviewee Kasper mentioned, 'When I have to choose whether or not to join in the communication, ... I mainly focus on what is occurring in that

specific situation and own feelings.' Second, compared to Chinese high school classrooms, which are stressed out by standardized tests, Chinese college English class are more laid back because of the less pressure of exam and assessment. In addition, as Ren [46] discovered, the assessment of English proficiency in Chinese college English courses does not just look at paper test but also emphasizes the development of communicative abilities by adopting peer feedback, group collaboration, etc. Therefore, as Lee et al.'s [31] explanation on why the ought-to L2 self is not associated with the L2 WTC in EFL class in Swedish context, various assessment of English also lessens the detrimental effects of external negative pressure and on students' state willingness to participate in EFL class.

Lastly, the questionnaire data and interview responses of this study all show that self-confidence might be another main variable which would directly influence participants L2 WTC in EFL class. Interviewees of this study also voiced that aligns with other research into the relationship between the self-confidence and the L2 WTC in Chinese context [20], [21]. The results indicate that participants in this study had a low perceived English-speaking proficiency, especially in accent, which might also influence their confidence and L2 WTC. This result is partially attributable to the fact that Chinese students in monolingual environment have few chances to be exposed to different English accents, and they learn standardized native-speaker accents, especially British and American English [59].

VI. PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Informed by the current findings, teachers could focus on enhancing language learning motivation, especially their ideal L2 self-image to improve learner's L2 WTC in EFL class [11], [31], [41]. For example, teachers could help students with low level of L2 WTC in EFL class to set realistic and achievable goals so that learners could be motivated by their own ideal direction in learning [3], [16]. Universities could also provide career assistance to students to help them understand which jobs are likely to employ English because many of the participants' Ideal L2 self-pictures focus around the usage of English in the future [56].

Since Chinese non-English major students' ought-to L2 self does not seem to have significant impact on their L2 WTC but L2 learning experience plays a crucial role in L2WTC in EFL class, teacher could focus on how to improve students' L2 learning experience, which, as confirmed in this and previous studies, has a positive effect on state L2 WTC in classroom [21], [55]. Therefore, teachers could provide communicative activities with attractive content and topics which are familiar to learners' real social life, interests and experience, such as group debate, group discussion, free talk in favorite topic. According to Harmer [57], such communicative activities could also reduce learners' language anxiety in speaking so that their self-confidence could be improved.

Given that the study's Chinese non-English major participants have low self-confidence due to their Chinese

accent, which eventually causes them to avoid communicating in English in EFL class, teachers should be more tolerant of students' Chinese accents and concentrate speaking teaching on whether or not students can accurately express their ideas through language [58]. In addition, teachers could expose students to diverse English accents and contexts by using authentic teaching material to help them understand that different English accents and varieties are normal and acceptable.

Nevertheless, this study does have limitations and directions for future study. First, despite the fact that this study confirms the positive impact of the ideal L2 self, L2 learning experience and self-confidence on the L2 WTC in EFL class, future research is still needed to explore whether there is a mediating relationship between these variables. Second, this study examined only non-English major students from particular university in China, which makes the current findings difficult to generalize the performance and phenomenon of overall Chinese non-English major students in China. Future studies could be conducted in different Chinese universities to obtain more samples. Thirdly, the finding of the relationship between the ought-to L2 self and the L2 WTC in EFL class in this study seems question other research into the ought-to L2 self and L2 WTC in Chinese contexts, but in line with the results in Swedish context [31]. It means that the further study could be conducted in cross-cultural context to explore the in-depth explanation.

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