

Increasing Willingness to Communicate among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students: effective teaching strategies

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Keywords: *classroom participation, teaching strategies, second language learning, questioning techniques*

Introduction

This article looks at English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) as one of the predictors of their participation in classroom activities and L2 use in the classroom. A review of the literature highlights the potential role of teachers' discourse and interaction strategies as one of the causes of learners' WTC. Through reviewing the relevant literature and by deriving some insights into the relationship between language teacher talk and learners' opportunity to participate, we suggest ways in which teachers can intervene in their patterns of teacher-learner interaction to provide their learners with ample opportunities to volunteer ideas and to participate more in classroom activities.

WTC as a goal of second language learning and facilitation of second language communication has drawn the attention of language researchers in recent years (see, for example, Cao & Philip, 2006; Dornyei, 2005; Kang 2005). However, so far little discussion has been on how teachers can increase their students' level of WTC in second language (Weaver, 2010). In fact, making learners talk is still a challenge for teachers, as it has been frequently reported that most EFL learners, especially Asians, are passive, quiet, shy, reticent and unwilling to answer (Cheng, 2000; Tsui, 1996; Liu, 2005). There are myriad factors that contribute to EFL learners' WTC and participation. Recent research identifies EFL learners' WTC as a dynamic, situation-specific factor (Kang 2005). As teachers are reported to affect learners' WTC by addressing factors such as learner self-confidence and anxiety or through choosing

topics of learners' interests (Cheng, 2000; Tsui, 1996, Xie, 2010), it seems reasonable to contemplate that teachers might influence students' WTC. However, research concerned with linking teachers' discourse and interaction strategies to WTC has been sparse. Accordingly, by focusing on that aspect of pedagogical practice, this article makes an attempt to offer some practical strategies for increasing EFL learners' level of participation and WTC.

How WTC contributes to our understanding of 2nd language learning

What is WTC?

The construct of WTC emerged in the mid 1980s. This concept was introduced to the communication literature based on 'Unwillingness to Communicate' (Burgoon, 1976), 'Predisposition to Verbal Behavior' (Mortensen, Arnston & Lusting, 1977) and 'Shyness' (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). For the first time, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) applied the WTC model to second language settings and showed that personality and social context had an effect on the frequency of second language (L2) use as well as WTC.

Later, MacIntyre et al. (1998) broadened what was proposed by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) on the assumption that WTC in L2 could not simply manifest WTC in first-language (L1) users (p.546). The rationale behind the lack of transferability of WTC from L1 to L2 was justified by greater difference in L2 users' communicative competence and social factors influencing L2 use (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Cao & Philip, 2006). Looking at WTC as a situational construct, they defined L2 WTC as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (ibid., p. 547).

Effects of WTC on second language learning

Much has been documented on the effect of WTC on second language learning (SLL). A brief perusal of the literature shows that WTC is a cause of L2 use, even more importantly, a factor influencing the frequency of L2 use in classrooms (Hashimoto, 2002; Clement, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004) which in turn leads to enhancing L2 fluency (Verplaetse, 2000), developing L2 communicative competence and improving L2 proficiency (Oller & Perkins, 1978; Kang, 2005). Moreover, through extensive practice or active participation, learners can derive much benefit from the cognitive effect of the practice and cultivate their critical thinking and learning (Davis, 1993; Fassinger, 1995) and increase their affective learning (Kember & Gow, 1994).

Causes of WTC

There is a variety of reasons for learners to become more willing to communicate. The Heuristic Model of L2 WTC developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) took into account an interaction between personal, societal and affective variables which influence learners' L2 use and distinguished these variables in terms of their situational (Layers I, II and III) and enduring (Layers IV, V and VI) influences on L2 WTC (see the diagram below). Moving from the top to the bottom of the model means moving from the most immediate situational and transient influence to the more stable and enduring influences on L2 communication situations.

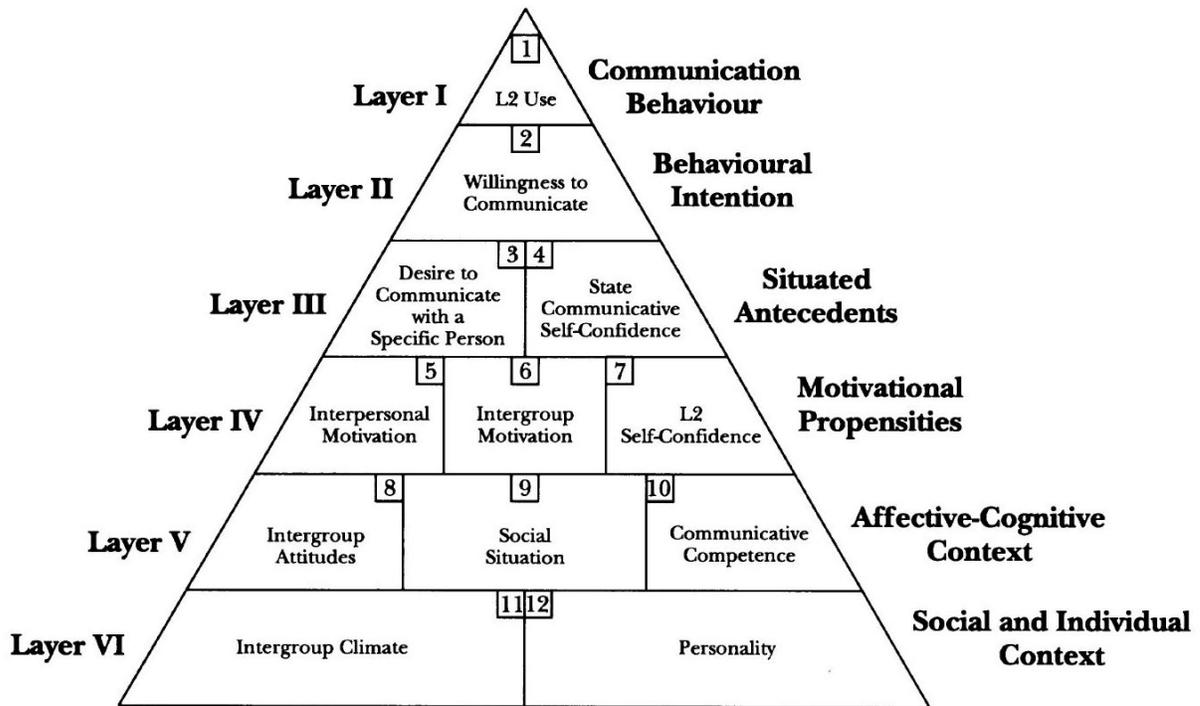


Figure 1: The heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547)

Of all the variables said to produce significant and direct effects on students' WTC (see Weaver, 2010; Cao & Philip, 2006; Kang, 2005; Leger & Storch, 2009), teachers and teachers' variables are said to weigh most heavily against students' reticence and WTC (Lee & Ng, 2009).

How teachers contribute to WTC

Teachers have been institutionally bestowed the right to create, manage and decide the different types of students' interactions carried out in the classroom. More precisely, teachers, as those who, one way or another, could shape the curriculum in its direct application with respect to content and topics for discussion and the specific methodological procedures which determine who talks, how they talk, who they talk to and how long they talk, hold a responsibility for creating participation opportunities and

increasing them in classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Xie, 2010). MacIntyre et al. (1998) stress the importance of “opportunity”, as “intention must combine with opportunity to produce behavior” (p.548). This implies that “without such an opportunity, reticence will be encouraged as the learners’ wish to communicate is not stimulated” (Lee & Ng, 2009, p. 303).

This opportunity is important in the EFL classroom in which students hardly ever get the opportunity to use the language for communication purposes (Walsh, 2002). Tsui (1996) conducted an action research project through which he planned to study teachers' better understanding of their students in terms of participation or being reticent. To do so, she investigated with 38 Hong Kong English teachers who had videotaped their classes to specify the possible problems of their pedagogical teaching. Almost all the teachers observed the fact that teachers' talk is much more than students' talk during a lesson. These teachers believed that making students talk was one of the most problematic parts of the students' engagement in the class and it was in fact their primary concern. The teachers did their best to avoid the silence in the classroom as they felt failure when their learners failed to reply. In such a situation, teachers repeated or rephrased the question or finally answered themselves. Tsui (ibid.) also found that turn taking was not equal among the students and in some cases incomprehensible input intensified silence and put the selected student under stress. Xie (2010) mentions that if student pressure and the supervision over classroom interactions are reduced, learning opportunities will increase. In this case students' participation is leading them towards learning; in other words, having less control over the classroom content lets learners get engaged in topics which are highly amusing for them. In a similar vein, Donald (2010), referring to the role of teachers in learners' WTC, argues that students' fear of being corrected, the amount of wait-time and group work are among the factors influencing willingness to participate in the classroom discourse.

Strategies for increasing WTC

Students' opportunity to participate actively in the classroom communication may vary with quantity and quality of the verbal behavior of the teacher. According to Lei (2009), there is no agreement on what “good teacher talk” is. In order to provide the students with much opportunity to talk, some researchers believe that the amount of time allocated to student talk has to be increased and the amount of time for teacher talk has to be reduced (Harmer, 2000; Zhou & Zhou, 2002). According to Lei (2009, p. 75), “good teacher talk” is more a matter of quality than quantity and it should be evaluated by how effectively it is able to facilitate learning and promote communicative interaction in the classroom.

The most common classroom communication pattern starts with teachers' questions or directions which draw answers on which the teachers give evaluation (McGraw, 2005). This exchange is known as "IRF". 'I' stands for an initiating move, a question asked by the teacher; 'R' stands for the response, a short and simple response from student(s) and 'F' is follow-up or feedback from the teacher, evaluative in nature, having either the form of an explicit acceptance or rejection of the student's response or an implicit one. This pattern is reported to occur in all classrooms (Nassaji & Wells, 2000), at all ages of school (Fisher & Larkin, 2008) and mostly in low-ability classes (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997). According to Cullen (2002, p.181), "Teachers instinctively adopt an IRF mode of instruction because it is perceived, perhaps unconsciously, to be a powerful pedagogical device for transmitting and constructing knowledge." IRF, as a teacher-driven discourse, has been criticized for the following reasons:

1. Limiting students' opportunities for initiating a conversation or a discussion (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995)
2. Creating inequalities in distributing opportunities among students (Nystrand et al, 1997)
3. Reducing independent thinking and self-determination (Van Lier, 1996).

However, some researchers argue how the F move could make the IRF more dialogic and encourage students' contribution in the following ways:

1. Scaffolding students through tapping into the responses or initiations that they introduce (Panselinas & Komis, 2009, p.86)
2. Extending students' answers and linking the answers to students' experiences (Wells, 1993)
3. Using high-level evaluation and challenging students' mind (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997)
4. Avoiding evaluation and asking for justifications, connection or having counter-arguments (Nassaji & Wells, 2000)
5. Listening to students as a sign of valuing and respecting their contributions (Damhuis, 2000)
6. Giving students a voice in knowledge construction (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005)
7. Using different strategies, e.g. reformulation, elaboration, repetition, commenting and back-channeling (Verplaetse, 2000).

Variation within the IRF exchange with regards to opportunity to talk can be created mainly through turn taking, the types of questions and wait time.

Turn taking

According to Poole (2005), turn taking or the means by which teachers and students take, hold and relinquish the speaking floor, can deepen teachers' understanding of student expectations vis-a-vis their classroom speaking role (p.301). Hall's (1997) investigation of teachers' turn regulation patterns inside a high school Spanish classroom illustrates how the teachers' distribution of learning opportunities via biased turn regulation produced two unequal groups of learners. Although one group of participants was equally or more active than their counterparts in classroom interactions, they were, nonetheless, provided with fewer speaking opportunities in comparison to their classmates. Their classmates were given more opportunities for initiating topics for discussion and commanded greater turn based opportunities for elaborating upon their ideas. Zhao (1998) conducted a study through which he showed that teachers' self-answering was in fact the largest proportion of teachers' elicitation. Moreover, those students who were proficient language learners mostly volunteered and dominated the classroom. According to Zhang and Zhou (2004), English teachers have a tendency to involve students mostly through individual nomination or inviting the whole class to reply (Xie, 2010).

Teachers' questioning techniques

Many teachers use questioning as a powerful and useful tool to perform and manage classroom discussions. Sometimes more than half of the class time is occupied with questioning and answering (Richards & Lockhart, 2000). Richards and Lockhart (2000) put these questions into three main groups:

- *Procedural questions*: These types of questions deal with classroom routines and are used to guarantee the standard process of teaching.
- *Convergent questions*: These questions encourage responses concentrating on a central theme and often requiring short answers, like "yes" or "no". Such questions do not usually engage students in high-level thinking.
- *Divergent questions*: These questions encourage various and diverse responses which are not short answers and demand higher-level thinking.

The question types can also be categorized as *referential* or *display*. The answer to the first group of questions is already unknown or it is genuine whereas in display questions, the questioner knows the answer. Dalton-Puffer (2006) believes that questions should not be classified based on their purposes but based on the extent to which they are stimulating; for example, open ended questions which ask for reason, explanation, description and opinion are able to stimulate more complex student replies both linguistically and cognitively than questions asked for factual statements. According to a number of studies conducted in the west by ELT scholars (e.g. David,

2007; Nunan, 1989), teachers tend to use display questions more than referential ones in the language classroom.. The same issue was reported in Asian contexts as well. Hu (2004) investigated the type of questioning techniques that teachers used in the classroom. He found that 68% of the questions that the teachers asked in their classrooms were display questions.

On the other hand, Zhou and Zhou's (2002) study in China showed that teachers mostly used referential questions than display ones. David (2007), however, argued that display questions acted as a better and more efficient tool for language learners, especially for elementary levels, via creating enthusiasm for class participation. In a similar vein, Wu (1993) concluded that using referential questions did not mean that the quality of the interaction or the language use was higher, rather students' points of view and their motivation needed to be taken into account as well. According to Wu, better questions do not surely make better answers and teachers' intention is also a crucial element that needs to be taken into consideration.

Questions can also be classified based on the level of the cognitive function which is required for answering them:

- *Lower cognitive level:* which are the questions calling for factual recall of information that measure knowledge.
- *Higher cognitive level:* which include analytic thinking questions that measure analysis, creative thinking questions that measure synthesis and evaluative questions that measure evaluation (Gall, 1970).

Jackson's study (2002) indicated that limiting the range of questions, especially questions of higher cognitive level, and inadequate wait time would decrease the students' interaction level. Wait time, which is defined as a brief pause after a question and an answer, is truly fundamental to the learners' thinking and processing the questions (Brown & Wragg, 1993; Thornbury, 1996). According to Rowe (1986), wait time (three seconds or more) causes clear changes not only in students' use of language but also in their attitudes and expectations. He also points out that the number of volunteers among students will increase and more people can talk if teachers follow the wait time. Similar studies confirm the fact that more so-called inactive students will interact if the wait time increases to 4 or 5 seconds (Hu, 2004; Ma, 2008; Thornbury, 2000).

Pedagogical implications

Based on the review presented in this article, given the finding that learners' WTC can contribute to learners' L2 use and success in SLL and looking at WTC as a situational construct, it would be naive to assume that having a classroom with high levels of

students' WTC and participation is just a result of student quality. As a matter of fact, teachers have a considerable role in this and should work hard to identify those elements that might contribute to students' WTC and participation. The following section suggests how the teacher could foster the level of students' participation:

1. Take the first step toward raising students' opportunity to talk by reducing the amount of teacher talk and allowing adequate wait-time.
2. Take responsibility to engage all students evenly and equally in classroom activities.
3. Let students produce language without restrictions (uncontrolled use of language).
4. Video tape yourself in the classroom, reflect on your interactional behavior to see if it has extended or limited the opportunity for your students to enter dialogues.
5. Involve your students in classroom activities as co-participants, i.e. active learners who initiate conversations and discussions and co-construct knowledge in collaboration with the teacher and in cooperation with other learners – using appropriate types of questioning (divergent, referential, higher level) and feedback to do so.
6. Remember and apply the rule of thumb: *Tell me and I will forget; teach me and I will remember; involve me and I will learn.*
7. Give the instruction that lends itself to more giving and receiving of unpredictable information.
8. Increase your own awareness of what interaction strategies work or do not work with specific students.

Conclusion

To address the challenge of increasing students' WTC and consequently students' participation in classroom activities, teachers are invited to consider the strategies outlined above. However, the provided list is by no means comprehensive, because learners' level of willingness to communicate can vary based on the context (cognitive, affective, social etc., including subject discipline) as shown in the model of L2 WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This implies that teachers need to adjust these techniques by considering all these dimensions of the classroom context.

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