

# **Conception on How to Promote Vocational Students' WTC and Scaffold Their Oral English**

**Wen Minlin**

School of Foreign Languages,  
China West Normal University  
Nanchong, Sichuan province,  
China, 637002

This paper is sponsored by China West Normal University (Project No.: 14D028)

## **Abstract**

*Broadly speaking, vocational students' oral English are relatively very poor, so they are usually unwilling to communicate with others. This paper introduces the reason why the author choose this topic and analyze some factors that lead to this serious problem. In the end, the author gives visions on how to promote vocational students' WTC and at the same time, scaffold their oral English.*

**Key words:** WTC (willingness to communicate), oral English, vocational students, college English teaching

## **1. Introduction**

Generally speaking, compared to college students, vocational students have relatively lower competence in English, especially in speaking. There are some reasons as follows according to my own observation.

Firstly, most of the students' speaking English are really very bad, they can't use English to express their opinions clearly, and sometimes, they even can't understand the teachers' questions and answer them in English, let alone to communicate with the teachers or their classmates in English. Secondly, in the English class, a few of students can answer teachers' questions, articulate their own ideas, and participate in the class activities positively and actively, most of them keep silent in the class and join in these teaching activities passively and inactively, their willingness to communicate is extremely low during the teacher process. So most of the time, teacher-centered teaching model exists unavoidably, which is bad for college English teaching. Thirdly, there is a reform in the final exam of college English in our university, that is the test for oral English will take up 20% of the total score, which means oral English is attached great importance to in college English teaching. However, last term, I made my students to do an simple introduction for the oral English test. They can choose any topic to finish this introduction, for example, introduce themselves, their hometown, their favorite sport, film star, and so on. I tested nearly 200 students, only one student can talk with me freely with no preparation, and the rest all wrote down what they would say first, then recited it literally during the oral English test, which I don't think is the real oral English. Last but not least, the main purpose of college English teaching for vocational students is to improve their practical ability, so oral English is obviously very important for them. So this is why I choose this topic to discuss in this paper: to improve vocational students' willingness to communicate and scaffold their oral English.

## **2. The cultural background of WTC in China**

### **2.1 The cultural background of communication**

In an L2 'willingness to communicate' (WTC) primarily relates to people's speech communication traits, which are to a large extent defined by a specific culture (Ramirez, 1995). Confucianism is the dominant culture and social value system in China that shapes Chinese interpersonal communication norms. (Peng, Jian E, 2007) Confucius stressed on "ritual propriety", i.e. *li* in social life. It is customary and also important for Chinese to keep to their social roles and

maintain harmonious social relations with each other.

In China, great significance is attached to protecting one's *lian*, 'face', which relates to one's claimed public image. In speaking practices, due to their concern for *lian*, Chinese people may resort to face-saving strategies like non-confrontation (Gao, 1998) or keeping silent (Liu, 2002). Most follow some socially accepted norms of behavior such as *han xu*, 'being reserved and implicit', *chen mo shi jin*, 'silence is golden', or *san si er xing*, 'to think twice before you speak' (Liu, 2002, P42). Therefore, the inactive and passive oral participation of vocational students in college English class may reflect this cultural orientation. For worrying about losing face before their classmates, most of the students choose to be the dumb in the class so that they will be impossible to make mistakes and will not be laughed at by their schoolfellows. Maybe this is the deep root of students' lack of WTC.

## 2.2 The cultural background of learning

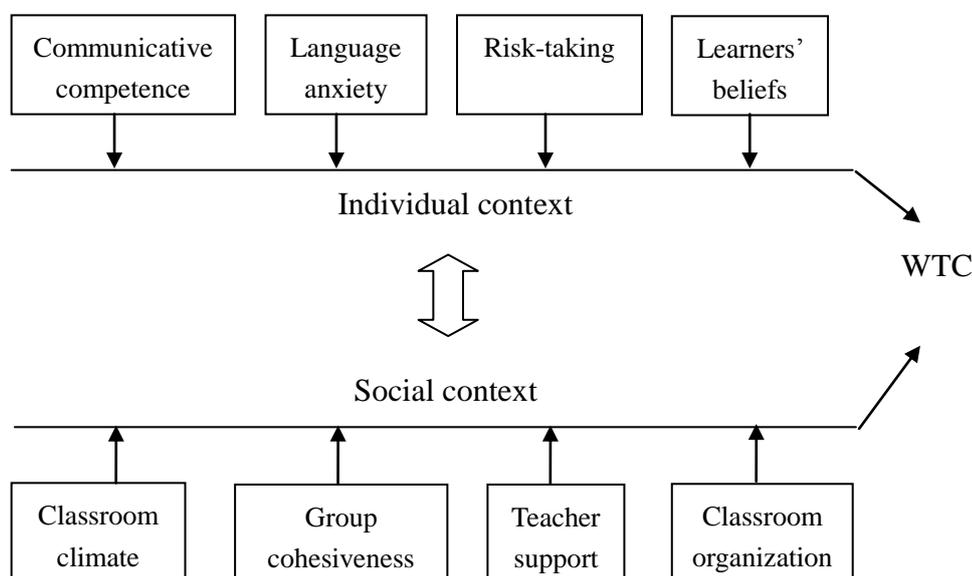
Within the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in China, students' L2 communication mainly happens in their language classroom, a typical educational setting where the culture of learning needs to be attended to (Peng, Jian E, 2007). Culture of learning refers to learning behaviors shaped by attitudes, values and beliefs about good learning and teaching that bear specific cultural properties (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). From their early education, a majority of Chinese students have already adapted to such a culture of learning: teacher guided everything for them, the teaching model in the classroom is definitely teacher-centered. What the students should do are just being disciplined and attentive, taking notes of what their teacher said, and cling to memorizing everything the teacher taught, which was called rote memorization.

Besides, according to Confucian culture, hierarchy is emphasized. So Chinese students are taught to be submissive to superiors like teacher (Chan, 1996). Teacher is the authority of their students, which is reflected in the old saying *yi ri wei shi, zhong shen wei fu*, that is to say he who teaches me for one day is my father for my whole life. In students' mind, they expect their teachers to be omniscient and omnipotent, they can solve all types of problems for them, and they just like endless repositories of skill and knowledge from which students may partake at will. In this way, teachers are expected to take responsibility for students' learning. From this point of view, students may dare not to speak in English class because of the authoritarian role of the teacher.

### 3. The influential factors on WTC

According to Peng J. E. (2007), here are eight factors that will influence students' willingness to communicate. These eight factors are divided into two groups - individual context and social context – and each group consists of four factors.

Under individual context, there are four primal factors which affected on WTC: communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking and learners' beliefs. Another four factors that influenced WTC under social context are: classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support, and classroom organization respectively.



**Figure 1: Factors contributing to L2 WTC in Chinese EFL classroom**

#### 3.1 Individual context

Communicative competence refers to the ability to express one's ideas in English thoroughly and correctly, especially without much preparation (Peng, Jian E, 2007). This factor, in my opinion, is considered the most significant one that influences vocational students' WTC. In the college English class, students usually can't find the appropriate words or structures to transfer their own ideas into verbal expressions, this problem always puzzles them. In addition, their thought is affected by Chinglish deeply, that is to say the habit of relying on Chinese-to-English translation while speaking, which is also a big problem. The main reason for their bad communicative competence is because of their poor grammar and vocabulary, so that they can't express their opinions in English correctly.

Anxiety is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry (Brown, 2002). And language anxiety, conceptualized as the discomfort or emotional arousal anticipating or accompanying communication in English, was found to negatively affect L2 WTC (Peng, Jian E, 2007). This was especially so when the students were asked to do some tasks without preparation in the class. There are various reasons for anxiety, for example, stage fright, a sense of competing against others, and a fear of losing face (Peng, Jian E, 2007). In a word, the reason for vocational students' anxiety when they speak English is ultimately related to their poor competence in English.

The third factor influenced WTC under individual context is risk-taking. Risk-taking students were found to be more willing to communicate. Risk-taking is conceptualized as learners' tendency to use the target language regardless of uncertain outcome (Peng, Jian E, 2007). However, among the vocational students, most of them lack of the spirit of risk-taking. When uncertain about certain questions, they choose to keep silent unless they will be with the help of their teachers, peers, reference books and so on. This problem is especially highlighted when they will take the risk of making mistakes, for all of them fear of losing face before the whole class.

The last individual contributing factor concerns learners' perceptions of foreign language learning, instruction and communicative behaviors in the classroom, which are collectively labeled learners' beliefs (Peng, Jian E, 2007).

Among the four individual contributing factors on WTC, communicative competence and language anxiety are considered to be the most decisive factors that will influence vocational students' willingness to communicate. So in the teaching process, we should find proper ways to improve their communicative competence and reduce their language anxiety.

### **3.2 Social context**

Classroom climate, refers to the atmosphere in the language classroom built up by the teacher and students as socially interactive members. Students tend to be speech-inhibited in a reticent class while an active and cooperative classroom climate could inspire their L2 WTC (Peng, Jian E, 2007). In college English teaching, interaction should be given priority in the language classroom. According to Breen (2001), classroom interaction is based on the assumptions that learners can benefit from learning together and that the success of L2 classroom communication requires learners to willingly

and capably put aside disbeliefs and engage in stimulated communication within classroom-specific interaction. If the students are not cooperative, the classroom interaction might not be fruitful and colorful. Therefore, students' total participation in the classroom activity can make a lesson successful. Next, students are not studying in a foreign language climate, so they will not want to communicate in English when their mother tongue can satisfy all their communicative purposes. Last, the size of one class is too big so that it's hard for the teacher to get the chance to talk to everyone.

Group cohesiveness refers to the commitment of a small learning group to work together in achieving the best task outcomes in class (Peng, Jian E, 2007). Students usually will feel free and relaxed to talk in their own groups. So the leader of each should consider how to guide their teammates to behave actively in the whole class.

Teacher support is teachers' dedication to and skills in providing both linguistic and non-linguistic aid, and foster a warm and wholesome classroom environment to boost L2 communication. Teachers' role is very important in improving vocational students' willingness to communicate. First, teacher should encourage the students, and give them confidence in learning English, and at the same time, arouse their learning interests and motivation towards English. Second, they should give students linguistic support such as explanations on language points, correction of grammar mistakes, feedback on their writing, introduction of the background information, and the like. If a teacher can play an important role in the classroom and guide his or her students actively, it will have great effects on improving students' WTC.

The last factor under social context is classroom organization, which involves how teachers manage the class, what teaching styles they employ and what tasks they design for the class (Peng, Jian E, 2007). An effective, reasonable and ordered classroom organization can make students participate in the tasks more actively.

#### **4. An vision on how to promote vocational students' WTC and scaffold their oral English**

##### **4.1 Research methods**

Try to promote WTC and scaffold oral English for vocational students, three research methods are conceived to use: questionnaire, journals and recording.

The questionnaire will designed to find out the real barrier to WTC among vocational students. It will especially aim to the eight factors mentioned above, and from the students' point of view to see

what contributing factor has the greatest effect on inhibiting WTC?

Second, keep journals. According to my observation, the journals about vocational students' performance and participation of the activity in the classroom during the whole term will be recorded. And based on the journals, I want to know whether their willingness to communicate in the English class improve, and whether they make some progress in their oral English after the whole semester.

Finally, to better understand students' participation and analyze the data, I will record some of their performance.

#### **4.2 Activity to promote WTC and scaffold oral English**

Various activities can be designed to promote WTC and scaffold oral English. But the key factor is that all activities should be related to vocational students' majors or their professions, and involved with their daily life, so that these topics can arouse their interests, and they have words to say. For example, one of the topic in the textbook is about food, and I find that in this unit, many students volunteered to speak, and all the students can join in the discussion on food actively. On the contrary, another topic in the textbook is about wisdom, few of students wanted to share their opinions with us, that is because the topic is, to some extent, a little abstract and hard to define.

Because most of vocational students' English competence are relatively lower, so we can choose some simple but effective teaching activities to arouse their learning interest, and stimulate them to speak in English.

For example, dialogic interaction can be used. Shehadeh (2005) highlights the importance of dialogic interaction in language learning, and makes the following points:

- Dialogic interaction is an important trigger for language learning.
- When individuals interact with other people, their cognitive processes awaken.
- These processes include both cognitive and language development.
- Individual learners ultimately internalize language by participating in dialogue with others.

However, Samuda and Bygate (2008) warn that it is not enough just to provide tasks for learners to do and hope that valuable interaction takes place. Besides, tasks need to be designed in ways that: offer clear learning goals; provide contextualized guidelines; support particular types of questioning, and ensure formative feedback.

For example, we can divide students into different groups first, and give them some topics like sports, food, travel, etc. Each group can choose their favorite topic to discuss first, then make it in dialogues and share the results with the rest of the class. Next, each group can change their topic, and practice again. Some other activities like role-play and interview can also be used when they act the dialogues so than make dialogues more colorful and meaningful.

Therefore, when students talk about their interested topics, and do this in their own groups, their willingness to communicate will be stimulated, and they would like to talk in English. Awards can also be used by the teacher to motivate vocational students to talk.

In addition to dialogic interaction, substitution tables can also be used to scaffold vocational students' oral English. The topic should also be related to students' majors and daily life, and can inspire them to talk.

Teacher can give students the topic like jobs, hobbies, music, and so on. Students can talk these topics in pairs, do mini conversations, or work in groups. Cite the topic jobs as an example? Question can be asked like this: Would you rather be a doctor / teacher / secretary / pilot, etc? According to different jobs, students can give various answers, thus, they can improve their oral English gradually by the substitution drills.

## **5. Conclusion**

In a word, the willingness to communicate of vocational students are really lower, and their oral English are practically poor. The reasons for this problem are various, like the influence of Confucianism, the traditional teaching environment – teacher-centered, poor communicative competence, language anxiety, classroom climate, and also their self-defects, such as lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, and the like. However, the teacher can guide them correctly and use proper teaching approaches or teaching activities to improve their WTC and oral English. It is a long and difficult process, but I hope through my effort, my students' oral English can really improve, and they can communicate with others freely and fluently.

**Reference**

Breen, M. (2001). The social context for language learning: a neglected situation? In C. N. Candlin and N. Mercer (eds), *English Language Teaching in its Social Context: A Reader*. London: Routledge, pp 122-44.

Chan, S. (1999). The Chinese Learner – A Question of Style [J]. *Education and Training*, 41(6/7), 294-304.

Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1996). Cultures of Learning: Language Classrooms in China. In H. Coleman (ed.), *Society and the Language Classroom* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 169-206.

Gao, G. (1998). “Don’t take my word for it.” – Understanding Chinese Speaking Practices [J]. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 22(2), 163-86.

H. D. Brown. (2002). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p141.

Liu, J. (2002). Negotiating Silence in American Classroom: three Chinese cases[J]. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 2(1), 37-54.

Liu Jun. (2007). *English Language Teaching in China – New Approaches, Perspectives and Standards* [M]. London: Continuum.

Peng, J. E. (2007). Willingness to Communicate in the Chinese EFL Classroom: a cultural perspective. In Jun, Liu “*English Language Teaching in China*”. London: Continuum.

Ramirez, A. G. (1995). *Creating Contexts for Second Language Acquisition: Theory and Methods* [M]. New York: Longman USA.

Samuda, V. & Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in Second Language Learning*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shehadeh, A. (2005). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching: Theories and Applications*. In C. Edwards & J. Wills (eds) *Teachers exploring tasks in English language teaching*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.