

The Use of Foreign Language Enjoyment in the Promotion of EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate in a second or foreign language (L2 WTC) is of great importance when it comes to individual difference variables, which influences largely the target language learning process. The growing emphasis on real communication in language learning has greatly promoted studies of L2 WTC and made it a significant goal of L2 pedagogy. In view of that, many potential antecedents of L2 WTC were examined to with anticipations of facilitating it. However, emotional factors, especially positive ones, remain relatively rare touched. Thus, present study aims to explore the effects of foreign language enjoyment, one of the positive emotions applied in pedagogy, upon Chinese high school EFL learners' WTC through the review of relevant studies, and provide some solutions on how to take advantage of foreign language enjoyment in the promotion of EFL learners' L2 WTC. The first solution concerns learners' motivations, interests, and their attitudes towards the target language. The second solution related to teachers themselves, including their enthusiasm, teaching styles and their emotions. While the third solution deals with learning environment, a friendly and safe atmosphere probably leads to higher degrees of FLE, and further more engagement.

Keywords

Willingness to Communicate; Foreign Language Enjoyment; EFL Learning.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching has increasingly become a widely accepted approach to second/foreign language teaching for decades as it caught one of the basic features of language--a tool for communication. People who try to teach or learn a second/foreign language have realized that communication is and should be their primary goal, rather than aiming at mastering a mass of forms and structures but remain mute in the learning process. Communicating is the actual behavior that can be easily perceived. While there is a psychological intention before the authentic act takes place, which is termed as willingness to communicate (WTC). The concept of WTC, originally developed to address communication behavior in a first language (L1), was applied to second language (L2) contexts by MacIntyre et al [1], by whom it was defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons, using an L2".

The growing emphasis on real communication in language learning has greatly promoted studies of L2 WTC and made it a significant goal of L2 pedagogy [2]. Thus, many researchers have tried to find out different antecedents of L2 WTC with the hope to identify those factors and further get learners to talk in the target language. Among those previous studies concerning antecedents of L2 WTC, environmental and cognitive dimensions were massively probed, while affective factors remain relatively rare touched.

Compared with cognitive variables, affective factors, especially emotions, were long remained peripheral aspects in second/foreign language research field with just one exception---anxiety. However, the emergence of positive psychology has broken the routine by gradually shifting

people's attention to positive emotions. In this process, some researchers pleaded for more attention to the combined roles of positive and negative emotions as the catalyzers of language learning [3]. It is well-known that practice cannot go much further without the guidance of relevant theory. Resonating with the Broaden-and-Build Theory [4], foreign language enjoyment (FLE) has received much attention among those positive emotions.

Theoretically, this study can augment research on emotional antecedents of L2 WTC for there is a large gap between abroad and domestic on this issue, and extend the scope of L2 WTC and FLE research to a wider range. Additionally, this study may contribute to arouse researchers' and practitioners' attention towards language learners' emotions.

Practically, this study may help EFL teachers and learners look into the importance of L2 WTC in the process of language learning. What is more, this study might make EFL teachers aware of the facilitative role of FLE. Last, this study can to some extent promote the generating and augmenting of L2 WTC of EFL learners in and out of classrooms by illustrating one of the emotional antecedents of it and providing some feasible suggestions for front-line English teachers.

The following chapter will review the literature that are relevant to present study.

2. Literature Review

The following sections will review the literature of L2 WTC and FLE, and how the two are combined together.

2.1. L2 Willingness to Communicate

As a typical individual difference variable, WTC was originally introduced to first language acquisition as a personality-based, trait-like psychological preparation before authentic communicative behavior [5]. MacIntyre et al [1] applied it in second language acquisition and defined it as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2". They also developed a heuristic pyramid-shaped model that represents a systematic view of how trait-like and state-like individual variables interact with WTC in L2. Relevant research on the conceptualization, in and out of classroom situations of WTC will be reviewed below.

2.1.1. Conceptualization of WTC

As mentioned above, L2 WTC was introduced into second language acquisition by MacIntyre et al [1]. Their pyramid model unveiled the situated nature of L2 WTC based on the analysis of the uncertainty and complexity of L2 learning. It has been further argued that L2 WTC in a specific moment is a volitional micro-level process and that it rises and falls rapidly as the situation changes [6]. The model considered one's L2 WTC behaviors as the outcome of both stable and volatile situational factors. Thus, the characteristics of L2 WTC can be divided into two kinds, with one more personality- and trait-like, which reflects a stable predisposition towards communication, and the other a more situational and specific inclination, which can vary from one situation to another. These dual characteristics have been called trait L2 WTC and state L2 WTC [7].

Many researchers have studied both trait L2 WTC and state L2 WTC. And among those studies, antecedents of both two kinds of L2 WTC shares massive attention. Many studies have shown that L2 WTC is influenced by ideal L2 self [8], beliefs [9], emotions [10], language mindsets [11] and so on. Those relatively stable factors underlie trait L2 WTC. While state L2 WTC is mainly interrelated with external and situational factors, such as learning environment [10], tasks, topic, interlocutors or teacher variables [2]. These studies have verified the effectiveness of the pyramid model, which considers L2 WTC as a dual-characteristic construct consists of stable and situational dimensions.

Therefore, present study considers this pyramid model as the systematic depiction of L2 WTC and applies it as the theoretical foundation. According to the model, emotions are more related to trait L2 WTC. However, affective factors, especially emotions are similar to WTC, with one side relatively trait-like and enduring, while the other side more dynamic and context-based [12]. Thus, present study operationalizes L2 WTC as an integrated individual difference variable that can be measured by self-reported scales.

2.1.2. L2 WTC Inside and Outside Classrooms

As the final psychological step before real L2 communication takes place, L2 WTC places a quite crucial role in triggering L2 learners' communicative behaviors. It should be recognized as an essential component of L2 instruction. Relevant study finds that students with high level of L2 WTC tend to seek and grasp opportunities to use L2 in authentic occasions both inside and outside classrooms [13].

Because of the unique language learning environment, Chinese EFL learners lack foreign language use context and there are far less opportunities for them to use English for authentic communication. So, previous studies mainly put emphasis on inside classroom WTC, leaving outside classroom WTC an insufficient researched topic. However, considering the central role of naturalistic contact in L2 development, activating and boosting outside classroom WTC is merely as important as increasing pragmatic competence in the L2 [14]. Language learning emotions are likely to have impact on learners' attitudes toward the target language, which may affect their L2 WTC outside classrooms. The following section will particularly review FLE, one of the positive language learning emotions that can promote L2 WTC.

2.2. Foreign Language Enjoyment

Enlightened by positive psychology, there has been an increasing research interest in positive emotions [15]. Among those emotions, FLE has attracted massive attention in the past several years because of its role in facilitating language learning as well as promoting language learners' well-being. The essential role of enjoyment in foreign language learning has been grounded on Fredrickson's [4] Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions [16]. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions have the ability to broaden individual's momentary repertoires of thoughts and actions and build their psychological resiliency and personal resources. FLE empowers language learners to be creative and to explore. The construct of FLE and relevant studies will be reviewed below.

2.2.1. The Construct of FLE

Different from pleasure, enjoyment should not be simply defined as the good feelings people experience when they are satisfied and reached to a hedonic state. Instead, enjoyment contributes to personal development and long-term well-being. FLE is a typical and common positive emotion experienced by foreign language learners. The important role of enjoyment in foreign language learning has been grounded on the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions and the Control-value Theory of achieve emotions [17]. The former sees positive emotions like enjoyment as facilitators of the building of resources in language learning with the power to broaden individuals' perspective and open them to absorb more during the learning process [4]. And according to the later theory, enjoyment is a positive activating activity-focused emotion and has been shown to positively affect learners' learning performance. In the field of second language acquisition research, FLE is a trait-like enjoyment perceived by foreign language learners in the foreign language learning situation or process, which is closely related to learning situation [12]. It characterizes as holistic concentration and complete involvement in an activity.

A few studies focused on the conceptual structure and sources of FLE since the emerging and flourishing of positive psychology. Among those studies, Dewaele and Dewaele [18] propose a

three-factor structure for FLE, namely, FLE-Social, FLE-Private and Peer-controlled versus teacher-controlled positive atmosphere. But whether it can be applied in Chinese context or not has not been confirmed, since EFL learners in Chinese may differ greatly from other EFL learners. Thus, Li et al. [16] further examined the structure of FLE and developed a Chinese version of FLE scale by surveying large samples of 1718 students studying in China, consisting of FLE-Private, FLE-Teacher, and FLE-Atmosphere.

2.2.2. Studies on FLE

In the exploration of FLE, studies have focused on its conceptualization, measurement and sources, as well as its potential relations to foreign language learning and various variables involved in foreign language learning. As discussed above, FLE has mainly three recognized aspects, namely, private-related, teacher-related and atmosphere-related. These three aspects are corresponding to internal and external antecedents of FLE that many studies have covered. FLE was found to have positive effects on foreign language learning achievement, and it can largely promote learning effectiveness [19]. As for the relation to other variables in foreign language teaching, many individual difference ones were found to have positive correlations with it, such as language proficiency, foreign language leaning attitudes, characteristics, emotional intelligence and so on [20]. Besides, many external variables were also found to have correlations with FLE, such as teacher's personal charisma, teaching skills, teaching contents and teacher support [21]. And there are also a few studies explored the effects of FLE on WTC, which will be discussed in detail below.

Students' emotional experiences can influence engagement and learning in the classroom in different ways. Although language anxiety has been shown to play a crucial role in the development of WTC, the role of other emotions, especially positive ones, in supporting or detracting from WTC has been rarely studied. Khajavy [10] verifies that FLE is an important factor in increasing WTC at both student and classroom level by using the doubly latent multilevel analysis. They broke the routine by setting FLE out as an equivalence of anxiety in influencing EFL learners WTC.

Thus, how to apply FLE in the promotion of EFL learners' L2 WTC becomes a necessary issue. The following part will have some discussions on how to facilitate EFL learners' L2 WTC by increasing their FLE.

3. Problem Solutions

According to preview studies discussed above, FLE can positively affect learners' WTC. Thus, it might be a practical way to promote learners' WTC by facilitating their FLE. Then, the issue comes to how to facilitating their FLE.

According to Li et al. [16], FLE can be divided into three aspects, namely, FLE-Private, FLE-Teacher, and FLE-Atmosphere. These three dimensions provide some hints on how to promote learners' FLE. Firstly, teachers can improve learners' own motivations, attitudes and other internal positive factors towards FLE by various kinds of plausible means. Additionally, teachers can change their teaching styles and the way of dealing with learners, as well as other issues related to their ways of interacting with learners. Lastly, teachers can create a more enjoyable and less anxious learning environment. Detailed discussions will be presented below. As for the first solution, it means that teachers can adopt some measures to augment learners' motivation in learning a foreign language as well as assist them in building more positive attitudes toward that language. In doing so, learners may find themselves willing to delve into a new language, and further build relatively strong beliefs in leaning that language well. As a possible result, FLE may occur and increase. To be more specific, teachers are suggested to do the following things to achieve this: providing more cultural knowledge to better learners' cognitions about the language and arousing their interests in understanding another different

culture compared with domestic one; showing them the advantages of speaking the target language, either from the self-improved dimension or from the instrumental aspect, in different situations where they might be in the future.

The second solution deals with teacher-related issues. One of the most important aspects concerning FLE-Teacher is teachers' enthusiasm. The more enthusiastic the teacher is, the more the learners will probably engage. A teacher with high enthusiasm tends to attract learners' attentions and make them more willing to follow the design of the lesson. Besides that, teachers' emotions could largely affect learners' FLE, too. Perhaps no one wants to interact with a person full of negative emotions.

Lastly, teachers can augment FLE by creating a safer and more enjoyable atmosphere. Safety comes from more open discussions and encouraging statements instead of close questions and critical comments. Enjoyable comes from respect and peer as well as teacher support. As researchers propose, the decrease of anxiety breeds the increase of enjoyment. Thus, learners may have higher FLE in a friendly learning environment.

As teachers adopt these above suggestions to promote learners' FLE, it might also be the case that learners' L2 WTC get corresponding improvement.

4. Conclusion

Based on what have discussed above, conclusion can be drawn as follows: FLE can positively affect learners' L2 WTC, and teachers can lure more L2 talk from learners by increasing their FLE. As for ways of promoting FLE, present study provides three main solutions based on previous studies. The first solution concerns learners' motivations, interests, and their attitudes towards the target language. The second solution related to teachers themselves, including their enthusiasm, teaching styles and their emotions. While the third solution deals with learning environment, a friendly and safe atmosphere probably leads to higher degrees of FLE, and further more engagement.

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