WTC and Learning to Speak in English: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study is a narrative inquiry of willingness to communicate (WTC) in students who are learning speaking in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) in a teachers' university in China. Through a narrative analysis of the qualitative data collected via a series of one-to-one interviews, it aims to reveal, from the learner's perspective and in relation to WTC, the factors that influence the development of EFL speaking ability. The study shows that the six identified factors that are inductive to the learner's success in learning spoken English are closely related to the learner's WTC on the six corresponding layers of WTC. The relationships between those factors and WTC are fluid, dynamic and contextualised. Although the learner's success in learning is generally dependent on their performance in the activities afforded in the program, their learning in a given activity is contingent on the ways those factors actually relate and operate.

Keywords: *WTC; EFL; Speaking; Language Learning*

Introduction

Adult learners who are learning English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) usually share one goal in common, that is, they want to be able to speak in English. Two kinds of models have been proposed to account for such an ability in the literature. From the perspective of EFL learners, the models proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Luoma (2004) consisted of two parts: language knowledge and strategic competence, and they treated language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) as language use activities where language knowledge and

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strategic competence converge. According to these models, the operation and the development of the learner's ability to communicate in spoken English is fundamentally related to the learner's language knowledge and strategic competence. The relationships among its components can be configured as follows (see Figure 1).
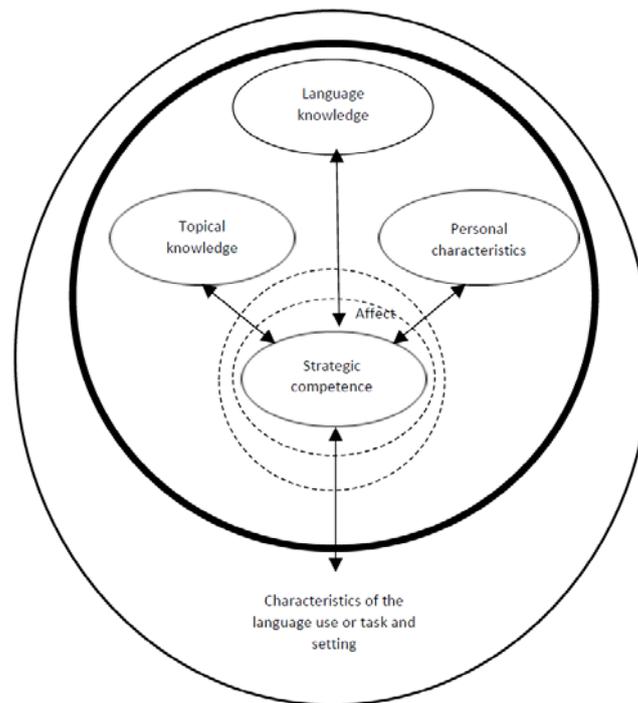

Figure 1. Relationships among the components of the model

It can be seen from the figure that the application of language ability is mediated internally by the learner's language knowledge, topical knowledge, strategic competence and affective factors and externally by the characteristics of the normal language use in the given setting. It follows that variations in those factors would alter the operations of the learner's ability to communicate Dornyei, in EFL and its development as well.

The other kind of models related the operations of the learner's language ability to the learner's willingness-to-communicate (WTC) in the target language. MacIntyre, Richard, and Noels' model of WTC (1998) signified not only the roles that the linguistic, communicative, and social psychological variables played in shaping the learner's WTC but also a system that would help describe, explain and predict the learner's ability to communicate in the target language. This

model of WTC includes 12 variables, which are arranged in a 6-layer pyramid structure (see Figure 2).
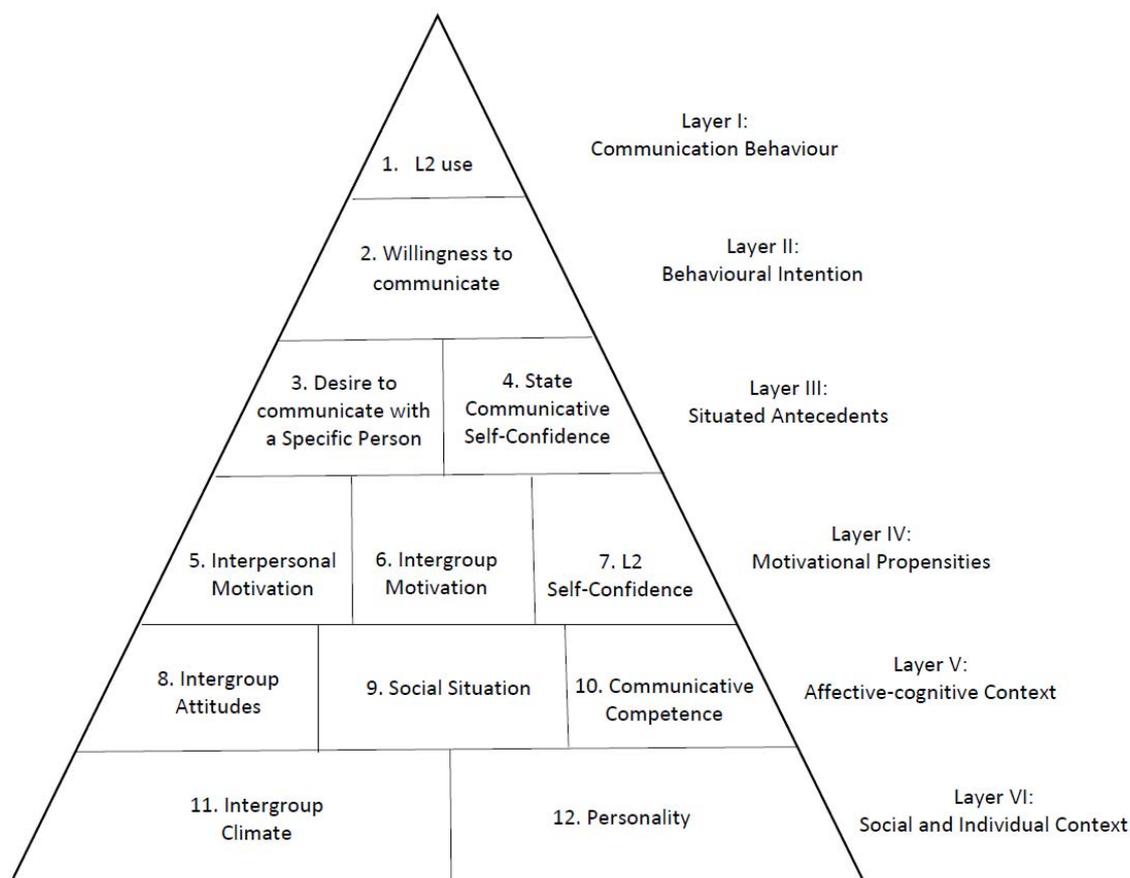

Figure 2. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC.

According to the system, the influences of the factors on Layer I-III are temporary and situation-specific while those on Layers IV-VI are stable and enduring.

Although Bachman and Palmer's model (1996) and MacIntyre et al model of WTC (1998) differ in their purposes and structures, the two groups of factors involved are closely related and mutually premising or reflexive, that is, the EFL learners' WTC shapes the operations of the learner's ability to communicate in spoken English, which, in turn, also influences the learner's WTC.

In the 21st century, the concept of WTC has gained much attention in the studies of EFL teaching and learning. As a crucial component of modern pedagogy, WTC lends itself very well to a practical and pedagogical account of the reasons why an EFL learner is willing to talk at one

time but not another, or why a learner is willing to talk while another is not in a given situation. Among those reported studies, to just name a few, Yashima (2002) and Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) investigated the influence of perceived competence and communicative apprehension on learners' WTC. MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrod (2001) and Kang (2005) examined the influence of social and affective factors on learners' WTC. Cao and Philp (2006) researched the dual characteristics of WTC, namely trait-like WTC and situational WTC. Leger and Storch (2009) reported in their study how learners' perceptions and attitudes influenced the learners' willingness to communicate in the L2. Pattapong (2010) looked into the reasons why Thai L2 learners are reluctant to use English to speak in English speaking classes. Peng (2014) investigated university EFL learners' WTC in the English language classrooms in China. Öz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015) studied the relationships between motivational factors and EFL learners' WTC in Turkey. It can be seen from these studies that both quantitative and qualitative inquiries of WTC have tended to focus on the components and characteristics of WTC and the factors that influence learners' WTC.

An area that appears to have been overlooked is learners' accounts of the development of their spoken English, not to mention from the perspective of WTC. This study was designed to examine tertiary EFL learners' narratives of their experiences in learning spoken English in an EFL environment in China. Instead of exploring theoretically what WTC is, the study aimed to reveal, from the learner's perspective, the relationships between WTC and the factors that influence the development of EFL speaking ability in an EFL program based on a small and purposefully selected information-rich sample.

Method

The study was conducted at a teachers' university in China and the participants were six graduating fourth year students of a 4-year EFL program, which was designed to prepare students to be teachers of English in secondary schools in China. The six participants were selected and recruited from three tiers, representing respectively high, medium, and low achievers in spoken English. The research data were collected through one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview took about 30 minutes and the interviews were conducted either in English or in Chinese (the participating students' native language) according to their preferences. The recordings of the

interviews were then transcribed and the Chinese transcripts were translated into English afterwards.

The analysis of the transcripts was conducted in two rounds. It was first conducted as a thematic analysis to extract the thematic factors from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Freeman, 1998). On the basis of the identified factors, the data were then analysed for the second round, following Labov's model of narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky, 2003) to construct series of stories about the previously identified thematic factors. In other words, the transcripts of the six interviews were analysed to tease out the relevant information according to the six elements of Labov's model: *abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, result* and *coda* (2003). To be more specific, the *abstract* is what signals an upcoming event and summarises its main point. The *orientation* provides important information about the characters of the story and the settings concerned. The *evaluation* signifies the meaning of the story and highlights the perspectives and attitudes concerning the story. *Result* is about the outcome of the event while the *coda*, as an optional, indicates the end of the story.

Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of six factors (1) *Activities afforded in the program,* (2) *Readiness to speak in EFL,* (3) *Momentary feeling of confidence,* (4) *Motivation to learn spoken English,* (5) *Sociocultural context,* and (6) *Personality.* These factors were found to relate to the six structural layers of the model of WTC - *Communication Behaviour* (Layer I), *Behavioural Intention* (Layer II), *Situated Antecedents* (Layer III), *Motivational Propensities* (Layer IV), *Affective-Cognitive Context* (Layer V), and *Social and Individual Context* (Layer VI) (MacIntyre et al., 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Likewise, Factors 1-3 are temporary and situation-specific while Factors 4-6 are stable and enduring in influencing the learner's WTC. It must be noted that the six factors were extracted from all the six interviews and should be applicable to all the participating students.

As a narrative inquiry, the results of the study are expository and will be organised under six headings named after the six identified factors. The discussions will be included after the expositions of the factors. It must be noted that the emphasis of the presentation will be placed on the findings that address the gap or the need of very detailed descriptions in much of the existing work of WTC rather than a critical evaluation of specific issues, because it is deemed that one may

learn a great deal more if examining in depth a study that engages a small number of carefully selected participants and that illuminates the people behind the numbers and put faces on the statistics to deepen the understanding of the issues involved (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Activities afforded in the program

The number one factor extracted from the data is about the activities afforded in the program. It includes both classroom activities and extra-curricular activities that took place on or outside university campuses. It appeared from those little stories reported in the interviews that students were critical about the activities in general even though some of those activities were considered satisfying and commendable by some of the participating students.

In the EFL program, spoken English was a content subject and was taught formally in class for two years. The lessons in the first year were taught by non-native English teachers and the lessons were focused on English pronunciation and intonation. The students were required to learn "correct" pronunciation and intonation and to transcribe English words and sentences using the International Phonetic Alphabet system. The lessons in the second year were taught by native English-speaking teachers and the students were usually engaged in practising spoken English in class.

From the narratives collected in the study, the activities in the EFL speaking lessons in the first year usually took the forms of drills in speech sound productions, reading aloud exercises and transcribing speech sounds with international phonetic alphabets. In contrast, the activities designed by native English-speaking teachers in the 2nd year lessons were much less structured and less rigid in the forms and tended to engage students in oral and meaning-focused practices in contrived situations.

Extra-curricular activities were also afforded to facilitate students' development of spoken English throughout the 4- year program and varied considerably in form. Some were offered as a social gathering like 'English Corner' where students met to make friends and practise spoken English in the meantime. Some were dormitory-specific and initiated and organised by students living in the same dormitory to speak only in English during a certain period of the day. Some were officially organised by the department for students to participate in voluntary social activities or to offer free interpretation services in some social, sport or commercial events…

When talking about the activities in speaking lessons, S1 commented:

> S1   There were not many opportunities to communicate in English [in Year 1 EFL speaking lessons taught by Chinese teachers]… It [i.e. an opportunity to communicate in English] was generally possible only in a foreign teacher's lesson… The foreign teacher created a situation and engaged us to talk in English about something that was relevant to the situation… [Translation from Chinese]

According to S1, students of EFL would like to have chance to engage in real meaning making activities in class even when they were supposed to be in the stage of learning "correct" English pronunciation and intonation.

> S2   I don't think my spoken English has made much progress [in the four-year program] but I enjoy the speech contest. I first took part in the contest at the class level in my class and then, with the help from the teacher, I entered the next round at the year level. Unfortunately, I didn't get any prize at the end… Anyway, I enjoy it… It's a challenge to me. I want to do my best, so I practised hard.

Seemingly, S2 thought she did not make much progress in her spoken English. The reason which she did not give directly could very well be inferred from the extra-curricular activity she remembered so well when she confronted a real challenge - the speech contest, and she had to practise hard in spoken English to face the challenge. It appeared that the EFL program did not afford her many opportunities of this kind to propel her to take initiative to practise spoken English.

> S3   My spoken English is definitely better than it was four years ago. I used to have a very strong local accent but I don't have it that bad now… In comparison with other students, my spoken English still has much to be desired…I liked the spoken English lessons in the first year – it helped me to improve my accent but I didn't like those foreign teachers' lessons. They didn't help me much and I didn't learn much from those speaking lessons. They were too simple like teaching children to speak English… I hardly took part in speech contests or spoken English competitions. But I did some

voluntary work such as to be an interpreter or an assistant at the Cross-Strait Trade Fair. I did some interpretation and also helped to sell products at the fair… In the classroom, we lacked such an environment for real communication in English. [Translation from Chinese]

S3 student compared the activities afforded in the first year lessons and those in the second year. Unlike S1, she liked those first-year lessons that were drills in pronunciation and intonation because they served her need to get rid of her "strong local accent". Her less than positive comment on the activities organised in the second year by native English-speaking teachers highlighted one particular aspect of those activities, that is, they were childish and lacking in addressing real meaning making needs such as those found in interpreting at a trade fair. It must be noted that S1's positive comment on the same activities in the Year 2 lessons was more about the opportunities for interactions than the nature of the interactions. Nevertheless, it was clear in the remarks made by S1 and S3 as well as S2 that, although EFL learners might have different expectations for the activities in a speaking lesson, they would like the activities to address their needs and to engage them in real and proper meaning making interactions as well. This desire for practice in real meaning making was also reflected in the excerpt from S4 below.

S4   I think I've made some progress [in spoken English] but not good enough… I like to talk. I never keep my mouth shut and try to speak English whenever I can… In a spoken English class, the teacher needs to encourage us to speak and urge us to speak, force us to speak… The activity I remember well was a debate in a spoken English class. It was taught by a foreign teacher from Philippine. She pushed us to speak English because we have to debate… It was quite funny because some students whose spoken English was not quite good wanted to rebut but had lost their tongues when expressing themselves.

Similarly, S5 felt her spoken English did not improve much in the 4-year program because of lacking sufficient opportunities to practise spoken English. It can be inferred from her narrative that activities like *debates,* which were "helpful" to improve her spoken English, were lacking in the program.

S5   I feel my spoken English did not improve much… I took part in speech contests at the school level and at the municipal level when I was in high school. So my spoken English wasn't too bad when I entered the university…

> I felt I should have more opportunities to practise … if one has little chance to speak in English, it is unlikely one will have much progress in spoken English… I think at this stage of learning [in the final year of the program] *debate* should be more helpful [for the development of spoken English]… because, fundamentally, speaking is not only about pronunciation but about thinking and fluently expressing ideas. [S5 code-switched from time to time and some parts of the excerpt were translations from Chinese.]

Unlike the other five students, S6 thought his spoken English had improved a lot in the past years. He had "a very pretty teacher and she spoke very beautifully" at the beginning of the program and she became a role model for him and he tried hard to "imitate" and that was why he practised a lot after class. However, despite his significant progress in spoken English, he was still not satisfied with the way the spoken English was taught and practised in class.

> S6 … I'll go to some volunteer activities as interpreters and that helps a lot… because that's the time you talk to foreigners, the native speakers. And you know the way they communicate and how they get each other understood… The teacher should be good at talking… and should let everyone in the class talking.

It can be inferred from these stories that the classroom activities in the program were designed and organised on a rationale that made a basic distinction between knowledge and skills as in Bygate's speaking-specific model (1987). The teaching was focused initially on linguistic knowledge – speech sound articulation and discrimination, and then on language use – interactions in speaking.

On the other hand, according to the model of WTC, a language program that fails to produce students' WTC is "a failed program" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). In other words, a program that did not offer students sufficient opportunities to communicate in the target language cannot be considered as a successful program. According to the model, activities are temporary and resulting from a complex system of related variables, both internal and external. The participating students' general dissatisfaction with the activities could be attributed to the variables involved such as varying individual needs, personal likings and interests, curricular pressures, as indicated in the stories.

In short, the learning activities for EFL speaking in the program generally did not go down well with the participating students. None of them were satisfied with the progress they made in spoken English and they all took the view that they could have done better if activities had not only targeted their linguistic competence in English pronunciation and intonation but also provided them with ample opportunities to engage in meaningful communicative interactions. They all found they would benefit better from more interactive activities to engage them in making real meaning in spoken English.

Readiness to speak in EFL

Another factor identified in the data concerns students' readiness to speak in EFL. In the model of WTC, such readiness means students' "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular tie with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). The data have shown that students' readiness to speak in EFL was contingent on and dynamically related to the tie with the interlocutor, the topic and the situation. "If you don't know what to talk about, you wouldn't dare to open your mouth," said S1 in the interview. "When we talk to classmates or roommates [in English], we are usually in a more casual way, like making jokes," noted S2 in the interview. "In class, we usually lack the environment [for communicating in English]… We are not used to communicate in English in everyday life," S3 observed. Unlike the other previously noted views, when giving her view on the way to improve one's spoken English, S5 noted the importance of some contextual factors, especially a shared similarity in the proficiency in spoken English, when engaged in practice. "To practise and improve your spoken English… you must also have several partners, not too many, but their spoken English should be at a similar level to yours", she noted.

Apart from a shared similarity in proficiency, students' WTC could also be affected by the topic and the situation involved. Even with a rather limited proficiency, students' readiness to communicate might well be lifted when the topic was right and the situation was right, that is, when "the teacher encourage us to speak and urge us to speak, and force us to speak… [In the activity], I didn't expect that they [i.e. fellow students] will give me that much information. I can see that everybody are really trying and they really learn a lot. They learned that they can speak [in English]," said S4 when he described an activity he remembered well and that went off very well in a speaking lesson. Similarly, S5 attached much importance to the knowledge of the topic and that of the world. "The most difficult in spoken English is content. You don't know enough.

The limited knowledge caused you tongue-tied. You must have received enough input before you can have some output," she remarked in the interview.

In short, the factor of readiness was found to be temporary and contingent on at least three variables – a similar proficiency shared by the interlocutors, adequate familiarity with the topic, and a supportive environment for the communicative activity. This finding has confirmed that students were ready to communicate in English if their ties with the interlocutor(s) or the partner(s) in a classroom or extra-curricular activity were right, and the intended topic and situation were also right, and the incentive was sufficiently propelling, too. Any variations in those elements involved might significantly alter the resultant strength of their readiness. In other words, a change in the familiarity with the interlocutor, in the supportiveness of the environment, in the shared prior knowledge of the topic, or in the motivation to enter the given discursive activity could very well alter the student's readiness to communicate in English.

Momentary feeling of confidence

A third factor extracted from the data was *momentary feeling of confidence*. Such confidence was transient, not trait-like, and was usually found to be situational. On the model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998), it is referred to as *state communicative self-confidence*. It is interesting, however, that the participating students did not seem to make a distinction between the momentary feeling of confidence and the stable and enduring feeling of confidence when they talked about the role of confidence, but the stories they told provided clear clues to indicate which they were talking about.

When responding to a question about what she felt the weakest in her speaking, S1 identified the lack of confidence. "In fact," she said, "I lack confidence. I dared not open my mouth because I felt that I didn't know what to talk about… I was afraid of making mistakes." "Maybe it was because I wasn't confident enough," S3 noted in her answer to the same question. "I felt self-conscious about my accent and my fellow students were very good at English, so I usually dared not converse with them [in English]," S3 continued to give the reason why she wasn't used to speaking in English after all the four years of training. "I felt I might lose my face as soon as I started speaking in English and saw the looks on others' faces. Immediately I felt nervous and distressed," she further explained. S5 also mentioned the impact of the lack of confidence on her EFL speaking ability, "I should have been bolder… and not afraid of being laughed at… I don't mean my English is that bad but that I'm too timid to show it to others."

The only student who noted about experiencing the benefits of the trait-like feeling of confidence was S6. "I got my confidence," he remarked. "People around you will think you are good at it. So sometimes they invite me to be the host in a gala or in a speaking competition. So when you're standing on the stage, you feel you are really making the thing moving…"

It was clear from the data that students most often felt a lack of confidence, which was usually transient because such a feeling usually arose in response to a perceived challenge in the given activity. Its intensity and duration might vary from person to person and from situation to situation in which it occurred. It is in this sense that the factor had the name of '*momentary*' and it was due to this transient characteristic that the factor was mapped onto the third layer of *Situated Antecedents* on the model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

It must also be noted that the narrative data have cast light on the fluidity and contingency of the factor and the complex relationships among the range of situational elements involved: Student tended to feel more confident when they were more familiar with the interlocutor(s), or when they were more knowledgeable about the topic, or when they were less apprehensive about the situation. Generally speaking, the lack of confidence, either momentary or trait-like, could easily nullify a student's willingness to communicate in EFL and result in a withdrawal or avoidance from, or a failure in, the given communicative activity.

Motivation to learn spoken English

Motivation, as "a cumulative arousal, or want, that we are aware of" (Zoltán Dörnyei, 2009, p. 209), may display in dispositional and predictable trajectories as well as in frequent and often seemingly irrational fluctuations. The narratives elicited from the interviews are related to both kinds of motivations.

Instances that were noted repeatedly in the interviews were about the intent to pass high-stack tests of spoken English organised in the program and they all demonstrated an instrumental orientation (Zoltán Dörnyei, 2001). "For TEM4 [a nation-wide English proficiency test], we practise for a period… talked to each other after class in the dormitory with the roommates… Whenever we think of this test, we practise… Once the test was over, we stopped doing it although I don't think it's OK," S2 commented on the example she gave about how she was motivated to practise spoken English. In the story she told, all the eight girls who lived in the dormitory agreed to speak English only when they were in the dormitory because they all wanted to do well in the

TEM4 test of speaking but they soon stopped speaking to each other in English once the test was over since the pressure of testing was gone and the motivation had disappeared.

Similarly, S1 also noted the impact of the test of TEM4 on her motivation to learn spoken English, "Under the pressure, you would undertake intense practice for a period of time before the test. However, once the test was over, you would almost forget to practise," she said. S4 apparently took the same view on the motivational role that high-stack tests like TEM4 played in propelling students to engage in English speaking activities. He noted forcefully in the interview, "It [TEM4] is necessary. I don't think many of us will work on English if they never have this test. Because people are born to be lazy, so you have to push them… There should be more tests of this kind." Similarly, S6 also emphasised the role of motivation, "I mean they [students enrolled in the program] have to know why they are learning English. If they don't know their purpose of learning English, why should they ever learn it? … Motivation is very important. They need to know why they want to do it."

However, the incentive to learn spoken English is subject to the influences of a constellation of factors. The overall instrumental motivation may be nullified easily by culture-specific psychological intent to follow the norm of modesty. S3 mentioned what happened to her urge to practise spoken English in the early days four years before. "At the beginning, we were all very much determined to gain good spoken English since we had enrolled in the English Education program. We made a rule in our dormitory that we all must speak in English only on Fridays in our dormitory even though we did not speak good English at that time. But we followed the rule merely for about a month or so and then we gave up because of no reasons… When others came to visit us in the dormitory and we spoke in English in their presence, we appeared to be showing off in front of them and that caused a weird and strange feeling among us."

S5 also noted the tension between the motive to practise spoken English and the constant intent to be modest and keep a low profile. "Opportunities to practise spoken English are out there and you have to make efforts to grip them. If you are not psychologically ready to cut a figure in public, you will not make a move – there are so many others, their English is better than yours." S5's remark is clearly a euphemistic statement that one should not expect to speak good English if s/he is not mentally strong enough to seize opportunities to practise spoken English and ignore the sneers and ridicules from others. Likewise, S2 believed that if she had chance to practise, her

spoken English would be better, but she did not because "others will consider - will think I'm odd or weird," she explained in the interview.

It can be seen from the data that, although students had a general and stable motive to learn spoken English and would like to learn it well, such a motivation fluctuated considerably due to the influences of a wide range of contextual factors. In other words, the motivational power of pull/push was amplified or mitigated by constellations of environmental and temporal factors and realised in seemingly irrational ups and downs. What was insignificant pull or push a moment ago on an action might exercise an enduring influence on it now.

The factor of *Motivation* related closely to Layer IV *Motivational Propensities* in the system of WTC. The participating students all agreed that they would need more external pressure like the high-stake STEM4 examination, because it would be the green light for them to deviate from the norm of modesty and promote their WTC to practise spoken English when they would not otherwise. This can be clearly seen from their stories that such a pressure legitimated and fortified their instrumental oriented motivation and WTC, which helped them fight off the adverse influences coming from the sociocultural contextual factors and thereby propelled them to practise and improve their spoken English. Even though the participating students had a general motivation to practise spoken English, their WTC was usually not resilient enough to counteract the inroads from many contextual factors. They appeared to take the view that maintaining sufficient motivation for them to practise spoken English in everyday life would require sufficient external pressures like high-stacked STEM4 tests to help them combat the adverse influences, both internal and external.

Sociocultural context

The factor of sociocultural context is closely related to that of motivation in the data collected in the study. As indicated in the previous discussion, the fluctuations of the motivation were usually causally related to the influences of the sociocultural context. It is clear from the data that such contextual influence might take different forms. Among them, the most salient was the adherence to the sociocultural norm of modesty or humility. According to Bond et al (2012), modesty is a key virtue in Chinese culture and is exemplified in avoiding attention, effacing oneself, and enhancing others. This was obvious in the stories where they explained why they did not speak in English when they could.

S2   There is nobody stopping you using English every day, but why can't you practise it every day? Because I think others will consider or think you are odd or weird or you are showing off… The culture around you does not encourage people to speak in English… If the culture encourages you to speak in English, I believe my English will be better.

S3   Others will look at you and consider you are weird and strange if you speak in English when you are not preparing for an exam or a speech contest… The key issue is you've got to have a reason to speak in English when others don't… [Translation from Chinese]

The fear of being different from others and the intent to efface themselves into humility or to avoid attention had caused these students to shrink from practising spoken English. It appeared that the possible benefits of improving their spoken English through practice could not outweigh the possible sociocultural harms that a deviation from the norm of modesty might inflict on them.

However, it must also be noted that it so happened that some students did not succumb to the pressure for a conformity with the norm of modesty. The two participating students from the top tier clearly ignored the norm of modesty and prioritised the learning of spoken English. They both emphasised in the interviews they practised spoken English whenever they could and dared to be different.

S4   I feel like I have an urge of communication. I really feel like to get to know what's in your mind, especially if I found you are interesting and when you are speaking in English outside the campus. This is quite often… I don't fear they find me strange. I would think they find me brave…

S6   I believe all languages are for communication. So if you want to learn English, you must try to communicate in English and not be afraid. And the way you communicate is the way you talk to people… You can make foreign friends. We have a foreign students' college. Unlike many others, I went to that college and I made friends there. And we had parties and activities, and you really learnt something from these.

The concern for *face* is another social element that also stood out in the participants' narratives. The concept of *face* in Chinese culture consists of two distinct dimensions - the social aspect and the moral aspect (Zhang, Cao, & Grigoriou, 2011). It concerns, at once, both the prestige

and honour that one accrues in life and the integrity of one's moral character. It appeared that most of the participating students would consider it losing face if making a mistake or stammering or lost for words when speaking in English and that they would rather not say a word than run the risk of losing face in class or in public.

> S1: In fact, I dared not open the mouth to speak in English because I felt that I didn't know what to say and how to say it… because we are more familiar with written English than spoken English… I felt the way I spoke was rather strange… Shall I divide my sentence into clauses? This was rather odd, so I didn't feel like saying anything in English. [Translation from Chinese]

> S2: I was too afraid to go [to the English corner], because others were experienced and very good at it. I would appear to know nothing if I went. So I didn't go and, once I decided not to go, never I could afterwards, because I would more likely be out of place, like an outsider.

> S5: I should have been brave… There were so many excellent students in class… I just felt that my ideas were not good enough to be shared with them. They could be laughed at… Because of this fear of losing face, I missed opportunities of practising spoken English in class.

As shown above, the demand for conformity with the norm of modesty and the fear of losing fact impose an invisible constraint on the students of EFL, and may restrict their WTC to the extent that they gave up their intention to practise spoken English. According to the model of WTC, such an affective influence is usually rather stable and coming from *affective-cognitive context*. The participating students reportedly felt constant sociocultural obligation to follow the norm of modesty to avoid attention and to efface themselves into humility if they were not brave enough to be different and if they could not resist the overwhelming inclination to avoid the risk of losing face while speaking in English.

Personality

The sixth factor revealed from the data concerns the learner's individual characteristics and personality. According to the data, the learners' characteristic traits and personality have also influenced their learning of EFL speaking. S1 noted how her personality had influenced her chances of practising spoken English.

S1: This [i.e. seizing opportunities to practise spoken English] has something to do with one's personality: some people are braver and dare to open the mouth and be extrovert and out-going, but some others are more timid and dare not to open the mouth and be introvert and reluctant to speak… One's accent may also have a role to play here, but it is more a matter of personality, I think. [Translation from Chinese]

Similarly, S3 also blamed her characteristic self-consciousness and trait-like lack of self-confidence for her unsatisfactory achievement in learning spoken English.

S3: I'm very self-conscious and lacking self-confidence when it comes to speaking in English, especially after hearing others' answers – they spoke so well. I thought I'd better give up and not to have a go. Mainly because of lacking self-confidence, I think... I don't think I have a thick face [i.e. having the ability to fend off and ignore ridicules] and I always feel very nervous as soon as I speak in English and become fearful of others' weird looks on me. [Translation from Chinese]

Likewise, the evidence of the positive impact of extrovert personality on learning EFL speaking was also evident in the two high-achieving students.

S4: Well, I don't think the environment is quite encouraging you to speak English. I think that's my personality that makes the difference. That is something people cannot get because it is the personality, something you're born with.

S6: I was pretty shy when I entered the university about four year ago. I did not know how to express myself. I think these four years, I mean, it was of great help and I don't feel so shy and I would like to use English more and I think my spoken English has been improved a lot in the past three or four years… We had a very pretty teacher and she spoke beautifully. At that time, I thought that's how you talk, and that's the way you should talk, and I tried hard to imitate and that's why I practised a lot after class… After you do that, I got my confidence.

It can be seen from the data that the participating students believed that students with extrovert personality are more likely to take opportunities to speak in English while those with introvert personality tend to shy away from such opportunities. This was particularly clear with S1.

However, it must be noted that, although adverse influence of introvert personality on learning EFL speaking finds clear evidence in the responses from the participating students, such a characteristic tendency might be checked and reverted if the student could take initiative to address it as shown in S6's success, or if some other factors have also come into play. For example, S3, as she put it, is of introvert personality and she is usually abide by the norm of modesty and always guards against attracting unwanted attention from others. However, when she once volunteered to be an interpreter in a trade fare and when she toured in Hong Kong on another occasion, her habitual intent to be modest and keep a low profile and her reluctance to initiate a conversation in English gave way to her desire to provide quality service or to survive in a new and foreign environment. Consequently, she found her spoken English had improved through such activities and events. Like S3, but in an opposite manner, S1 was also an introvert girl and she was always in fear of losing face through the mistakes she made. As a result, she acknowledged after four years of study that she could have done better in spoken English if she had been more outspoken and less scared of making mistakes or losing face.

According to the model of WTC, *personality* is not conceptualised as a direct influence on language learning although it helps learners to set or choose the context where language learning occurs (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The findings of the study have shown that certain personality traits such as extravert/introvert shyness/boldness were often associated with liabilities of success in learning spoken English. What is more, successful learners of spoken English like S6 were usually flexible enough to use their strengths to compensate for their characteristic weakness. It is for this reason that the factor of personality is on the bottom layer of the model of WTC, indicating it is less directly involved in determining a learner's WTC in a given activity.

Conclusion

In this study, the participating students recalled and reported their experiences and they were also encouraged to reflect on those experiences, highlighting the significant parts from the perspective of improving the delivery of the program to better enhance students' achievements in learning spoken English in future. The analysis of the data has led to the extraction and identification of six key factors, which can be ranked according to the recurrence rates in the data and the relative importance attached by the participating students. Interestingly, the rankings of the six factors map squarely onto the six layers of the model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998) as shown in Table 1:

Table 1
The Connections between the 6 Factors and the 6 Layers of WTC

6 Factors	6 Layers of the model of WTC
(1) Activities afforded in the program	Communication Behaviour (Layer I)
(2) Readiness to speak in EFL	Behavioural Intention (Layer II)
(3) Momentary feeling of confidence	Situated Antecedents (Layer III)
(4) Motivation to learn spoken English	Motivational Propensities (Layer IV)
(5) Sociocultural context	Affective-Cognitive Context (Layer V)
(6) Personality	Social and Individual Context (Layer VI)

One contribution of the study lies in the ranking of the six factors that have reportedly influenced learning to speak in English in an EFL program and in revealing their connections with the six layers of WTC. Specifically, the opportunities to participate in meaningful interactions in spoken English have been found to be the number one factor that may determine the success in learning spoken English. The other five factors descend in their contributions to learning EFL speaking. Furthermore, the six factors have been found to relate directly to the six layers of WTC, and the higher on the layer the more temporal and contextualised and tend to exercise more direct influence on the learner's WTC and vice versa.

It must be noted that, although the impact of the six factors on learning spoken English can be ranked in general based on the data, the influences of those factors on students' WTC for a given activity are not necessarily as steady as the structure of the model might have suggested. A slight variation of a particular factor, such as some feature(s) of the activity, students' readiness to speak in EFL, momentary feeling of confidence, motivation to learn spoken English, sociocultural contextual element(s), or personality, may result in variations in other factors' influences on the student's WTC as a whole and thereby lead to the student's varied performance and learning in the activity.

Furthermore, the influences of those factors may positively complement each other and may also negatively nullify each other in a given activity. For example, introvert personality does not always relate to less successful performance in spoken English. However, because of a stronger motivation caused by some sociocultural contextual elements, an introvert learner like S3 might gain greater WTC and achieved better performance and learning at a trade fare and through her tours in Hong Kong. In other words, the relationships between the factors identified in the study are often fluid and dynamic although they may appear static and stable in Table 1. The joint impact of those factors may result in supportive synergies to promote learning or punitive force to impede learning. All this is dependent very much on how they are instantiated and operate in reality.

To sum up, the findings of this narrative inquiry are three folds. First, the six factors (Table 1) that are inductive to the learner's success in learning spoken English are closely related to the learner's WTC at the six layers of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Second, the relationships between those factors are fluid, dynamic and contextualised. Thirdly, although the learner's success in learning EFL speaking is generally dependent on their performance in the activities afforded in the program, their learning in a given activity is contingent on the actual ways those factors relate and operate. It follows that the implication of the study for teaching and learning speaking in EFL is that teachers, program designers and learners involved should make sure those factors are properly addressed and managed in the EFL program to optimise the learner's WTC throughout the program to achieve the best possible outcomes in learning to speak in English.

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