

Chapter 96

Do Opposites Attract?

Willingness to Communicate in the Target Language for Academically, Culturally, and Linguistically Different Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the results of an online intercultural chat task designed to see whether students from different cultural backgrounds, with different English language abilities, with different L1s and who had different academic interests would be willing to communicate using English—the target language. Taiwanese university students who were marine science majors (lower proficiency) chatted electronically in small groups with Japanese university students who had been studying English intensively for two years (higher proficiency). Student comments taken from a questionnaire indicate that both groups were invigorated and willing to communicate by the task; it was considered meaningful because it provided an opportunity to use English in a realistic way, represented the only means to communicate with their overseas partners and helped students to empathize with their newly found peers. To sum up briefly, text-based chat can be useful for EFL and ESL teachers as a tool for language learning students, providing learners with “real” target language opportunities for communication.

INTRODUCTION

When considering a student's willingness to communicate (WTC) in a target language (TL), there are a multitude of factors that must be contemplated. One of the factors that has been given scant attention is whether a student's academic outlook might impede desire to communicate (Richards, 2006; Ushioda, 2007; 2011, Sampson, 2012). In this study, then, we compare two groups of university students, who are distinct both culturally and socially, who have different L1s, different academic goals and different

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English language proficiencies to see if they are willing to communicate in the target language (TL) while engaged in an online chat activity. The task was designed for two groups of EFL students—a mixed (male and female) group of Marine Sciences students from a Taiwanese university and a group of female International Communication students who had been studying English intensively for two years in a Japanese university. Responses from a set of broad-based, open-ended interview questions provide evidence indicating a concerted WTC for both groups. In the next section, we point to some of the situated differences between the two groups of second language learners; such differences have the potential aid or hinder WTC.

ACADEMICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN ASIA

One of the problems that can arise in English classes taught in an EFL setting is that students—particularly non-English majors—may or may not understand why they need to be enrolled in an English class. Their view of English class may be achievement-based—or perhaps even fulfillment-based—rather than acquisition-based (Nezhad, 2008; Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007, Sampson, 2012). In many parts of Asia, although the use of English is prevalent—being used in signs, products and advertisements—there is often little or no opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. Consequently, English class is viewed as a requisite hindrance, as Chen, Warden and Chang (2005) so aptly point out (p. 610).

...settings where English is a foreign language (EFL) often present little or no opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. Even when the environment's broadcast and print media use English, people have very little incentive to access such input.

Additionally, students may have learned from their experiences that stimulating language learning classes may be subservient to academic achievement. Indeed, as Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) have pointed out, language teachers from a variety of settings in Taiwan assigned little importance to creating interesting tasks for students. Savignon and Wang (2003) have suggested that the focus on grammar exercises—apparently still common in Taiwan despite students' desires for more communicative language classes—is at the heart of the problem.

The way in which teachers are perceived by students may also influence students' perceptions of English language learning. In Confucian-heritage societies such as Japan and Taiwan classroom behavior by students may be influenced by their instilled beliefs: 1) a view that teachers are supreme authorities, 2) information and knowledge should be passed down to them from the teacher, and 3) the classroom is a somber place, so attentive students are to behave quietly and respectfully. Because of the potential for embarrassment caused by making errors in front of peers and teachers, students may be reticent to speak in the TL (Tsui, 1996; Sampson, 2012). Tsui (1996) adds that students with lower English proficiencies are the most apt to refrain from participating in a noticeable manner in an English class for fear of being laughed at.

The upshot is that students who look at English class as simply a required subject to be completed rather than as an opportunity for communication may not be particularly encouraged to participate fully in an English class. In the case of this study, we have two distinct groups of Asian students: Japanese students who had entered their university with the understanding that one of the primary purposes was to

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