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Willingness to Communicate in Intercultural Interactions between Chinese and Americans

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This study investigated the differences in willingness to communicate (WTC) between Americans and Chinese living in China and the United States, and the factors affecting WTC between these two nationalities. A battery of questionnaires was administered to 47 American and 54 Chinese college students in China, and 51 American and 42 Chinese college students in the US. Overall Americans were found to be more willing to communicate with Chinese than were Chinese with Americans. Participants living abroad reported higher levels of WTC than those living in their home country. Among Chinese, WTC was positively related to self-perceived communication competence, language competence, immersion time and motivation being positively correlated and negatively associated with CA. Similar results were obtained from Americans, except that immersion time and language competence were not related to WTC.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate; Immersion; Communication Competence; Language Competence; Motivation; Communication Apprehension

As a recent issue of *Time* magazine (Wallis & Steptoe, 2006) pointed out, we are 21st century global citizens now and our ability to communicate well with people from different cultural and language backgrounds has become an essential skill for success in today's world. One of the most important factors for effective intercultural communication is our willingness to communicate with people of different cultures.

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Willingness to communicate (WTC), a communication trait, refers to the probability of initiating talking when the opportunity arises (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Individuals with high levels of WTC are more open, confident, willing to share their ideas with others, curious about new cultures, and interact with people of other cultures more frequently than those with low levels of WTC (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishiide, & Shimizu, 2004). Moreover, levels of WTC were found to be significantly higher among Americans than people of other nations, including Australia (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992), Finland (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991), Hong Kong (Asker, 1998), Japan (Yashima et al., 2004), Korea (Lin, Rancer, & Lim, 2003), Micronesia (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992) Puerto Rico (McCroskey, Barraclough, & Christophel, 1988), Sweden (McCroskey, Burroughs, Daun, & Richmond, 1990), Taiwan (Hsu, 2007), and Thailand (Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatiketu, & Smith, 2002).

While WTC has been widely studied, most studies compared WTC with people in general rather than members of a particular culture or nation. Particularly, research about intercultural WTC between Chinese and Americans is scarce. Today the relation between Americans and Chinese has become increasingly close. China is the third-largest trading partner of the United States and the trade between China and the US continues growing fast (Morrison, 2005). In addition, about 10.5% of international students in US are Chinese, while 9.7% of international students in China come from US (*Chinese Scholars Abroad, 2006*). Given the strong ties between the two nations, this study compared WTC between Americans and Chinese living in China and the US, and examined the factors affecting their willingness to communicate with each other.

Willingness to Communicate between Chinese and Americans

The communication differences between Chinese and Americans could be explained by the two distinctive styles of communication: Eurocentrism versus Asiacentrism. According to Klopf (in press), Eurocentric communication style values personal thoughts, feelings and actions in communication. Individuals are encouraged to express their ideas precisely, explicitly and directly. In contrast, Asiacentric communication style stresses harmonious relationships. Direct confrontation is discouraged and silence is valued. Therefore, WTC is considered not as important among Asians as Europeans. Given that, Chinese who hold Asiacentric communication style would be less willing to communicate cross-culturally than Americans with Eurocentric style.

Another possible explanation concerns *facework*, which refers to maintaining one's positive image. Chinese's unwillingness to communicate in public could be explained by their face-protected orientation. Chinese are sensitive to the judgment of the public, and thus are less likely to be active in communication in a foreign language. According to Ho (1976), face may be lost when a conduct or performance falls below the expectation or when certain vital requirements are not satisfactorily met. Therefore, if Chinese are not confident in their English language competence in

interactions with Americans, they would perceive that they risk losing face and thus tend to avoid communication. Based on the preceding explanations, the following hypothesis was derived:

H1: Americans are more willing to communicate with Chinese than are Chinese with Americans.

Factors Affecting Cross-Cultural WTC

MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noel's study (1998) built a heuristic model, which identified more than 30 variables affecting WTC when people are using a second language. The four most immediate antecedents of WTC are self-perceived communication competence, language competence, motivation, and communication apprehension. Another important variable, immersion in a different culture, was also found to affect levels of WTC and these antecedents. Therefore, this study examined the influences of these five factors on WTC in interactions between Americans and Chinese.

Immersion

Immersion refers to the experiences of staying in a specific cultural or language environment. Many studies (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002, 2003; Yahima et al., 2004) have found that immersion in a different language environment has a positive influence on one's self-confidence and WTC in using that language. Specifically, high school and college students who have studied abroad tend to be more confident and willing to communicate in the second language than those without immersion experiences. According to MacIntyre and his colleagues, (2003), immersion provides students with more second language contact and greater opportunities to master the language. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) further argued that as the number of opportunities to communicate in the second language increases, students' language and communication skills should also improve. As a result, they will become more likely to initiate communication with native-language speakers. However, language skills and communication competence do not improve suddenly; time is an important factor for developing such skills. While no previous studies have investigated the relationship between immersion time and WTC, some evidence suggests that fluency of speaking second language is positively related to the length of residence in the target-language country (Moyer, 2004). Therefore, it is likely that people will become more willing to communicate with native-language speakers as their time staying in that country increases. Given the importance of immersion experiences in language learning, the following hypotheses were derived:

H2: Americans in China are more willing to communicate with Chinese than are Americans in the US.
H3: Chinese in the US are more willing to communicate with Americans than are Chinese in China.
H4: The length of immersion time is positively related to WTC.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the extent to which a person holds positive attitude and desire to learn communication skills of a different culture (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Previous studies (e.g., MacIntyre, Clément & Noels, 1996) found that motivation positively affected WTC in second language, which, in turn, resulted in more frequent communication in second language. Further, studies (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 2003) also found that the deeper people want to learn about cultural differences, the more likely they will initiate communication with people of a different culture. Therefore, the following hypothesis was derived:

> H5: People with higher levels of motivation are more willing to communicate cross-culturally than those with lower levels of motivation.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) refers to fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others (McCroskey, 1977). High CA people often avoid and withdraw from communication with other people (Daly & McCroskey, 1984; Daly & Stafford, 1984). In American culture, people who are more fearful of communication tend to be less willing to communicate than those with less fear (McCroskey et al., 1990). Therefore, the following hypothesis was derived:

> H6: People with lower CA are more willing to communicate cross-culturally than those with higher CA.

Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) refers to the self-evaluation of one's ability to communicate appropriately in a given situation (McCroskey, 1982). It has been found that SPCC is one key communication variable relating to WTC in both native- and second-language communication (Clément, 1986; MacIntyre, Babin, & Clément, 1999). McCroskey and Richmond (1991) argued that WTC is likely to be influenced by both one's actual communication ability and self-perceived communication competence, but self-perceptions have stronger influences on WTC. SPCC was found to be positively related to WTC in American culture (McCroskey et al., 1990; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Based on these previous studies, the following hypothesis was derived:

> H7: People with higher SPCC are more willing to communicate cross-culturally than those with lower SPCC.

Self-Perceived Language Competence

Self-perceived language competence refers to one's own confidence in using a second language (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). It is argued to be an important predictor

of language use and cross-cultural adaptation than actual linguistic competence (MacIntyre, et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 1996). Several studies (Noels & Clément, 1996; Clément, Noels, & Pon, 1996) found that higher self-perceived language competence of a second language in intercultural interactions usually results in better adjustments in a different culture.

McCroskey, Burroughs and Marie (2003) argued that when people speak in a language that is not their first language, they are likely to see themselves as less competent as a communicator, which also results in higher communication apprehension. They also found that second-language speakers perceive themselves as less communicatively competent and are less willing to communicate than native-language speakers. However, when a person becomes more confident in using the second language, his or her chance of initiating communication with native-language speakers becomes higher (Yashima et al., 2004). Based on these previous studies, the following hypothesis was derived:

> H8: People with higher self-perceived language competence are more willing to communicate cross-culturally than those with lower self-perceived language competence.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in two different settings: a university in the western US, and two universities in Beijing and Chengdu in China. Four groups of people living in these locations were surveyed: Chinese in China, Chinese in the US, Americans in China, and Americans in the US. All data were collected during May and June in 2007.

A total of 194 college students participated in this study. The sample consists of 47 Americans (44.7% men and 55.3% women) living in China, 51 Americans (43.1% men and 56.9% women) in the US, 54 Chinese (53.7% men, 44.4% women and 1.9% unidentified) in China, and 42 Chinese (50% men and 50% women) in the US.

Americans in China had an average age of 22.7 years ($SD = 8.31$). The average time of their stay in China was 11.2 weeks ($SD = 20.78$). Americans in the US were recruited from a general requirement class, and had an average age of 25 years ($SD = 11.42$). Two of them had been in China, and their average time of stay was 3.5 weeks. The Chinese participants in China had an average age of 24.9 years ($SD = 2.39$). They were selected by convenience sampling. Some participants in this group were chosen by snowball sampling. Questionnaires were sent to some acquaintances initially, and then they were asked to provide contact information of other acquaintances. Three of them had experiences of living in the US, and the average time of their stay in the US was 10.7 weeks. The Chinese students in the US had an average age of 26.4 years ($SD = 4.72$). They were mainly approached via email addresses provided by the *Chinese Students and Scholars Association* of the university.

The average time of their stay in the US was 20.6 weeks ($SD = 23.67$). The selection of these participants is appropriate for the purpose of this study because they represent a cross-section of students.

Procedure

Participants were approached during their academic year in China and the US. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants were instructed to complete the survey at their convenience. Some of them did not complete the questionnaire at the time of receiving it due to time constraints. Follow-up emails were used to send the surveys to these participants. Participants were also informed that they could refuse to take the survey for any reason.

Measurement

Four slightly different versions of the questionnaire were used for the four groups of participants. These questionnaires were generally the same except for some specific items because of the differences among these groups. For example, in the questionnaire for Americans in China, the question "How long have you been staying in China?" was asked, whereas in the questionnaire for Americans in the US, the question "Have you been in China before?" was used. Besides immersion experiences, participants were asked about their age, gender, nationality and first language.

WTC

This variable was measured by the 12-item Willingness to Communicate scale (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Participants were asked to assess their attitude toward willingness to communicate cross-culturally in different situations (e.g., public and with different people (e.g., friends), on a scale from 0 (= not choose to communicate at all) to 100 (= always choose to communicate). Given the purpose of this study was to investigate WTC between Americans and Chinese only, the scale was modified by changing the target population from general people to Chinese and Americans. The original WTC scale had reliability ranging from 0.85 to 0.90 (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). The alpha reliability of the modified scale was 0.90 for Americans and 0.87 for Chinese.

CA

The Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension scale (McCroskey & Neuliep, 1997) was used to measure communication apprehension in intercultural interactions on a scale from 1 (= strongly agree) to 5 (= strongly disagree). Participants were asked to respond to 14 statements, such as "Generally, I am comfortable interacting with a group of people from China/America," and "I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from China/America."

The reliability of this scale was above 0.90 (McCroskey & Neuliep, 1997). The alpha reliability of the modified scale was 0.93 for Americans and 0.91 for Chinese.

SPCC

The 12-item Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988) was used to measure this variable. Participants were asked to assess their own ability to communicate in different settings on a scale from 0 (= not competent) to 100 (= fully competent). Some examples of statements are ''Present a talk to a group of strangers from China/America,'' and ''Talk with an acquaintance from China/America.'' The SPCC scale had reliability above 0.85 (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). The alpha reliability of the modified scale was 0.96 for Americans and 0.87 for Chinese.

Motivation

No established scale on motivation about intercultural interactions is available. Four items concerning motivation were developed. Participants were asked to assess their attitude on a scale from 1 (= strongly agree) to 5 (= strongly disagree) toward statements, such as ''I want to make friends with Americans/Chinese'' and ''I want to learn more about American/Chinese culture.'' These items were developed to measure people's desire to learn about a different culture, to learn a new language, and to make friends. The alpha reliability was 0.75 for Americans and 0.71 for Chinese.

Self-perceived language competence

No established scale on self-perceived language competence is available. Five items that assess one's own language ability were developed. Participants were asked to assess their perception on a scale from 1 (= strongly agree) to 5 (= strongly disagree) toward statements, such as ''I can express myself well in English/Chinese.'' The alpha reliability was 0.62 for Americans and 0.78 for Chinese.

Bilingual Test

The questionnaire was translated to Chinese from English for the Chinese in China group. To find out if the translations were adequate, a bilingual pretest was conducted. Twenty Chinese participants, ten in China and ten in the US, were asked to do both English and Chinese version questionnaires. All of these students have adequate proficiency in English. To make sure that memory from doing the same questionnaire did not affect their answers, participants were asked to do the second questionnaire one week after they had done the first one.

As shown in Table 1, the results of Pearson correlations indicate that the two versions were strongly related to each other. Also, the results of paired sample *t* tests indicated no significant differences between the two versions of self-perceived language competence, WTC and SPCC, but participants reported significantly lower motivation in the English version than in the Chinese version. In addition, the

Table 1 Results of bilingual tests ($n = 20$).

Variables	English		Chinese			Pearson correlation
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	
WTC	678.25	235.16	685.25	196.63	−0.25	0.84**
Motivation	17.10	1.94	17.80	1.79	−2.41*	0.76**
Language competence	14.45	3.03	14.55	2.89	−0.24	0.80**
CA	34.60	7.00	31.90	6.85	2.18*	0.68**
SPCC	738.75	217.47	680.50	228.72	1.62	0.74**

Note: *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

English-version CA was significantly higher than the Chinese-version CA. Perhaps participants experienced lower motivation and higher anxiety when responding to items written in English than in Chinese. Overall, these results suggest that the translations are reasonably adequate.

Results

WTC Differences between Chinese and Americans (Hypotheses 1–3)

A series of independent *t* test were used to test Hypotheses 1–3. For H1, significant differences were found between Chinese and Americans on their WTC with each other, $t(192) = 4.035$, $p < 0.01$. Americans ($M = 779.6$, $SD = 277.79$) were significantly more willing to communicate with Chinese than are Chinese with Americans ($M = 620.53$, $SD = 271.20$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

For H2, as shown in Table 2, WTC of Americans in China is significantly higher than WTC of Americans in the US, $t(96) = -2.45$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. For H3, as shown in Table 2, Chinese in China were significantly less willing to communicate with Americans than Chinese in the US, $t(94) = 3.83$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

The Relationships between WTC and Independent Variables (Hypotheses 4–8)

Pearson correlations and multiple regressions were used to analyze the relationships between WTC and each independent variable, including immersion time, self-perceived communication competence, language competence, motivation and communication apprehension. Data were analyzed separately for Americans and Chinese. Table 3 displays descriptive data of each independent variable.

Results for Americans
As seen in Table 4, WTC was positively related to motivation and SPCC, and negatively related to CA. Thus, Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 were supported. However, immersion time and self-perceived language competence were not

Table 2 Results of independent sample *t* tests on WTC by location.

Nationality	Location	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Americans	China	47	849.49	194.85
	US	51	715.20	325.51
Chinese	China	42	732.86	233.42
	US	54	533.17	268.15

Table 3 Descriptive data of independent variables.

Variables	Nationality	*M*	*SD*
Immersion time	Americans	5.44	15.37
	Chinese	9.33	18.60
Motivation	Americans	16.70	3.11
	Chinese	17.14	2.16
Language competence	Americans	10.50	4.33
	Chinese	13.91	3.32
CA	Americans	32.91	12.46
	Chinese	34.70	9.84
SPCC	Americans	741.66	321.28
	Chinese	669.26	310.64

Table 4 Results of Pearson correlations for Americans.

	WTC	Immersion time	Motivation	Language competence	CA	SPCC
WTC	1					
Immersion time	0.15	1	–	–	–	–
Motivation	0.36**	0.23**	1	–	–	–
Language competence	0.13	0.28**	0.34**	1	–	–
CA	−0.52**	−0.21*	−0.19*	0.05	1	–
SPCC	0.58**	0.30**	0.31**	0.13	−0.32**	1

Note: $*p < 0.05$. $**p < 0.001$.

significantly related to WTC. Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 8 were not supported in Americans.

A multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the effects of immersion time, motivation, self-perceived language competence, CA and SPCC on WTC in Americans. An overall significant relationship was found, $F (5, 84) = 17.51$, $p < 0.01$, with an R-squared of 0.50. That is, 50% of the variance in WTC was explained by the combination of these independent variables. As shown in Table 5, an examination of the beta weights indicated that the most significant variable affecting Americans' WTC is SPCC. CA and motivation also significantly contribute to WTC. Self-perceived language competence and immersion time, however, did not

significantly affect WTC, after statistically controlling for the effects of all other independent variables.

Results for Chinese

As shown in Table 6, WTC was significantly related to all independent variables: immersion time, motivation, self-perceived language competence, CA and SPCC. WTC was negatively related to CA, and positively associated with immersion time, motivation, self-perceived language competence and SPCC. Thus, Hypotheses 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 were all supported in Chinese.

A multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the effects of immersion time, motivation, self-perceived language competence, CA and SPCC on WTC in Chinese. An overall significant relationship was found, $F (5, 87) = 35.58$, $p < 0.01$, with an R-squared of 0.67. That is, 67% of the variance in WTC was explained by a combination of these independent variables. As shown in Table 7, an examination of

Table 5 Results of multiple regression for Americans.

Variables	B	β	SE_B
Immersion time	−2.39	−0.14	1.47
Motivation	18.45	0.21*	7.61
Self-perceived language competence	5.72	0.09	5.29
CA	−7.96	−0.36**	1.83
SPCC	0.36	0.43**	0.07

Note: *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.001$.

Table 6 Results of Pearson correlations for Chinese.

	WTC	Immersion Time	Motivation	Language competence	CA	SPCC
WTC	1					
Immersion time	0.27**	1	–	–	–	–
Motivation	0.32**	0.09	1	–	–	–
Language competence	0.50**	0.27**	0.24*	1	–	–
CA	−0.56**	−0.15	−0.16	−0.58**	1	–
SPCC	0.76**	0.46**	0.15	0.49**	−0.60**	1

Note: *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

Table 7 Results of multiple regression for Chinese.

Variables	B	β	SE_B
Immersion time	−1.65	−0.12*	1.00
Motivation	22.96	0.19**	7.69
Self-perceived language competence	11.43	0.14*	6.28
CA	−2.24	−0.08	2.3
SPCC	0.57	0.67**	0.07

Note: *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

the beta weights indicated that the most significant variable affecting Chinese people's WTC was SPCC. In addition, motivation, self-perceived language competence and immersion time were positively related to WTC. CA, however, did not significantly affect WTC, after statistically controlling for the effects of all other independent variables.

Discussion

Several significant results were found in this study. First of all, Americans were more willing to communicate with Chinese than were Chinese with Americans. Cultural differences could be the main explanation of this finding. Americans with Eurocentric communication style value explicit and direct verbal expressions, whereas Chinese with Asiacentric style emphasize silence and group harmony (Klopf, in press). In order to maintain positive face or image, Chinese tend to remain silent rather than taking the risk of saying wrong things and appearing foolish.

This study also found that Americans in China were more willing to communicate with Chinese than were Americans in the US; Chinese in the US were more willing to communicate with Americans than were Chinese in China; and immersion time was positively related to WTC among Chinese. These findings suggest that immersion experiences in a different culture have a positive influence on WTC. As pointed out by MacIntyre et al. (2003), people who have been living abroad usually hold more positive attitude toward intercultural interactions than those without immersion experiences. In addition, immersion takes time to be effective. The longer time people are immersed in a foreign country, the more willing they are to communicate with its residents.

Among all of the factors, SPCC was the most significant variable predicting WTC in both Chinese and Americans. This result is consistent with the previous finding that people who believe themselves as having good communication skills tend to be more confident when interacting with others, and thus are more willing to communicate cross-culturally (MacIntyre, 1994). Also, consistent with previous studies (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), motivation was positively related to WTC in both nationalities. That is, the higher the desire people hold about learning cultural values and language skills in a foreign country, they more likely they will initiate communication with local people.

For both Chinese and Americans, people who are apprehensive about talking with members of a different culture also tend to be less willing to communicate cross-culturally. This result is not surprising, given people with high levels of CA often avoid communication with others whenever possible (McCroskey et al., 1990).

Another interesting finding is that self-perceived language competence was positively related to WTC among Chinese, but not Americans. One possible explanation is that English is mostly used in the interactions between Chinese and Americans. Therefore, competence in Chinese language is not important for

Americans when initiating conversations with Chinese people. Another explanation for this insignificant result is that items measuring self-perceived language competence had a relatively low reliability (alpha = 0.62) for Americans. The measurement errors could be due to the possibility that Americans were not interested in answering questions about their Chinese language competence.

Certainly, this study contained several limitations. First, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants from college students in China and America. Thus, the samples were not representative of general populations in both nations. Future studies should recruit participants from a wide variety of regions in order to obtain more generalizable results. Secondly, the results of bilingual tests revealed some possible language biases. While strong correlations were found between the ratings of Chinese-version and English-version scales, motivation levels were significantly lower in the English version than in the Chinese version, and CA ratings were significantly lower in the Chinese than English version. Possible explanations for these inconsistencies could be translation problems or, more possibly, language effects. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), second-language tasks are more anxiety-provoking than first-language tasks. Therefore, when participants are completing a second-language survey, their increased anxiety may lead to higher self-reported CA and lower motivation.

Lastly, the results indicated that about 50–70% of the variance in WTC can be explained by the combination of immersion time, motivation, self-perceived language competence, CA and SPCC. Thus, about 30–50% of the variance in WTC was not explained by these variables. Besides measurement errors, one important factor that could affect cross-cultural WTC is personality traits, such as introversion. An introverted person tends to experience high levels of anxiety in social situations (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). In turn, he or she may find conversations with foreigners less enjoyable. Another potential factor concerns one's identification with the new culture. People who like the cultural norms of a foreign country are more likely to seek out opportunities communicating with the locals than those who are disinterested.

In conclusion, several factors can explain willingness to communicate between Chinese and Americans. It is vital for both nationalities to develop communication competence and broaden immersion experiences in each other's country. Moreover, a friendly communication environment with acceptance attitude from native people should help reduce communication apprehension of foreign nationals, which, in turn, should improve cross-cultural WTC and relationships.

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