

# Communication Research in the EFL Context: Challenges and Directions

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of the existing research on learners' communication behaviors in the English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL), mainly Asian context, and identify the fields which need to be further explored. By reviewing the research investigating factors influencing EFL learners' willingness to communicate, this paper argues that though learners' use of English in communication has become the common interest in EFL education research and factors influencing their oral participation have been widely documented, there are limitations. This paper suggests that it is necessary to conceptualize the communication behaviors of EFL learners in English in terms of situational-specific practices, and to identify the underlying causes of student self-exclusion from oral tasks, by examining the context in which these students are located. In light of the review of the literature, this paper also identifies some variables which need to be taken into consideration in future research, such as identity negotiation, investment in English learning, international posture and imagined community. It is hoped that this paper will inform the development of L2 communication research.*

Key words: *second language communication, EFL context, challenges and directions*

## 1. Introduction

The idea that some people have difficulty communicating across a range of situations is first introduced by Phillips in 1965 with the publication of his paper on reticence (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). Originally, reticence is defined by Phillips (1965) as a personality-based anxiety disorder. Most studies focus on the effects of individual characteristics. The communication concept is mainly conceptualized as a trait-like and personality-based predisposition, rather than as a situation-based variable (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). Then after realizing that second language (L2) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is not a simple manifestation of L1 WTC, growing attention has been drawn to the study of English-as-a-second-language (ESL)<sup>1</sup> learners' willingness to communicate in the target language. Communication research in the ESL context has moved from the idea of WTC as personality-based predisposition, to include also situation-specific practices. ESL learners' communication behaviors are seen as jointly influenced by personal and situational variables.

English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL)<sup>2</sup> learners are different from L1 and ESL learners, in that the target language is hardly used outside the classroom (Fushino, 2010). Differences in the extent of involvement in English language communities, and in the opportunity to use English in communication, might affect the factors underlying their communication behaviors. This suggests it is unwise to directly apply theories and findings derived from L1 and ESL contexts to understandings of EFL learners. The field of EFL learners' communication research needs its own distinctive research. To examine the factors influencing EFL learners' use of English in oral communication, scholars from various cultures have attempted to transfer into EFL learning contexts, variables found to have influenced L1 and ESL WTC and communication behaviors (e.g. Wen & Clément, 2003; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004; Liu, 2005; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008; Fushino, 2010; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges of the existing research and identify the fields which need to be further explored in the field of EFL communication research. Based on a review of the research on learners' communication behaviors in the EFL, mainly Asian context, this paper will argue that though learners' use of English in communication has become the common interest in EFL education research, there are limitations. This paper suggests that it is necessary to conceptualize the communication behaviors of

<sup>1</sup>ESL=English as a Second Language. In the present paper, second language refers to the language learned after the first language or mother tongue in the context that the target language is the main language for communication.

<sup>2</sup>EFL=English as a Foreign Language. In the present paper, foreign language refers to the language being learned in a context where that language is not generally used.

L2 learners in English in terms of situational-specific practices, and to identify the underlying causes of student self-exclusion from oral tasks, by examining the context in which these students are located. In light of the review of the literature, this paper also suggests some variables which need to be taken into consideration in future research, such as identity negotiation, investment in English learning, international posture and imagined community. It is hoped that this paper will inform the development of L2 communication research.

## 2. Communication research in the EFL context

Asian students have long been described as reticent and passive in EFL class (Chen, 2003; Liu, 2005; Fushino, 2010). Some scholars attribute this to cultural attributes of Asian societies (e.g. Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Jones, 1999). Flowerdew and Miller (1995) believe that Chinese students adopt a negative attitude to participation due to the impact on those students of local and academic cultures, especially teacher-centred primary and secondary education. Song (1995) notes, in relation to teaching East Asian students in an American University, that some students are uneasy and anxious in group discussions, even at the thought of asking questions in class. She too attributes reticent behaviors to cultural factors and previous educational experiences. Some scholars (e.g. Jones, 1999) maintain that students' silence may be caused by Asian culture as by shyness or language difficulties.

However, the assertion that Chinese students have negative attitudes toward participation due to the influence of cultural attributes is challenged by Liu and Littlewood (1997), in a paper reporting the findings of two large-scale surveys conducted among the teachers and students at the University of Hong Kong. They critique the tendency of some studies to attribute observed behavioral traits to Asian culture and values. They state that most Chinese students prefer an active speech role in class. A large majority of students are willing to participate in interpersonal conversations. Some feel uncomfortable speaking English simply because they do not practice it frequently. Littlewood (1999) further reports, in relation to studies conducted in China, that most students are not satisfied with their teachers because the teachers do not provide enough discussion opportunities in class. Cheng (2000) asserts it is an over-generalization to allege that cultural attributes are causal factors of students' passive participation, arguing that the explanation may lie in the specific situation. Students' English language proficiency (ELP) and teaching strategies may affect patterns of participation.

In addition to cultural elements, some scholars attribute differences in students' learning to personality factors. Liang and Tan (1999) investigate the relations between introverted/extroverted personality and students' English learning, based on questionnaires collected from 263 non-English major undergraduates in Mainland China. They find that students with extroverted personalities tend to perform better in English speaking communication and are more active in English class than are introverted students. Exploring the factors influencing Chinese tertiary students' participation patterns in classroom activities, Zhang and Zhou (2004) report on a questionnaire survey that examined the correlations between students' participation in classroom activities, learning outcomes and personality factors. They find that students' patterns of verbal class participation are mainly determined by their personalities.

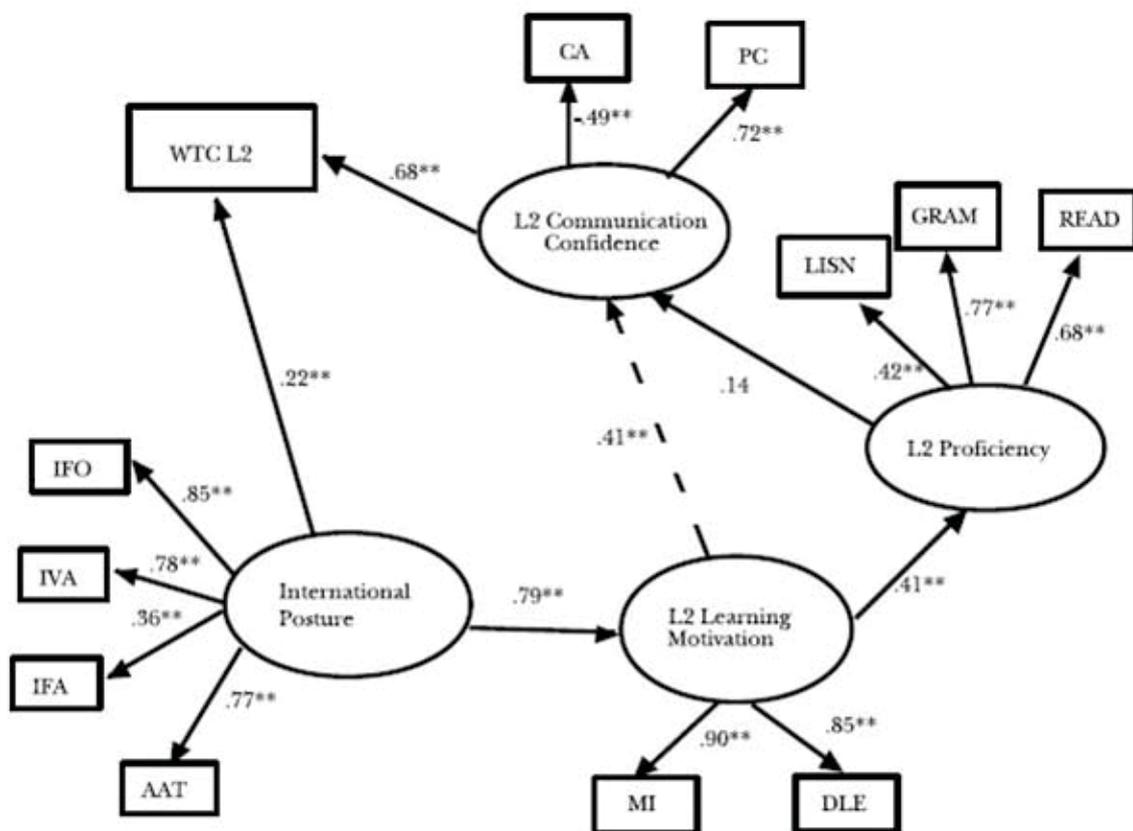
Liu and Littlewood (1997) maintain that students' English communication confidence and oral English proficiency are affected by the frequency of opportunities to speak English. The more students speak English, the more confidence they are in their own English speaking competence and vice versa. Also some students do not evaluate their own English oral competence positively, even though their oral performances might be regarded as adequate by their peers or teachers. Liu and Littlewood attribute this to "uncertainty avoidance" (Hofstede, 1986). For some students, speaking in front of a group is a high risky behavior, especially when they are not confident in their English. Many students choose to avoid oral participation, which they perceive as uncertain, in case they lose face or make fool of themselves. Liu and Littlewood (1997) also find that student silence in class can also be affected by mismatches between teacher and student perceptions of the role of learners and the nature of tertiary English learning. In a questionnaire survey of 997 tertiary students and 50 English teachers at a Hong Kong university, Spratt (1999) also reports on discrepancies between teachers and students in their perceptions of English learning. Spratt investigates 48 possible classroom activities, finding a considerable difference between the classroom activities preferred by learners, and those activities identified by teachers as being preferred by learners.

Yashima (2002) reports a study conducted among 389 first-grade Japanese students majoring in Information Science at a coeducational university in Osaka. The questionnaire survey investigated the influence of L2 communication confidence, L2 proficiency, L2 learning motivation and international posture on L2 communication in the EFL context. Yashima used the concept of "international posture" to refer to the learners' general attitude toward the international community, said to influence English learning and communication among EFL learners (p. 62-63). According to Yashima, international posture includes an interest in international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and openness toward different cultures (2002, p. 57). A socioeducational model (relationships between attitudes, motivation, and achievement) and WTC model are used as a framework for examining

the relations among L2 learning and L2 communication variables. Based on the analysis, a model of L2 communication in the Japanese EFL context is developed (Figure 1). The results are consistent with the WTC and socioeducational models, and also prove the applicability of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model in an EFL context.

In Figure 1 the variables directly influencing L2 WTC are L2 communication confidence and international posture. International posture also influences WTC indirectly through its influence on motivation, which, in turn, predicts L2 proficiency and L2 communication confidence. In this model, international posture and confidence in L2 use seem key both to understanding and to promoting L2 learning and communication in EFL context (Yashima, 2002, p. 63). Therefore, in order to increase students' willingness to communicate in English, EFL teachers should try to enhance students' international posture, meaning their favourable attitudes toward international cultures and affairs, and help students to build confidence in L2 communication.

Figure 1. Yashima's (2002, p. 61) L2 communication model in the Japanese EFL context



Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ;  $\chi^2 (49) = 62.63$ , n.s.; GFI = 0.97; AGFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.031; WTC L2: Willingness to Communicate in L2; CA: Communication Anxiety in L2; PC: Perceived Communication Competence in L2; LISN: Listening Comprehension; GRAM: Grammar & Vocabulary; READ: Reading Comprehension; IFO: Intercultural Friendship Orientation in Learning English; IVA: Interest in International Vocation/Activities; IFA: Interest in Foreign Affairs; AAT: Intergroup Approach Avoidance Tendency; MI: Motivational Intensity; DLE: Desire to Learn English.

In Yashima's (2002) study, WTC is the last point of investigation. Actual L2 communication behavior is not included in the model because, according to Yashima, in the Japanese EFL context, even if willing to use English in real communication, the students may have few opportunities to do so.

Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) conducted a follow-up study with the purpose of exploring whether WTC could function as an indicator of L2 use in intercultural situations, when the learners could choose freely to communicate in L2. This study consisted of two investigations. The first, involving 160 students, tested the model developed previously, and in particular the hypothesis that WTC predicts L2 communication. The second, an investigation among 60 students who participated in a study-abroad program in the U.S., also tested the earlier model. The results indicate that L2 WTC predicts the frequency and amount of L2 communication in and out of class. Students who show willingness to communicate in various contact situations are more inclined to initiate communication in the classroom.

Among the examined variables, students' self-perceived L2 competence seems to exert the strongest impact on L2 WTC. As in Yashima's (2002) study, it is found that students' self-confidence in L2 communicative competence is crucial for their willingness to be involved in L2 communication. In addition, students who show greater interest in international affairs, occupations and activities tend to be more actively involved in L2 communication.

Because the previous two studies were mostly cross-sectional and did not reflect the developmental aspect of WTC or international posture, Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) conducted a study that followed up the Yashima et al. (2004) research. The new study compared 165 Japanese high school students in two different English learning contexts. The study found that when individual learners engage more actively in the community of practice, whether actual community or imagined community, they are more successful in gaining the knowledge and experience encouraged by that community. The findings of Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) are important for EFL teaching. Though most EFL students cannot participate in an actual L2 community, the teachers can provide teaching contexts in which a positive imagined community is created.

In 2003, Wen and Clément extend MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model to enable it to reflect more closely the situation of Chinese English classrooms. Wen and Clément explore Chinese students' unwillingness to communicate in English classrooms from Chinese cultural and philosophical perspectives. They focus on the relationship between Desire to Communicate (DC) and Willingness to Communicate. The two concepts are distinctive in that "desire refers to a deliberate choice or preference, while willingness emphasizes the readiness to act...Having the desire to communicate does not necessarily imply a willingness to communicate" (p. 25). They believe the desire to communicate is universal. Chinese students' reluctance to communicate in English is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, rather than being a problem of language. They join different research findings on intercultural communication, social psychology, humanistic pedagogy and second language acquisition. It emerges that WTC is jointly influenced by "communicative, linguistic and social-psychological factors rather than being a simple display of linguistic or communicative competence" (p. 34). Figure 2 illustrates the Wen and Clément theorization of the variables that moderate the relation between DC and WTC in the Chinese EFL classroom.

The researchers find that Chinese students' WTC in EFL classroom settings is affected by group cohesiveness, teacher support, affiliation, task-orientation, risk-taking, tolerance of ambiguity, inhibited monitor and positive expectation of evaluation (Wen & Clément, 2003). These variables incorporate cultural values including social orientation, the insider effect and submission to the authority of teachers and grammar. The variables together contribute to the formation of a positive communication environment and promote engagement and the reduction of anxiety. "A positive communication environment is characterized by comfort, courage, confidence and co-operation" (Forman, 1998, cited in Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 33), in which the students feel secure taking risks and initiating speech (Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 34). According to Yang (1981, cited in Wen & Clément, 2003), Chinese students are society-oriented. This may lead to "submission to social expectations, and worry about external opinions in an attempt to achieve one or more of the purposes of reward attainment, harmony maintenance, impression management, face protection, social acceptance, and avoidance of punishment, embarrassment, conflict, rejection, ridicule and retaliation in a social situation" (p. 159, cited in Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 20). Therefore, in L2 classroom where students are more concerned about judgements of others about the students' own language communication behaviors, those students are more reluctant to participate in class communication activities.

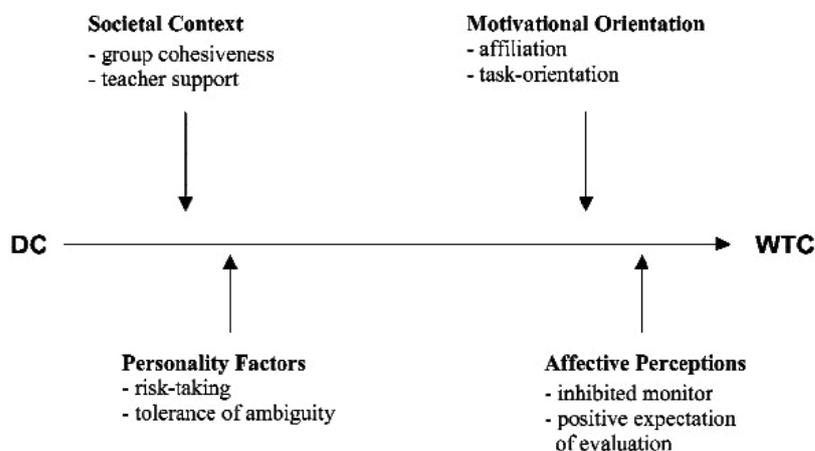


Figure 2. Wen and Clément's (2003, p. 25) variables moderating the relations between DC and WTC in the Chinese EFL classroom

Wen and Clément's (2003) study is significant because of their identification of proposed variables constituting the positive communication environment. Nevertheless, their study is also limited, in that they propose a theoretical framework without the support of empirical research, the variables they identify are positioned in the different positions along the axis in Figure 2, and they do not indicate the temporal sequence of the influence of those variables on Chinese students' willingness to communicate in EFL classroom settings (Wen and Clément, 2003).

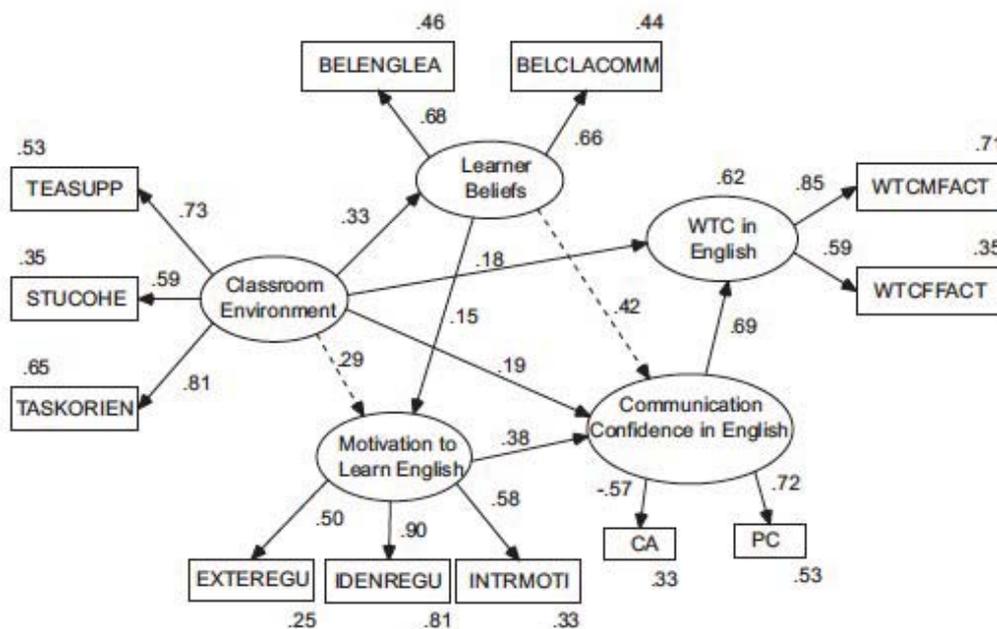
Communication apprehension is frequently cited as a factor that contributes to an individual's unwillingness to communicate, in both in L1 and ESL contexts (Keaten et al., 2000; Hashimoto, 2002). Originally, communication apprehension referred to first language anxiety. Later it became widely used in L2 communication research in relation to anxiety about communication. Its negative effect on students' interaction and communication behaviors has also been explored in the EFL classroom setting (Liu, 2005; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Communication apprehension is defined as "fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78).

The PhD thesis by Liu (2005) investigates Chinese university students' reticence and communication apprehension in EFL oral classes and testing situations, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research included 527 questionnaires among first year undergraduate non-English majors at three different ELP levels at Tsinghua University. Subsequently the researcher conducted a case study among three EFL classes (one from each ELP level) over the full term. The study used data from students' reflective journals, class observations, semi-structured interviews and oral test results to explore students' reticence and anxiety during oral English lessons and tests, and to identify the underlying factors and students' coping strategies. Liu finds that reticence and nervousness in oral EFL classes and tests are widespread. Reticence is positively related to the anxiety experienced by the students in oral EFL lessons and tests. Reticence and anxiety negatively impacted students' oral EFL performances. Students with higher ELP tended to be less anxious and reticent. Reticence and anxiety were not permanent and changed from activity to activity. Reticence and anxiety were caused by multiple factors and interacted with each other.

Peng and Woodrow (2010) report a quantitative study among 579 students from eight universities in Eastern China. They investigate Chinese tertiary students' willingness to use English in classroom communication, from an ecological perspective in relation to classroom dynamics. In light of the previous studies, six scales are included in the questionnaires. They are students' willingness to communicate in English, communication anxiety in English, their self-perceived English communicative competence, English learning motivation, learner beliefs and classroom environment. Based on the data analysis, a structural model of willingness to communicate in English in Chinese EFL classroom is developed (Figure 3).

As illustrated in Peng and Woodrow's model, students' willingness to communicate in English in EFL classroom setting is influenced both directly and indirectly by the joint effect of communication confidence in English, learner beliefs, classroom environment and motivation to learn English. Communication confidence in English exerts a strong and direct influence on students' willingness to communicate in English in EFL classroom. This result is consistent with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) L2 WTC model and the empirical cross-cultural studies on the basis of it (Yashima, 2002; Clément et al., 2003). It seems to support the claim that communication confidence is a primary and universal precursor to L2 WTC regardless of the diversities of cultures and contexts (Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p. 855). At the same time, communication confidence in English is influenced by the other three factors: learner beliefs, classroom environment and English learning motivation.

Figure 3 shows how English learning motivation influences WTC in English indirectly via English communication confidence. Though motivation is regarded as closely related to L2 WTC (also see Yashima, 2002), higher motivation in English learning does not necessarily lead to more willingness to communicate in English in the EFL classroom. Peng and Woodrow attribute this to Chinese EFL students' tendency to focus on test-related skills like vocabulary, reading and writing, rather than speaking. However, the significant path from motivation to communication confidence in English implies that higher motivated students tend to have higher communicative competence and lower communication anxiety. The significant paths from learner beliefs to motivation and communication confidence indicate that learner beliefs shape L2 learning motivation and communication confidence. In this study, learner beliefs are associated with Chinese sociocultural influences (Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p. 850), which are seen as especially relevant and powerful in shaping learners' L2 learning behaviors. If the students believe that active participation in class communication does not conform to social norms or expectations, they may experience anxiety and lack of confidence before or during speaking up and less motivated to engage in oral activities.



Indicators: WTCMFACT = WTC in English in meaning-focused activities; WTCFFACT = WTC in English in form-focused activities; CA= communication anxiety in English; PC = Perceived communication competence in English; EXTEREGU = external regulation; IDENREGU = identified regulation; INTRMOTI = intrinsic motivation; TEASUPP = teacher support; STUCOHE = student cohesiveness; TASKORIEN = task orientation; BELENGLEA = beliefs about English learning; BELCLACOMM=beliefs about classroom communication

Figure 3. Peng and Woodrow's (2010, p. 853) structural model of willingness to communicate in English in Chinese EFL classroom

In Peng and Woodrow's (2010) study three composite indicators of class environment are examined: teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. As illustrated in Figure 3, task orientation and teacher support have a larger effect on classroom environment than does student cohesiveness. University students' perceptions of the class environment to a great extent reflect their understanding of the value of the learning tasks, and the extent to which they perceive their teachers support their communication in English. In addition, student cohesiveness is highly effective in influencing students' attitudes to the class environment. According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), "students who share feelings of cohesiveness might feel psychologically closer to each other and perceive the class as a more pleasant community, which may influence their class learning behaviors" (cited in Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p. 856). As shown in the model, classroom environment not only influences the WTC in English, it also influences other factors such as learner beliefs, communication confidence in English, and motivation to learn English. The direct path from classroom environment to communication confidence indicates that a conducive learning atmosphere may reduce students' anxiety and improve their self-perceived competence. This is important as it appears that the students who have positive perceptions about the communication-oriented class environment tend to develop positive beliefs toward class oral participation and interaction in English. They might be less anxious about their level of ELP and negative evaluation from teachers and peers. The contribution of classroom environment to motivation suggests that students' beliefs about the classroom environment might influence their motivations for English learning. In sum, a positive and engaging classroom environment helps boost students' willingness to interact and communicate in the EFL classroom both through its direct and indirect influence on WTC.

Fushino (2010) investigates L2 learners' communication in EFL group work settings among 592 first-year university students in Japan. The study explores the causal relationships between three factors: (1) confidence in one's ability to communicate; (2) beliefs about group work; and (3) WTC. This study found that students' understanding of the value of group work has a relatively strong and direct influence on their communication confidence in L2 group work, and a moderate and indirect effect on their willingness to communicate with group members via communication confidence in L2 group work. Fushino (2010) is significant because it includes a new concept of "belief about L2 group work" as a

variable and finds that it is subject to change with the changes of learning situation. According to Fushino students' belief in the importance of L2 group work is relatively stable because it is formed by their past experiences in social contexts and language learning. Nevertheless, it is also changeable when there is an alteration in the student's situation. Different belief on communication might cause variation in the student's communication behavior.

### 3. Discussion: challenges and directions

The overview of the L2 communication research in the EFL context indicates that it is necessary to investigate the factors influencing learners' communication behaviours from both personal and situational perspectives. The situational views of communication research tend to capture not only the impact of personality factors, and ELP in communication, but also the variables of learner beliefs, EFL classroom context, communication confidence and international posture. In light of the WTC and communication behavior constructs reviewed in this paper, the variables identified as influencing students' use of English in communication are outlined in Table 1. The view that different contexts might lead to an individual's various communication behaviors has useful indications for the future research since it suggests the need to take the situation that the students are located into consideration when examining EFL learners' communication behaviors. The research questions linking to these issues listed in Table 1 should be addressed.

Given the significance of class learning to English acquisition in the EFL context, many scholars focus on the question of learners' level of classroom participation, and the factors that lead up to students' passive class oral behaviors (e.g. Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2005; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Nevertheless, most previous research on the topic of students' oral participation is focused at the level of the student in isolation or merely based on the data collected from the students. The influence of the implementation of educational policies at the institutional level and the pedagogical views at the level of the teacher are largely invisible in the existing research. In the EFL setting, class education is the main source of students' English learning. The teachers are regarded as the bridge between the institution and the students. They convey the requirements of the institution to the students and in the meanwhile face the students directly to sense their frustrations and aspirations. It is the teachers who decide to a certain extent how the administrator understands the students' needs and whether the students are fully aware of what they are expected to achieve. Also, the administrators in charge of English program in the institution decide to a great extent the implementation of policies and the orientations of educational practices. However, most of the studies explore students' use of English in communication from the students' perspectives. The institutional perceptions and the teachers' pedagogical views are largely invisible. Little research examines the perspectives from the lenses of the administrators and teachers by asking them to reflect on their attitudes towards English education and views on students' use of English in communication so as to uncover individual's values underpinning their behaviors. Research that does this is therefore of great significance.

Table 1. *Variables identified as influencing EFL learners' use of English in communication (based on the literature)*

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EFL communication confidence
– Communication anxiety
– Self-perceived communicative competence
Learner beliefs
– The value of English learning
– The value of EFL class oral participation
– Negative traditional instruction orientation
EFL classroom context
– Interlocutor
– Teacher support
– Student cohesiveness
– Task
English learning motivation
Personality factors
– Risk-taking
– Tolerance of ambiguity
International posture
English language proficiency

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Research indicates that students' learning approaches are not stable and their academic practices might change across educational contexts (Wen & Clément, 2003; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Also, classroom is a place where people with different socio-educational background meet. Before entering university, the students have already had years of experience in learning English language. It is assumed that they have acquired their own understanding and aspirations for English learning. Most students will attempt to behave in accordance with their interpretation on the disciplinary requirements and the academic practices that they thought of as being valued. In the course of participating in English oral activities, students may constantly negotiate their identities as English learners and adjust their learning behaviors, which may in turn impact their willingness to use English in communication (Norton, 2000). However, there seems to be insufficient information on how students actually adapt to their English learning. In response to this gap, the study attempting to explore how the EFL students negotiate their identities and change their English communication behaviors through the course may help understand the reasons causing students' reticence in English communication.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) introduce the notions of instrumental and integrative motivation in L2 acquisition. Later, Norton (1995) challenges the notion of motivation and argues that the theory advocated by Gardner and Lambert is inconsistent with her (Norton's) research findings. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1977) economic metaphors, Norton (2000) extends the notion of motivation to the concept of investment; and sees language learners as "individuals with complex social histories and multiple desires" (p. 11), rather than as "unitary, fixed, and ahistorical individuals" (p. 10) as suggested by the concept of motivation. Using the term "investment" differently to its traditional economic sense, Norton's term signals the "socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (2000, p. 10). Learning a language is a form of investment (Kubota, 2011). When language learners invest in a certain language, they expect to get a good return (Norton, 1995). In EFL classes, teachers and students draw on their past and present experience, and their visions for the future, to organize and reorganize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. This determines how much they invest in English communication. However, the influence of students' investment in EFL learning on their use of English in communication has been little documented. Therefore, the study which takes EFL learners' investment in English learning into consideration when examining factors influencing students' communication behaviors may contribute to the efforts to improve students' willingness to communicate in English.

The term "imagined community" was first coined by Benedict Anderson (1991) to refer to communities that only exist in people's imagination. Norton (2001) has adapted this term in L2 learning research and asserted that language learners' imagined membership of the L2 community exerts great influence on their present language learning practices. In the past decade, imagined community has become a prominent topic in L2 educational research (e.g. Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In the educational context, what students expect and imagine about the future can strongly influence their ongoing activities (Norton, 2000). For example, when a learner learns in class, he/she not only invests in the classroom community, he/she also invests in the community that he/she expects to enter after leaving the classroom. Normally this future community is much more significant. In educational context, learners' imagined communities shadow their relationships with English (Gu, 2009) and influence their investment in English learning. Some students view English language learning as a task they must perform, focusing solely on passing exams. Others are interested in the language and the culture of English-speaking communities and view English learning as fun. These different views are associated with very different perspectives on English learning and English oral activities. These differences in turn may lead to variations in English learning behaviors and involvement in communication. Understanding students' imagined communities can help in understanding their ongoing behaviors involving English communication. If teachers neglect learners' imagined communities, learners may refuse to participate in learning activities (Norton, 2000). Though the variable of "imagined community" has been identified by scholars (e.g. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide, 2004) as one of the influential factors on students' willingness to communicate in English, the research on to what extent it may impact students' communication behaviors and what the teachers should do to make learner's imagined community concrete, tangible and accessible (Kanno & Norton, 2003) are largely invisible in the existing research.

As discussed above, Yashima (2002), Yashima et al. (2004) and Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) conducted a series of studies on L2 communication research among Japanese EFL learners and introduce the term of "international posture". According to Yashima, international posture exerts direct influence on learners' L2 WTC. This variable is new in L2 communication research. Whether it influences L2 learners' communication in other EFL contexts, such as China and other Asian countries, and to what extent it may influence students' willingness to communicate in English need further exploration.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper explores the challenges and directions for further L2 communication research in the EFL context by reviewing the literature in this field. The finding of this study indicates that while learners' use of English in communication has become the common interest in L2 education and factors influencing their oral participation have been widely documented, there are limitations. Students' class oral participation is by no means an individual endeavour. Further research could exceed the scope of previous research on the topic of students' oral participation, which mainly focuses at the level of the student in isolation or merely based on the data collected from the students by also examining the pedagogical perspectives and teaching practices from the lenses of the administrators and teachers. In addition, future research should take some variables, such as identity negotiation, investment in English learning, imagined community, and international posture, into account when examining factors influencing EFL learners' English communication behaviors.

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