

Willingness to communicate in a second language

A professor at Shantou University in China, Dr Jian-E Peng is interested in the factors that contribute to second language motivation and a learner's willingness to communicate. Through her research, she helps steer language policy towards helping students in China and across the world to become proficient in a second language like English. Dr Peng is particularly focused on addressing the lack of large-scale studies into the impact that multimodality has on a person's willingness to communicate so that they can practice their chosen language.



Dragon Images/Shutterstock.com

With many Chinese citizens learning English as a foreign language (EFL) given its prominent status as a world language, Dr Jian-E Peng at Shantou University is concerned with how to increase students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Since this second language (L2) learning most often takes place in a classroom, rather than during an authentic human interaction, it's here where WTC needs to be high but often isn't.

At certain times and in certain situations, students are reluctant to speak in their L2, despite being both capable and free to do so. Dr Peng's research has focused on the factors that lead to a low WTC. Through this, she investigates under-researched hypotheses about how classrooms need to go beyond mere words and instead take a multimodal approach.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (WTC) IN A SECOND LANGUAGE (L2)

WTC was originally conceived as a personality trait used to study people speaking in a first language. It's defined as how ready a person is to enter into discourse. This can be either a general disposition, which is the trait level of WTC, or dependent upon the situation, which is known as state WTC. With regards to L2, there are many complex variables that contribute to a learner's trait or state L2 WTC.

These variables can be internal or external. They include self-confidence in one's ability to communicate in L2, how introverted or extroverted they

are, how they relate to other members in the group, and how motivated they are to practice this skill. Research undertaken thus far has focused on how these factors interplay to exert influences on L2 WTC.

Peng's studies into Chinese students' learning EFL reveal that there are many factors on L2 WTC. Within the microsystem of the EFL classroom, Peng identified six factors that have a joint effect on L2 WTC. These are learner beliefs, motivation, cognitive factors, linguistic factors, affective factors, and classroom environment. Each one of these must be understood if we are to find ways of increasing the WTC of students learning a foreign language.

MULTIMODALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Research into WTC, whether with regards to L1 or L2, has focused on language in isolation. Dr Peng's hypothesis is that it's necessary to take a multimodal approach. This means focusing on factors besides the words a person is using. This may include facial expressions, gaze, or hand gestures. These are forms of non-verbal behaviours (NVBs) and are also a component of communicating with others.

While these NVBs have been extensively researched, other multimodal variables have not. In particular, Dr Peng is concerned with the lack of research into audio and visual tools in the EFL classroom. It is increasingly common to teach EFL using music, television, and movies.



The research of Dr Jian-E Peng, Shantou University, is concerned with how to increase students' willingness to communicate (WTC).

However, the effect of these semiotic resources on WTC is not clear.

Peng's research builds on previous studies which posit that the meaning of language arises from social interaction. It also looks into the effect of multimedia presentations that have become a common sight in school and university classrooms across the world.

It's theorised that the inclusion of images, video, and sound can stimulate the senses, heighten a sense of excitement, and more effectively teach L2 to a group of students. Words alone would not

Factors that contribute to a poor L2 WTC could be enduring, such as possessing an introverted personality, or transient, such as exhibiting a lack of self-confidence arising from being a beginner language learner.

In countries such as Japan, China, Iran, and Poland, where EFL is highly desirable among ambitious workers, there has been increased research into the effect of the classroom on L2 WTC. This research has been largely quantitative in nature and has found success in identifying variables that most affect L2 WTC. These variables are mostly internal

Dr Peng has undertaken the first large-scale investigation into multimodal effects and classroom environment on students' willingness to communicate.

be enough to account for students' ability to make meaning of classroom communications. It seems reasonable, then, to posit that a multimodal approach is necessary for increasing social interaction through a WTC.

THE IMPACT OF CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT ON L2 WTC

The classroom is where students go to learn and learning an L2 cannot be successful without sufficient practice in talking. Therefore, if the classroom environment is contributing to a low WTC, then it's failing in its role of facilitating the mastering of an L2.



Learning a second language (L2) cannot be successful without sufficient practice in talking.



Peng identified six factors that have a joint effect on WTC in a second language.

factors, including personality, self-confidence, enjoyment of the topic, and motivation to succeed.

Following this research, attention turned to educational situations in the form of classroom observations and other qualitative methods. Interviews and journaling have been particularly well-utilised in getting to know why a student may have a limited WTC.

It was revealed that the topic, the teacher, and the class size can all influence WTC. Psychological conditions also play a role. Students who feel safe and excited have a higher WTC than those who feel at risk or bored by the situation. However, this research mostly focused on verbal communication.

THE IMPACT OF MULTIMODALITY ON L2 WTC

Dr Peng is concerned by the limited scope of research undertaken thus far. Instead, she argues in favour of a systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA). This looks at semiotic resources that are non-verbal. This includes facial expressions and gestures but also multimodal media sources, including photos, music, and films.

In a study in Taiwan, it was found that increased WTC in English could be predicted in a teacher who had relaxed body language, touched her students, and held longer eye contact. Similarly, a Turkish class responded more enthusiastically when recording



The research can help classrooms change their environment to enhance the effectiveness of English teaching and learning for students around the world hoping to become proficient in English.

their answers to questions asked by a teacher who was shown on video within a PPT presentation.

In Japan, a *Harry Potter* movie clip prompted an increase in WTC. There are studies from many different countries all pointing to the same conclusion: multimodality boosts L2 WTC. However, the empirical evidence is sporadic and non-cohesive. To give these issues the attention they deserve, Dr Peng has undertaken the first large-scale investigation into multimodal effects and classroom environment in WTC.

DR PENG'S RESEARCH AND RESULTS

Dr Peng is concerned with two key questions. First, how do university students perceive multimodal pedagogies in their EFL classrooms? And second, how do multimodal pedagogic effects and classroom environment contribute to WTC in English?

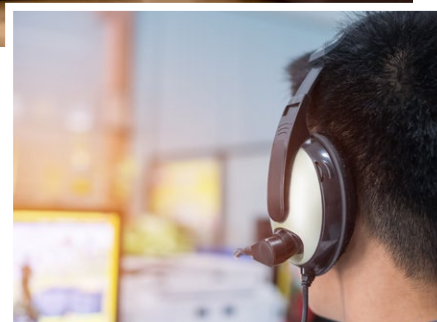
In this study, multimodal pedagogies were divided into five categories: audio and video media, the design of PPT slides, the tone of voice and facial expressions, gestures, and spatial position. The first two categories refer mostly to on-screen text while the final three are related to verbal discourse.

The participants in this study include Chinese students from 14 universities. They were non-English students taking a mandated EFL course. They filled in questionnaires related to the five multimodal pedagogies outlined above, as well as on the topic of classroom environment and WTC.

The results support Dr Peng's hypothesis that multimodality improves WTC when learning EFL. For instance, over 90% of participants believed that audio and visual media enhanced their understanding of

English. 97.1% had a greater WTC when their teacher smiled at them and 94.1% said the same about maintained eye contact. However, fewer than 80% considered the font and layout of PPT slides to be important, suggesting that less attention needs to be paid here.

Dr Peng's study is the first large-scale research project of its kind. While there has been sporadic yet mounting evidence that multimodal approaches increase WTC, the evidence isn't overwhelming or conclusive. Dr Peng's study has taken research in this area to the next step, helping to explore beyond anecdotes and provide hard statistical evidence for this hypothesis. This has broadened L2 WTC research and given rise to a new model that can help classrooms change their environment to improve the life prospects of students around the world hoping to become proficient in English.



Behind the Research Professor Jian-E Peng

E: pengjiane@stu.edu.cn **T:** +86 1380 2712 719 **W:** http://www.wxy.stu.edu.cn/team_son.php?id=181&LB=86

Research Objectives

Professor Jian-E Peng's research interests include learner motivation, multimodal discourse analysis, academic writing, teacher development, and research methodology.

Detail

Address Jian-E Peng
College of Liberal Arts
Shantou University
243 Daxue Road, Shantou City
Guangdong, China

Bio
Jian-E Peng is Professor of English in

the College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University. She holds a PhD from the University of Sydney. She was on the Editorial Advisory Board of *TESOL Quarterly* (March 2017-February 2020). Her works include two books, three book chapters, and a number of papers.

Funding
The Ministry of Education of China (MOE) Project of Humanities and Social Sciences [13YJA740041]

Collaborators
• Lindy Woodrow, Li Zhang, Yumin Chen

References

- Peng, J. and Woodrow, L. (2010). Willingness to Communicate in English: A Model in the Chinese EFL Classroom Context. *Language Learning*, 60 (4), pp 834–876. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00576.x>
- Peng, J. (2012). Towards an ecological understanding of willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms in China. *System*, 40 (2), pp 203-213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2012.02.002>
- Peng, J., Zhang L. and Chen Y. (2017). The Mediation of Multimodal Affordances on Willingness to Communicate in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 51 (2), pp 302-331. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.298>
- Peng, J. (2019). Understanding willingness to communicate as embedded in classroom multimodal affordances: Evidence from interdisciplinary perspectives. *Linguistics and Education*, 51, pp 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2019.04.006>
- Peng, J. (2019). The roles of multimodal pedagogic effects and classroom environment in willingness to communicate in English. *System*, 82, pp 161-173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.04.006>

Personal Response

Is personality or classroom environment more significant for an individual's L2 WTC?

“ I am afraid that there is no conclusive answer to this question. Both theoretical thinking and empirical evidence do not weigh these factors in terms of which one is more important. Mostly it is believed that learner internal and external factors jointly and interdependently influence L2 WTC. Recent research has particularly embraced the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) to explore the situated and dynamic nature of L2 WTC. At the least, I would say that classroom environment is more within the power of teachers and is malleable to pedagogical intervention for the purpose of boosting students' L2 WTC . ”



汕頭大學
SHANTOU UNIVERSITY

