

Book Review

Willingness to Communicate in the Chinese EFL University Classroom

Jian-E Peng. *Multilingual Matters*, 2014. 204 pp. ISBN: 978-1783091553

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Chinese students are generally portrayed in the literature as reticent and quiet in class. The main reasons given for such reluctant or even non-participation in the classroom include the influence of traditional Chinese values (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), the teacher-centred class mode predominant in the Chinese education system (Liu & Littlewood, 1997) and a collection of other factors such as students' communication confidence, motivation and the classroom environment. These factors, however, are often researched separately. The novelty of the study Jian-E Peng discusses in this book lies in its aim to account for Chinese EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) with an ecological model, taking into consideration myriad factors both from the teachers' and the students' perspectives.

WTC, albeit a relatively new research focus in the field of second language acquisition, has become increasingly extensively studied in the past decade (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, 2007; Wen & Clement, 2003; Yashima, 2002). Peng has chosen to investigate WTC in the context of China, and very rightly so, as there is a very large number of EFL students in Chinese universities where English is a compulsory subject even for non-English majors. The research findings reported in this book will, therefore, have implications for those students and, perhaps more importantly, their English teachers.

Peng used a large-scale mixed-methods approach in her investigation of the interrelationships between WTC, confidence, motivation, beliefs and environment, making use of triangulation of different quantitative and qualitative findings. She has outlined her methodological processes in meticulous detail which builds reader confidence in her findings and provides a blueprint for the inevitable replication studies that will follow. Although the subject matter and content are complex and the intricate relationships lying within are manifold, Peng depicts the context clearly and lays out her analyses in simple yet effective language, showing with clarity the depth and breadth of her research project. Despite dealing with a large quantity of research data, Peng has succeeded in adding to the credibility of her insights by establishing the trustworthiness of her qualitative findings through trajectory triangulation and thick descriptions in the form of observations, interviews, and journals.

In the study described in this book, Peng designed the classroom environment as a central variable. Given this centrality, it would have added value to the research if more careful thought had been put into selecting focal subjects in regard to the class mode. An observation scheme detailing class communication activities and student responses (p. 96) has been adopted, suggesting that the different tasks selected by the teacher have

a direct influence on the types of interaction that take place in class. As such, it would make more sense if the four focal students under observation had taken the same classes and been taught by the same teachers (Chinese or international) to aid comparison and contrast. It would also be of interest to readers if the book had commented more on the ways in which Chinese and international teachers facilitate classroom communication differently, especially as the author suggests that there still exist many trait and state characteristics across Chinese and Western EFL teaching practices (p. 6).

Another point worth addressing for readers of this review is the apparent paradox between Peng warning readers “to avoid falling into cultural stereotypes” (p. 31) while at the same time perpetuating the same by writing “[in] the current research context, the influence of Confucian philosophy and values is pervasive and functions as collectively accepted ideologies and behavioural norms” (p. 29) and also going on to identify four such Chinese aspects as “the Chinese culture of learning and communication” (p. 29). In the highly globalized twenty-first century, China is different from what it was forty years ago especially with the prevalence of contemporary online media and social media platforms. This means that Chinese university students, compared with their forebears, are much more exposed to English communication channels beyond those available in the classroom. For example, such students are likely to have easier access to English news and networking services, which would in turn affect their confidence, motivation and beliefs about using English as a second language and even the environments in which they use it. It is therefore essential to avoid falling into cultural stereotypes and to maintain impartiality as far as possible.

Despite the few small concerns expressed above, this book is of great value to ELT practitioners because of its meticulous analysis of the important context of China and its EFL learners, as well as the provision of practical and sensible suggestions on educational practices in the last part of the book which will help EFL teachers identify suitable and appropriate cognitive and linguistic resources for learning. For those who want to understand more about the willingness to communicate (or lack of it) among Chinese learners of English, this is an excellent read.

References

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