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Trait Emotional Intelligence and Willingness to Communicate in Foreign Language Learning

Junchao Zhang*
School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, Taizhou, China

Weiyi Zhang
School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, Taizhou, China

***Abstract*—Over the last decades, the integration of interdisciplinary theories and methodologies in the study of foreign language learning has gained significant attention. In contrast to the cognitive approach, an innovative psychological perspective is adopted to understand the influence of emotions in the learning process. Inspired by such a new turn, this paper investigated the relationship between learners' Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) and their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in foreign language classes. 181 first-year Chinese students majoring in English participated in the study. By using quantitative methods, it was found that participants' Trait EI and its four sub-items all significantly correlated with their L2 WTC level. Moreover, the regression analysis indicated that Trait EI can have a predictive effect on L2 WTC. In terms of the four facets of Trait EI, only welling-being and sociability could predict participants' L2 WTC.**

***Index Terms*—Trait EI, Willingness to Communicate, foreign language learning, English speaking teaching**

I. Introduction

With the increasing popularity of interdisciplinary research in academia, many alternative theories from other subjects have contributed to the study of foreign language learning and teaching. More and more researchers begin to explore those long-standing issues like the effectiveness of foreign language learning & teaching from another unique perspective. Unlike the traditional research which mainly focused on the cognitive aspects of language (Prior, 2019), the new trend starting from the 1980s employed a psychological view to understand the process of language learning & teaching (Dewaele & Li, 2020, p. 36). To be more specific, as no mankind can be utterly rational, human behaviors are widely influenced by his/her psychological status and emotions. In contrast to negative emotions like "anxiety", positive emotion, on the other hand, was believed to "build students' longer-term resiliency and hardiness" (Dewaele et al., 2019, p. 17) and helped them better tackle linguistic problems during language learning. Therefore, the main issue at this stage would be how to combat the negative emotions and arouse learners' positive emotions like enjoyment and happiness. While some scholars like Piasecka (2016) and Gregersen (2016) argued external interventions like the application of a particular teaching material or method can serve as a stimulus to make learners happier, others identified a more subtle and internal factor named Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) that had a decisive role in one's emotional experience. Compared with the intervention studies, the research on Trait EI does not intend to change individuals' emotional status immediately but aims to identify the interplay between Trait EI, the emotional experience and foreign language learning & teaching. By understanding such interplay, teachers are capable of finding out the underlying reasons for one's success or failure in language learning from the psychological aspect, which is beneficial for them to develop more comprehensive pedagogical methods. Under such circumstances, this essay aims to explore the relationship between Trait EI and Chinese students' oral English learning and will pay heed to students' "Willingness To Communicate" (WTC) in oral English class rather than their performance in a particular test. WTC as an important indicator can clearly reflect one's learning effectiveness in oral English class (Zarrinabadi & Tanbakooei, 2016). By conducting quantitative methods, the present study will unveil the way in which one's WTC in oral English class is influenced by his/her Trait EI level rather than simple linguistic factors.

II. Literature Review

A. Willingness to Communicate in Foreign Language Learning

Although the study of Willingness To Communicate (WTC) was limited to individual's predisposition to communicate with others in their first language (L1) at the beginning (McCroskey, 1992), it soon extended to the use of a second language, especially in the field of foreign language learning. The reasons for such an extension are obvious. Compared with L1 WTC, L2 WTC plays a vital role in language learning. People with low L1 WTC do not necessarily possess a low communicative competence and low L1 WTC will not prevent individuals from learning their mother

* E-mail: junchao.zhang@nnutc.edu.cn

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tongue either. Nevertheless, second and foreign language learners who are reluctant to communicate with others in L2 are less likely to have a high L2 competence as the ultimate purpose of learning a language is to use it in real-life situations other than having good results on a particular test. Learners with high WTC, on the other hand, can often "seek out opportunities to engage in L2 communication" (Peng, 2012, p. 203) and their L2 learning effectiveness will also be significantly improved.

Under such circumstances, researchers then tried to probe into the underlying factors that influenced one's WTC level in foreign language learning. One important and all-inclusive model was MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model of L2 WTC which indicated the complex linguistic, psychological and contextual reasons behind the L2 WTC level. MacIntyre et al. (1998) classified those factors as situational and stable. The former can be seen as the "immediate factor" (Zarrinabadi et al, 2019) that was dependent on a particular context while the latter, including individual's attitudes towards the L2 community, communicative competence and personality, was more intrinsic. In the following years, such a model served as a major framework for L2 WTC research with a large amount of empirical evidence being generated both quantitatively and qualitatively. For instance, Liu and Jackson (2008) employed various questionnaires to examine the relationship between learners' Unwillingness To Communication (UWTC) and their classroom anxiety. It was found that the two variables were significantly correlated. Most students were willing to communicate but due to anxiety, many of them "did not like to risk using or speaking English in class" (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 82). Likewise, Dewaele (2019) identified foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) as the major negative predictor of L2 WTC (adjusted $R^2 = .30$, $\beta = -.48$, $P < .001$).

Obviously, these studies were affected by the prevalence of "anxiety studies" starting from the 1980s when Krashen (1985) proposed the "Affective Filter Hypothesis" which called for researchers' attention to the emotional factors in language learning. In this phase, a specialized questionnaire, namely the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)" was designed to identify learners' anxiety levels. Due to its high validity and reliability, such a questionnaire gained popularity in the study of foreign language learning, which in turn made "anxiety" become the "exclusive emotional focus" (Dewaele & Li, 2020, p. 36) from the 1980s to 2010. Nevertheless, mankind's emotions and psychological status are too complex to conclude with merely one word or phrase. Anxiety could not be the only feeling that learners experienced when learning a foreign language. Other emotions like happiness and enjoyment or frustration and burnout can have a great impact on the effectiveness of foreign language learning and teaching. It is necessary for language teachers and researchers to identify those emotions so as to improve the students' learning experience in a more subtle and caring way.

B. Trait Emotional Intelligence and Foreign Language Learning

With Goleman's seminal book "EI: Why It Can Matter More than IQ" in 1995, the public started to realize that as an indicator of one's emotional and interpersonal ability, "Emotional Intelligence" played a vital role in one's success. An increasing number of firms and organizations would even measure applicants' EI to evaluate their potential (Matthews et al., 2002). Nevertheless, as the study went further, many researchers like Petrides began to notice that the definition of EI was somewhat vague. Moreover, questionnaires were often designed by different scholars based on their own research purposes. One individual could often be tested with extremely distinct EI levels because of the inconformity of measurement (Liu & Zhang, 2012, p. 45). Under such circumstances, Petrides (2010) classified EI into Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) and Ability Emotional Intelligence (Ability EI). The former is related to one's intrinsic personality and is often measured by self-report questionnaires, indicating an individual's capability in emotional self-perception. It can be seen as the "constellation of emotion-related dispositions" (Dewalele & Li, 2020, p. 35). By contrast, Ability EI pertains to one's emotional cognitive ability and is normally tested through performance tasks similar to the traditional IQ tests (Chen & Zhang, 2020). It is clear that Trait EI investigates an individual's internal emotional experience, aiming to assess the "typical performance" while Ability EI examines one's emotional skills under some certain situations and can often lack objectivity (Petrides et al., 2007). Therefore, an increasing number of researchers tend to employ the concept of Trait EI to understand the complicated process of foreign language learning as such a process is invariably long and arduous. The instrument of Trait EI can reveal four facets of individuals' Trait EI: "well-being", "self-control", "emotionality" and "sociability". Well-being refers to one's capability in feeling "cheerful and satisfied with life". Individuals with high well-being are often more confident and optimistic (Dewaele, 2018, p. 471). Emotionality pertains to one's ability in empathizing with others. The facet of self-control obviously indicates the ability to control and regulate emotions while sociability can be seen as the indication of one's social awareness (Dewaele, 2018).

Substantial empirical evidence has proved that Trait EI can have significant impacts on foreign language learning and teaching. On the one hand, teachers' Trait EI level can affect their attitudes towards teaching (Dewaele, 2018). On the other hand, students' Trait EI level can influence their sense of enjoyment and achievement, which may ultimately improve or hinder the language learning process (Chen & Zhang, 2020, p. 4). In a survey of 1307 Chinese high school students, Li (2019) found that students' English grades correlated with their Trait EI at a medium level. Chen and Zhang (2020) also found such correlations among Chinese postgraduates. Apart from the correlation analysis between Trait EI and English learning in general, studies were also conducted on the relationship between a particular English skill (e.g., reading; listening; writing or speaking). Abdolrezapour and Tavakoli (2012) explored the relationship between learners' Trait EI level and their reading comprehension ability. The result indicated that high Trait EI significantly correlated

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with high reading comprehension ability (R = .660, P < .01). With all the endeavors, Wei et al. (2021) first explored the impact of Trait EI on L2 WTC among Chinese non-English majors. It was found that Trait EI can significantly predict L2 WTC (β = .131, P < .001). At the same time, Trait EI can also have a predictive effect on learners' enjoyment in language class (β = .103, P < .001), which would ultimately affect one's L2 WTC (β = .859, P < .001). After this attempt, Wei et al. (2022) continued to investigate the interplay between Trait EI, class social climate and L2 WTC. Such research also confirmed the strong connections between Trait EI and L2 WTC. Nevertheless, the two studies overlooked the four sub-items of Trait EI and thus, failed to provide systematic and holistic understandings. The present study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the role that sub-factors play in affecting L2 WTC.

III. Metholodgy

A. Sampling and Participants

Before the study, ethical approval for the research was obtained by the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at T College. All the participants were informed that the data was collected for research only and they were entitled not to share their data at any given time. A pilot study was conducted before the formal test. No ambiguity or vague expressions was found in the questionnaires by the five participants in the pilot study.

A convenience sampling was carried out in December 2022 when a one-term oral English class came to end. All the participants were first-year English majors. The second author forwarded the online questionnaires to the students in the class by the means of Wenjuanxing. Wenjuanxing is a widely used platform in China for questionnaire surveys and data collection. Participants can simply scan the QR code generated by Wenjuanxing and fill out the form on their own mobile phones. A total of 181 students constituted the final sample with 28 males (15.5%) and 153 females (84.5%). The mean age was 18.41 (Max: 23, Min: 17; SD=.715).

B. Research Instruments

Two online questionnaires were distributed to the participants:1) Trait EI Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF); 2) Willingness to Communicate-Short Form (WCT-SF). Characteristics of the two instruments can be seen in Table 1. The first one was a simplified version of the original Trait EI questionnaire which was introduced by Petrides in 2009. Unlike the original questionnaire which contained 153 items, TEIQue-SF only contained 30 items and thus, easier for the participants to fill out and more convenient for the researchers to collect the data. Moreover, the validity and reliability were also good despite the limited questions. According to Dewaele and Li (2020), the Cronbach's alpha for TEIQue-SF's reliability was above .70 in many situations. In terms of the present study, all the questions were shown on a 7-point Likert Scale (from 1- completely disagree to 7- completely agree) and the reliability result was considerably satisfying with Cronbach's alpha at .911. All versions of the Trait EI questionnaire can be obtained for free via the website of the London Psychometric Laboratory (www.psychometriclab.com). When it comes to the evaluation of one's L2 WTC, both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been employed (Zarrinabadi et al., 2019) and the current study adapted Liu and Jackson's (2008) questionnaire mentioned in the second part. It consisted of eight items and reliability was at .930.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INSTRUMENTS

Instrument	Number of Items	Reliability
TEIQue-SF	30	.911
WCT-SF	8	.930

IV. Results and Discussions

The descriptive results can be seen in Table 2. As is illustrated from the table, while the participants showed a good speaking willingness in the oral English Class (Mean=4.91), the difference between individuals was still great with SD = 1.08. In terms of the Trait EI and its four sub-items, most students regarded themselves as a high medium level, with global Trait EI at 4.93 (SD = .68). Such a result was akin to Chen and Zhang's (2020) study in which 72 first-year postgraduates indicated the mean score of Trait EI at 4.92 (SD = .68). With regard to participants' four sub-items of Trait EI, it was found that well-being and emotionality had higher mean scores than self-control and sociability. A high score in well-being indicated that the subjects generally had positive views of themselves such as feeling successful and confident while high emotionality scores meant that the participants were alive to their and other people's feelings (Petrides, 2017). In comparison, the test takers' sociability mean score served as the lowest, which was also consistent with Chen and Zhang's (2020) study. As discussed in their study, the low sociability level meant that subjects were not certain about their "social relationship". Given that all subjects were first-year students who lacked social experience, such a result was plausible.

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TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR TEIQUE-SF AND WTC-SF

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
L2 WTC	1.88	6.88	4.91	1.08
Global Trait EI	2.83	6.67	4.93	.68
Well-Being	2.17	7.00	5.17	.97
Self-Control	3.00	6.50	4.93	.71
Emotionality	2.63	6.75	5.20	.79
Sociability	2.50	6.67	4.26	.75

After the preparatory descriptive analysis, the relationship between students' Trait EI and L2 WTC was first explored by Pearson Correlation Analysis (two-tailed). The skewness and kurtosis values for the six variables fell between -.503 to .017 and -.686 to .541, indicating that their distributions are normal. As is shown in Table 3, participants' global Trait EI and its four sub-components were all significantly correlated with their L2 WTC ($P < .01$) in a moderate to a strong positive level. Therefore, it might be inferred that students with high Trait EI may be more self-motivated in oral English class and are more likely to show initiative in practicing oral English. This finding was supported by prior research that found positive correlations between Trait EI and English-speaking performance (Khooei, 2014; Abdolrezapour, 2016; Chen & Zhang, 2020). The reason for such a result may arise from the communicative nature of speaking skills. Compared with other English skills like reading, individuals are often required not only to comprehend the linguistic meaning but also the emotions in real-time communication. As Rintell (1984) said, being able to understand the emotional state of the person you were communicating with was key for successful communication.

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TRAIT EI AND L2 WTC

Variables	Global Trait EI	Well-Being	Self-Control	Emotionality	Sociability
L2 WTC	.537**	.495**	.430**	.428**	.403**

***P < .01*

As the correlation analysis was not capable of revealing the causal relationship between variables, the linear regression analysis was conducted to find out the possible predictive effect. By using the regression method "enter", the data illustrated that the global Trait EI significantly predicted participants' L2 WTC ($\beta = .537$, $P < .01$). The adjusted R^2 was .289 which meant that global Trait EI could predict 28.9% variance of students' L2 WTC level (See Table 4). Compared with previous research (cf. Costa & Faria, 2015; Chen & Zhang, 2020) where R^2 was invariably below .20, such a result was undoubtedly significant and exceptional. The reasons for this unusual data might be complex but one thing was certain. All the previous research only explored the causal relationship between Trait EI and overall speaking performance through structured tests or self-perceived reports. Nevertheless, the impact of Trait EI is often subtle and indirect. It is more likely that Trait EI first influences learners' L2 WTC. Then as a mediation, L2 WTC generates salient impacts on the speaking performance. Therefore, future research should move beyond the relationship between Trait EI and English proficiency, identifying more factors mediating learners' language proficiency.

TABLE 4
SIMPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS WITH GLOBAL TRAIT EI AS PREDICTORS OF L2 WTC

Variables	β	Std. Error	t	P	Adjusted R^2
Trait EI	.537	.915	8.521	.000	.285

After the simple regression analysis, the causal relationship between four sub-items and L2 WTC was also explored by multiple regression analysis (stepwise method). Unlike Trait EI, the linear combination of "well-being", "self-control", "emotionality" and "sociability" cannot significantly predict L2 WTC. As is shown in Table 5, only "well-being" and "sociability" had predictive effects on L2 WTC ($P < .05$) and the standardized coefficients were .394 and .175 respectively. The result echoed both the theoretical findings as well as the previous empirical studies. First, it is argued by positive psychology that a high score in well-being signifies a strong presence of positive feelings, which can enhance students' ability to learn a foreign language effectively and overcome the lingering effects of negative emotions (Dewaele et al., 2019). Additionally, Chen and Zhang (2020) found that well-being had a significant impact on students' overall performance (adjusted $R^2 =. 05$, $\beta = 1.37$, $P = .034$) and the combined effect of well-being and self-control significantly predicted students' speaking performance. Learners with low levels of self-control and high levels of well-being showed the greatest improvement in their speaking scores. In terms of the sociability factor, while the mean score was the lowest in the study, its unique effect of it cannot be neglected. Since human beings are social creatures in nature, language learning in essence is a social behavior. Sociable learners are more confident and comfortable in social situations, which enables them to effectively communicate their ideas and thoughts in English.

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TABLE 5
MULTIPLE REGRESSIONS WITH FOUR SUB-FACTORS AS PREDICTORS OF L2 WTC

Model	Variables	β	t	P	Adjusted R^2
1	Well-Being	.495	7.624	.000	.241
2	Well-Being	.394	5.004	.000	.257
	Sociability	.175	2.221	.028	
3	Self-Control	.177	2.029	.044	\
	Emotionality	.146	1.561	.120	
	Sociability	.175	2.221	.028	
4	Self-Control	.144	1.635	.122	\
	Emotionality	.113	1.204	.090	

V. CONCLUSION

There are a large number of studies on L2 WTC and foreign language learners' Trait EI has also received wider attention during the last decade. Nevertheless, very few studies link the two areas. Understanding the multifarious impact of Trait EI on foreign language learning is crucial for both teachers and students as Trait EI is "amenable to change, and this change may lead to concomitant improvements in some of its correlates" (Petrides, 2017, p. 6). This is especially vital given the relentless COVID-19 pandemic in which individuals' emotions are prone to be affected.

Under such circumstances, the current research uses two online questionnaires: TEIQue-SF and the WCT-SF to explore the possible relationship between Trait EI and L2 WTC. It provides evidence that learners' Trait EI level and the four sub-factors significantly link to their L2 WTC. Additionally, by using both simple and multiple regression analysis, the study shows that Trait EI can have predictive effects on L2 WTC while only well-being and sociability can significantly predict subjects' L2 WTC. Further research should examine the role of a wider range of factors in mediating learners' language proficiency and their Trait EI level. It is vital to understand the mechanism of Trait EI and emotions in affecting the language learning process. As indicated by Dewaele and Li (2018, p. 18), "there is much more that can be done" in terms of the study of emotions and language learning.

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Junchao Zhang is currently the assistant lecturer from the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, China. He received his M.A. degree from Durham University, U.K, in 2020. His current research interests include foreign language learning and teaching, English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English teacher training.

Weiyi Zhang is currently the assistant lecturer from the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, China. She received her M.A. degree in Translation and Interpreting from Nanjing Normal University, China, in 2020. Her research interests include translation as a social interaction, English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English language learning.

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