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Cultural Moderation in Second Language Chinese Learning: Enjoyment and Willingness to Communicate Among International Students in the Target Language Environment

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ABSTRACT

How does cultural background moderate the relationship between enjoyment and willingness to communicate in second language (L2) Chinese learning? This study addresses this question through an empirical investigation involving 457 international L2 Chinese learners in Shandong Province, China. The participants completed a paper-based questionnaire. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and moderation analysis were subsequently performed with the statistical software packages SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 26.0. The findings revealed significant positive predictive relationships between enjoyment and WTC both inside and outside the classroom and between willingness to communicate (WTC) inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, cultural background (Asian vs. non-Asian) significantly moderated the “enjoyment—WTC” relationship outside the classroom and the pathways linking enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside. The findings from this study reinforce the essential role of cultural background in L2 learning environments, offering practical recommendations for refining Chinese pedagogy and strengthening intercultural engagement in second language education.

Keywords: China, cultural background, enjoyment, higher education, international students, L2 Chinese learning, willingness to communicate

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INTRODUCTION

As the third-largest global study destination, China hosted over 250,000 international students in the 2023--2024 academic year, maintaining a steady 5-10% annual growth in enrollment over the past decade (MOE, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). With China gaining increasing global influence, learning the Chinese languages has also gained popularity (Zang et al., 2022). The necessity of L2 Chinese proficiency is underscored by the fact that 60% of these students enroll in degree programs taught in Chinese, with nearly half specializing in humanities disciplines requiring advanced language skills (CSCSE, 2023; MOE, 2022). This trend is particularly evident in Shandong Province, which hosted 5,810 international students in 2022 (Shandong Department of Education, 2022) and serves as a key destination for Asian learners due to its geographic proximity and extensive Chinese language programs. This demographic concentration, combined with the target-language environment of Chinese universities, makes cultural background a critical moderator of students' enjoyment and willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language (L2) Chinese—a gap this study aims to address.

While WTC has been extensively studied in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) (e.g., Cao, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018), its application to L2 Chinese remains limited (Lv et al., 2021). Defined as “the state of readiness to use the L2 to engage in conversation with one or more specific people at a given time” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). WTC is shaped by both internal (e.g., enjoyment) and external variables (e.g., social support) (Joe et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). The “affective turn” (Prior, 2019, White, 2018) in second language acquisition (SLA) has shifted focus toward positive affective factors, particularly enjoyment, in fostering L2 WTC (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Enjoyment, defined as “the pleasure of learning a foreign language and thoughts and feelings coalesce around a sense of accomplishment” (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2016, p. 228), has emerged as a key predictor of language learning outcomes. Despite its prominence, its specific impact on L2 Chinese learning WTC, especially in target language environments, remains unclear.

The achievement of academic objectives by international students is frequently obstructed by pedagogical and interpersonal difficulties experienced during their cross-cultural adjustment process in host countries (Singh & Jack,

2022). Cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) is particularly salient in L2 Chinese learning because of the stark differences between Chinese characters and alphabet scripts (Lai, 2022; Li, 2018). It shapes classroom dynamics, intercultural communication, and learners' willingness to engage (Gao, 2017; Li, 2019). Variations in acculturation experiences and comfort levels with native speakers may significantly impact WTC both inside and outside the classroom (Ma, 2020). However, no study has used structural equation modeling (SEM) to systematically examine how cultural background moderates the enjoyment-WTC relationship in L2 Chinese learning in the target language environment. To address these research gaps, this study employs SEM to investigate the following:

RQ1: How does enjoyment affect WTC (inside and outside the classroom) among L2 Chinese learners in target language environments?

RQ2: Does cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) moderate (1) the enjoyment→WTC (outside classroom) relationship and (2) the enjoyment→WTC (inside classroom)→WTC (outside classroom) relationship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Willingness to communicate and SLA

WTC is a critical predictor of L2 use and a key determinant of successful SLA (Clément et al., 2003; Peng, 2019; Yashima, 2002), making its cultivation essential in L2 instruction (Kruk, 2022). Originally conceptualized as a stable personality trait (MacIntyre et al., 1999), WTC in L2 contexts is now understood as a dynamic process shaped by both trait-like predispositions and situational factors (MacIntyre et al., 1999). This shift emphasizes the complexity and diversity of WTC, reflecting learners' communicative motivation and competence across different contexts. Research has identified key influences on L2 WTC, including the classroom climate, motivation, perceived communicative competence, topic interest, and affective factors such as enjoyment (Lee, 2022; Lee & Drajiati, 2019; Waluyo & Bakoko, 2022).

More recently, research has shown that L2 WTC inside the classroom predicts L2 WTC outside the classroom (Lee & Lee, 2020; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). This perspective remains a gap in the field of L2 Chinese studies, providing a valuable entry point for future research (Hao, 2015). Cultural background is particularly relevant in the target-language environment, yet findings on its role in L2 Chinese WTC are inconsistent. In L2 Chinese learning, cultural background (e.g., Asian vs. non-Asian) is a pivotal variable due to linguistic and sociocultural differences. While some studies suggest that Asian learners exhibit greater WTC (Lai, 2022), others report the opposite (Li, 2018) or no significant effect (e.g., Li, 2022; Zhang, 2021; Zheng, 2009). These contradictions may be due to contextual factors, such as the following: East Asian learners may hesitate to speak due to hierarchical norms (Lee, 2011); learners with greater cultural confidence engage

more (Munezane, 2021), yet Asian learners often face fewer local friendships (Gareis, 2012). These inconsistencies highlight the need for further research to clarify the role of cultural background in WTC during L2 Chinese acquisition. These studies can uncover the mechanisms behind these influences, providing valuable insights for L2 Chinese educators and curriculum designers.

Enjoyment and SLA

In recent years, empirical research on enjoyment has rapidly expanded in the field of ESL/EFL, with relevant literature indicating that enjoyment is a significant predictor of L2 learners' actual performance (Bensalem et al., 2023; Kun et al., 2020, Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2023). Specifically, research indicates that enjoyment not only influences L2 learning outcomes (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Jin & Zhang, 2021) but is also significantly correlated with L2 learners' language performance (Li & Li, 2022). MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) noted that positive affective factors, such as enjoyment, enhance L2 learners' ability to focus and internalize information, thereby promoting mental resilience. Furthermore, Khajavy et al. (2018) emphasized that enjoyment significantly predicts L2 learners' WTC at both the individual and classroom levels. These studies suggest that enjoyment plays a crucial role in the L2 acquisition process by helping learners engage more effectively in L2 learning and use while in a positive affective state, thereby enhancing their WTC and overall learning outcomes. Therefore, understanding and promoting learners' enjoyment is essential for optimizing language instruction and improving learning outcomes.

Within SLA research, learner enjoyment is conceptually rooted in positive psychology, most notably through its association with Fredrickson's (2001, 2004) broaden-and-build theory. According to this framework, affective positivity broadens cognitive-behavioral repertoires, enabling the development of enduring psychological, intellectual, and interpersonal capacities—critical foundations for L2 achievement (Fathi & Mohammaddockht, 2021). Studies confirm that enjoyment encourages L2 learners' engagement, improves proficiency (Hosseini et al., 2022), and positively influences WTC (Lee et al., 2021). Fostering enjoyment in L2 Chinese learners can thus enhance engagement and WTC, offering valuable insights for teaching practices.

In the field of CSL/CFL, enjoyment has garnered increasing attention as a positive affective factor, particularly in relation to WTC. Studies have demonstrated that enjoyment positively impacts motivation and learning outcomes for L2 Chinese learners. For example, Liu (2023) and Du (2022) reported high levels of enjoyment among international students learning L2 Chinese in China, highlighting its role in L2 Chinese acquisition. Similarly, Ou (2023) reported a positive correlation between enjoyment and WTC in a 5-week conversation practice program. While enjoyment enhances WTC, the factors influencing it are complex and multifaceted, involving both situational and personal elements.

Although studies have demonstrated the association between enjoyment and WTC, this study remains relatively limited in the field of L2 Chinese. Therefore, further research addressing this area is particularly crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of how positive affective factors affect L2 Chinese learners' WTC, as well as the mechanisms by which enjoyment works across different cultural backgrounds and learning environments. This study provides valuable theoretical foundations and practical guidance for improving the quality of L2 Chinese instruction and promoting L2 Chinese learners' language proficiency.

The Present Study

While research on enjoyment and WTC has grown, four key gaps persist in L2 Chinese acquisition: 1) the psychological mechanisms linking enjoyment and WTC remain underexplored; 2) the cultural background's moderating role shows inconsistent findings across studies; 3) SEM has rarely been applied to these relationships in L2 Chinese contexts; and 4) the classroom-to-outside WTC transfer effect, established in ESL/EFL, remains unverified for L2 Chinese learners. To address these gaps, this study examines 1) the enjoyment–WTC relationship inside and outside the classroom; 2) cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) as a moderator; and 3) the predictive relationship between WTC inside and WTC outside the classroom. An a priori model is proposed that includes the following five hypotheses:

- H1: Enjoyment significantly predicts WTC inside the classroom among L2 Chinese learners.
- H2: Enjoyment significantly predicts WTC outside the classroom among L2 Chinese learners.
- H3: WTC inside the classroom significantly predicts WTC outside the classroom among L2 Chinese learners.
- H4: Cultural background (Asia vs. Non-Asian) moderates the “enjoyment→WTC outside the classroom” relationship among L2 Chinese learners.
- H5: Cultural background (Asia vs. Non-Asian) moderates the “enjoyment→WTC (inside the classroom)→WTC (outside the classroom)” relationship among L2 Chinese learners.

METHOD

Participants and Sampling Methods

This study employed a causal design and utilized both cluster sampling and convenient sampling methods. Among the 153 universities in Shandong Province, only 26 have international students (Department of Education of Shandong Province, 2022). These 26 universities were categorized into five types: A) University of Finance and Economics, B) Normal University, C) University of Science and Technology, D) Medicine University, and E) Comprehensive University. One university was randomly selected from each category. From each

of the five universities, 100 international students were randomly chosen by student number (to protect privacy), resulting in 500 distributed questionnaires. Of these, 465 completed questionnaires were returned.

Data were collected through paper questionnaires, and all the data were manually entered into Excel after rigorous checking, resulting in 457 valid questionnaires with complete data and no missing data for demographic analysis. Among the participants, 189 (41.4%) were male, and 268 (58.6%) were female. In terms of age distribution, 187 (40.9%) were between 18 and 20 years old, 210 (46.0%) were between 21 and 23 years old, 36 (7.9%) were between 24 and 26 years old, and 23 (5.0%) were older than 26 years. In terms of cultural background, 212 (46.4%) learners were from Asian countries, whereas 245 (53.6%) were from non-Asian countries. None of the participants spoke Chinese as their first language, and the top three native languages were Russian (22.5%), Arabic (22.3%), and English (13.1%).

Although age is a commonly considered demographic variable in SLA, prior research (e.g., Ma, 2020; Yu, 2013) has suggested that its role may be less significant than that of other variables (e.g., enjoyment and WTC) in the context of L2 Chinese. Age, as a fixed variable, is likely to exert a more indirect and stable effect on WTCs, and it is unlikely to change dramatically, especially in the short term. This study focuses on cultural background to ensure a more concise and interpretable analysis.

Instruments

The WTC scale for both inside and outside settings was adapted from Lee & Lee (2020). The scale includes three sections: in-class (4 items), out-of-class (3 items), and digital (4 items) contexts. In this study, the out-of-class sections and digital context sections were combined to form the “WTC outside the classroom” dimension, which consists of seven items categorized according to the adaptation by Mulyono and Saskia (2020) to suit the purpose of this study. The participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely not willing) to 5 (definitely willing), with higher scores indicating greater WTC (e.g., “When given the opportunity to speak freely in the Chinese language class”). The reliability of the WTC scale was high, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .89 for the in-class dimension, 0.83 for the out-of-class dimension, and 0.83 for the digital context dimension, demonstrating strong internal consistency. The reliability of this scale was further supported in Lee et al. (2021).

The enjoyment scale used in this study consists of 11 items adapted from the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES) developed by Li et al. (2022), which was based on the original scale by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016). This scale employs a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater enjoyment experienced by the language learner (e.g., “The atmosphere here is good”). The original scale in Li et al. (2018) demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.83. Studies by Li et al. (2022) and Wei et al. (2019) also supported the reliability of this scale.

Research Process

Following institutional review board clearance, the investigator administered a preliminary trial involving a cohort of 150 participants. On the basis of the factor loading analysis, one item (EN11) was removed because its factor loading was less than 0.5, and another item (WTC11) was removed to improve model fit. All other indicators met the acceptance criteria for use in the formal research. Following initial preparations, the research team established contact with Chinese L2 instructors across five provincial universities in Shandong, China, to secure institutional cooperation. All prospective participants received comprehensive disclosures regarding the study's aims, methodological approach, anticipated advantages, and possible drawbacks prior to involvement. Prior to completing the paper-based questionnaire, each participant provided written consent. Data were collected from July to September 2024.

Data analysis

Amos was selected for its ability to model complex relationships in SEM, whereas SPSS was employed for measuring moderator variables in the SEM analysis. The researcher utilized SPSS 26.0 for preliminary data analysis, which included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and reliability analysis. Following these initial steps, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in IBM AMOS 26.0 to verify the construct validity of the instrument. SEM was subsequently constructed in IBM AMOS 26.0 to investigate the relationship between enjoyment and WTC both inside and outside the classroom among L2 Chinese learners in target language environments, with path analysis conducted within the model. Additionally, the moderating role of cultural background was examined in IBM SPSS 26.0 via PROCESS.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Before analysis, the data were thoroughly reviewed to identify and eliminate any questionable entries. No missing data were found, and no suspicious response patterns (e.g., consistently increasing, decreasing, or fixed values) were detected. Additionally, normality was assessed via a Q–Q scatter plot, which revealed that most data points aligned closely with the diagonal line, indicating an acceptable level of normality. This verification supported the use of AMOS 26.0 for subsequent data analysis.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the questionnaire items measuring enjoyment and WTC both inside and outside the classroom were .865, .817 and .772, respectively. The overall Cronbach's alpha was .885, indicating that the questionnaire demonstrated good internal reliability. The analysis of Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive correlation between enjoyment and WTC inside the classroom ($r = .404, p < .01$), as well as between

enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom ($r = .384, p < .01$). Furthermore, there was also a significant positive correlation between WTC inside and outside the classroom ($r = .565, p < .01$).

Confirmation Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model was constructed via AMOS 26.0 to establish the construct validity of the research instrument within the specific research context. The results indicate acceptable model fit: CMIN (600.619), DF (167), CMIN/DF ($3.597 \leq 5.00$), RMSEA ($.075 < .09$), CFI (.868), IFI (.869), and TLI (.849). All the data were within the acceptable fitting thresholds, indicating good model fit. The model is subsequently further tested for convergent and discriminant validity to ensure its validity in the research context.

The standardized factor loadings for the latent construct enjoyment ranged from .551--.695, with a CR of .868 and an AVE of .397. For WTC inside the classroom, loadings ranged from .616--.803, the CR was .821, and the AVE was .537. WTC outside the classroom showed loadings from .538--.666, a CR of .774, and an AVE of .365. While the AVE values for enjoyment and WTC outside were slightly below the conventional cutoff of .50, the CR values for all the constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70. According to Hair et al. (2010), high CR values can still justify the convergent validity of constructs even when the AVE is marginally lower than .50, especially in behavioral research contexts. Therefore, convergent validity was deemed acceptable.

The square root of the AVE for each construct was compared to its correlations with other constructs. The square root of AVE was .630 for enjoyment, .733 for WTC inside, and .604 for WTC outside, all of which were greater than the respective interconstruct correlations: enjoyment--WTC inside (.404), enjoyment--WTC outside (.384), and WTC inside--WTC outside (.565). These results confirm that each construct is empirically distinct, thereby demonstrating satisfactory discriminant validity. Taken together, the findings indicate that the measurement model exhibited both acceptable convergent validity and discriminant validity, thereby supporting the overall construct validity of the instrument in the given research context.

RQ1: Path Analysis

Research question one aimed to investigate the mutual predictive relationship between enjoyment and WTC inside and outside the classroom in the model. On the basis of the path data in Table 1, the results support hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, suggesting that enjoyment plays a positive predictive role in WTC both inside and outside the classroom, with WTC inside the classroom further serving as a strong predictor of WTC outside the classroom.

Table 1: Results of Path Analysis

Path	Standardized Estimate	P	Result
<i>H1</i> WTC inside ← Enjoyment	.497	***	Accepted
<i>H2</i> WTC outside ← Enjoyment	.155	**	Accepted
<i>H3</i> WTC outside ← WTC inside	.608	***	Accepted

Notes. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Table 2: Results of Moderation

Items	Parametric Estimation				H
	B	SE	t	p	
Y= W2					
constant	1.34	.24	5.52	***	
X=Enjoyment	.56	.06	9.42	***	
R ²	.16			***	
Y= W2					
constant	1.58	.48	3.26	***	
X=Enjoyment	-.09	.13	-.68	-	
M=W1	.71	.09	7.71	***	
W=CB	-.16	.31	-.51	-	
Int_1	.17	.08	2.15	*	H4
Int_2	-.15	.06	-2.65	***	H5
R ²	.49			***	
Model summary	R	R ²	MSE	F	p
	.70	.49	.22	86.9	***

Notes. Model = 15, W1 = WTC inside, W2 = WTC outside, CB = Cultural Background, E = Enjoyment, Int_1 = E × CB, Int_2 = W1 × CB, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, (two tailed).

RQ2: The Moderating Role of Cultural Background

Research question two examined the moderating effect of cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) on the relationship between enjoyment and WTC inside and outside the classroom. To assess this, the researcher constructed two interaction terms, Int_1 (E * CB) and Int_2 (W1 * CB), following the moderating variable model15 proposed by Hayes (2013). The PROCESS tool of SPSS 26.0 was used to detect the moderating effects. Additionally, a simple slope analysis was conducted to further verify the significance of these interaction effects. This series of analyses aimed to reveal how cultural background (Asia vs.

non-Asian) influences the relationship between enjoyment and WTC among L2 Chinese learners.

Specific data on the moderate effects are presented in Table 2. In this moderate analysis, cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) significantly moderates two paths (H5 and H6), corresponding to the interaction terms Int_1 ($E \times CB$) and Int_2 ($W1 \times CB$). The findings indicated that the interaction term Int_1 ($E * CB$) had a significant effect on WTC outside the classroom ($\beta = .169, p < .05, 95\% CI = .144$ to $.324$), highlighting the notable moderating role of cultural background in the relationship between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom. Consequently, hypothesis H4 was supported.

Figure 1 illustrates how cultural background (1 = Asia, 2 = non-Asian) moderates the relationship between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom. This moderating effect results in distinct slopes. For L2 Chinese learners from Asian backgrounds, WTC outside the classroom significantly decreases as the learners report higher levels of enjoyment. This finding indicates that Asian learners with greater enjoyment have lower WTC outside the classroom. Conversely, for L2 Chinese learners with a non-Asian background, WTC outside the classroom slightly increases as enjoyment levels rise, suggesting that WTC outside the classroom grows with greater enjoyment among non-Asian learners. Figure 1 (left) illustrates that the negative effect of enjoyment on WTC outside the classroom is more pronounced in Asian contexts, whereas the positive relationship between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom is more moderate in non-Asian contexts.

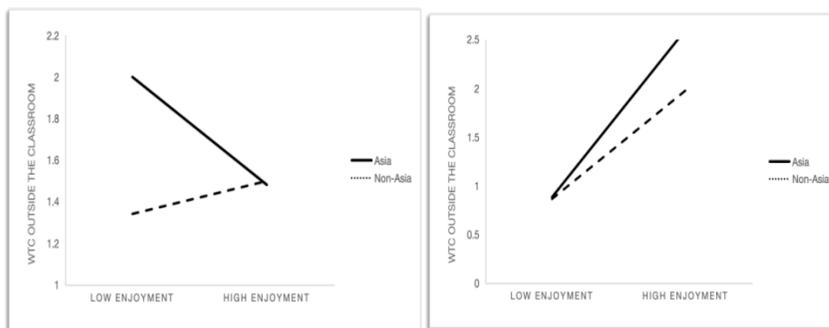


Figure 1: Simple Slope Chart of Int_1 ($E \times CB$) and Int_2 ($W1 \times CB$)

Additionally, the interaction term Int_2 ($W1 * CB$) significantly affects WTC outside the classroom ($\beta = -.151, p < .001, 95\% CI = -.264$ to $-.039$), further demonstrating the significant moderating role of cultural background (1=Asia, 2=non-Asian) in the relationship between enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside the classroom. Therefore, Hypothesis H5 was also supported.

Figure 1 (right) illustrates how cultural background (1 = Asia, 2 = non-Asian) moderates the paths between enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside the

classroom. For both Asian learners and non-Asian learners, the WTC inside increases as the WTC outside also increases. However, the slope is steeper for Asian learners, indicating a stronger shift from WTC inside to outside the classroom among Asian learners than among non-Asian learners. This finding suggests that Asian learners are more likely to transfer inside class language experiences to outside communication, possibly influenced by cultural background and classroom engagement.

DISCUSSION

Research Question One: Relationships between Enjoyment, WTC Inside, and WTC Outside the Classroom

In response to the first research question, the findings revealed a significant predictive relationship among enjoyment and WTC inside, enjoyment and WTC outside, and WTC inside and WTC outside, supporting hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, respectively. The results of hypotheses H1 ($\beta = .497, p < .001$) and H2 ($\beta = .155, p < .001$) aligned with previous studies in EFL/ECL. For example, Bensalem et al. (2023) confirmed a positive predictive relationship between enjoyment and WTC ($p < .001$) among 446 students learning English as L2 learners in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Similarly, Kun et al. (2020), Lee (2020), Lee et al. (2024), and Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023) further supported this relationship in the contexts of China, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Iran. This study expands the diversity and generalizability of the relationship between enjoyment and WTC.

Although relatively underresearched, Hypothesis H3 ($\beta = .608, p < .001$) aligns with findings from previous studies. Wang et al. (2021) studied 168 Chinese undergraduates learning L2 English and reported a moderate to high correlation between WTC inside and outside the L2 English classroom, which is consistent with findings from South Korea (Lee & Lee, 2020). Similarly, MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) examined 238 high school students learning French as a second language, further confirming this result in the field of SLA. This study further confirms that these results apply to the context of CSL/CFL, as demonstrated by Li (2018) and Zhang (2021), indicating that WTC inside L2 Chinese learners is significantly and positively correlated with WTC outside the classroom ($p < .001$). These studies provide additional empirical evidence for the transfer of WTC from inside the classroom to outside in L2 Chinese acquisition, suggesting that enhancing WTC inside can effectively promote WTC outside the classroom.

The broaden-and-build theory (BaBT, Fredrickson, 2001) helps explain the relationships among enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside the classroom in CSL. Positive affective factors (enjoyment) expand individuals' (L2 Chinese learners') thoughts and actions. For example, enjoyment may encourage learners to try new expressions or participate in various discussions within the L2 Chinese classroom, boosting self-confidence, increasing activity, and fostering exploratory behaviors. These actions, in turn, enhance psychological resources,

including L2 WTC (Figure 2 modified from Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008, p. 783). When L2 Chinese learners experience enjoyment, they are more likely to feel safer and more open both inside and outside the classroom, which increases their psychological resources and encourages more positive L2 communicative behaviors, significantly impacting their actual L2 communication. This interpretation is supported by Lee et al. (2021). This study extends the explanatory power of BaBT (Fredrickson, 2004) by shedding light on the relationship between enjoyment and WTC in the context of L2 Chinese acquisition.

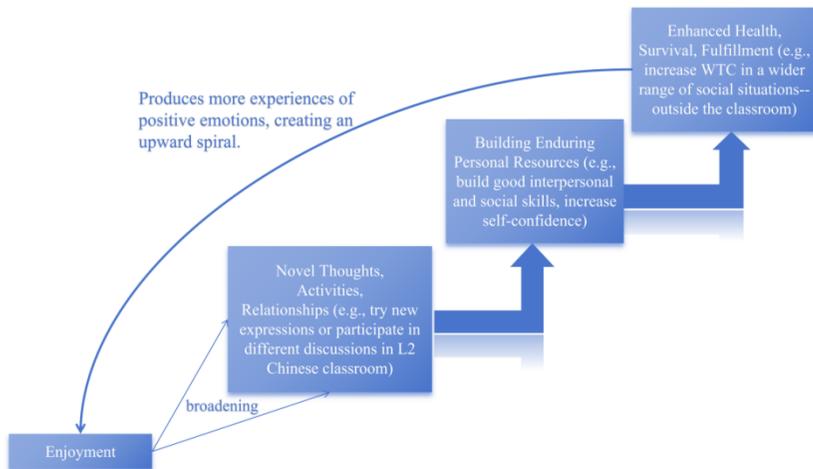


Figure 2: Broaden-and-build Theory Explains how Enjoyment broadens and builds WTC in L2 Chinese Learning

Research Question Two: The Moderator Effect of Cultural Background

In response to the second research question, cultural background (Asia and non-Asian) not only moderated the mediating relationship between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom ($Int_1 = E*CB, p < .05$) but also influenced the paths among enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside the classroom ($Int_2 = W1*CB, p < .001$).

For L2 Chinese learners from Asian cultural backgrounds

For Chinese learners from Asian cultural backgrounds, there is a negative correlation between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom. This phenomenon can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals’ social identity and group affiliation affect their behavior and interactions. In many Asian cultures, social behaviors are viewed as essential for maintaining interpersonal harmony. This cultural orientation allows Asian learners to feel comfortable engaging in classroom communication; however, they may experience pressure outside the classroom due to social expectations, such as behavioral norms and interaction choices. For example, a

Korean student in Gao (2017) mentioned that behaviors deemed acceptable in Korea might be perceived as impolite in China, leading to feelings of nervousness when speaking in the homes of Chinese friends. This suggests that social anxiety outside the classroom can inhibit intrinsic motivation, making L2 Chinese learners feel intimidated and uneasy in intercultural communication. In addition, face-saving behaviors and an emphasis on the conformity and restraint of Asian educational socialization may limit learners' active self-expression in unfamiliar social contexts. While these cultural traits tend to foster high levels of participation and willingness to cooperate in formal classroom settings, learners may be withdrawn or hesitant to initiate communication in unstructured, extracurricular interactions.

However, when WTC inside the classroom has an indirect effect, it may serve as a crucial path between enjoyment and WTC outside the classroom, which is consistent with previous findings in the field of ESL/EFL (Lee & Lee, 2020; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). In the field of CSL/CFL, Zhang (2012) further supports this finding, noting that WTC inside the classroom not only provides an enjoyment platform for L2 Chinese learners to express themselves but also alleviates, to some extent, the pressure they encounter with WTC outside the classroom. This, in turn, helps them to gradually improve their self-confidence and competence in real communication scenarios. This highlights the significance of WTC inside the classroom in facilitating WTC outside the classroom for L2 Chinese learners from Asian cultural backgrounds, which is further supported by Yu (2013) and Zhang (2021).

For L2 Chinese learners from non-Asian cultural backgrounds

In the target language environments, “enjoyment and WTC outside” and “enjoyment, WTC inside, and WTC outside” were positively correlated among L2 Chinese learners from non-Asian cultural backgrounds. This aligns with the findings of previous studies (Li, 2018; Yu, 2012; Zhang, 2021), suggesting that learners are generally more willing to engage in cross-cultural communication. This can be related to the process of acculturation, as described in cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2017). According to this theory, enjoyment helps non-Asian learners adapt more positively to the culture and language in the target language environment by reducing adaptation stress, enhancing cultural acceptance, boosting psychological self-confidence, and facilitating social interaction. As a result, this enhances their willingness to engage in extracurricular communication.

However, the effect on non-Asian learners is less significant than that on Asian learners. A significant relationship exists between cross-cultural adaptation and the WTC of non-Asian students (Gao, 2017). This phenomenon can also be analyzed through cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2017), which suggests that non-Asian learners' WTC may be constrained by cultural expectations, teacher–student interaction patterns, and the classroom climate, leading to increased adaptation stress and lower intercultural adaptation (Ma, 2020). Specifically, non-Asian learners may lack effective social support systems, be

overly concerned with others' evaluations (e.g., receiving excessive attention when speaking Chinese in public), and have a strong desire for cultural belonging. These factors can make them feel nervous, thereby diminishing their motivation to socialize outside the classroom (Yu, 2012). Li (2019) further supports this view, emphasizing that international students face not only challenges in language adaptation but also difficulties in cultural integration and interactions with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds. These intertwined factors lead non-Asian learners to feel frustrated and powerless in extracurricular communication. Notably, owing to the negative effects of cultural differences, non-Asia learners may be more focused on their own performance inside the classroom and more sensitive to peer evaluations, potentially limiting their WTC outside the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of enjoyment on willingness to communicate (WTC) inside and outside the classroom among L2 Chinese learners in target language environments, with a focus on how cultural background (Asia vs. non-Asian) moderates these relationships. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between enjoyment and WTC both inside and outside the classroom, and they underscore the critical moderating role of cultural background. Specifically, enjoyment positively predicts WTC in different ways depending on the learner's cultural background, highlighting key factors for enhancing L2 Chinese education in multicultural settings.

Implications

The results of this study have far-reaching implications for L2 Chinese language education, particularly in refining cross-cultural teaching strategies. The study revealed that cultural background significantly affects learners' enjoyment and WTC, suggesting that teachers should incorporate cultural diversity into instructional design. By incorporating culturally relevant content and activities, teachers can design interactive cultural simulations based on real-life scenarios, such as "cultural conflict role-play challenge". This approach differs from traditional role-play by framing the interaction within the context of a "culture conflict" with the goal of resolving the conflict through communication. For example, in the cultural scenario of "gift-giving," one student plays the role of a Chinese person, and the other plays the role of a foreign friend. The foreign friend must choose an appropriate gift, while the Chinese participant must respond with suggestions or comments on the basis of different cultural norms. Students are encouraged to explore taboos in Chinese gift-giving culture (e.g., giving a clock symbolizes death and giving an umbrella symbolizes separation) and to understand the types of gifts that are considered appropriate (e.g., tea), depending on the person receiving the gift. During interactions, students should be prompted to ask questions and express interest in how to resolve cultural conflicts or misunderstandings. Alternatively, they can share similar experiences from their own cultures. This approach not only helps students resolve cultural

misunderstandings but also subtly reinforces their language knowledge and facilitates their communication skills.

Limitations and Further Directions

The geographical restriction to Shandong Province constitutes a study limitation that may compromise the generalizability of the results. Future research should incorporate more diverse regional samples and adopt a more nuanced categorization of cultural backgrounds to strengthen the external validity of findings. Additionally, while this study utilized quantitative methods, it did not capture the subjective experiences of L2 Chinese learners. Subsequent investigations might benefit from the use of qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews or systematic classroom observations, to elucidate the nuanced relationships between cultural factors and the willingness to communicate. Exploring WTC in digital contexts would also be beneficial for understanding the full spectrum of L2 learners' experiences across different environments.

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