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EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN A LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEX – A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

Abstract: The qualitative study is intended to determine if there is a potential relationship between willingness to communicate and cultural capital in young learners of English and whether it may be possible to assess levels of cultural capital and cultural participation in a quantitative fashion, which would then open the way for a broader range of studies that would allow for regressive analysis of the relationship between cultural capital and a broad range of individual differences to determine the extent to which this may be a key factor in language acquisition and learning. The qualitative investigation was conducted on five participants who were willing to give interviews during a language camp in the UK in the summer of 2022. All five of the participants scored highly on a WTC assessment scale and also showed confidence in communicating in a non-classroom environment. The tentative findings of the study would appear to indicate that there is a firm basis for further research on a quantitative scale in order to validate the basic hypothesis.

Key words: willingness to communicate, cultural capital, cultural participation, individual learner differences, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

In an investigation into the influence of cultural capital on educational attainment, Alice Sullivan demonstrated that there was a clear link between the amount of meaningful cultural interaction and exam results in 16-year old children in the UK (Sullivan, 2001). What is more, these results were even better when the cultural capital of the parents was included in the regression models. A more recent study by Shifeng Li on Chinese children indicated a clear link between higher Socio-Economic Status

and attainment in language and mathematics tests in a large population of 13-15 year olds (Li, 2020). The old proverb suggests that success breeds success, which implies that small early advantages can multiply through life to lead to significant later achievements, and it would appear that being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth may well give us a helpful boost up the ladder of life. The downside of this is that it would appear the research confirms that social mobility will remain an exceptional achievement, rather than the norm as to herald from a socially disadvantaged background would actually impede one's chances of educational attainment.

With this in mind the present study was initiated in order to determine the extent to which cultural capital would correlate with a range of individual factors which have been identified to play a crucial role in the language acquisition and learning processes. Before embarking on a more significant study, it was decided that the optimal approach would be to first assess the feasibility of such a study, and to establish a basic hypothesis upon which to work. Given that language is, above all things, our primary vehicle for the transmission of ideas between interlocutors, it was felt that an ideal starting point would be the concept of Willingness to Communicate. Therefore, the study was planned to investigate from a qualitative perspective a small group of learners who all demonstrated a high level of willingness to communicate from the perspective of their cultural capital and, importantly, cultural participation. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Following a brief outline of the theoretical background, which is intended to provide a valid context for the proposed investigation, the methodology of the study is outlined before a detailed analysis of the resulting qualitative interviews is provided. The discussion at the end shows the tentative validity of the proposed hypothesis, namely that there is a potential link between cultural capital, cultural participation and a learner's willingness to communicate.

2. General Background and selected results

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (henceforth WTC) has been at the centre of linguistic research since it was first posited back in 1985 (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). It became a central element of SLA research on the back of an investigation by MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1998), who collectively sought to build a comprehensive model describing the multi-faceted nature of the factors influencing a learner's willingness to communicate in the L2 classroom. What they did not deviate from was the belief that WTC was a key indicator of successful language acquisition as the more willing a learner is to engage in language use at every opportunity, whether this be in the classroom or an everyday chance of interaction, the more successful their chances of acquisition become (an extension of the old adage that practice makes perfect). Studies since its general acceptance as a model have tended to broadly focus on the effective factors that

influence, to a greater or lesser extent, an individual's WTC. These include gender and age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan, 2003), levels of individual motivation (Peng and Woodrow, 2010), shyness (Fallah, 2014) and grit, self-confidence and anxiety (Lee and Drajeti, 2019). The most recent studies have gone on to investigate correlations between Ideal L2 Self and WTC in L2 (Lan, Nikitina and Woo, 2021), and WTC in the learning of English for Special Purposes (Sjaifullah and Laksmi, 2022 and Karimkhanlooei, Motamed and Gharehbaghi, 2022). Non-effective factors such as social support and the learning context (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Conrod, 2001), and the prestige level of the target language (commonly referred to as International Posture) (Yashima, 2002) have also been evaluated. What seems to be lacking in this wealth of research is a genuine attempt to investigate the background of learners, and the levels of self-confidence which they bring from their domestic and educational origins.

This leads us nicely into the main concept of this study, namely Cultural Capital, which was first forwarded as a sociological concept by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and further developed independently by Bourdieu (1985). In essence, cultural capital describes the various elements that contribute to successful academic achievement that incorporates both material and non-tangible factors such as the number of books at home, the way in which an individual dresses, the school which they attended, their level of *cultural participation*, and so on. Effectively, this theory has been expanded over time and used to explain levels of educational inequality (Goßmann, 2018). This narrow understanding of cultural capital has been significantly broadened since its inception, with aspects such as skills and knowledge passed on during the educational process (Crook, 1997; De Graaf, De Graaf & Kraaykamp 2000) and the quality of social interaction (Kraaykamp & Eijck, 2010). In a broad educational context, the relationship between wealth of cultural capital and linguistic competence in L1 has been investigated (Sullivan, 2001), and a correlation between cultural capital and educational attainment has been proven (Sullivan, 2008; Zimdars, Sullivan & Heath, 2009; Tzanakis, 2011).

What is lacking here from our perspective is twofold. Firstly, there has been no specific attempt made to establish a relationship between levels of cultural capital and WTC in the EFL/SLA context. Secondly, there seems to have been no effort made to investigate the extent to which cultural capital accrued in the L1 context maybe at all transferable to the L2 environment. This qualitative study has thus been undertaken primarily to investigate the wealth of cultural capital of a small number of learners of English as a foreign language who demonstrated high levels of willingness to communicate in the classroom environment. As a subsidiary aim, it was thought advisable to see the extent to which it was possible to differentiate between cultural capital accrued in the L1 context and that obtained through an L2 environment, and the extent to which it may be discernible how far L1 cultural capital encroaches into the L2.

3. Instrument and procedures

In order to determine suitable candidates for a qualitative investigation, a number of groups of learners participating in a language activity camp in the UK, based in London during the summer of 2022, were first observed for their perceived willingness to communicate in a classroom environment, and around the campus during non-classroom activities. Once a potentially suitable group of learners had been identified, all members of the group were asked to complete a composite questionnaire based upon the synthetic research paper by Ayers-Glassey and MacIntyre (2019) in which they sought to bring together the varied attempts by scholars to quantify WTC in a single piece of meta-research. This paper provides both a useful set of guideline questions to help identify WTC both in and outside of the classroom. The learners were asked to fill in the questionnaire, indicating the frequency with which they felt they would use English in given situations. From the group of eleven participants, five were identified, based on the results of the survey, to have a very high level of WTC. These five subjects were then asked to participate in a further qualitative interview, the questions of which were drawn from a study by Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath (2009) into entry into elite universities and Goßmann's attempts to study the influence of cultural capital in the German National Education Panel study results (2018). Each of the students participated willingly, on the condition of anonymity. The interviews were conducted strictly on the basis of the pre-compiled set of questions, with follow up questions being as short as possible and designed to elicit further or supplementary information where necessary. A second round of interviews was conducted once the first had been completed, in order in this case to seek explanations for specific responses recorded during the initial interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in English, but the participants were encouraged to use translation tools if they felt this would help with understanding the questions or the clarity of the responses.

The results of the interviews, presented below, were subject to forensic analysis to establish potential patterns and discrepancies in the nature of the individual cultural capital of the participants, and the extent to which their experiences varied according to the prevalent culture in their own countries of origin, and how they perceived those cultures to vary from the prevalent culture which they had experienced in Britain.

4. Interview Findings

Following the WTC test, as previously mentioned, five suitable candidates were selected based on their uniformly high scores in the composite test of WTC, results which were verified through observation in both the classroom environment, and in 'real-world' scenarios both on campus and off site during the period of the

residential course. The five candidates all agreed to participate in the qualitative interview stage of the research on condition of anonymity. However, they did agree to allow some basic information about themselves to be shared. Subject A is a male aged 16 from Vienna, Austria. He lives with both parents in a suburban detached house and attends a fee-paying state school in the centre of the city. Both of his parents are professionals. Subject B is a female aged 14 attending a private international school in Vienna, although she is Ukrainian by birth. She lives with her mother in an apartment in the city centre (although in her home town of Kiev she has a detached house). Her mother is a professional and her father is an entrepreneur. Subject C is a female aged 14 attending a private international school in Ankara. She lives in a boarding house during the week and then with her family in a detached country house at the weekends. Her mother works from home as a writer and her father is an entrepreneur. Subject D is a 14 year old male living in Luanda, Angola. He lives in a detached suburban house and attends a private school. His father is a managing director of a large multinational corporation and his mother is engaged in local community development projects. Subject E is a seventeen year old female from Lisbon, Portugal. She lives in a detached house and her parents are both professionals. She attends a private international school.

An obvious starting point is Bourdieu's 'number of books at home' algorithm to determine the base level of what can be termed 'meaningful' cultural capital and cultural participation on a domestic level. All five of the participants indicated that they have significant numbers of books at home, with subjects A and D indicating the number being between 200 and 500, while subjects B, C and E all claimed to have in excess of 500 books in their homes, although subject B did clarify that she had very few books in her temporary place of residence (her permanent home in Kiev has 'thousands' of books). The main difference seems to be when it comes to who actually owns the books. Subject A claimed that of his entire domestic library, maybe 20-30 books were his, of which most were set texts from school which he had purchased to avoid borrowing the books from a library. Subject D also suggested that the number of books he personally owned was 'relatively small', between 40 and 50, although he differed from subject A in that he said he not only chose the books he owned, but actually enjoyed reading them. Subjects C and E both indicated they had about 100 books, although neither could be sure, and both were adamant that their personal library was full of books of their own choice. Subject B, when asked how many of the books were her own cried out 'oh, thousands!' when asked to clarify this, she stated adamantly that she was a book collector and spent much of her free time browsing the internet for new additions to her variety of collections.

But, owning a book is not quite the same as using it, so we moved our interviews immediately on to stricter reading habits, and what is interesting is that three of the participants (B, C and E) all read for pleasure, while D admits that he does read, although only when he is 'not being watched by other people or friends,' as reading

is ‘definitely not cool’. Only participant A claimed a relative disinterest in reading, with his main interest being reading about sports, although he stated that it was much better to watch highlights than read a report of a football match, for example. The remaining four participants all read widely for pleasure, including a range of fiction and non fiction materials. An interesting area of divergence appears when we consider the language in which they read, with B, C and D all reading more in English than in their native languages, while A and E tend only to read in English what they were instructed to cover as a part of their schooling. It would seem from the first part of the interviews connected with reading that the only outlier is participant A, who seems to view reading quite unfavourably and definitely does not conform to Bourdieu’s maxim.

When it comes to other form of modern cultural interaction and participation, it is difficult to avoid the ubiquitous nature of social media and streaming services as a platform for instant cultural gratification. While such media forms may not belong to the classical pantheon of high culture, they do constitute a major cultural stakeholder in teenage lives, with the young person spending 8 hours and 39 minutes per day on their phones (Common Sense Media, 2022). When asked about cultural uptake, the responses of all five participants were very similar, with the most popular social media platforms, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram being present in each person’s daily activity. Participants A, D and E also use Twitch, while B, C and D all use Snapchat, which while being a communication platform also allows for a large volume of digital content resharing. Participants A and B also use Telegram and D and E are both on Twitter. In terms of streaming, they all watch Netflix (although E only occasionally), A has access to and watches Apple TV+, B watches Disney + and HBO Go, and D watches Amazon Prime Video. Interestingly, none of the participants watches terrestrial Television stations at all, unless it is on in the background when their parents are watching. They all state that they interact with a variety of content on the social media streams in English, with B making the enlightening statement that ‘[...] the content in English is always much better than anything else.’ Also, they all prefer to stream content in its original language if it is in English, and while platforms such as Netflix have a large amount of movie content, they all seem to be more interested in streaming popular series, which they can pop in and out of as they wish, and as E indicated, ‘[I]t is important to keep up with the latest serials because everybody else will be talking about them.’

Following current affairs is another important aspect of cultural capital, and also providing a basis for the forming of an opinion, which is an essential factor in a high level of WTC. All five of the participants used social media as a source of information about current events and news, but there were some caveats, most notably B and E, who indicated that they only used reliable sources on Instagram, Telegram and YouTube who could be verified and purported to spread genuine news content rather than unverified rumour and supposition. B also regularly

watches CNN while D reads *The Economist* and *Time Magazine* ‘in the car on the way to school’ (although he was at pains to make it clear that this was his father’s suggestion, and not of his own volition), while participant D is also encouraged by her father to read the national daily newspaper *Hürriyet*, although not on a regular basis. All five of the families have some form of subscription, whether in print or online form, to at least one newspaper or weekly news digest, with Participant D listing at least six regular sources. In all cases they are encouraged to read, even if, as in the case of participant A, it is only to catch up on the sports news. The attitude of A to newspaper reports was again quite enlightening because he pointed out that ‘the stuff in the newspapers is out of date, so there’s never much to read there.’

Moving on to more traditional forms of cultural participation, B and E are the only two participants who regularly go to museums through choice, with A stating bluntly that they are ‘boring and a waste of time.’ C claims that if the content of the museum is interesting, she would consider going of her own free will, while D stated that where he lived there were no museums worth visiting, and the same is true for art galleries, where D indicates that he has only ever viewed a gallery while visiting New York or Paris. C has a similar position, in which she indicates that visiting galleries is a purely holiday based activity. B and E both love art and visit galleries whenever the possibility arises, while A has only ever done so as a part of an organised school trip, which he stated that he wanted to play truant from, but his parents delivered him directly to the coach taking them to the gallery in question, so he had no alternative but to participate. Only B goes to the theatre on a regular basis, claiming to see a play or musical at least once a month, while the others attend sporadically, if at all. This is somewhat reflected in their cinema-going habits, in which none of the participants goes more than once a month. While they attend a variety of stage productions, their consumption of movies is primarily based on American blockbusters, which B indicates are ‘much better than anything else produced.’ While A suggests that ‘the only thing people talk about are Hollywood films, so if I can’t stream them, I have to go to the cinema to watch them.’ C suggests that ‘films are boring,’ and that she prefers watching series where the episodes are edited to thirty minutes.

They all, conversely, listen to music on a daily basis, especially when travelling around. They all use Spotify as their streaming service of choice and have a subscription to avoid advertising breaks and to give them a better choice - mainly of skipping unwanted content. They have a standard taste covering mainly pop, rock, hip hop, rap and R&B. None of them stream Classical music, or other forms of expressive music, such as Jazz. Of the five, B, C and E make the effort to produce their own playlists, while A uses those playlists recommended by the algorithm and D tends to listen to songs that his friends recommend. Interestingly, only C makes a conscious effort to listen to music from her own country, while the remainder listen to whatever is popular on a global scale. When it comes to a physical interaction with music, only E goes regularly to concerts, but mainly Jazz

music, which runs contrary to her Spotify habits. The others have only occasionally been to concerts, if at all, as in the case of A. However, he has been on a regular basis to recitals and classical performances in Vienna, which his family attend on a regular basis, and while this was not something he would do on his own, he did admit to ‘actually enjoying the experience’, especially the annual New Year’s Concert, to which he has been on a number of occasions. Besides this, B and D stated that they have been to a couple of ballet performances, while E has been to the opera at least twice.

When it comes to the influence of the recent Pandemic on their cultural participation, they have a range of responses. A insisted adamantly that his cultural interaction was exactly the same pre and post Pandemic, and that absolutely nothing had changed. B, C and D all indicated that they had significantly increased their cultural activity since the official ending of the Pandemic restrictions in their home town, with D stressing that ‘the restrictions had been really tight, so it was nice to go and chill in the cinema, even if I wasn’t interested in the film.’ E indicated that she had moved a lot of her activity online during the Pandemic, and had not really managed to return to life as it had been previously, although she did not find this uncomfortable as she found it a nice supplement to real life.

Finally, we turned our attention to the way in which their immediate environs contributed to their abilities and willingness to form and express opinions, on the basis that such qualities are far from innate. When it comes to participant A, he indicated that his school takes a particularly dogmatic approach, and that the pupils are expected to repeat the materials given by the teachers, and that deviation from the curriculum is actively discouraged, with pupils being given negative grades for non-conformity. At home his parents tend to avoid discussions on current affairs, but when they do drift into such areas, ‘my Dad usually tells us what he thinks, and we have to accept that, or we get into a big fight.’ His discussions with friends tend to revolve around sport and what is currently trending on Social Media. B indicated that her teachers were more tolerant, and prepared to discuss a range of views ‘as long as they remain on topic.’ The only subject in which she felt actively encouraged to express her opinions on a range of topics was Social Studies, which she indicated was a forum for debate on topics related to current affairs. At home, her family often discuss a range of issues, and again B felt emboldened to say what she thinks as her parents rarely negated her views. With friends they often discuss current affairs, although much of that has been dominated in 2022 by the Russian invasion of her country. Participant C has a similar educational experience to A, although her domestic situation is more open as they occasionally enter into discussion about current affairs, especially ‘Turkish politics and human rights issues’. In such discussions she felt that her parents, while never negating her, had an occasional tendency to try to steer her thinking. With her friends, C never discusses topics of a global nature. D indicated that, at school at least, he is actively encouraged to go beyond the basic instructions of the teachers, and that doing so always earns extra

credit 'so long as it [the opinion] is well formed.' At home, his father is especially keen for him to develop a world view, indicating that this was an essential part of growing up. While it is not fashionable to do so, D did indicate that in small groups his friends do occasionally discuss national and international affairs. Finally, E claimed that her teachers were incredibly keen for her and her friends to express themselves, regardless of the 'official line' on various topics. The same, she also stated, was true of her domestic life where her parents were incredibly respectful of her views, often masking their own to avoid undermining her opinions. Her friends were also very active in stating their views, and she said they were 'quite proud of their woke views,' which differed markedly from their parents.

5. Discussion

Overall, it may be stated with a degree of confidence that all five of the participants in the study demonstrated a high degree of cultural capital that may well be the basis for why they also demonstrated a high level of WTC. The only significant outlier within the admittedly limited population sample is participant A, who seemed to demonstrate the most restricted level of both domestic cultural capital, and environmental capital, especially in the form of educational encouragement. While this may be down to some form of mis-reporting on behalf of the subject, measures were taken to try to avoid the participants giving answers that were possibly intended to either impress the interviewer or peers, most notably the interviews were conducted on an individual basis, and they were conducted at the end of a period during which the interviewer had had the opportunity to get to know them, thus allowing for any potential exaggeration of answers to be diplomatically challenged. Also, the five participants were selected in part for their perceived levels of candour and reliability. Participants B and D shared a very high degree of cultural capital in both English and their native languages, while C and E have a wealth of cultural capital primed towards reinforcing L1. So the first tentative conclusion that may be put forward is that the language or source of the cultural capital is less relevant than its overall or cumulative influence. Furthermore, the level of voluntary participation in high culture was only significant in B, and to a lesser extent in E, which suggests that there may be an increasingly fuzzy boundary between popular culture and its more highbrow equivalent, especially when it comes to the relationship between culture and intellectual development.

When we turn to less culture based influences, such as exposure to current affairs, it would seem that all of the participants have some access to up-to-date news, although the potential reliability of social media sources may bring into doubt the quality of some aspects of that exposure. However, if we take into account the Agenda Setting Theory of Media Studies (see, for example, McCombs, Shaw and Weaver, 2014), the main role of contemporary mass media is not so

much to shape public opinion, rather it sets the main agenda as to what topics people chose to discuss. The media, either traditional or online versions, therefore suggests what people could engage with, rather than conditioning a set of socially accepted opinions. Thus it may be claimed that, given the fact that all five of the participants have access to sources of news and current affairs on social media with which they regularly engage, they have sufficient awareness of said topics to be able to engage in discourse with a fair degree of confidence – after all, it is difficult to discuss such a topic as Cancel Culture if one is completely ignorant of its existence. In the case of B, D and E their schooling certainly helps to develop the ability to express an opinion, regardless of the extent to which it is correct, and this is further reinforced by parental attitudes. It would be interesting to investigate further the extent to which these last two questions are broadly culturally based and inherent within the national education systems, or whether it is the experience of the individual participants that have led them to form such an opinion about the dogmatic nature of their educational systems. The fact that both A and C share similar home experiences may tentatively indicate that the former is true, but such a conclusion would require a much broader population to allow for proper substantiation.

It was not possible given the nature of the camp in which the participants were involved to investigate the psychological profile of the individual participants to determine the extent to which such aspects may also be included as a factor in determining WTC, and it would certainly be worth investigating the extent to which the relationship between cultural capital and WTC is offset by various psychological traits. It would also be of interest to examine a broader population to investigate the extent to which WTC correlates with level of Cultural Capital.

In this study the main aim was to determine the level of cultural capital accrued in five young learners who demonstrated a high level of WTC both in the classroom and in a broader social context. With the limited exception of participant A, this aim has been completed. Furthermore, it would appear to be the case that a quantifiable, Likert-style questionnaire could be construed to help enhance the process of establishing level of cultural capital that would allow for it to be statistically correlated as so many other individual factors already are.

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