Do Non-Native Speakers Have the Floor? -- A Case Study of

Cross-Cultural Communication via WeChat

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Abstract

Smart phone applications (apps) are new tools for cross-cultural communication. WeChat as a popular app that is being used by more than 963 million people around the world, connecting English language learners in China and native speakers of English, who, otherwise, would not be able to speak directly. Language learners are unwilling to communicate orally with native speakers because of a lack of communication competence, introversion, self-esteem, and communication apprehension (Modirkhameneh & Firouzmand, 2014). In an attempt to understand whether language learners are willing to initiate and maintain conversations with native speakers via smart phone apps, this study investigated whether Chinese learners and native speakers have equal amount of conversational floors in WeChat communication; the characteristics of non-native speakers' floor management; and the effects of WeChat on foreign language learners' floor management. The study was conducted at a college in Beijing, China. A class of English language majors used WeChat to communicate with a class at a university in Australia to discuss culture-related topics. WeChat scripts were downloaded and analyzed. The results show that WeChat can create a comfortable environment and give non-native speakers equal floor time and inspire confident participation. Non-native speakers, though able to comply with social conventions, still possess unique characteristics when communicating with native speakers via WeChat. WeChat as a communication tool is able to promote active and conductive participation in conversations between non-native and native speakers.

Keywords: WeChat, floor management, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

With the development of Internet technology and the increase in usage of smart phones, language learners in China now have opportunities to communicate with native speakers (NSs) in other countries and experience the target culture in an authentic

context. In face-to-face communications, Chinese learners are reported as passive, reluctant to participate (Cao, 2011; Peng, 2012). Social, contextual and individual variables influence students' decisions to speak up or remain silent when the situation calls for participation (Bernales, 2016). Low willingness to speak was one of the reasons for students to remain silent, since communicating with native speakers might cause fear, social-discomfort, and embarrassment. The social force of not wanting to admit non-understanding is related to the issue of face (Zwaard & Bannink, 2014). Different from face-to-face communications, computer mediated communication (CMC) has been reported as providing learners a behind-the-curtain effect, causing low anxiety (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). How Chinese learners operate when interacting with NSs in CMC has been an ongoing topic of interest for language teachers and researchers in China. Studies on CMC have been accumulating rapidly in recent years, however, findings on smart phone app mediated communication are very rare. Smart phone apps, such as WeChat, are commonly used in China. More and more Chinese teachers use WeChat to facilitate discussion, either within their classroom or with partners from other universities.

Studies on cross-cultural CMC indicate that language learners are active and willing to speak when interact with NSs via computers (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). With more and more language learners in China choosing to use smart phone apps as a communication tool, this study attempts to investigate whether foreign language learners are willing to communicate with native speakers via WeChat. The findings presented below investigate whether language learners have floors when WeChatting with NSs; the characteristics of language learners' floor management; and the effects of WeChat on language learners' floor management.

Literature Review

Conversational Floor

In conversational analysis, the term "floor" was first defined by Sacks (1972) as a ticket, that is to begin to talk or to make a first statement. For example, by asking a question such as "You know what?" one gets a ticket to begin a talk; or if a mother says "The baby cried," she then gains a right to open a conversation.

Sacks (1972) claims that speaker exchange is a basic conversational process, and that the turn-taking mechanism determines when the next speaker may take the floor. Most researchers have been using "floor" and "turn" interchangeably (Wennerstrom & Siegel, 2003; Hillary et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2019). Since most researchers do not make a distinction between "floor" and "turn", this study does not distinguish them either. Simpson (2005) describes conversational floor as an organizing principle that emerges in conversations and identifies three main floor types: speaker-and-supporter floor, collaborative floor, and multiple conversational floor.

Text chat discourse appears to be different from face-to-face conversation in

that potential speakers do not have access to the same channels at the same time, and the discourse is one way in nature. To examine learner participation in WeChat conversations, counting the floors seems to be more appropriate than counting the lines. In this study, a floor was counted only when there was a change in speaker but not when participants started a new line by clicking the Enter key. Floor exchanges were not counted when the speaker produced an utterance that did not have lexical or contextual meaning.

Floor Claiming and Yielding

When a participant claims intention to take a floor, the behavior is referred to as "floor-claiming"; and when the present floor holder leaves the floor for the next speaker, the behavior is regarded as "floor-yielding." Floor claiming or yielding is usually determined by the group leader. Dominant or high-status speakers (usually group leaders) tend to claim floors, whereas low-status speakers wait for opportunities to speak when there is floor-yielding.

In cross-cultural communications between NSs and NNSs, NSs are generally regarded as high-status speakers and NNSs as low-status speakers. If NNSs are overly-concerned by the language deficiencies in their communication, they will speak less. Once NSs realize the communication inadequacies in NNSs, they tend to dominate the conversation and yield relatively less floors to NNSs. However, Woken and Swales (1989) note that participants in asymmetrical relationships claim or yield the floor based upon expertise and authority, not just on language proficiency. In their study, NNSs were more experienced in the discussion topics and took a total of 528 floor units compared to 309 floor units taken by the NSs. The average floor unit length by NNSs was 5.21 words compared to only 3.30 for the NSs. The researchers conclude that specialists claim floors based upon the recognition of their expertise, despite of their language deficiencies.

Language learners are able to use interactional features to claim and yield floors while constructing meaning negotiation. Kit et al. (2014) presents a qualitative exploration of the experiences of Asian trainee group counselors in an in-class and online support group. Results show that the Asian trainees have used turn allocation process to create their authority and power.

Floor Maintenance and Support

Gibson (2009) investigated an online asynchronous discussion group and claimed that the management of posting turns is of concern in the online group in a similar way to face-to-face conversation. One way of maintaining a floor within a group is by using questions. Answers to questions may trigger a brief exchange of information or a cognitively demanding response, depending on the type of question. Comprehension check questions have the effect of limiting the floor length of respondents through yes-no answers. Open-ended queries relinquish the floor to the listeners and therefore extend the floors. The listener plays an important role in floor maintenance as well.

Listeners support the current floor holder in maintaining his or her floor through strategies like sending back channel including questioning, commenting, and repairing.

Floor maintenance and support is a social activity that requires strategies from both NSs and NNSs. In the light of Vygotskian (1978) stance, online interaction tools offer language learners opportunities to get to know each other and accomplish collaborative tasks. Participants are dependent on each other rather than the teacher, and hence more collaboration is likely to occur among the learners (Ajabshir, 2019). According to social conventions, floor shift needs to be carefully negotiated between NSs and NNSs to make the negotiation successful.

WeChat

WeChat, a popular smart phone App used by more than 963 million people around the world, connects English language learners in China and NSs who would otherwise not able to meet. Miao (2016) investigated the feasibility of WeChat in the English classroom. The results show that the excellence rate, passing rate and average score of the experimental class who used WeChat were higher than those of the control class that did not. Students' achievements were also higher in the class that used WeChat. Besides feasibility, WeChat also promotes learners' motivation and interest in learning. Wang (2015) studied synchronous communications between foreign exchange students and Chinese students on a WeChat platform. The results show that WeChat is an effective learning tool and plays a significant role in language learning. WeChat also promotes mobile learning, stimulates students' interest, and enhances the efficiency of classroom teaching.

From a pedagogical perspective, WeChat appears to be a feasible tool in the language classroom. Yet how language learners maintain smooth communication with NSs via WeChat remains unanswered. Hence, the questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What are the features of language learners' floor management when interacting with NSs via WeChat?
2. To what extent does WeChat affect language learners' floor management in cross-cultural communication?

Research Design and Methods

The study was conducted in a joint online course, namely Cross-Cultural Distance Learning, offered at a university in Australia and a teachers' college in China. Students taking the course in the Spring semester of 2017 voluntarily joined the study, including 20 Australian students majoring in Education and 21 Chinese students majoring in English Education. All the participants were first-year students. The Australian participants were pre-service teachers, and all of them were native speakers of English. The Chinese students were pre-service teachers of English. The English proficiency level of the Chinese participants was intermediate based on their College Entrance

Examination scores.

Procedures

To start the project, both the Chinese and the Australian participants downloaded WeChat to their smart phones. A WeChat group was created, including all of the 41 students and 3 professors in China and Australia. This is the "home group", where the professors gave instructions and answered questions. Communication happened in five randomly organized small groups. In Group 1 to Group 4, there were 8 participants in total, 4 Chinese and 4 Australian. The one extra Chinese student was in Group 5, which contained 9 participants, 5 Chinese and 4 Australians. The Chinese and Australian professors were added to all the small groups as observers and did not participate in group discussions. The professors observed the conversations in each group in order to resolve possible problems. They did not participate in the discussions because the Chinese students tended to regard the professors as the authority, which might become a contextual factor that affects the participants' willingness to speak (Zhong, 2013).

All the participants used pseudonyms. The small groups had one session of synchronous WeChat every week for 10 weeks, each session lasted 80 minutes. For the Chinese students, the WeChat discussions were integrated into their classroom activities and were carried out inside the classroom during class hours. As for the Australian students, the WeChat activity was part of the course requirement, which could be finished outside the classroom at a place of their choice. A prompt was given to all the small groups to spark conversation. It invited the students to plan for a short trip to Australia and China. With limited time and budget, the groups discussed on where to visit in order to fully experience Australian and Chinese culture, then decided on what souvenirs they should take home for their family. Free discussion was also encouraged after planning on the trip.

During the 10-week study, three of the five groups had 10 WeChat sessions while the other two groups had only 9 sessions each due to unexpected cancellations. As a result, there was a total of 48 WeChat sessions which were saved and analyzed.

As shown in Picture 1, when someone typed in a message, the WeChat screen displayed the names of the speaker, his or her portrait, and the time. If the speaker did not have a portrait, the area next to the name will be left blank.

Picture 1
WeChat Screen Shot
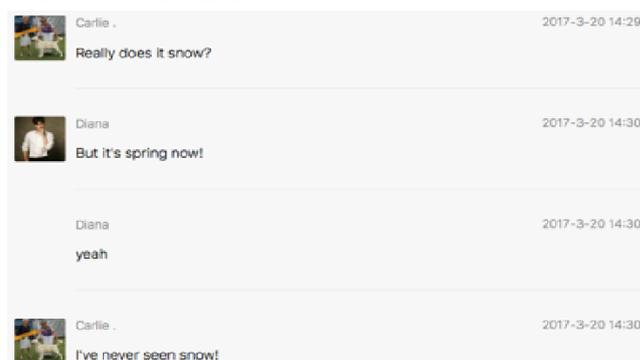
When the conversation ended, the chat screen was saved, and the scripts were downloaded and transcribed. Mistakes and errors were kept as is. Pictures, videos, and emoticons were described in the transcripts using parenthesis. Dates and times were marked in small font next to each line. Floor was counted only when there was a change of speaker. If a speaker separated his or her speech into more than one line by clicking the Enter key, the entire talk was counted as one turn. Only lexical or contextual utterances were counted as meaningful turns. Non-meaningful utterances resulted from unintentional touches of the keyboard were not counted. The number of words was also counted.

Results

Group Equity

The number of floors and the amount of words in each WeChat group were counted as a measurement of equity. Table 1 reveals the floors and words that the Chinese and the Australian students used in the 48 WeChat sessions. Apparently, the Chinese students contributed more turns and more words. A total of 923 floors of the Chinese students outweighed the 613 floors of the Australian students. The 5529 words produced by the Chinese students were more than twice of the 2457 words of the Australian students. The results indicate that the Chinese learners had more opportunities to speak and their utterances were longer than their Australian partners.

Table 1
Floor and Word Distribution

	Floors	Words	Mean words per floor
Chinese students	923	5529	5.99
Australian students	613	2457	4.01

The results echo earlier studies on online native/non-native interaction (see Freiermuth 2001; Zhao 2010; Angelova & Zhao, 2016) that NNS contribution is a major part of online cross-cultural communication and NNSs could potentially become dominant members in group discussions.

Based on Simpson's (2005) classification of floor types, the Chinese and Australian students' participation was measured. After the participants diffused into subgroups, the membership changes to form different floor groups. In each group, there

were three types of floors: collaborative floor, prime-speaker floor, and supporter floor. In some group discussions, there was no clear distinction between the primary speaker and secondary speakers. Everyone was equal in holding the floor. In such a case, floors were counted as "collaborative floor". While in other cases, there was a primary speaker who held the floor most of the time and was the primary speaker to introduce the topic. His or her turns of speech were counted as "prime-speaker floor". Some participants were less active, playing the role of attentive listeners and minimally interacting with others. The remarks they made were mostly repetitions or simply replies to others' opinions. Such remarks were counted as "supporter floor". Simultaneous talk, overlapping, and back channel signals were counted according to the purpose of the remark and the situational context.

Table 2
Types of floor produced by Chinese and Australian participants

	Chinese students	Australian students
Collaborative floor	420 (45.50%)	399 (65.09%)
Prime-Speaker floor	350 (37.92%)	82 (13.38%)
Supporter floor	153 (16.58)	132 (21.53%)
Total	923 (100%)	613 (100%)

As shown in Table 2, most of the floors produced by the Chinese and the Australian students were collaborative floors. The Chinese students were found to act as the prime speaker in their groups and thus yielded more prime-speaker floors and less supporter floors compared to their Australian counterparts. Apparently the Chinese students were able to actively participate in the WeChat discussions and play a leading role.

Floor Claiming and Yielding

Floor claiming and yielding are skills of opening and closing a turn. The Chinese learners were found picking up conversational triggers and holding the floor as primary speakers. As in WeChat Excerpt 1, the students were discussing school life in China and Australia. An Australian student (A1) asked a question to invite her group members to speak, a Chinese student (C1) immediately picked up the topic and shared her story at school.

WeChat Excerpt 1: Floor claiming

A1: So who would like to start? 2017-3-13 13:50
C1: maybe starting from me 2017-3-13 13:50
C1: When I was three or four in kindergarten, we were asked to sleep for
    an hour at noon. One day the teacher asked "what will the earth
    become if there is no water at all". Whoever answered the question
    could go to sleep and she started to listen to the answers. 2017-3-13 13:55

C1: I was so reluctant to say something repeated but I could not come up
with a good enough answer. So I kept sitting in my bed…2017-3-13 13:59
C1: The teacher punished me by not allowing me to sleep that noon. So I
sat there and wept alone… 2017-3-13 13:59
C1: In fact, she was a good teacher, right? 2017-3-13 14:03

When given a chance, C1 was able to claim her floor by indicating that she would like to share her story first, and then she held the floor for more than 10' as the primary speaker. Yet, after telling the story, she yielded the floor to others with a question "she was a good teacher, right?" The question was used to frame her talk and invite responses. Later in the conversation, the Australian students made strong comments that argued the teacher in her story was not a good teacher, which in turn triggered another round of discussion concerning the differences in Chinese and Australian cultures.

Besides using questions, the Chinese students yielded floors with polite remarks. As in WeChat Excerpt 2, the Chinese student (C1) was planning her imaginary trip to Australia with two Australian students (A1 & A2). After getting the information she needed, C1 politely yielded the floor by saying "thank you both" to her Australian partners.

WeChat Excerpt 2: Floor yielding

A1: parks are free. Sorry Luna park has price. Garden free. 2017-4-24 13:41
C1: How much 2017-4-24 13:41
A1: 48$ 2017-4-24 13:42
C1: And what about the Olympic Park? Better than Luna park? Could
you tell me the location of each place. 2017-4-24 13:44
A2: The rocks. Darling harbor are the closest to the hotel. Opera house
gardens bridge are all around darling harbor. Location is Sydney.
2017-4-24 13:45
C1: okay, that's really helpful, thank you both. 2017-4-24 13:45
A2: You're welcome 2017-4-24 13:46
A1: I was thinking of asking you a question as well, C1. 2017-4-24 13:46

Floor Maintenance and Support

The shifting floors and rearranging of primary speakers occurred continuously and involved the reallocation of attention from both the Chinese and the Australian students. In the following excerpt, students were talking about their daily activities. One Chinese student (C1) said she spent her day at home just to "eat". After 2' silence, C1 realized that her reply was too short to trigger a meaningful response. In order to maintain the flow of the conversation, she added more information and an emoticon of a laughing face with tears. In return, her Australian partner A1 replied with a laughing face emoticon, expressing understanding.

WeChat Excerpt 3: Floor maintenance

A1: *That's good! What have you been doing today? 2017-4-24 14:11*
C1: *So I just stay at home 2017-4-24 14:12*
C1: *eat 2017-4-24 14:12*
C1: *I eat when I stay at home, that's what I do (emoticon of a laughing*
      face with tears) 2017-4-24 14:14
A1: *(emoticon of a laughing face) 2017-4-24 14:12*

When there were difficulties in understanding each other, the students would stop and negotiate meaning. The use of pictures, videos, and sometimes emoticons played a supportive role in maintaining the conversation. In WeChat Excerpt 4, Australian student A1 was interested in learning about children's literature in China. Chinese student C1 introduced poems from the Tang Dynasty but had trouble explaining "easy ones (poems) with four lines", then the group stopped the topic they were working on and started to negotiate over the concept. To support the discussion, 3' later Chinese student C2 presented a picture that he found online and successfully solved the problem.

WeChat Excerpt 4: Floor support

A1: *I'm interested in starting a bit of conversation about children's*
      literature. This could help us when we come to visit. What were some
      of your favorite children's book as a child and are these still popular
      now? 2017-3-20 15:11
C1: *Let me think. I remember when I was young, I read some traditional*
      Chinese poems and old tales. 2017-3-20 15:13
C1: *but only easy ones, easy ones with four lines. 2017-3-20 15:13*
A1: *Easy ones with four lines? 2017-3-20 15:14*
C1: *Yes…Err...2017-3-20 15:1*
A1: *Like what? 2017-3-20 15:15*
C2: *Like in this picture. It's poem with four lines. (showing a picture of a*
      four-line Chinese poem) 2017-3-20 15:18
A1: *Ok, I see. 2017-3-20 15:18*

Discussion

Features of Language Learners' Floor Management

Cheng (2000) argues that in face-to-face communications, many Asian students do have a strong desire to participate in classroom but if some are quiet in certain circumstances, the causes are unsuitable methodologies and lack of language proficiency. In CMC activities, Chinese learners appear to be active participants because of the "behind the

curtain" effect (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). The current study found that smart phone APPs like WeChat support the idea of using suitable methodologies to promote equal participation between NNSs and NSs. In WeChat activities, NNSs have a choice of expressing ideas through non-verbal means of communication such as pictures, videos, and emoticons. These are factors that minimize NNSs' disadvantage in language proficiency. Though data was limited, a tendency of NNSs producing more turns, more words and using longer sentences than their NS counterparts in WeChat communications appeared in this study.

WeChat participation is related to strategies in floor management. Edelsky (1981) claims that such features as quantity and frequency of participation, number of non-turn utterances, overlaps, etc. stem from language differences, and collaborative floor appears to more forcefully reflecting equality. With noticeably lower language proficiency, NNSs maintain floor and a collaborative venture through cooperation and floor management skills. In the current study, the Chinese students framed their talk in WeChat conversations by claiming and yielding the floor. When the conversational flow was interrupted by a lack of topic or non-understanding, an interactional repair sequence aimed at restarting the conversational flow and reaching shared understanding in communication was started by the Chinese students.

Furthermore, NNSs observe social conventions in WeChat floor management. Observing social conventions, in other words, is knowing how to participate politely in a situation. Chinese learners are generally known as polite. However, the perceived politeness arises from "shyness", which is associated with lack of communication competence, introversion, self-esteem, and communication apprehension (Modirkhameneh & Firouzmand, 2014, p.1135). These are factors that lead to Chinese learners' failure to act in pragmatically appropriate ways when communicating with native speakers. Recent studies found positive effects of synchronous CMC instruction on L2 learners pragmatic competence (Ajabshir, 2019). The current study yielded similar findings: in WeChat conversations, Chinese learners are able to observe social conventions, especially in managing the floor and maintaining a smooth flow of conversation.

Language Learners' Floor Management Affected by WeChat

As a tool for synchronous cross-cultural communication, WeChat proves to be more flexible than computer software as it can be equipped to smart phones and used anywhere covered by Wireless Internet. Apparently that was a feasible feature for cross-cultural communication activities in this study. With a three-hour time difference between China and Australia, the Australian students could only WeChat with their Chinese partners in after-class hours. Most of the 50 communication sessions worked out in the way they were planned, except for the 2 cancellations. The Australian students found it easier for them to WeChat out of class because they could carry out other activities while chatting with the Chinese students over their smart phones. As a result, the topics were sometimes triggered by the activities the Australian students were doing at the moment or had just finished while they were chatting. For example,

one group talked about pets and animals in China and Australia while an Australian student was just outdoors to walk her dog. Another group once talked about part-time jobs off campus and how Chinese and Australian college students balance academic pressure and financial independence. The topic was a natural result when the Chinese students found out that one of their Australian partners was chatting with them on his way home from his part-time job.

Warschauer (1996) claims that CMC is promising in reducing the anxiety of foreign language learners' by providing an entirely different modality of interaction that seems to lower inhibition with little or no stress and anxiety. With respect to floor management in WeChat, the outside-of-classroom atmosphere of WeChat is multiplied with the behind-the-curtain feeling of CMC and creates a comfortable and relaxing context. WeChat also allows NNSs more time to organize ideas and find appropriate language to express ideas.

Conclusion

This study highlights the possibility of using WeChat as a synchronous CMC tool in the L2 classroom, supporting the argument that WeChat communication promotes active and conductive participation of the L2 learners, especially in the Chinese L2 classroom setting. The Chinese learners regarded WeChat pair/group work with the Australian students a communication opportunity which they were keen to make full use of. Therefore, it is important for teachers to identify various factors affecting learners' participation in WeChat.

One of the challenges for WeChat communication is group size, which may affect floor management. Statements are listed in chronological order and may overlap if two or more interlocutors send a message at the same time. Topic threads are sometimes intertwined, and a gap of silence may cause misunderstanding, especially when there are many topic threads. In the current study, Chinese and Australian students were randomly grouped into groups of 8-9 people, with roughly the same number of NNSs and NSs in each group. WeChat scripts show that overlapping and misunderstanding happened in every group. Future research may focus on whether smaller groups more effectively promote floor management in cross-cultural WeChat interactions.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the implementation of WeChat in the Chinese classroom has not been normalized yet. In this study, communicating with the Australian students via WeChat was a novel experience to the Chinese students. The participants' attitudes toward using smart phone APPs as a learning tool may either promote or hinder their motivation and stress, which are variables that affect the result of this study. Second, quantitative and qualitative data sources were less than sufficient due to the limited number of participants in this study. Apparently, increasing the number of participants would result in valid inferences and is likely to increase the external validity of the findings.

Acknowledgement

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