

Teacher–Student Relationships and Willingness to Communicate in English: A Comparative Study of Thai and Chinese College Students

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Abstract

This quantitative comparative study examined how teacher–student relationship (TSR) dimensions—closeness and conflict—affect willingness to communicate in English (WTC) among Thai ($n = 544$) and Chinese ($n = 518$) college students. A total of 1,062 students completed a survey. ANOVA revealed significant cross-cultural differences: Thai students reported higher closeness ($M = 3.46$) and WTC ($M = 4.10$) than Chinese students ($M = 2.82$ and $M = 3.55$), whereas Chinese students perceived greater conflict ($M = 2.97$) than Thai students ($M = 2.68$). Gender-stratified analyses showed that both Thai males and females reported higher closeness and WTC than their Chinese counterparts, while conflict was more pronounced among Chinese females ($\eta^2 = .105$). These findings extend attachment theory and social role perspectives, demonstrating that TSR emotional quality functions differently across gender and culture. Practically, the study calls for gender-responsive and culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches to reduce relational tension, especially for female students in hierarchical learning environments.

Keywords: teacher–student relationships, willingness to communicate, cross-cultural comparison

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Introduction

Driven by globalization and the “Belt and Road” initiative, English as a global language has gained increasing prominence in higher education. However, many Asian college students in collectivist cultures display classroom silence and low willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). WTC – the intention to speak when free to do so – is shaped not only by individual language proficiency and motivation but also by the socio-emotional structure of teacher–student interactions. Teacher–student relationship (TSR), conceptualised through the two dimensions of closeness and conflict (Pianta, 2001), influences learners’ emotional security and expression. Despite evidence on TSR’s impact on academic engagement, systematic cross-cultural comparisons between Thailand and China – two neighbouring countries with Confucian and Buddhist heritages – remain scarce. This study addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher–Student Relationship, Willingness to Communicate, and Their Socio-Emotional Basis

Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Pianta’s (2001) model, teacher–student relationship (TSR) comprises two relatively independent dimensions: closeness (emotional warmth, trust, and support) and conflict (opposition, tension, and negative interactions). Closeness fosters learners’ emotional security and psychological resilience, whereas conflict tends to induce avoidance behaviours and classroom anxiety.

The willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language is conceptualised as the intention to initiate communication when free to do so (MacIntyre et al., 1998). MacIntyre et al.’s heuristic model places WTC at the intersection of stable personality traits and situational factors, with classroom emotional climate acting as a proximal determinant. Empirical research has confirmed that positive teacher–student emotional bonds significantly predict higher L2 WTC (Khajavy et al., 2018). In collectivist educational contexts, where face-saving and group harmony are valued, the socio-emotional quality of teacher–student interactions may be especially consequential for learners’ willingness to speak in English. Thus, closeness and conflict are expected to shape WTC in culturally patterned ways.

The Role of Culture and Gender

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions indicate that China has a high power distance orientation with strong academic hierarchy, whereas Thailand – also high in power distance – emphasises relational harmony through the Buddhist ethic of *krengjai* (consideration for others) (Komin, 1990). Furthermore, gender socialisation makes females more sensitive to relational conflict signals (Cross & Madson, 1997).

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Thai students report significantly higher teacher–student closeness than Chinese students.
- H2: Chinese students report significantly higher teacher–student conflict than Thai students.
- H3: Thai students report significantly higher WTC than Chinese students.
- H4: The effect of country on TSR and WTC varies by gender.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 1,062 college students from science, technology, and vocational programmes in China ($n = 518$) and Thailand ($n = 544$). The sample included 472 males (295 Thai, 177 Chinese) and 577 females (236 Thai, 341 Chinese); 13 participants did not report gender.

Measures

Teacher–Student Relationships

Our versions of the Student Perceptions of Affective Relationship with Teacher Scale (SPARTS) were validated for this study. In the Chinese version of SPARTS, the Closeness sub-scale had 8 items (e.g., “When I feel uncomfortable, I go to my English teacher for help and comfort”) and the Conflict sub-scale had 10 items (e.g., “I feel my English teacher doesn’t trust me”). Our survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree.”

Willingness to Communicate in L2

Willingness to communicate (WTC) was selected as the primary outcome variable due to its pivotal role in determining language learning success in both ESL and EFL instructional contexts, where effective communication skills are often a primary goal of language education. The WTC measurement instrument presented respondents with fourteen hypothetical communication scenarios in English. For each scenario, participants indicated their likelihood of engagement using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Definitely not willing to”) to 6 (“Definitely willing to”), with intermediate anchors appropriately spaced.

Data Analysis

Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation on the 18 TSR items yielded two factors explaining 77.03% of the total variance. Loadings ranged from 0.735 to 0.880 for closeness (CL1–CL8) and from 0.713 to 0.931 for conflict (CO1–CO10). Cronbach’s α was .945 for closeness and .970 for conflict, indicating excellent reliability.

One-way ANOVA was performed using SPSS, with country and gender as grouping variables; effect sizes were computed.

Results

Overall Country Differences

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and ANOVA results. Thai students scored significantly higher than Chinese students on closeness ($F(1,1060) = 163.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .134$) and WTC ($F = 55.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .050$). Chinese students reported significantly higher conflict ($F = 19.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .018$). H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

Table 1*Comparison of TSR and WTC Between Thai and Chinese Students (N = 1,062)*

Variable	Thai M (SD)	Chinese M (SD)	F(1,1060)	<i>p</i>	η^2
Closeness	3.46 (0.80)	2.82 (0.84)	163.42	< .001	.134
Conflict	2.68 (1.11)	2.97 (1.01)	19.16	< .001	.018
WTC	4.10 (1.13)	3.55 (1.27)	55.68	< .001	.050

Gender-Stratified Comparisons

Table 2 shows results by gender. The most striking finding was the large gender-by-country interaction for conflict: Chinese females perceived considerably higher conflict ($M = 3.11$) than Thai females ($M = 2.42$; $\eta^2 = .105$), whereas the difference for males was negligible ($\eta^2 = .009$). H4 was supported.

Table 2*Gender-Stratified Cross-Cultural Comparisons*

Gender	Variable	Thai M	Chinese M	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
Male	Closeness	3.53	2.86	70.65	< .001	.131
	Conflict	2.90	2.69	4.25	.040	.009
	WTC	4.23	3.64	26.24	< .001	.053
Female	Closeness	3.36	2.80	70.13	< .001	.109
	Conflict	2.42	3.11	67.34	< .001	.105
	WTC	3.94	3.51	18.04	< .001	.030

Discussion

Cultural Scripts and Teacher–Student Emotional Bonds

The higher closeness reported by Thai students aligns with the Thai cultural concepts of *bunkhun* (gratitude/indebtedness) and *krengjai* (reluctance to impose), where teachers are viewed as spiritual guides and emotional reciprocity is normalised. In contrast, the Chinese “respect for teachers” ethic, while valuing deference, maintains emotional distance, creating a combination of high power distance but low affective closeness.

Relational Vulnerability Among Female Learners

Chinese females’ elevated conflict perception deserves special attention. According to Cross and Madson’s (1997) relational self-construal theory, females are more sensitive to negative interpersonal cues. In China’s hierarchical academic culture, teacher criticism or disciplinary acts are more likely to be interpreted by female students as relationship rupture, thereby suppressing English speaking. This “relational vulnerability” calls for pedagogical awareness.

TSR as a Socio-Emotional Foundation for WTC

The results reinforce MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) claim that WTC is a function not only of linguistic competence but also of the classroom's socio-emotional climate. Higher closeness reduces L2 anxiety and increases willingness to communicate.

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

This cross-cultural comparison extends attachment theory to East Asian higher education, revealing that closeness and conflict operate through distinct cultural pathways. It highlights intra-collectivist heterogeneity – Thailand's "harmonious collectivism" versus China's "hierarchical collectivism" – shaping classroom emotional ecologies differently.

Practical Implications

First, Chinese EFL teachers may benefit from incorporating emotionally warm elements from Thai classrooms while maintaining academic authority. Second, gender-sensitive feedback strategies (e.g., the "sandwich method") should be used to reduce conflict perception among female learners. Third, informal teacher–student interactions (e.g., English corners, joint projects) can help mitigate power distance and lower relational tension.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Longitudinal studies could examine cumulative effects of TSR on WTC. Mediators such as L2 anxiety and academic self-efficacy should be explored.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepSeek solely for proofreading and formatting purposes. After the completion of the full manuscript, DeepSeek was employed to check for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors, as well as to verify compliance with the required formatting guidelines. No generative AI was used for idea generation, data analysis, literature synthesis, or any substantive content creation. The authors assume full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of this work.

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