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Advancing the Conceptualization of Willingness to Communicate in China's English Education Landscape: Insights from English Corners

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ABSTRACT

English corners, as informal student-led English-speaking spaces, are widely established across Chinese universities as a response to exam-oriented English instruction, offering opportunities for real communication beyond test preparation. Yet empirical research on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in these contexts remains limited. Guided by Self-determination Theory, this qualitative study examines how peer-led English corners shape students' WTC. Data from 36 undergraduate students were collected through focused essays, asynchronous peer response letters, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that learners' WTC was more intrinsically motivated in English corners than in classroom settings, supported by greater autonomy (e.g., topic choice), competence (e.g., rehearsal), and relatedness (e.g., peer encouragement). Learners also pursued intrinsic goals such as enjoyment, self-growth, and connection. The study positions English corners as motivational ecologies that foster sustainable second language engagement and highlights asynchronous peer response as a novel, low-pressure tool for emotional support and reflective strategy sharing. Implications suggest informal peer-led spaces complement formal instruction by enhancing self-determined motivation, contributing theoretically and methodologically to socially oriented language education.

Keywords: English Corner, Informal Learning, Peer Support, Self-Determination Theory, Willingness to Communicate

INTRODUCTION

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language, commonly defined as an individual's readiness to initiate communication when given the opportunity, is widely regarded as a central outcome of successful language learning (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Wei & Xu, 2022; Yashima, 2002). Early conceptualizations treated WTC as a relatively stable trait associated with personality variables such as extroversion and anxiety (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). However, more recent research has reconceptualized WTC as dynamic, context-sensitive, and shaped by the interaction of cognitive, affective, and situational factors (Cao, 2014; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Syed et al., 2022). Within MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model, WTC is understood as the outcome of multiple interacting layers, ranging from enduring individual differences to moment-to-moment contextual influences, including perceived competence, anxiety, task features, and interpersonal relationships (Lee & Chiu, 2023; Lee & Liu, 2024; Leeming et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022).

Despite this growing recognition of WTC as a situated phenomenon, much of the existing research remains anchored in formal classroom settings, where opportunities for

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communication are often structured, teacher-directed, and linked to assessment (Henry et al., 2024; Freiermuth & Ito, 2020). In many contexts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly those with limited exposure to English beyond institutional environments, learners' communicative engagement is largely confined to such settings (Liu et al., 2024b; Siddiqa & Whyte, 2025; Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024). These environments are frequently shaped by examination-oriented practices that prioritize grammatical knowledge and reading skills, often at the expense of spontaneous spoken interaction (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). As a result, learners may develop substantial linguistic competence without a corresponding readiness to communicate.

This pattern is especially evident in the Chinese tertiary education context, where English instruction commonly emphasizes test preparation and academic performance (Nam et al., 2023). In such environments, learners' motivation is often externally regulated, with limited opportunities to develop personally meaningful reasons to use English beyond institutional requirements. As Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue, motivation plays a crucial role not only in determining the intensity of learning effort but also in shaping learners' behavioral choices, including whether and when they choose to communicate. From this perspective, WTC cannot be fully understood without examining the motivational conditions under which it emerges.

Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) offers a useful framework for understanding these conditions. It posits that high-quality, self-determined motivation arises when three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are satisfied. Within second language acquisition research, these needs have been linked to increased engagement and WTC (Joe et al., 2017; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Noels et al., 2019). Basic Psychological Needs Theory highlights how environments that support choice, provide opportunities for skill development, and foster social connection promote intrinsic motivation, while Goal Contents Theory distinguishes between intrinsic goals (e.g., personal growth, meaningful interaction) and extrinsic goals (e.g., grades, approval), with intrinsic orientations associated with deeper engagement and higher WTC (Khajavy et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2025; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Together, these perspectives enable a more nuanced understanding of how motivational quality shapes communicative behavior.

While Self-determination Theory has been widely applied in classroom-based studies, less attention has been given to how these motivational processes operate in informal, peer-driven learning environments. Emerging research on technology-enhanced language learning environments suggests that learner-driven contexts can support WTC by shaping affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of communication (Huang & Li, 2024; Tai & Chen, 2023; Peng & Liang, 2025). However, digitally mediated interaction does not always replicate the embodied, socially co-constructed nature of face-to-face communication, particularly in terms of emotional resonance and dynamic meaning-making (Bojić et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of examining physical, peer-based informal environments where communication is jointly constructed in real time.

English corners, widely established across Chinese universities, represent one such environment. Typically organized as voluntary, peer-led extracurricular activities, English corners provide opportunities for learners to engage in English through discussions, performances, and collaborative tasks in relatively low-pressure settings (Peng, 2012; Reynolds, 2019). Research has shown that participation in English corners and similar informal spaces can reduce anxiety, increase confidence, and support authentic language use (Chen, 2011; Couto-Cantero & Sanderson, 2018; Reynolds, 2019). These environments have

also been associated with broader outcomes such as intercultural development and social engagement (Liu et al., 2024a; Nam et al., 2023).

However, existing research has largely described the outcomes of participation in English corners without systematically examining the underlying motivational mechanisms that shape learners' WTC within these environments. In addition, while peer interaction is recognized as important, most studies have focused on synchronous communication, with limited attention to how reflective, asynchronous forms of peer engagement may support learners' emotional regulation and strategic development (Ducker, 2021; Cavalari & Aranha, 2022). Asynchronous formats such as response letters and reflective exchanges offer learners time to process experiences, articulate challenges, and provide support in ways that may complement real-time interaction (Alt & Raichel, 2020; Liaqat & Munteanu, 2020). Yet these practices remain underexplored in informal, student-led contexts such as English corners.

These gaps collectively point to the need for a more integrated account of how WTC is shaped in informal, peer-driven environments, particularly through a motivational lens that captures both psychological needs and goal orientations, as well as through methodologies that can trace learners' experiences across time and interactional formats.

In response, this study investigates how learner-driven, peer-supported English corners foster or inhibit university students' WTC in English. It draws on a multi-source qualitative dataset comprising focused essays, asynchronous peer response letters, and semi-structured interviews to examine how learners experience, interpret, and negotiate their communicative engagement in these settings.

This study makes three interconnected contributions. First, it advances a conceptual contribution by extending WTC research into informal, peer-led contexts and positioning English corners as motivational ecologies in which communicative intention emerges through the interaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and learners' goal orientations. Second, it offers a methodological contribution by employing an integrated qualitative design that combines reflective writing, peer interaction, and interviews, enabling a process-oriented and socially grounded understanding of WTC that captures both individual experience and co-constructed meaning. Third, it provides a pedagogical contribution by demonstrating how informal, student-led communicative spaces, together with low-pressure asynchronous peer interaction, can support emotional engagement, strategy development, and sustained participation, offering practical insights for bridging formal and informal language learning environments.

To address these contributions, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors shape learners' WTC in peer-led English corners settings?

RQ2: How does asynchronous peer interaction support or hinder learners' WTC?

RQ3 (exploratory): In what ways do students' accounts suggest differences in WTC between English corners and classroom contexts?

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants and Research Context

The initial participant pool comprised 73 first-year undergraduate students (aged 18–19) enrolled in a student-led English corner program at a university in Guangdong province, China. All participants had achieved scores between 115 and 135 out of 150 on the national university entrance English examination, indicating relatively strong English proficiency. A convenience sampling strategy (Dörnyei, 2007) was employed, reflecting practical

considerations such as accessibility, institutional affiliation, and participants' willingness to engage in the research. From this pool, 36 students were included in the final dataset. Selection was guided not only by availability and consent but also by an effort to ensure variation across academic majors, gender, and English corner participation roles (e.g., speakers, organizers). English majors and students from other universities were excluded to maintain contextual consistency, as their more intensive exposure to English instruction and speaking-focused curricula could introduce confounding motivational factors. While the sample was non-random and volunteer-based, attention to demographic and functional diversity supports the transferability of the findings. It is acknowledged, however, that participants who opted into the study may have exhibited higher levels of communicative motivation or confidence, representing a potential source of self-selection bias.

The English corner examined in this study reflects the defining features of such programs in Chinese universities (Gao, 2009; Peng, 2012), including voluntary, peer-led participation, open access, and flexible activity formats. It is a structured yet student-managed extracurricular initiative comprising six departments, each facilitating distinct communicative activities such as pair discussions (English Corner Channel), drama performances (Come On! Debut), science-themed presentations (I Discover), and intercultural dialogues (Chitchat Column). While guided by a faculty advisor, the program is primarily student-run, with participation and leadership roles shaped by students' English proficiency and willingness to engage in communicative practice.

Instruments and data collection

To explore learners' WTC in a naturalistic, informal context and examine its motivational underpinnings, the study employed three data sources: focused essays, peer response letters, and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were designed to capture individual experiences, reciprocal peer engagement, and in-depth reflection, enabling methodological triangulation.

Participants submitted focused essays weekly via the *Wenjuanxing* platform over a six-week data collection period. Prompts invited them to describe moments when they felt most or least willing to communicate in English and to reflect on associated emotions, interlocutors, and task conditions (e.g., "Describe a time in English corner when you wanted or didn't want to speak. What influenced this?"). Based on MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) focused essay method, this approach elicited context-rich, affect-laden accounts aligned with the study's focus on motivational processes. Instructions were provided in both English and Chinese, and responses were accepted in either language to support depth and authenticity.

A total of 78 focused essays were collected, comprising 52 entries from Weeks 1–2 and 26 entries from Week 6. Each essay was approximately 300 words in length. An anonymized example of a focused essay entry is presented in Figure 1.

在我去英语角的活动中，我和我旁边的好朋友一起讨论主持人在节目中提出的问题，我最愿意说英语。我和好朋友都是英语角的成员，她具备成长型思维，不会因为语法错误或者发音不标准而去批判别人，在她身旁，我有积极回答问题的意愿。这次感受让我体验良好，我觉得我能够在轻松的环境下提升我说英语的流利度。 During one of the English Corner activities, I felt most willing to speak English when I was discussing the host's question with my close friend sitting next to me. Both of us are members of the English Corner. She has a growth mindset and never criticizes others for grammar mistakes or mispronunciations. Being around her, I felt a strong willingness to respond to questions actively. This experience gave me a good feeling—I felt that I could improve my English fluency in a relaxed environment.
我是英语角社团的负责人，我需要对他们的表演进行反馈，当我感觉语言能力有限的时候，我会最不愿意说英语，因为不知道怎么表达，就会停滞反馈进度。比如我当时忘记了说悄悄话whisper 的表达，我当时想表达“当你想要表现的是说悄悄话的时候，不要真的说的很小声”。但是我太卡顿了，一时不知道怎么表达。 I'm the leader of the English Corner club, and I need to give feedback on others' performances. When I feel limited in my language ability, I feel least willing to speak English, because I don't know how to express myself, and it delays the feedback process. For example, I once forgot the word "whisper". I wanted to say: "When what you're trying to show is whispering, don't actually speak too softly". But I got stuck—I didn't know how to say it at that moment.

Figure 1 Anonymized Example of A Focused Essay Entry

In addition, participants completed peer response letters in Weeks 3 and 6. In this task, students responded to a peer's account of their WTC or unwillingness to communicate, reflecting on shared experiences and offering suggestions or encouragement. Participants were randomly paired via WeChat and guided by prompts such as "What part of your peer's experience resonates with your own?" and "What advice or encouragement would you offer?" A total of 22 response letters were collected, each approximately 1000 words in length. These letters provided insight into how learners interpreted and responded to peers' emotional and strategic challenges, offering an additional perspective on communicative experiences. An anonymized example of a peer response letter is provided in Figure 2.

Response letter from Wan to Du	
亲爱的同学： 非常有幸，能看到你在学习英语中发生过这么有趣的经历！对于那些你十分乐意学习英语的时刻，我在字里行间感受到了speak English真真正正给你带来大的乐趣，当然也少不了与朋友，或外国友人交谈带来的感染力！	Dear fellow student, It's such a pleasure to read about the interesting experiences you've had while learning English! Through your words, I can truly feel the great joy that speaking English brings you—especially when it's combined with the contagious energy of chatting with friends or international guests!
在第一个场景中，你和学姐以及朋友Chris用英文聊到专业和喜欢的电影，旅游胜地。想来都是很美的话题，相信以后，你也可以用英文或者其他语言畅谈所有，从个人的superhero，到人生理想和各个里程碑。相信speak English时，是你的思考与回忆给予了这门语言更多的浪漫！	In the first scene you described, you talked about your major, favorite movies, and travel destinations in English with your senior and your friend Chris. Those all sound like such beautiful topics. I believe that in the future, you'll be able to talk freely in English—or even other languages—about everything from your personal superhero to your life ideals and milestones. I'm sure that when you speak English, it's your thoughts and memories that give the language its extra sense of romance!
看到你不愿说英语的例子，想来也是我的通病。很大部分是应试教育的问题。克服哑巴英语maybe只能多说，直面恐惧。说了总比不说好，语言最重要的是传递信息，也许我们都太看重别人的想法，先大胆说才能练！加油！	As for your example of being unwilling to speak English—honestly, that resonates with me a lot. I think it's a common problem, largely rooted in exam-oriented education. Overcoming "mute English" may require us to simply speak more and face our fears head-on. Speaking is always better than staying silent. After all, the core purpose of language is to convey meaning. Maybe we care too much about what others think—but only by speaking boldly can we truly practice! Keep going!
所以，我们应该具备成长性思维，在老师面前或者其他重要场合前，放松表达，相信自己。不需要追求完美，只需要做好像平常一样的准备就可以。我和你约定，一起在重要场合放松自己，不必苛求。静静感受自己的英语表达进步。	Therefore, we should adopt a growth mindset. Whether in front of teachers or in other important situations, let's learn to express ourselves with ease and trust in our abilities. We don't need to be perfectly prepared as we normally would. I make a promise with you. Let's both relax in important moments, stop being so hard on ourselves, and quietly feel the progress in our English expression.

Figure 2 Anonymized example of a peer response letter

To clarify data sources, excerpts in the analysis are labeled as follows: "Focused essay", "Response letter", and "Interview". All participant names are pseudonyms. Both focused essays and response letters were originally written in Chinese or English; where necessary, English translations are provided to support reader comprehension.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants whose written responses demonstrated particularly rich reflection on motivational and communicative experiences. Selection was based on the presence of detailed narratives, explicit emotional content, and relevance to the study's analytical focus. Participants were purposively chosen to ensure variation in gender, English corner participation roles, and expressed levels of WTC. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and generated approximately 3,200 words of transcribed data. These interviews enabled deeper exploration of themes emerging from the written data, particularly in relation to motivational orientations and contextual comparisons between English corner and classroom settings.

Data analysis

All data from focused essays, peer response letters, and interviews were transcribed and translated from Chinese to English where necessary. To preserve semantic accuracy, two bilingual postgraduate researchers independently reviewed the translations.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which emphasizes the researcher's active role in meaning-making and the iterative development of themes. The analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, coding was conducted inductively across the datasets using NVivo 14. Focused essays and peer response letters were initially analyzed separately, with each text read line by line to generate open codes capturing key concepts, emotions, and communicative strategies. These codes were then grouped into preliminary themes through an iterative process that examined patterns and relationships across participants' experiences.

In the second stage, a theory-informed interpretive analysis was conducted to examine how these emergent themes related to learners' motivational processes. At this stage, semi-structured interview data were integrated into the analysis, enabling further refinement and elaboration of themes. Interview transcripts were coded inductively alongside the written data, allowing for cross-validation as well as the identification of additional insights. In some cases, interview data revealed underlying fluctuations and tensions that were less visible in written reflections, thereby enriching the overall interpretation.

Importantly, constructs from Self-determination Theory were not used as predefined coding categories. Instead, they were applied in a secondary interpretive phase to illuminate patterns that had already emerged inductively from the data. These constructs functioned as sensitizing concepts, supporting the interpretation of themes related to autonomy, competence, relatedness, and goal orientations, without constraining or predetermining the coding process. Where themes did not align directly with these constructs, they were retained and analyzed on their own terms. The integration of these interpretive categories with inductively generated themes is illustrated in Table 1, which presents representative excerpts across data sources.

Throughout the analysis, analytical memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and evolving insights. Regular discussions between researchers were used to refine theme development and ensure theoretical sensitivity while preserving the richness and complexity of the data. By integrating multiple data sources and combining inductive and theory-informed analysis, the study achieved coherence across datasets and a nuanced understanding of learners' communicative experiences.

Table 1 Self-determination Theory informed codes and illustrative participant excerpts across data sources

Self-determination Theory Construct	Operational Definition	Illustrative Excerpt (Data Source)
Autonomy	Expressions of volition, self-initiation, or choice	觉得回答什么完全由我自己决定 (Fei, RL) *I felt that what I chose to say in response was entirely up to me.*
Competence	Indications of confidence, improvement, or task mastery	我感觉特别棒…成功地运用英语清晰地表达了自己的想法 (Ding, FE) *I felt really great... I successfully used English to clearly express my thoughts.*
Relatedness	Signs of emotional connection, support, or inclusion	对于你的Unwilling经历，我也感同身受，因为英语毕竟不是我们自己的母语呀，这非常的正常！(Chan, RL) *I totally empathize with your unwilling experience, because after all, English isn't our mother tongue — it's completely normal!*
Intrinsic goals	Motivation linked to enjoyment, growth, or connection	AI确实是一个挺好的工具，但我个人我更喜欢跟真人去聊天，感觉这样更加有成就感。(Kai, Int) *AI is indeed quite a useful tool, but personally, I prefer chatting with real people — it feels more rewarding that way.*
Extrinsic goals	Motivation tied to grades, approval, or comparison	我临场发挥了一小段，…得到了身旁小伙伴的认可, 这让我感到很开心 (Guo, FE) *I improvised a short bit on the spot... and got recognition from the peers next to me — that made me really happy*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the key findings from the data, organized into three interrelated dimensions that explain how learners experienced and navigated their WTC in English corner activities: (1) choice and agency in communication, (2) confidence and capability in language use, and (3) the social environment of peer interaction. Together, these dimensions highlight how learners' readiness to communicate was shaped by the extent to which they could make meaningful choices, feel prepared and capable, and participate in supportive and responsive group settings.

Sections 3.1 and 3.2 address RQ1 by examining how opportunities for choice, preparation, and feedback influenced learners' willingness to communicate. Section 3.3 addresses RQ2 by focusing on the role of peer interaction, including both real-time and asynchronous forms of engagement. Finally, Section 3.4 addresses RQ3 by presenting learners' spontaneous comparisons between English corner and classroom contexts, offering additional insights into how communicative conditions vary across settings.

Exercising Choice and Expressing Self Through Language Use

This theme addresses RQ1 by examining how learners' WTC was shaped by opportunities to make meaningful choices and express their perspectives in English corner

activities. Across the data, learners reported greater WTC when they could decide what to talk about, how to participate, and how to present themselves in interaction. These conditions enabled more engaged and self-directed communication, often linked to personal interest and relevance.

A central pattern in participants' accounts was the importance of topic choice. In focused essays, learners frequently described increased WTC when discussing subjects aligned with their interests, such as music, gaming, or popular culture. As Tian noted, "*When I talked about my favorite band, it was totally my choice. I wanted to speak because I cared about the topic*." (Focused essay). This sense of personal relevance made communication feel purposeful rather than obligatory.

Flexibility in participation formats further supported this willingness. Learners could choose between activities such as drama performances, paired discussions, or small-group conversations, and could also take on less visible roles when they felt less confident. This adaptability allowed them to regulate their level of engagement while remaining involved in the communicative environment. As Lei explained, "*Even when I was nervous, I knew I could choose something else or just help with preparation. That freedom helped me speak more*." (Focused essay).

Participants also emphasized the value of communicative tasks that felt authentic and meaningful. Interactions such as conversations with visiting speakers, role-play activities, and collaborative event preparation were described as opportunities to use English for real purposes rather than as classroom exercises. As Hui reflected, "*I felt like I was really using English, not just doing an exercise*." (Focused essay). These experiences appeared to strengthen learners' WTC by connecting language use to personally and socially meaningful contexts.

Although this theme centers on individual choice and expression, learners' accounts also suggest that these experiences were supported by the surrounding social environment. Familiarity with peers and shared participation reduced anxiety and encouraged risk-taking. As Min described, "*We encouraged each other before the show. Because we were all nervous, it actually felt safe to try.*" (Focused essay). In this way, opportunities for choice and expression were closely intertwined with a supportive group atmosphere, which enabled learners to participate more confidently.

Building Confidence Through Preparation, Rehearsal, and Peer Feedback

This theme highlights the role of perceived readiness and capability in shaping learners' WTC across different interactional situations. Across the data, learners reported greater WTC when they felt prepared, could draw on rehearsed language, and received supportive feedback from peers. Conversely, sudden speaking demands and perceived linguistic limitations often reduced their willingness to participate.

Preparation emerged as a key factor supporting learners' confidence. Many participants described feeling more willing to speak when they had time to rehearse or organize their ideas in advance. Repeated practice, particularly in structured activities such as drama performances, helped learners internalize language and focus on delivery rather than formulation. As Wen noted, "*After doing the skit several times, I knew what to say and how to say it. I felt more confident on stage*." (Focused essay). Similarly, in a response letter, Lina reassured a peer: "*If I go over my lines enough, I can focus on delivery and feel more at ease*." (Response letter). These accounts suggest that preparation reduced cognitive load and enabled more fluent participation.

In contrast, unanticipated speaking demands often undermined learners' WTC. Situations such as impromptu speeches, unrehearsed hosting roles, or being asked to speak

without warning were frequently associated with hesitation or withdrawal. As Jie explained, "*When I had to introduce the guest on the spot, my mind went blank. I couldn't find any words*." (Focused essay). Lulu expressed a similar concern: "*I'm fine if I can prepare, but if I have to speak suddenly, especially in front of others, I get very anxious*." (Interview). These moments highlight how a lack of preparation disrupted learners' ability to formulate responses and reduced their confidence in communication.

Linguistic limitations also played an important role in shaping learners' willingness to speak. Participants frequently referred to difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, or expression, particularly in more complex discussions. For example, one learner described being unable to articulate a viewpoint due to missing terminology: "*I knew what I wanted to say about the pink tax, but I didn't know how to say it in English*." (Focused essay). Others noted that even familiar language became inaccessible under pressure, leading to withdrawal from interaction. These experiences indicate that perceived gaps in linguistic resources constrained participation, especially in cognitively demanding or socially visible situations.

At the same time, some learners actively developed strategies to manage these challenges. In response letters, peers shared practical suggestions such as preparing key words in advance or using digital tools to rehearse speaking. For instance, one student wrote, "*If you worry about forgetting words, maybe prepare some keywords in advance. It helps me stay on track*." (Response letter), while another noted, "*I practice speaking with ChatGPT before activities. It helps me hear myself and fix small errors*." (Response letter). These strategies reflect learners' efforts to improve fluency and maintain participation despite linguistic difficulties.

Peer feedback also contributed to learners' WTC. Participants described informal encouragement, such as positive comments or acknowledgment from peers, as reinforcing their confidence and motivating further participation. As Shan explained, "*When someone says 'you did well' or 'that was interesting,' it boosts my confidence a lot*." (Interview). Such feedback was typically perceived as supportive rather than evaluative, helping learners feel more comfortable contributing to discussions.

However, learners also reported sensitivity to social comparison, particularly when interacting with more proficient peers. In some cases, this led to hesitation or self-censorship. As Liang noted, "*I admire her English, but I feel embarrassed to talk in the same group. I worry I'll sound stupid*." (Focused essay). These accounts suggest that while supportive feedback could enhance confidence, perceived differences in proficiency could have the opposite effect, reducing learners' willingness to participate.

To summarise the key factors shaping learners' WTC across Sections 3.1 and 3.2, Table 2 presents a synthesis of the main dimensions identified in the analysis.

Table 2 Key dimensions shaping learners' WTC in English Corner settings (RQ1)

Dimension	Key Factors Influencing WTC
Choice and agency	- Freedom to choose topics and formats - Voluntary participation - Opportunities to express personal interests
Confidence and capability	- Preparation and rehearsal - Use of strategies (e.g., keyword planning, rehearsal tools) - Supportive feedback from peers
Social environment	- Supportive, encouraging peer environment - Encouraging peer atmosphere - Emotional safety and familiarity - Collaboration and mutual support - Sensitivity to peer comparison

Relatedness and Peer Support: Building Belonging Through Social Connection

This theme addresses RQ2 by examining how peer interaction shaped learners' WTC through the social environment of English corner activities, with particular attention to asynchronous peer response. Across the data, learners highlighted the importance of emotional safety, encouragement, and shared participation in supporting their WTC. At the same time, the absence of these conditions could reduce engagement.

A consistent pattern in participants' accounts was the role of group atmosphere in shaping communicative behavior. Learners reported greater willingness to speak when interactions were perceived as supportive and non-judgmental. As Shan explained, "*If the group feels warm and open, I'm more relaxed. Even if I make mistakes, it doesn't matter*." (Interview). In contrast to classroom settings often associated with evaluation, English corner interactions were described as collaborative, allowing learners to participate without fear of negative judgment.

Peer encouragement played an important role in reinforcing participation. Participants frequently referred to moments where positive responses from others increased their confidence and motivation to speak. For example, one learner recalled, "*After my first speech, my group clapped and said 'good job'. I didn't expect that, and it really made me want to try again*." (Focused essay). Such interactions created a cycle in which participation was acknowledged and sustained through social support.

Learners also described communication as a shared activity rather than an individual performance. In collaborative settings, students supported each other during tasks, which helped reduce pressure and maintain engagement. Tan explained, "*She forgot her lines, so I whispered them to her. Later she said thank you. It made me feel like I belonged there*." (Focused essay). These small acts of cooperation contributed to a sense of involvement and encouraged continued participation.

At the same time, the absence of responsive interaction could quickly reduce learners' WTC. Some participants described situations where limited feedback or lack of engagement from peers led to withdrawal. As Hui noted, "*When no one answers or makes eye contact, I just want to stop trying*." (Interview). These accounts suggest that participation depended not only on individual readiness but also on how others responded in the interaction.

The asynchronous peer response task provided an additional form of social support by allowing learners to reflect on experiences and respond to peers in a less immediate, lower-pressure format. Many participants used response letters to express empathy, share similar experiences, and offer practical suggestions. For example, Jing wrote, "*You were brave to speak up. I get nervous too, but seeing you do it inspires me*." (Response letter). These exchanges extended interaction beyond real-time activities and created space for reflection and encouragement.

However, not all asynchronous interactions were equally effective. In some cases, responses focused mainly on advice or surface-level suggestions without engaging with the emotional aspects of the original account. These responses were perceived as less meaningful, highlighting that the value of peer interaction depended on the degree of personal engagement. Rather than hindering participation directly, such exchanges represented missed opportunities for deeper connection and support.

Spontaneous Comparisons with Classroom Contexts: Emergent Insights

Although the study focused on learners' WTC in English corner activities, some participants spontaneously compared these experiences with classroom-based interaction when describing moments of reluctance or engagement. These comparisons, particularly evident in interviews and response letters, provide additional insight into how different learning environments shape communicative behavior.

Several participants described classroom settings as anxiety-inducing, often associated with unpredictability and fear of evaluation. Shang recalled the experience of being called on in class:

When the teacher started looking around the room, my heart was just pounding. I tried to sink into my seat and kept thinking, 'Please don't call on me.' Speaking English has always been a bit hard for me and just imagining doing it in front of everyone made my hands sweat and my throat feel tight. (Shang, Interview)

Such accounts suggest that perceived pressure and public exposure can discourage participation, even when learners possess the necessary language knowledge.

At the same time, classroom environments were not uniformly constraining. Some participants reported increased WTC when activities were interactive, collaborative, and less evaluative. For example, Ping described a group-based activity:

We did this murder mystery game in class, and honestly, it was really fun. Everyone got into it the role cards were in English, so using English just felt natural. It didn't feel hard at all. (Ping, Interview)

This example indicates that classroom contexts can also support participation when tasks are engaging and socially oriented.

Other accounts reflected more ambivalent experiences. Learners sometimes expressed a desire to speak English but refrained due to perceived peer norms. As Lin explained:

In our English class group discussion, almost all the groups spoke Chinese except when reading out prepared English answers. In that kind of setting, I felt even less inclined to use English. Maybe it's a kind of conformity… I didn't want to be the only one doing it and risk seeming pretentious. (Lin, Interview)

This suggests that learners' participation is influenced not only by task design but also by the interactional norms of the group.

These comparisons indicate that classroom environments offer a shifting set of conditions that can either support or constrain communication, depending on how tasks are structured and how interaction unfolds. Rather than being inherently limiting, classrooms were experienced as variable spaces in which learners adjusted their participation in response to both situational and social cues.

Discussion

Building on prior research that positions English corner activities as low-pressure spaces for communication (Chen, 2011; Peng, 2012, 2024; Reynolds, 2019), this study provides a more fine-grained account of how learners' WTC is shaped within such environments. Drawing on a multi-source qualitative dataset, the findings show that learners' participation was influenced by the interaction of opportunities for choice, a sense of readiness and capability, and the quality of peer interaction. Rather than treating English corner settings as uniformly facilitative, the analysis demonstrates how these conditions were actively interpreted and negotiated by learners across situations.

Against this background, the study makes three contributions. Conceptually, it reframes English corner activities as dynamic communicative environments in which WTC

emerges through the interplay of individual, social, and task-related factors. Methodologically, it shows how combining focused essays, asynchronous peer response, and interviews can capture both immediate and reflective dimensions of communicative experience. From a pedagogical perspective, it highlights how informal, student-led spaces, together with structured opportunities for peer interaction, can support sustained engagement and complement classroom-based learning.

English corner as a communicative environment

First, the findings extend existing research by showing that learners' WTC is shaped by the interaction of three key conditions: opportunities for choice, a sense of readiness and capability, and a supportive social environment. Rather than operating independently, these conditions worked together to enable or constrain participation across situations. Learners were more willing to communicate when they could engage with personally meaningful topics, draw on preparation or prior experience, and interact in settings perceived as non-evaluative and socially supportive.

In this respect, the study builds on previous research highlighting English corner activities as low-pressure environments that reduce anxiety and encourage participation (Chen, 2011; Peng, 2012, 2024; Reynolds, 2019). However, the present findings move beyond describing these environments as simply "low-pressure" by showing how learners actively interpret and respond to specific features of interaction, such as task flexibility, peer dynamics, and opportunities for self-expression. This shifts the focus from structural characteristics to learners' situated experiences of participation.

The findings also highlight the dynamic nature of WTC across contexts. As shown in the comparative accounts, classroom environments were not uniformly constraining; rather, learners' participation varied depending on task design, interactional norms, and perceived expectations. This supports a view of WTC as context-dependent and continuously negotiated, rather than fixed or determined by a single environment.

Capturing WTC through multi-source and asynchronous data

Second, this study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of combining focused essays, peer response letters, and interviews to capture learners' communicative experiences across different modes and timeframes. This design enabled the analysis to move beyond single-point accounts and to examine how learners reflected on, responded to, and reinterpreted their experiences over time.

In particular, the inclusion of asynchronous peer response letters provides a novel perspective on peer-supported communication. While previous research has focused primarily on real-time interaction (e.g., Ducker, 2021), the present study shows that delayed, written exchanges can also play an important role in supporting participation. The response letters allowed learners to articulate experiences, express empathy, and share strategies in a less immediate and less pressured format, thereby extending communicative engagement beyond face-to-face interaction.

These findings suggest that asynchronous interaction can complement real-time communication by creating additional space for reflection and meaning-making. At the same time, the variability in response quality observed in the data indicates that such formats are not uniformly effective, and that their impact depends on the degree of personal engagement and responsiveness within peer interaction.

Implications for Informal and Formal Learning Environments

Third, the findings offer pedagogical insights into how communicative environments can be designed to support sustained participation. The results suggest that informal, student-led settings can provide conditions that are not always available in classroom contexts, particularly in terms of flexibility, emotional safety, and opportunities for peer support. These conditions enabled learners to engage more consistently and with greater confidence in communication.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that classroom environments are inherently less effective. Rather, they indicate that certain features, such as meaningful task design, opportunities for collaboration, and reduced evaluative pressure, can enhance WTC across contexts. This points to the potential for integrating elements of informal learning into formal instruction.

The use of asynchronous peer interaction also has practical implications. Structured opportunities for reflective exchange, such as response letters, may support learners who benefit from additional time to process experiences and formulate responses. Such practices can complement spoken interaction by encouraging reflection, strategy development, and mutual support.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how WTC develops within a student-led English corners in a Chinese university context. Drawing on multiple data sources, the findings show that learners' participation was shaped by the interplay of meaningful choice, perceived readiness, and the quality of peer interaction. Rather than simply increasing opportunities to speak, English corner activities appeared to reshape the conditions under which learners chose to engage, particularly by reducing perceived pressure and supporting more socially grounded forms of communication.

These findings suggest several pedagogical implications. First, informal peer-led initiatives such as English corner activities may be considered as complementary extensions of classroom instruction rather than peripheral activities. In contexts where formal learning is shaped by examination demands, such environments can provide opportunities for learners to engage in communication in more flexible and less evaluative ways. As Reynolds (2019) notes, informal settings can play an important role in supporting spoken language development, which is often underrepresented in formal curricula.

Second, the use of asynchronous peer interaction, such as response letters, offers a practical way to support reflection and sustained engagement. The findings indicate that written exchanges can create additional space for learners to process experiences, share strategies, and respond to peers without the immediacy of real-time interaction. With appropriate guidance, similar practices could be incorporated into classroom contexts to complement spoken activities.

Third, the study highlights the importance of designing communicative environments that balance structure with flexibility. Opportunities for learners to make choices, collaborate with peers, and participate at different levels of visibility can support more consistent engagement. Classroom practices that incorporate elements of choice, shared tasks, and peer support may help bridge the gap between formal instruction and informal communicative experiences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single university and involved a relatively small group of self-selecting participants with

comparatively high English proficiency, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative design provided detailed insights into learners' experiences, it did not capture changes in willingness to communicate over time or establish causal relationships. In addition, the specific institutional and cultural context of the English corner may not be directly transferable to other settings.

Future research could extend this work by adopting longitudinal designs to examine how WTC develops over time, or by comparing different institutional contexts to explore how similar initiatives function across settings. Further investigation is also needed into how learners with varying levels of confidence and proficiency engage in peer-led environments, and how different forms of peer interaction, including written and spoken formats, can be designed to support diverse learner needs.

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