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The mediating role of student engagement: How Teacher-Student relationships and collaborative learning activities influence willingness to communicate in college English classroom

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the factors influencing students' willingness to communicate in English in College English classroom management, as well as the mediating role of student engagement in the relationship between these factors and students' willingness to communicate. A Quantitative research design was adopted for this study. The research participants consisted of 344 non-English major freshmen from a Jiangxi university. Data analysis was conducted using path analysis. The results showed that teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities had a significant positive correlation with willingness to communicate. Teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities have a significant positive correlation with student engagement, and student engagement has a significant positive correlation with willingness to communicate. The mediating effect of student engagement on each variable and willingness to communicate is significant.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, Student engagement, Teacher-Student relationship, College English classroom, Collaborative learning activities

1. Introduction

Developing learners' communicative competence is the primary goal of English language teaching, but this is closely related to their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English (Lu, 2024). In research regarding the actual management of college English classroom teaching, a common phenomenon is that students exhibit a low willingness to express themselves in English. While they may be able to express their ideas in their native language, many students choose to remain silent or speak very little when required to use English. Students who are unwilling to communicate in a second language may not achieve the expected language learning outcomes (Lu, 2024). Students' willingness to communicate in English is not only a hot topic of close attention among scholars but also an important issue of great concern to teachers. Why do some individuals choose to speak up when they have the opportunity to communicate in English, while others remain silent? Why do some students never speak a second language, even after years of study? This issue is not simple, and various relevant influencing factors should be taken into consideration.

Student classroom engagement is one of the important aspects of classroom management and directly influences the quality and effectiveness of learning (Lu, 2020). The American educator Peter Renshaw once said, 'Contact, comprehensive analysis, and practical participation are the three main elements of learning.' The learning approaches advocated by the New Curriculum Reform in China, such as autonomous learning, cooperative learning, and inquiry-based learning, also take active student participation as a prerequisite. In this regard, educational researchers all emphasize the importance of student classroom engagement. Therefore, this paper explores the concept of classroom engagement to investigate students' willingness to communicate in English, which holds certain theoretical value and practical significance.

College English is a compulsory public course for almost all non-English major university students in China. Therefore, this study focuses on non-English major undergraduates as its research subjects and

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employs a questionnaire survey method. The findings indicate that the main factors contributing to the current low willingness to communicate in English among students in College English classrooms include several dimensions: Teacher-student Relationship, Collaborative Learning Activities, Inclusive Classroom Atmosphere, and Student Engagement. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires, this study identifies which factors have a significant impact on student participation, as well as the mediating role of student participation between the influencing factors and the willingness to communicate in English. Finally, corresponding suggestions for improving students' willingness to communicate in English are proposed based on the aforementioned survey results and analysis.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher-student relationship

Learning is a social and interactive process. Teachers provide students with an environment for meaning construction through support and feedback. A supportive and interactive teaching style can stimulate students to actively participate in discussions and expressions, thereby enhancing their willingness to communicate. If the teaching style gives students the space to choose and express themselves, it can meet their autonomy needs and enhance their communicative motivation (Lu, 2020). Teacher feedback can help students see their own progress and enhance their confidence in communication. Timely, positive and encouraging feedback provides students with a "scaffold" for constructing knowledge, reduces communication anxiety and enhances self-efficacy. Teaching style and feedback reflect the teacher's respect and support for students, meeting their relational needs and making them feel accepted and encouraged. Therefore, the teacher-student relationship is one of the most important factors in the classroom environment. Exploring the imagination of teachers' words and deeds and teaching styles on students' willingness to communicate is also a recent research direction for students.

Some study found that communication between teachers and students has an impact on students' willingness to communicate. The credibility and immediacy behaviors of teachers in classroom communication predict WTC only indirectly through the mediating effect of emotional variables. Motivation and communication confidence play a mediating role between credibility and WTC, while immediacy plays a mediating role between WTC (Fakieh, 2022). Another study explored the influence of teachers and teaching styles on the second language communication ability of Chinese English learners, and the connection between teaching styles and WTC is closer. This disparity is attributed to differences in social expectations, learning cultures, and opportunities to use English outside of foreign classrooms. This research can provide inspiration for the pedagogy of English teaching from the perspective of English as a multicentered language(Xuemei,20221). Lili Song (2022) found through Spearman correlation analysis that there was a good correlation among the variables. Multiple regression analysis examined the potential of teacher care and teacher-student relationship in predicting WTC of Chinese English learners. The results of multiple regression analysis show that teachers' caring behaviors and teacher-student relationships have significant predictive effects on the second foreign language learning ability of Chinese English learners.

2.2 Collaborative learning activities

Collaborative learning activities and student engagement have been extensively researched (Hong,2025). The task serves as a bond for interaction among students. If appropriate language tasks can be selected or designed, the interaction among students resulting from this will be positive and meaningful, which can help students' language learning. Research shows that the majority of students support this cooperative task because it effectively utilizes multiple dimensions of student participation, increases positive behavioral engagement, promotes positive emotional engagement, and deepens cognitive engagement during the process (Zhe, 2021). Meanwhile, peer support can also enhance students' participation process in group activities (Hong, 2025). By providing students with feasible and collaborative teaching tasks, students can become active classroom participants. The role of tasks is very important for language learners. Completing the corresponding

tasks not only enables learners to further consolidate their language skills, but also allows them to participate more in the classroom.

It can be seen from this that among the influencing factors of communication willingness, the role of peers is very important, as is the significance of the teaching method of cooperative learning. Therefore, this study selects collaborative activities as the influencing factor. In the classroom environment, only collaborative activities can maximize the interaction, cooperation and mutual influence among peers It mainly includes Sharing & discussion and Peer support.

2.3 Student engagement

Since the start of the 21st century, the concept of student engagement has grown in prevalence within higher education scholarship (Su, 2023). Conceptualized as a flexible, multifaceted construct, it encompasses three interrelated components: behavioral involvement, emotional investment, and cognitive commitment (Megan, Suzanne, & Tony, 2020).

Behavioral engagement denotes students' observable participation in learning tasks, such as adhering to classroom norms, actively engaging with instructor prompts, fulfilling assigned coursework, and maintaining focus amid distractions (Lu, 2020). Cognitive engagement describes the depth of mental effort and critical thinking students apply to grasp concepts, develop skills, and resolve challenges in English learning, including the strategic use of varied learning approaches to process information (Shi, 2023). Emotional engagement refers to learners' affective reactions and attitudes toward their studies, such as interest, enthusiasm, and a sense of belonging and satisfaction with instructors, peers, and the classroom environment (Li, 2023). A review of existing literature and scholarly work confirms that student engagement is a vital component of effective instruction, with levels of participation often serving as a key indicator of classroom success (Hao, 2023). Thus, investigating student engagement in classroom settings can yield valuable insights for enhancing teaching quality.

2.4 Willingness to communicate in english

The notion of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was first proposed by McCroskey and Baer in the context of first-language interaction, referring to an individual's readiness to participate in interpersonal exchanges. McCroskey & Baer (1985) framed WTC as the likelihood that a person would initiate communication when given a choice. In the late 1990s, MacIntyre et al. (1998) extended this concept to second-language acquisition (SLA), defining WTC as "the desire to interact with a particular person in a non-native language at a specific moment." MacIntyre et al. (1999) further elaborated that WTC exhibits both trait-like and state-like properties: the trait dimension reflects a stable disposition to initiate conversation across potential communication scenarios, while the state dimension captures context-dependent variability in whether communication actually occurs. They argued that second-language learners' WTC fluctuates across time and situations, and thus should be viewed not as a fixed personality trait but as a situational construct shaped by both enduring and transient factors. The trait component lends stability to WTC across contexts, while the state component makes it dynamic and responsive to immediate circumstances. Additionally, MacIntyre and colleagues highlighted that WTC in a second language differs from that in the first language due to the inherent uncertainty of L2 use, which interacts more intricately with factors such as language proficiency, perceived communicative competence, cultural differences, personality, self-esteem, and emotional stability—suggesting a stronger state-based nature (MacIntyre et al., 1999; Shi, 2008).

Building on MacIntyre et al.'s framework, subsequent scholars have advanced context-specific interpretations of WTC. Kang (2005), for example, introduced the idea of contextual WTC, defining it as "an individual's willingness and tendency to actively engage in communicative acts within a given setting, which varies according to contextual factors such as the interlocutor, conversation partners, and situational context." Peng (2017) characterized English WTC as "the inclination to engage in English conversation with a specific person at a particular time."

In summary, WTC is best understood as a state-like, dynamic construct that shifts across different contexts. As this study focuses on Chinese non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English, we adopt the following definition: "learners' psychological tendency or readiness to actively engage in English communication in specific situations, irrespective of whether their language skills allow for perfect expression.

2.5 Student engagement and willingness to communicate

There are relatively few studies on the impact of student engagement on willingness to communicate. Currently, there is a study by Seeder Javidkar et al (Seeder, Hoda, Masoud, &Ali, 2022). They studied EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate, Self-Regulation, Academic Engagement, and Perceived Locus of Control. The study evaluated the causal paths among a series of individual and contextual variables. Based on the findings, a new model of AST→SR→AE→WTC→LOC emerged. It is indicated that academic engagement has a positive impact on WTC. The research results suggest that teachers clearly state their expectations, give them the opportunity to participate in tasks, and inform them of the basic principles of learning (Seeder, Hoda , Masoud & Ali, 2022). In this way, students will be more capable of controlling the way they learn, express and present themselves by organizing their thoughts and communication.

Another related study is Lin Jie's (2025) Exploring Chinese university students' foreign language enjoyment, engagement and willingness to communicate in EFL speaking classes (Lin&Wang 2025). The research results and the findings showed that fostering positive emotions and nurturing behavioral engagement can significantly and positively impact students' WTC. These results highlight the interplay between FLE and behavioral engagement in shaping WTC, emphasizing the need to consider both emotional and behavioral perspectives in WTC research.

Over the past two decades, growing attention has been dedicated to the construct of learning engagement.Several studies have recognized engagement as essential to successful language learning (Marcia&Teixeira, 2024). Within Applied Linguistics, engagement represents a relatively novel but growing field of research (Hiver, Mercer & Al-Hoorie, 2021). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) believe that, in language teaching, especially in communicative contexts, a fundamental notion of pedagogical approaches is keeping learners' attention and ensuring genuine on-task behavior.

There is still too little research on the relationship between them. This study will continue the impact of student engagement on WTC. Because student engagement is of great significance in the classroom environment, especially in language classes, the key to improving English communication skills lies in the learners' autonomous learning practice. The cultivation of communication skills should mainly focus on autonomous learning. The quality of a class depends on students' reactions. No matter how meticulous the teaching design is, it is in vain without students' participation. Only when students engage in the class and their initiative and enthusiasm are fully mobilized can the teaching be effective. In the process of full engagement, students' willingness to express themselves can be fully mobilized.

3.Methodology

3.1 Research objectives

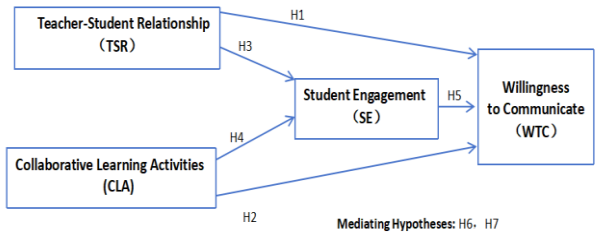
The specific research objectives that directed the present study were as follows:

·To assess the effect of teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities on willingness to communicate in English in College English classroom.
·To examine the influence of teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities on student's engagement in College English classroom.
·To analyze the effect of student's engagement on willingness to communicate in English in College English classroom.
·To investigate mediating role of student's engagement between teacher-student relationship, collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate.

3.2 Research conceptual framework

The dependent variable of this study is willingness to communicate. The independent variables are

Teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities. The mediating variable is student engagement.



Hypothesis1: There is significance relationship between teacher-student relationship and willingness to communicate.

Hypothesis2: There is significance relationship between collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate.

Hypothesis 3: There is significance relationship between Teacher-student relationship and student's engagement.

Hypothesis 4: There is significance relationship between Collaborative learning activities and student's engagement.

Hypothesis 5: There is significance relationship between student's engagement ans willingness to communicate.

Hypothesis 6: Student engagement mediates the relationship between Teacher-student relationship and willingness to communicate.

Hypothesis 7: Student engagement mediates the relationship between collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate.

3.3 Sampling design

Taking all first-year students of various majors as the samples for the study of communication intentions is aimed at enhancing the representativeness and reliability of the research conclusions and avoiding the limitations of the conclusions caused by sample bias. If only students from a certain class or a certain major are selected, the sample will be overly concentrated in a specific group and fail to reflect the overall characteristics of all students in the school. Taking all students of different majors as samples (or randomly sampling from them) can cover groups with different backgrounds, making the conclusion generalizable to the entire campus population.

If the sample is only from a certain major, the conclusion may only be applicable to that major and cannot be generalized to the entire school or even other universities. Taking students of all majors as samples, its characteristics are closer to the general situation of "college students", and the external validity of the conclusion is higher. It can not only explain the communication willingness of students in this school, but also provide a reference for similar studies in other universities, enhancing the practical value of the research.

Therefore, the subjects of this study are non-English major students in first academic year in Jiangxi University. According to the school's enrollment plan, the total number of first-year students is 3,336. Sample size estimation plays a crucial role in any research. The sample size consists of three functions: the level, strength and magnitude of the difference in importance. The most commonly used sample size in a given population is (Sekaran&Bougie, 2016). By merging the tables of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) into Sekaran&Bougie (2016), this method was further simplified, providing a foundation for a good decision-making model. According to (Sekaran&Bougie, 2016), the maximum sample requirement of 3,000 to 3,500 people is 346 people.

3.4 Instruments

The questionnaire is used to gather the need for the independent variables, mediating variables, and dependent variables. College student conduct the questionnaire survey for each affecting factors.

Based on the inductive arguments and logical interpretations discussed in the research development process, a Likert scale is developed to determine how forcefully the respondents admit the statement. The scale was given - 1. Strongly Disagree. 2. Disagree. 3. Neither agree nor disagrees 4. Agree. 5. Strongly Agree The respondent could choose a number which is ranging from 1 to 5 for ver response

they make to show how strongly subjects agree or disagree or otherwise. Accordingly, the questionnaire is consisted with series of statements reflecting provide solutions by agreeing or disagreeing or otherwise, thereby enabling respondents to present their individual view.

3.5 Procedures

The questionnaire of this study was distributed via an online survey. The questionnaire link was sent to participants through an online platform (Questionnaire star,a Chinese professional survey tool).Questionnaires were distributed randomly to students from different colleges, with the number of samples allocated according to the planned sampling size for each college. Data collection was completed with the assistance and supervision of English teachers in each college. According to the recommendation of Rahman and Muktadir (2021) for conducting survey research in educational settings, the calculated sample size was increased by 20% to account for potential non-responses and invalid returns. This adjustment resulted in a target of 415 distributed questionnaires. Ultimately, a final sample size of 344 was achieved, ensuring sufficient statistical power for the planned analyses while allowing the findings to be generalized to the broader population of college students in Jiangxi Province.

3.6 Data analysis

This study adopted a quantitative, deductive approach to test the hypothesized model, using a sequential data analysis strategy to ensure robust and reliable results. First, descriptive statistics were computed to examine the central tendency, dispersion, and distributional characteristics (skewness and kurtosis) of all variables, confirming that the data approximated normality and met the assumptions for subsequent parametric tests. Next, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore the bivariate relationships between teacher-student relationship, collaborative learning activities, student engagement, and willingness to communicate, providing preliminary evidence for the hypothesized positive associations and checking for potential multicollinearity.

Then, path analysis (a subset of structural equation modeling) was employed to estimate the direct effects of the predictors on the outcome variables, testing the initial hypotheses (H1–H7). Finally, bootstrap-mediated effect analysis with 5,000 resamples was performed to examine the indirect pathways through student engagement, verifying the mediating hypotheses (H8–H10) and distinguishing between partial and full mediation effects. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals used to assess the significance of indirect effects.

1. Results

1.1. The normal distribution test

The descriptive statistics for the 344 valid responses are presented in Table X. All core variables demonstrated moderate to high scores, with means ranging from 3.311 (Willingness to Communicate) to 3.423 (Collaborative Learning Activities). This indicates that, overall, participants perceived positive levels of student engagement, willingness to communicate, teacher-student relationship, and collaborative learning activities in their university English courses.

Descriptive statistics(n=344)

Variable Name	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std	Skewness	Kurtosis
SE	1.556	5	3.368	0.928	-0.062	-1.104
WTC	1.4	5	3.311	0.936	-0.029	-0.943
TSR	1.5	5	3.407	0.893	-0.159	-1.109
CLA	1.7	5	3.423	0.874	-0.065	-1.291

The standard deviations (SD = 0.874–0.936) suggest a moderate degree of variability in participants' perceptions across all variables, with no extreme clustering of responses. Regarding normality, the values of skewness (from -0.159 to -0.029) and kurtosis (from -1.291 to -0.943) all fell within the acceptable range (|skewness| < 1, |kurtosis| < 2), indicating that the distribution of each variable approximated normality. This provides a solid foundation for subsequent path analysis and structural equation modeling.

4.2 Correlation analysis

All variables in the study exhibited significant positive correlations at the $p < 0.001$ level, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.373 to 0.482. These results support the hypothesized positive

relationships between factors, student engagement, and willingness to communicate, providing preliminary evidence for the proposed theoretical model. The moderate effect sizes also indicate that the variables are distinct enough to avoid issues of multicollinearity in subsequent path analysis.

Specifically, the strongest correlation was observed between Student Engagement (SE) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) ($r = 0.482$, $p < 0.001$), which aligns with the theoretical expectation that greater engagement in learning activities fosters a stronger desire to communicate in the classroom. Meanwhile, Collaborative Learning Activities (CLA) also demonstrated a notably strong association with willingness to communicate ($r = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the role of interactive learning tasks in promoting communicative willingness. These correlation patterns lay a solid empirical foundation for testing the mediating effects of student engagement in the subsequent path analysis.

4.2 Path analysis: Acceptance Intention results

The path analysis results show that all hypotheses are supported. Teacher-Student Relationship (TSR) has the strongest direct effect on Student Engagement (SE), and Student Engagement (SE) in turn has a very significant positive effect on Willingness to Communicate (WTC). This confirms the mediating role of SE, as proposed in H6-H7.

Path analysis : Acceptance Intention results

Path			B	β	SE	T	P	Result
SE	<---	CLA	0.254	0.218	0.104	2.448	0.014	Supported
SE	<---	TSR	0.363	0.296	0.11	3.31	***	Supported
WTC	<---	SE	0.236	0.25	0.06	3.941	***	Supported
WTC	<---	CLA	0.281	0.256	0.096	2.938	0.003	Supported
WTC	<---	TSR	0.253	0.219	0.1	2.536	0.011	Supported

Furthermore, the standardized path coefficients reveal that among the direct predictors of willingness to communicate, collaborative learning activities (CLA, $\beta = 0.256$) exerted the strongest influence, followed by student engagement (SE, $\beta = 0.25$) and teacher-student relationship (TSR, $\beta = 0.219$). This finding underscores the critical role of interactive, peer-driven learning experiences in fostering students' willingness to communicate, while also emphasizing that both relational factors (TSR) and Student Engagement (SE) serve as key catalysts for communicative confidence in the university English classroom.

4.2 Analysis of mediating effect

4.2.1 Mediating effects of student engagement between teacher-student relationship and willingness to communicate

Bootstrap method was used to test the mediating effect. The results showed that the total effect of TSR on WTC was significant (Est.=0.294, SE=0.098, 95% CI= [0.087, 0.477], P=0.008).

Effect	Path	Bootstrapping		BC 95% CI		P
		Est.	Std.Error	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
Indirect Effect	TSR→SE→WTC	0.074	0.03	0.025	0.149	0.003
Direct Effect		0.219	0.096	0.021	0.404	0.028
Total Effect		0.294	0.098	0.087	0.477	0.008

Further decomposition of the effect revealed that the direct effect of TSR on WTC was significant (Est.=0.219, SE=0.096, 95% CI=[0.021, 0.404], P=0.028). Meanwhile, the indirect effect mediated by SE was also significant (Est.=0.074, SE=0.03, 95% CI= [0.025, 0.149], P=0.003), with the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval not including 0, indicating that SE played a significant mediating role between TSR and WTC. Since both the direct and indirect effects were significant, this model was a partial mediation model, in which the indirect effect accounted for approximately 25.2% of the total effect, suggesting that the influence of TSR on WTC was partially achieved through the mediating path of SE.

4.2.2 Mediating effects of student engagement between collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate

This study further examined the effect of the independent variable CLA on the dependent variable WTC, with SE as the mediating variable. Bootstrap results showed that the total effect of CLA on WTC was significant (Est.=0.311, SE=0.096, 95% CI= [0.121, 0.499], P=0.003).

Effect	Path	Bootstrapping		BC 95% CI		P
		Est.	Std.Error	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
Indirect Effect	CLA→SE→WTC	0.055	0.028	0.01	0.12	0.015
Direct Effect		0.256	0.092	0.069	0.433	0.009
Total Effect		0.311	0.096	0.121	0.499	0.003

Effect decomposition revealed that the direct effect of CLA on WTC was significant (Est.=0.256, SE=0.092, 95% CI= [0.069, 0.433], P=0.009). Meanwhile, the indirect effect mediated by SE was also significant (Est.=0.055, SE=0.028, 95% CI= [0.01, 0.12], P=0.015), with the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval excluding 0, indicating that SE played a significant mediating role between CLA and WTC. Since both the direct and indirect effects were significant, this was a partial mediation model, in which the indirect effect accounted for approximately 17.7% of the total effect, suggesting that the influence of CLA on WTC was partially transmitted through the mediating path of SE.

In summary, the data analysis of this study reveals how various factors affect the students' willingness to communicate in College English classroom in Jiangxi Univresity.The results showed that Teacher-Student Relationship(TSR) and collaborative learning activities(CLA) had a significant positive correlation with Willingness To Communicate (WTC). Teacher-student relationship(TSR) and Collaborative Learning Activities (CLA) have a significant positive correlation with Student Engagement（SE）, and Student Engagement (SE) has a significant positive correlation with Willingness To Communicate (WTC). The mediating effect of student engagement (SE) on each variable and Willingness To Communicate (WTC) is significant.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The data analysis of this study reveals how various factors affect the students' willingness to communicate in College English classroom in Jiangxi Univresity. The results showed that Teacher-Student Relationship(TSR) and Collaborative Learning Activities(CLA) had a significant positive correlation with Willingness To Communicate (WTC). Teacher-student relationship(TSR), and Collaborative Learning Activities (CLA) have a significant positive correlation with Student Engagement（SE）, and Student Engagement (SE) has a significant positive correlation with Willingness To Communicate (WTC). The mediating effect of student engagement (SE) on Teacher-Student Relationship(TSR), Collaborative Learning Activities (CLA) and Willingness To Communicate (WTC) is significant.

5.1 Relationship between teacher-student relationship, collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate

The teacher-student relationship is widely recognized as a crucial factor influencing students' Willingness To Communicate in English (WTC) within the College English classroom context. A positive and supportive teacher-student relationship creates a psychologically safe learning environment, which in turn reduces students' anxiety and increases their confidence to speak in English. When students perceive their teachers as approachable, respectful, and encouraging, they are more likely to participate actively in classroom interactions, ask questions, and express their ideas in the target language.

Collaborative learning activities are found to exert a significant positive influence on students' willingness to communicate in English. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, collaborative tasks—such as group discussions, role-plays, information-gap activities, and project-based teamwork—provide students with more opportunities to speak English in a low-pressure environment. When students work in small groups, they often feel less anxious than when speaking in front of the entire class, which increases their confidence to express themselves in the target language.

5.2 Relationship between teacher-student relationship, collaborative learning activities and student's engagement

Teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities are all critical factors that positively influence student engagement in College English classrooms. First, a positive teacher-student relationship establishes a foundation of trust and emotional support, which encourages students to invest more effort in learning activities. When

students perceive their teachers as supportive, respectful, and responsive, they are more likely to participate actively in class discussions, complete tasks diligently, and show greater commitment to their learning.

Second, collaborative learning activities promote student engagement by creating opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and shared responsibility. In group tasks such as discussions, role-plays, and project-based activities, students are required to communicate, negotiate meaning, and contribute to the group's goals. This active participation not only increases their behavioral engagement but also enhances their cognitive engagement as they process information and solve problems together. Moreover, collaborative activities foster a sense of belonging, which further strengthens students' emotional engagement in the classroom.

Overall, teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities collectively create a supportive and engaging learning environment that motivates students to participate more fully in College English classrooms. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of social and affective factors in promoting student engagement in second language learning contexts

5.3 Relationship between student's engagement and willingness to communicate

After statistical analysis, it was found that student engagement directly and significantly affects university students' willingness to communicate in English in College English classrooms, confirming H7. In the management of College English classrooms, student engagement is generally regarded as one of the key factors influencing the effectiveness of English learning.

Extensive research indicates that when students actively participate in discussions, collaborative activities, interactive tasks, or classroom presentations, they not only gain more opportunities for language input and output but also gradually build confidence in their own linguistic abilities. This participation experience further positively influences students' willingness to express themselves using English in the classroom.

5.4 Students engagement mediates the relationship between teacher-student relationship, collaborative learning activities and willingness to communicate

The findings of this study confirm the mediating role of student engagement in the relationship between the two antecedent factors (Teacher-Student Relationship, Collaborative Learning) and students' Willingness To Communicate (WTC) in English. This indicates that a supportive teacher-student relationship and collaborative learning activities not only directly enhance WTC in isolation, but also their influence is largely transmitted through the mechanism of student engagement.

Firstly, a positive teacher-student relationship creates a sense of psychological safety and belonging. This emotional support lowers students' anxiety thresholds, prompting them to transition from a passive state to an engaged state—where they are willing to invest their cognitive and behavioral energy into learning tasks. It is this active investment (engagement) that ultimately translates into the confidence and readiness to speak (WTC). Without this engagement, even a supportive environment may not lead to actual communication behavior.

Secondly, Collaborative Learning Activities and a supportive classroom environment provide the structural opportunities for interaction. However, these opportunities only lead to WTC if students are behaviorally engaged in the tasks. When students participate actively in group work or class discussions (behavioral engagement), they gain practical speaking experience, which improves their linguistic self-efficacy. This increased competence, built through engagement, further strengthens their willingness to communicate in future contexts. Thus, engagement acts as a catalyst that transforms environmental potential into communicative willingness.

In summary, Student Engagement serves as a critical psychological and behavioral bridge. It explains how the relationships and activities are internalized by students and eventually manifested as the motivation to communicate in English. This mediating effect highlights that fostering WTC requires not only creating a supportive environment but also ensuring

that this environment successfully stimulates students' active engagement and investment in the learning process.

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