Willingness to Communicate and Group Cohesion

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The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) and group cohesion in English discussion classes. Although WTC has been receiving increasing levels of attention in language learning research, little is known about how individual levels of WTC could be affected by the membership of classes into which individual language learners are placed. In this study, group cohesion was operationalized as commitment to task, a variable that has been shown to have positive effects on group work in non-language-learning settings. Approximately 3,000 Japanese university freshman students completed WTC and group cohesion questionnaires over the course of an academic semester. Results showed that levels of WTC significantly correlated with levels of group commitment to task over the academic semester and that this relationship became stronger over time.

本研究では、英語ディスカッションクラスにおけるwillingness to communicate (WTC)とグループの結束性における関係について検証した。言語学習の研究において、WTCに対する関心が高まっている一方、クラスのメンバーが、個々の学習者のWTCのレベルに、どのような影響を与えるのかについてはほとんど知られていない。本研究では、非言語系の学習におけるグループ作業に関してプラス効果があることが分かっている「タスクに対する責任感」を変数として用い、グループの結束性を測定可能にした。日本の大学1年生約3,000人が1学期間を通して、WTCとグループの結束性に関するアンケートに回答した。その結果、WTCとタスクに対するグループの責任感との間に有意の相関性がみられることと、時間とともにその強さが増すことが分かった。

In the field of SLA, there is much debate over how individuals can become proficient in a foreign language. However, both the two main theoretical approaches, sociocultural and interactionist-cognitive, see a large role for interaction as a means of gaining mastery of foreign language skills, in particular, speaking (Ellis, 2012). To learn how to communicate proficiently in a foreign language, individuals must experience meaningful communication with other speakers. Therefore, for EFL learners with limited opportunities to use English, it is of prime importance that the quality and quantity of interaction is maximized in language classrooms. In terms of teaching methodology, communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches such as task-based language teaching provide frameworks for structuring courses so that students can meaningfully interact with one another. However, although some learners may actively try to maximize their interactions with peers using the target language, others may be reluctant to do so.

This variation may be due to a variety of *individual differences* factors. Individual differences researchers in SLA have investigated many variables that can influence a learner's progress in learning a foreign language. One fairly recent construct in individual differences research is willingness to communicate (WTC), which seeks to measure the degree to which individuals are willing to engage in communication with other speakers. Because interaction is so important for developing speaking skills in L2 contexts, some theorists have proposed that the development of WTC should be the main goal of language instruction (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Conrod, 2001), under the assumption that learners can make better progress in developing their language skills if they are highly willing to interact with others using the target language.

Although WTC has been argued to be a relatively stable trait with respect to a speaker's native language, the case is more complex when investigating WTC in regards to a second or foreign language. MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) theorized that L2 WTC is influenced by a variety of individual and group factors. Qualitative studies have also shown that language learners' levels of WTC can be influenced by factors such as an individual's perceptions of their learning context and classmates (Kang, 2005), suggesting that language students may be less inclined to communicate when they lack a sense of affiliation with their peers. Therefore, more recent studies of WTC in L2 contexts have attempted to use questionnaires containing items that reflect the students' learning environments, rather than the more general items that are contained in the original L1 WTC questionnaires (Weaver, 2010).

The importance of learning context is also stressed in another area of L2 research, group dynamics. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) argued that the interpersonal processes between individual members affect the success or failure of language classes. This argument seems particularly relevant for EFL speaking classes, given that the interactions depend on successful pair and group work. In studies of group dynamics, researchers seek to understand the nature of how groups function. Cohesion, or the extent to which groups successfully work together, has been shown to have positive effects on work productivity (Mullen & Copper, 1994), and researchers have argued that levels of cohesion may also affect language learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998).

Cohesion, however, is a multi-dimensional construct, theorized to be composed of three main components: commitment to task, interpersonal attraction, and group pride (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). It is important to separate these components; in a meta-analysis, group commitment to task was found to be the only significant predictor of work productivity (Mullen & Copper, 1994). Interpersonal attraction and group pride may not result in higher levels of productivity because groups may enjoy spending time socializing rather than completing work. In contrast, groups that share high levels of commitment to task are able to complete more work.

In SLA research, there have been very few studies of group cohesion in L2 contexts, and these studies have not found much evidence for a relationship between group cohesion and L2 language use or individual difference variables (Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000). However, the questionnaires used in these studies contained a mixture of items from all three components of group cohesion (commitment to task, interpersonal attraction, and group pride), which may have resulted in the nonsignificant findings. When measuring psychological constructs, it is vital to ensure that questionnaire items refer to one component only, if measurements are expected to be accurate (Bond & Fox, 2007). Group commitment to task, the only significant predictor of group productivity (Mullen & Copper, 1994), has not been studied separately in L2 contexts; therefore, there may actually be a stronger relationship

between this aspect of group cohesion and L2 variables than those which have been found in previous studies. The aim of this study was to examine whether levels of group commitment to task were related to levels of WTC and if that relationship changed over time. The research questions were:

1. Over a semester in a small English discussion skills class, to what extent do levels of WTC change?
2. Over a semester in a small English discussion skills class, to what extent do levels of group commitment to task change?
3. To what extent are levels of WTC related to levels of group commitment to task?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 3,192 first-year university students (1,765 female and 1,427 male) who were taking a compulsory discussion skills class at a private university in Tokyo. The mean age of the students was 18.3 years. Of the entire group of students, only 98 had lived for a year or more in an English-speaking country. The participants were placed into discussion classes based, first, on the subject they were majoring in and then ranked in terms of their scores on a 30-minute listening test. Students were placed into four levels; however, due to the general nature of the placement test, the communicative abilities of students within classes were generally of mixed levels. The discussion classes were small: seven to nine students per class.

The Discussion Class

The discussion class meets once a week over two 14-week semesters. All classes are taught under a set curriculum with the main goal of developing the students' spoken fluency as well as communicative skills. The course has an in-house textbook and a teacher's manual that requires instructors to provide a minimum of 50-55 minutes of student-to-student interaction per class, in particular, one 10-minute and one 16-minute discussion during which students discuss a topic in groups of three or four without teacher intervention. Topics change every second lesson and are based around social issues (such as education, the environment, media, and gender) that 1st-year university students can discuss without reference to other sources. This criterion was chosen to ensure that students can focus on developing fluency without having to use technical or low frequency vocabulary during their discussions. The methodology is based around the direct approach to teaching conversational skills (see Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1992; Kehe & Kehe, 1998; Richards, 1990).

Instrumentation

The development of the WTC questionnaire began by compiling a list of the occasions during a discussion in which students have the opportunity to initiate some form of interaction with their peers. This list was compiled by looking at the performance objectives of the course as well as the behavior of students during discussions. This behavior fell into two main groups: behavior of a speaker holding the floor (for example, giving reasons to explain opinions or sharing experiences from the past) and behavior of a listener (for example, asking questions to negotiate meaning or showing disagreement with a prior speaker). The list items were then translated into Japanese and piloted with a group of approximately 300 students. From a list of 20 possible items, nine were chosen for the questionnaire based on the results of a factor analysis that was conducted with the results of the pilot study (for the final questionnaire items, see Appendices A and B). Students selected their answers from a 4-point Likert scale that was taken from a WTC questionnaire developed by Weaver (2010), also used with Japanese university students. Weaver noted that there had been several different

translations into Japanese of the term *willing* in previous WTC studies, and following his example, the term *yaru darou* was adopted because its level of informality was judged, by several Japanese instructors who taught the course, to be the most appropriate for the 1st-year students.

The items for group commitment to task (*task* in this context relating to the development of English discussion skills) were adapted from previous research into group cohesion in work teams. As these items investigate levels of *group* commitment, each question focused on students' perceptions of how cohesively the class worked together. The seven items on this subsection were based on commitment to task items in the Group Environment Questionnaire (Caron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985) that had been adapted by Carless and De Paola (2000). For a list of the items and the 4-point Likert scale used, see Appendices C and D.

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed using WINSTEPS 3.80.0 (Linacre, 2013a) to determine item fit and construct unidimensionality. The results of these analyses showed that all of the items fit the model well, with fit statistics within the range of 0.5-1.5 (Linacre, 2013b). The results of a Rasch Principle Components analysis showed that more than 50% of the variance was explained by the measures and that the unexplained variance in the first contrast was less than 2.0 for all questionnaires, showing that the constructs measured in each questionnaire had good dimensionality (Linacre, 2013b). In short, all of the items on both questionnaires were shown to be highly related to the attribute they were intended to measure. Following Weaver (2010), the logit scale of student responses was also converted into Woodcock units (WITs) to give an item mean of 500 to make the logit scale easier to comprehend.

Procedure

The questionnaires were given to all students enrolled in full-time instructors' classes during weeks 1, 4, 8, and 12. The questionnaire about group commitment to task was not administered until week 4, so that students had enough time to ascertain the overall class level of commitment to task. The questionnaires were administered immediately after a short quiz based on a homework reading, approximately 5 minutes after classes had begun. Students who arrived late were given a copy of the questionnaire and asked to return it the following week.

Results

A summary of the overall results for both the WTC and group commitment to task questionnaires is shown in Tables 1 and 2. As can be seen in these results, the nonoverlapping confidence intervals in each administration of the WTC questionnaire showed significant increases in levels of WTC over the course of the semester, as on average, students became more willing to communicate. On the other hand, group commitment to task fluctuated over the semester, beginning fairly high, but falling significantly in the middle of semester before rising again.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for WTC Questionnaires

Lesson	Mean *(SE)*	*SD*	95% CI
1	558.34 (1.72)	96.92	[554.97, 561.70]
4	582.65 (1.71)	96.96	[579.29, 586.02]
8	609.30 (1.84)	103.87	[605.70, 612.91]
12	625.15 (1.91)	107.52	[621.42, 628.89]

Note: SE = standard error, CI = confidence interval

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Group Commitment to Task Questionnaires

Lesson	Mean *(SE)*	*SD*	95% CI
4	694.02 (1.58)	89.27	[690.92, 697.13]
8	669.03 (1.63)	91.74	[665.84, 672.21]
12	689.25 (1.65)	93.04	[686.02, 692.48]

To ascertain the effect sizes of these changes, one-way within-subjects ANOVAs using SPSS version 20 were also conducted. However, for both questionnaires, Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, therefore, multivariate tests will be reported. For WTC, the results indicated a significant time effect, V = .37, $F(3,3189) = 623.31$, $p < .01$, multivariate eta squared = .38. (V = Pillai's effect.) Follow-up polynomial contrasts indicated a significant linear effect with means increasing over time, $F(1, 3191) = 1801.91$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .36. For group commitment to task, the results indicated a small but significant time effect, V = .42, $F(2, 3190) = 70.36$, $p < 01$, multivariate eta squared = .04. Although polynomial contrasts indicated a significant quadratic trend, $F(1, 3190) = 129.57$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .04, it should be noted that there was very little difference between means on the first and third administration of the questionnaire; however, the means on the second administration were significantly lower.

To determine if there was a significant relationship between WTC and group commitment to task, a correlation analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20, the results of which can be seen in Table 3. These results showed that there was a significant relationship between WTC and group commitment to task throughout the semester. Furthermore, this relationship grew stronger over the semester, indicating that students with higher levels of WTC perceived their classes as being more committed to improving their discussion skills.

Table 3. Correlations between WTC and Group Commitment to Task

Lesson	*r*	*p*
4	.33	.00
8	.42	.00
12	.46	.00

Discussion

On average, levels of WTC rose significantly over the semester, showing that students became more willing to interact with their peers as they gained experience using the discussion skills covered in the course. Although these gains in WTC cannot be generalized beyond the classroom, the findings are encouraging for the discussion course in which the study was conducted because as MacIntyre et al. (2001) argued, increases in WTC can lead to improvements in language skills. In contrast to WTC, levels of group commitment to task dropped midway through the course before returning to the initial levels. Such a phenomenon could be related to the group development process outlined by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), who stated that once a group has been formed, it begins two parallel processes: one related to interpersonal conflicts and the other to the establishment of group norms. During this phase, members begin to evaluate their investment in the group, which may account for the loss of perceived commitment shown in this study. It is also important to note that although levels of group commitment to task decreased, the means for this variable were consistently higher than those of WTC when converted to the same scale (see Tables 1 and 2). This means that although there was a significant decrease in group commitment to task in the second administration, on average, students perceived their classmates as being highly committed to improving their language skills.

Although levels of group commitment to task fluctuated, the relationship between WTC and group commitment to task strengthened, as can be seen by the increasing correlations in Table 3. This means that the students who had higher levels of WTC also perceived their classes as being more committed to improving their discussion skills. Although there appear to be no previous studies that have investigated WTC and group cohesion in a similar manner, these findings suggest that group cohesion may have a significant effect on the degree of communication that takes place within a language classroom. Such findings support the claims of researchers who argue that group cohesion is an important issue for language teachers to address in their classes (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Erhlman & Dörnyei, 1998).

One limitation of these findings is the context in which the research was conducted. The students who took part in this study had similar levels of English ability. Whether the same findings would be found with students of differing levels of proficiency in different contexts remains to be seen. Furthermore, the study was limited to only one semester. As the students in this study were all in the first semester of their 1st year at university, their levels of WTC could change dramatically in subsequent courses. The strongest limitation, however, similar to that in a lot of WTC research, is the lack of performance variable, which is needed if we want to ascertain whether students with higher levels of WTC actually do communicate more often. Although it was not feasible to include a performance measurement for such a large sample size, it remains unclear whether students' reported levels of WTC approximated their classroom levels of interaction in the L2.

Conclusion

Although the findings of this study have several limitations, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there was significant growth in WTC, which suggests that small discussion classes can be beneficial for improving student attitudes toward using English for communication. Secondly, levels of group cohesion fluctuated in the manner proposed by theorists of group dynamics (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). Although the reasons for these fluctuations in group cohesion require further investigation, the fluctuations suggest that a certain level of interpersonal conflict may be a natural process of newly formed L2 language classes. Finally, the correlational analysis conducted in this study was not able to identify a causal relationship, but the significant correlation between levels of WTC and group commitment to task shows that student levels of communication are strongly linked to their perceptions of their classmates. Given that group dynamics can be influenced by language teachers (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003), paying more attention to group levels of commitment to task may lead to an increase in student-to-student interaction in language classes. As teachers were not asked to include any cohesion building activities in this study, an interesting follow-up study could be conducted to compare levels of WTC and group cohesion between classes who have completed such cohesion-building activities as outlined in books such as Hadfield (1992) and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), with a control group. Furthermore, group commitment to task needs to be investigated with respect to other L2 individual difference variables, especially communicative confidence and language anxiety, which have been shown to strongly relate to WTC (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). It may be that students' perceptions of their own abilities can also affect how they perceive the level of classroom cohesion.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (Japanese)

These items were answered on a 4-point Likert scale (a = 絶対にやりたくない, b = あまり進んでやりたくない, c = たぶん進んでやりたい, d = 確実に進んでやりたい).

1. 英語の授業の中に、英語でトピックの変更を提案する。
2. 英語の授業の中に、英語で他のスピーカーの経験について質問する。
3. 英語の授業の中に、英語で自分の将来の計画について説明する。
4. 英語の授業の中に、英語で新しいトピックを提案する。
5. 英語の授業の中に、英語でディスカッションで最初に発言する。
6. 英語の授業の中に、英語で他のスピーカーの意見に反対する。
7. 英語の授業の中に、英語で自分の過去の経験について話す。
8. 英語の授業の中に、英語で自分の意見をサポートする為に例を挙げる。
9. 英語の授業の中に、英語で自分が好きな事又は嫌いな事について話す。

Appendix B

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (English Translation)

These items were answered on a 4-point Likert scale (a = I am definitely unwilling to do, b = I am generally unwilling to do, c = I am generally willing to do, d = I am definitely willing to do)

1. I'm willing to suggest a change of topic.
2. I'm willing to ask questions about other people's experiences.
3. I'm willing to talk about my future plans.
4. I'm willing to bring up a new topic.
5. I'm willing to be the first person to speak.
6. I'm willing to disagree with other speakers.
7. I'm willing to talk about my past experiences.
8. I'm willing to give examples to support my opinions.
9. I'm willing to talk about things I like or I don't like.

Appendix C

Group Commitment to Task Questionnaire (Japanese)

These items were answered on a 4-point Likert scale (a = 全然そう思わない, b = あまりそう思わない, c = 少しそう思う, d = すごくそう思う).

1. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、英語ディスカッションスキルを向上させようと努力している。
2. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、英語ディスカッションスキルを向上させようという姿勢を持っている。
3. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、英語ディスカッションで自分の意見を説明しようとしている。
4. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、英語ディスカッションで他の人の意見を聞こうとしている。
5. クラスメート全員が、自分の英語ディスカッションスキルを向上する機会を与えてくれている。
6. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、ファンクションフレーズを上手に使おうと努力している。
7. 私の意見ではクラスメート全員が、平等にディスカッションに参加している。

Appendix D

Group Commitment to Task Questionnaire (English Translation)

These items were answered on a 4-point Likert scale (a = I strongly don't think so, b = I generally don't think so, c = I generally think so, d = I strongly think so)

1. Our class is united in trying to improve our English discussion skills.
2. I'm satisfied with my classmates' level of commitment to improving their English discussion skills.
3. The members of this class equally want to explain their opinions during discussions.
4. The members of this class equally want to listen to others' opinions during discussions.
5. My classmates give me many opportunities to improve my performance in discussions.
6. Our class makes an effort to use the target function phrases effectively during discussions.
7. Our class works hard so that each member participates equally during discussions.