

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Trends in research on willingness to communicate

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Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual difference that has attracted the interest of teachers and researchers concerned with non-linguistic outcomes of classroom-based language learning situations. This paper provides an overview of the WTC construct and its evolution in second language (L2) theory and research. The paper then provides a critical review of L2 WTC research, which not only highlights some of the shortcomings of previous WTC research, but also offers some suggestions for future WTC investigations. The paper concludes with a call for more L2 WTC research that provides language teachers with pedagogical techniques that can help improve students' willingness to use their L2.

コミュニケーション意欲(WTC)は、教室での外国語学習という場で生じる非言語的な成果に関心がある教育者及び研究者の興味を惹きつけてきた個人差である。本論文では、第二言語(L2)理論と研究において、WTC構成モデルがどのように発展してきたかを概観する。次に、L2WTC研究について批評的な再検討を加え、WTCに関する先行研究の不十分な点のいくつかを明るみに出すと共に、今後のWTC調査研究のための提案もあわせて行う。本論文の結論では、学生が第二言語を進んで使用する意欲を向上させる助けになりうるような教授法の諸技術を、外国語教員に提供するL2WTC研究をさらに推し進めていく必要性について述べる。

An increased emphasis upon communicative language instruction in Japan promoted by Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology initiatives such as the action plan for cultivating Japanese with English abilities (MEXT, 2003) has directed the attention of second language (L2) researchers to examine learners' communicative behavior within the language classroom. One construct that has become central to this line of inquiry is willingness to communicate (WTC). This article provides a critical review of this construct starting with how the definition of willingness to communicate has evolved from a stable trait-like behavior to a situational-based behavior influenced by a whole host of linguistic and socio-psychological factors. This article then identifies some of the shortcomings that exist

in previous L2 WTC research and suggests possible issues that future L2 WTC researchers might address. This forward looking analysis of L2 WTC research concludes with a call for more research that provides teachers with practical pedagogical suggestions on how they can help increase their students' level of willingness to communicate in a second language.

Willingness to communicate in a second language

Originally, WTC was conceptualized as a construct that accounts for differences existing between individuals' willingness to initiate verbal interactions in their first language (L1) (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). In terms of L2 use, the scope of WTC has been broadened to a "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998, p. 547). More recent definitions, however, have become even more comprehensive with L2 WTC being defined as "an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversation context, among other potential situational variables" (Kang, 2005, p. 291).

The argument that situational variables mediate L2 use is evident in MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels' (1998) heuristic L2 WTC pyramid model (Figure 1). According to this model, linguistic and psychological variables sharing similar characteristics are grouped together and organized along a proximal-distal line. This organization suggests that situational-based variables such as Desire to communicate with a specific person and State Communication Self-Confidence

Confidence have a more immediate influence upon second language user's willingness to communicate as opposed to the more stable trait-like variables such as Intergroup Climate and Personality, which are located at the bottom of the model.

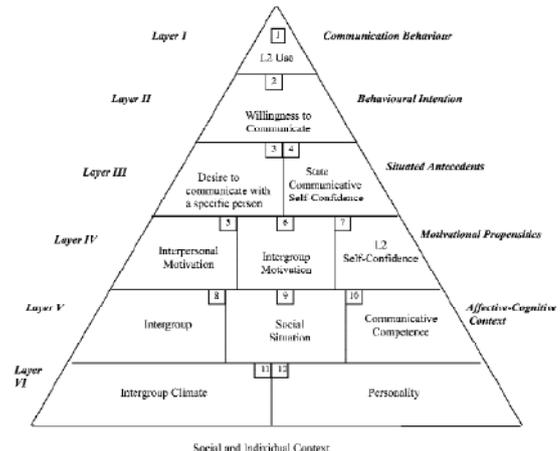


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the variables influencing WTC

One important consideration underlying L2 WTC is the role of volition. MacIntyre (1994), among others, has pointed out that WTC might not predict language use in situations where individuals have a limited amount of freedom over their communication behavior. In the case of classroom-based language learning situations, there has

been some research suggesting the relatively rigid allocation of turns afforded to second language learners (Trosborg, 1994). Interactions between teachers and students, for example, are sometimes conventionalized in a question, answer, and response turn sequence (Ohta, 1999). Previous L2 WTC research, however, has found that L2 WTC has a positive relationship with reported and actual L2 use within a classroom setting (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). This research thus suggests that WTC can mediate students' communication behavior in settings where the volitional nature of communication may be constrained.

Empirical studies of L2 WTC

L2 WTC research has primarily addressed three interrelated issues. The first issue involves confirming the relationship between WTC and L2 use. The primary purpose of this line of research has been to empirically establish the main tenet of actional theory (Ajzen, 1988), which argues that situational factors and personal predispositions or traits primarily determine one's decision to engage in purposeful activity such as initiating conversation. The second focus of L2 WTC research has attempted to determine the relative importance of the different psychological and linguistic variables that compose the L2 WTC construct. Considering that learners are often in the process of acquiring a second language, numerous studies have focused upon self-perceived communicative competence and communication anxiety. The third issue is a relatively recent development in L2 WTC research in which researchers have begun to examine students' L2 WTC in different communication

contexts. These investigations have in turn led to suggestions about other learner factors that should be incorporated into the L2 WTC construct and proposals for more dynamic situated-based conceptions of WTC.

Confirming the relationship between WTC and L2 use

A relatively strong relationship between L2 WTC and frequency of L2 use has been found in a number of different contexts and student populations including adult Anglophone students taking introductory conversational French lessons in Ottawa, Canada (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003); Anglo and Francophone students attending a bilingual university in Ottawa, Canada (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996); Japanese high school students learning English in a study abroad program in the United States (Yashima et al., 2004); and Japanese students pursuing an undergraduate or a graduate degree at a university in Hawaii (Hashimoto, 2002). All of these studies, however, rely upon learners' reported L2 use rather than their actual L2 use.

Researchers who have examined the relationship between students' level of L2 WTC and their actual L2 use in instructed language learning settings have produced mixed results. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) found a significant positive correlation between 44 Hungarian high school students' level of L2 WTC and their verbal output in a discussion task. In contrast, Cao and Philp (2006) could not find a clear relationship between L2 WTC and the communication behavior of eight ESL learners in New Zealand. These students' willingness to use English, however, did vary significantly across different communication contexts inside their classroom. Students

were most willing to speak when participating in group or pair work, but not as willing when the opportunity to speak with the whole class arose.

Collectively this line of research has found a fairly consistent relationship between L2 WTC and L2 use. Yet, closer examinations of actual L2 behavior within language classrooms suggest that there are a number of different situational factors influencing students' level of willingness. This finding is at the core of the second issue that has dominated L2 WTC research.

Clarifying the importance of the different components in the L2 WTC construct

In an attempt to determine the relative importance of the different variables composing the L2 WTC construct, researchers have examined both immediate and distant variables. Because L2 users are typically in the process of acquiring the target language, the more immediate situational variables such as state communicative self-confidence and communicative anxiety have traditionally been the focus of most L2 WTC researchers.

Self-perceived communicative competence

Self-perceived communicative competence seems to play a more influential role for language learners who have studied the target language as a L2 or who are at the beginning stages of their language studies. Baker and MacIntyre (2000), for example, found a positive relationship between self-perceived communicative competence and willingness to speak French for 124 nonimmersion students, but not for

71 French immersion students. Drawing on Harley's (1990) work, Baker and MacIntyre explained that the nonimmersion students' level of L2 willingness to communicate is mediated by their level of self-perceived communicative competence because they have not had the same exposure to the target language as immersion students. Yashima (2002) found a similar relationship between self-perceived communicative competence and L2 WTC with 297 Japanese first-year university students. Although communicative anxiety significantly correlated with their level of L2 WTC, self-perceived communicative competence accounted for the largest correlation between willingness to speak English and the other situational variables examined in this study. Similar findings were also found in two studies involving Japanese high school students (Yashima et al., 2004). In the first study, the researchers found that 166 Japanese high school students' self-perceived communicative competence had a stronger significant relationship with their L2 WTC than their communicative anxiety. In the second study, the researchers found that only self-perceived competence had a significant relationship with L2 WTC for 60 Japanese high school students preparing for a yearlong study-abroad program in the United States.

Going beyond correlations, MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Donovan (2003) entered self-perceived communicative competence and communication anxiety information into a regression equation to test whether or not they predicted L2 WTC. They found that only self-perceived communicative competence was a significant predictor of L2 WTC for 32 Canadian university students who had studied French as a second language. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) found a

similar relationship with 92 adult learners who possessed only a minimal competency level of French. In this particular study, self-perceived competence was actually a stronger predictor of students' reported use of French than willingness to communicate. Although this result was data-driven and thus awaits replication, it does suggest that self-perceived communicative competence influences students who have had limited exposure to the target language. What remains to be seen is the extent to which students with different levels of self-perceived communicative competence have significantly different patterns of L2 willingness inside an EFL classroom.

Communicative anxiety

Communicative anxiety, in contrast, seems to play a more influential role for language learners who are presently studying or have studied in educational contexts that expect high levels of L2 proficiency. For example, some French immersion students in Baker and MacIntyre's (2000) study reported that their teachers made them feel nervous and inadequate, which in turn lowered their willingness to speak French. MacIntyre et al. (2003) also found that anxiety and not self-perceived communicative competence predicted L2 WTC for 27 Canadian Anglophone students who had previously studied French in intensive language programs. Communicative context thus seems to have an important mediating influence upon communication anxiety. Within the context of an EFL classroom, the question now arises how communication anxiety mediates students' willingness to use English.

Communicative context and L2 WTC

The third issue driving L2 WTC research involves determining which types of contextual factors influence individuals' level of willingness to use their L2. One factor that has attracted some interest is the opportunity for L2 use in different communication contexts. MacIntyre and Charos (1996), for example, found a significant positive correlation between frequency of L2 contact and L2 WTC for 92 Canadian Anglophone learners, who were just beginning to study French as a second language. Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre (2003), however, did not find a similar relationship between frequency of L2 contact and L2 WTC for 130 Canadian Anglophone students attending a bilingual university in Ottawa, Canada. However, they did find a positive relationship between the quality of L2 contact and L2 WTC for 248 Francophone students attending the same university. Clément and his colleagues attributed the difference between the Anglophone and Francophone students to their level of ethnolinguistic vitality. Ethnolinguistic vitality involves defining the relationship between different social groups in a specific communicative context in terms of their relative socioeconomic status and the number of members belonging to each social group. It also influences the behavior of individuals and their tendency to act as a member of a group with a distinct identity. In the case of the Francophone students studying at a bilingual university, their L1 (i.e., French) had a lower level of linguistic vitality because English was predominately the language of communication and thus they felt more pressure to communicate in their L2 compared to Anglophone students feeling the need to communicate in French. This

finding thus suggests that L2 WTC researchers must not only take into consideration learners' level of L2 proficiency, but also the vitality of the learners' L1 and L2 within a given communicative context.

Expanding the L2 WTC construct

As the context of L2 WTC research broadens beyond investigations of Canadians studying either English or French as their second language, there have been a number of suggestions of other context-based factors that should be included in the WTC construct. One of the most researched suggestions is international posture. This factor entails language learners' "interest or favorable attitudes toward what English symbolizes" (Yashima, 2002, p. 57). Yashima and her colleagues (2002, 2004) have found that international posture is a significant predictor of L2 WTC for Japanese high school and university students. International posture was also found to be a more important predictor of reported use of English for 166 Japanese high school students than L2 WTC (Yashima et al., 2004). Although these findings suggest that international posture might be a valuable addition to the WTC construct, it might also be considered as a refinement to pre-existing factors such as intergroup motivation or intergroup attitudes, which have been largely informed by the language learning situation in Canada (e.g. Clément, 1980, 1986).

The argument for a WTC construct that is more responsive to different learning contexts can also be found in Wen and Clément's (2003) Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate. In an attempt to more closely reflect English language instruction in China, they proposed a

culturally informed refinement of the relationship between learners' desire to communicate and their willingness to use English in an EFL classroom (shown in Figure 2).

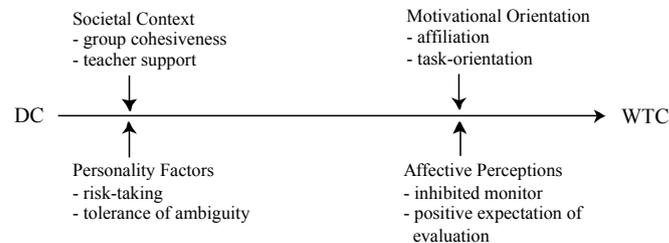


Figure 2. Variables moderating the relation between desire to communicate (DC) and WTC in the Chinese EFL classroom

Wen and Clément argued that the Chinese educational context is distinctive in that it is heavily influenced by Confucianism and the collective is emphasized. As a result, Chinese EFL students' level of L2 WTC can be mediated by a complex interaction of factors including societal context, personality factors, motivational orientations, and affective factors. Similar to the work on international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004), the Chinese conception of the WTC model involves refining and restructuring relationships between different factors outlined in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) original heuristic L2 WTC model. However, this re-conceptualization for the Chinese EFL context has yet to be empirically confirmed.

Shortcomings of L2 WTC research

Despite the significant strides that have been made in L2 WTC research, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. These issues involve how WTC has been operationalized and the limited focus that has characterized the majority of L2 WTC research.

Overuse of the original WTC measure

Kang's (2005) research highlights one of the most significant shortcomings of L2 WTC research. Most studies have utilized the original WTC measure designed by McCroskey and Richmond (1987). Although this practice facilitates the comparison of WTC studies, this measure of WTC is limited to verbal interactions in four types of communication contexts (i.e., dyads, group, meeting, and public speaking) with three types of receivers (i.e., friend, acquaintance, and stranger). These very general communication situations ultimately reflect McCroskey and Richmond's underlying belief that WTC is a function of people's personality, which is hypothesized to remain relatively stable across different communicative situations. Consequently, McCroskey and Richmond's WTC measure may not be sensitive enough to detect situational factors that could influence individuals' level of L2 willingness (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006). If this is the case, its use in much of the L2 WTC literature is a cause for concern considering that there might be a mismatch between McCroskey and Richmond's WTC measure, which is global in nature, and MacIntyre et al.'s heuristic model of L2 WTC, which represents an attempt to capture a number of situational factors that potentially influence learners' willingness to use their L2.

The desire for a more situation sensitive L2 WTC measure has been advanced by Sick (2001, October), who investigated the variability of 248 Japanese high school students' willingness to speak and write in English over time. Sick's L2 WTC measure is composed of 41 tasks that could potentially occur in a high school English classroom (e.g., "make a speech to the class about a movie or TV show that you saw") or in daily life in Tokyo (e.g., "tell a foreigner the time if he asked you"). The results of the study, however, indicated that there were no significant differences in the Japanese high school students' willingness to perform 41 communicative tasks after studying English for a year. Yet, the relatively low correlation between ($r = .48$) pre- and post-levels of WTC suggested that there was a great deal of variability amongst students with some increasing their willingness and others feeling no change or even a decrease in their willingness to use English. In a partial replication of this study, Okayama, Nakanishi, Kuwabara, and Sasaki (2006) found a similar null result with 85 Japanese first-year university students who had completed a semester-long English course. Exploratory follow-up analyses did, however, reveal some pre-post L2 WTC gains depending upon the students' field of study. The mixed results of these studies may ultimately reflect a disconnect between Sick's L2 WTC measure and what actually occurred in the learners' classrooms. In other words, there was no guarantee that the students participating in these studies had the opportunity in their respective language courses to engage in the different speaking and writing tasks featured in Sick's L2 WTC measure. As such, this lack of experience might have undermined any attempt to measure the effect of language instruction on students' level of willingness to communicate.

In an investigation of the relationship between task familiarity and L2 WTC, Weaver (2007) designed a WTC measure to assess 307 Japanese university students' willingness to do twelve different speaking tasks that they would perform a number of times during a semester-long compulsory English oral communication course. A pre-post oral communication course comparison of the students' level of L2 WTC indicated a significant increase in their willingness to engage in different speaking tasks along with higher levels of self-perceived competency and communicative anxiety. The combination of increased levels of willingness, self-perceived competency, and communicative anxiety, however, is somewhat at odds with the findings of other WTC researchers. Most studies suggest that WTC increases when learners' level of communicative competence increases and their level of communicative anxiety decreases. One possible explanation for increased levels of anxiety might be that the act of engaging in the different tasks heightened learners' awareness of the demands inherent in the twelve speaking tasks as well as any difficulties they might have experienced performing them. In sum, if L2 WTC research continues striving for more refined accounts of WTC, researchers will need to consider more contextually sensitive measures of L2 WTC.

A potential interlocutor effect on L2 WTC

Considering the number of studies that have focused on different situational factors underlying learners' L2 WTC, there have been relatively few investigations examining how learners' desire to communicate with a specific individual influences their level of willingness. One

possible explanation for this gap in the L2 WTC literature is MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément and Noels' (1998, p. 547) suggestion that this situational factor is the temporal manifestation of interindividual and intergroup motivation. As a result, most researchers that have considered learners' desire to communicate with a specific person have done so by focusing upon the more enduring motivational factors in the L2 WTC model. MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Conrod (2001), for example, found significant positive correlations between 79 students' desire to study French for the purposes of making Francophone friends and their willingness to use French inside and outside of their language classroom. Yashima and her colleagues (2002, 2004) also found a similar positive relationship between Japanese high school and university students' interest in intercultural friendships and their willingness to use English as a foreign language.

Learners' desire to communicate with people from a target language group, however, can be influenced by the quality of the interaction between language groups (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). As previously mentioned, Clément, Baker and MacIntyre (2003) found that the quality of L2 contact was a significant data-driven predictor of 248 Francophone university students' willingness to use English. However, the quality of L2 contact was not a predictor for the 130 Anglophone students' willingness to use French. These contradictory findings thus give rise to a need to identify factors such as ethnolinguistic vitality, which potentially underlie language learners' willingness to use their L2 with different types of interlocutors within a specific communication context.

Connecting L2 WTC research to the language classroom

An overview of L2 WTC theory and research reveals a steady progression of a construct that highlights the importance of situational factors. This movement also has the potential of identifying pedagogical approaches and practices that may help language teachers enhance their students' willingness to use their L2. Unfortunately, much of WTC research has offered little advice on how to increase students' level of WTC. Most suggestions have been limited to general recommendations of trying to create a classroom environment that maximizes learners' level of self-perceived competence while reducing their level of communication anxiety. This undeveloped area of WTC theory and research is surprising considering MacIntyre and colleagues' (1998) strong advocacy of WTC as being a suitable goal for L2 language instruction. Future L2 WTC research should thus aim to provide practical pedagogical recommendation such as the use of pre-task planning timing (Weaver, 2007) or the importance of group work (Cao & Philp, 2006) and topic selection (Kang, 2005) as ways to develop students' level of L2 WTC. These types of recommendations are essential if the WTC construct is going to be more than just a passing interest for language teachers.

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