

Antecedents of Willingness to Communicate: A Review of Literature

Mohammad Javad Riasati^{1,*}; Nooreen Noordin¹

¹University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

*Corresponding author.

Address: B.03.02. Jutamines Condominium, Serikembangan, Serdang, Balakong, Malaysia
Email: mjriasati2002@yahoo.com

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Abstract

A number of factors have been identified as having an impact on learning a second/foreign language. A recent addition to this list of factors is Willingness to Communicate (WTC), which is indeed a new addition to individual differences research. With the growing value that modern language pedagogy has attached to training language learners who are able to communicate effectively, it is plausible that “willingness to communicate” attracts attention from researchers. The present article attempts to describe WTC model and review the past studies conducted on willingness to communicate, with the goal to identify the antecedents of this variable and the factors that influence it. The article concludes by discussing some pedagogical implications as how to enhance willingness to communicate. Finally, the gaps in the literature are stated in order to show directions for further enquiry.

Key words: Communication; Willingness to communicate; Willingness to communicate model; Antecedents of willingness to communicate

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of modern language pedagogy, great emphasis has been placed upon communication and training individuals who will eventually be able to use their language for communicative purposes. In fact, the goal of modern language learning and teaching is to encourage learners to use the language for meaningful and effective communication not only inside but also outside classroom. In language classrooms, language teachers want learners who display great interest to speak in the second/foreign language. Such being the case, it is true that the notion of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) which is actually the intention and desire to initiate communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998) plays a key role in learning a second/foreign language. Some researchers (e.g. MacIntyre et al., 1998, 2003) have argued that a fundamental goal of L2 education should be the encouragement of willingness to communicate in language learning, because WTC is expected to facilitate the language learning process so that higher WTC among students leads to increased opportunity for practice in L2 and authentic language use. The purpose of the present study is to delve into this notion by identifying its antecedents and the variables that influence it.

1. WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE MODEL

Given the paramount importance of communication, the Willingness to Communicate model, which integrates psychological, linguistic and communicative variables to describe, explain, and predict second language communication, has been developed by McIntyre,

Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998). In the WTC model, it is hypothesized that all social, affective, cognitive, and situational variables influence one's willingness to communicate in the second of foreign language, which in turn predict one's actual use of that language. They define WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person, or persons, using a L2” (p. 547). The point that the developers of WTC model try to put across is that the most important goal of language pedagogy is to create willingness to communicate within individuals. They argued that after all, the ultimate goal of second/foreign language education should be to “engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness to communicate in them” (p. 547).

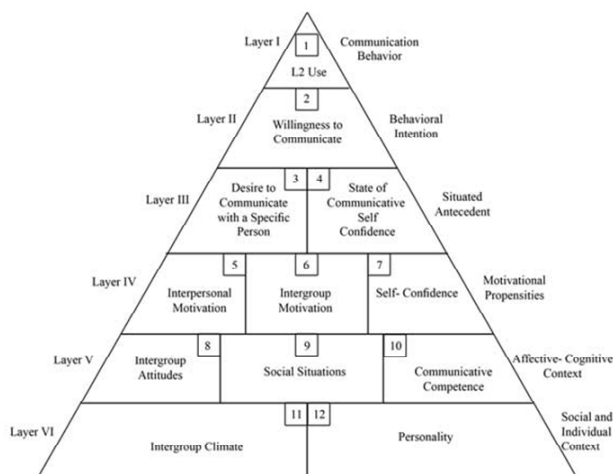


Figure 1
Willingness to Communicate Model

As can be seen in the figure above, the heuristic model of WTC consists of a pyramid-shaped structure with six categories or variables called layers. Among the variables in the structure, some variables are considered to produce rather *situational influences* on WTC, whereas others are hypothesized to cause relatively *enduring influences* on WTC. *Enduring influences* (e.g., intergroup relations, learner personality, etc.) can be defined as long-term properties of the environment or person that can possibly apply to any situation, while *situational influences* (e.g., desire to speak to a specific person, knowledge of the topic, etc.) can be described as more transient and dependent on the specific context in which a person functions at a given time. The first three layers of the pyramid (I, II, and III), which are supposed to exert situational influences on L2 communication, are Communication Behaviour (Layer I), Behaviour Intention (Layer II), and Situating Antecedents (Layer III). The bottom three layers, namely Layer IV (Motivation Propensities), Layer V (Affective- Cognitive Context), and Layer VI (Social and Individual Context) represent relatively stable, enduring influences on the process

of L2 communication. Similar to affective variables influencing WTC indirectly, the bottom layers function as the foundation of the pyramid on which the first three layers interact with each other as well as the latter layers in influencing L2 communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yshima, 2002) What follows is a brief description of the model.

1.1 Communication Behaviour

It involves the variable “L2 use,” which can be regarded as “the result of a complex system of interrelated variables” (p. 547). According to MacIntyre et al., in a broad sense, communication behaviour includes activities such as speaking up in class, reading an L2 newspaper, watching L2 television, or using the L2 at work. They argue that the goal of L2 education should be creating WTC among learners. A program that does not produce individuals who are eager to use the language to communicate is simply an ineffective program.

1.2 Behavioural Intention

This layer includes the variable “Willingness to communicate”. As mentioned above, MacIntyre et al., (1998) define willingness to communicate as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (p. 547). MacIntyre et al. clarify this definition through an example. They note that if a teacher asks his/her students a question and then the students raise their hands in order to answer the question, they have actually expressed WTC in the L2, although this communicative event is a nonverbal one. As a result, WTC can be regarded as the students’ intention to communicate if he/she is given the opportunity to do so.

1.3 Situating Antecedents of Communication

This layer includes two variables. One is the desire to communicate with a specific person, which is one’s desire to speak with a person who is frequently seen, physically attractive, or similar to one in different ways. The second variable is state communicative self-confidence, which is defined as a momentary feeling of confidence in a specific situation. It is, in fact, an individual’s feeling that he/she is able to effectively communicate in L2 at a particular moment in a specific situation.

1.4 Motivational Propensities

This layer involves three important variables: (a) interpersonal motivation, (b) intergroup motivation, and (c) L2 confidence. MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that motivational propensities are based on the affective and cognitive contexts and will eventually lead to state self-confidence and a desire to speak with a particular person. MacIntyre (2007) contends that intergroup motivation originates from one’s sense of belonging to a specific social group, while interpersonal motives stem from the social roles that one adopts within the group.

1.5 Affective and Cognitive Context

The variables in this layer are intergroup attitudes, social situation, and communicative competence. Intergroup attitudes denote L2 students' desire to be in contact with L2 community and the feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction that one feels while learning a language. Social situation include variables such as the participants, setting, purpose, topic, channel of communication, and the interlocutor's proficiency level. It is argued that such variables influence one's degree of self-confidence and hence willingness to communicate. Communicative competence is in fact one's level of proficiency which can significantly affect one's degree of willingness to communicate.

1.6 The Societal and Individual Context

This layer includes intergroup climate and personality. Intergroup climate is one's attitudes towards the L2 community, the value that one attaches to it, and the desire that one has to adapt and reduce social distance between the L1 and L2 communities. Personality is conceptualized to have an indirect impact on WTC through such affective variables as attitude, motivation, and confidence.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that their model has both theoretical as well as practical implications. Theoretically, the model highlights a set of learner variables that have been proved to have an impact on L2 learning and communication. Practically, the model regards WTC as the final stage of preparing language learners for communication, since it represents the probability that a learner will use the language for communication, if given the opportunity. According to MacIntyre et al., their model describes why different people show a great deal of variability in their tendency to communicate, for example why some learners are willing to speak and actually speak despite their limited L2 proficiency, while some others are reluctant to do so even if they possess high linguistic competence. However, one limitation of the model, as acknowledge by MacIntyre et al. is that their WTC model is a first step towards a comprehensive understanding of WTC in the L2, and that more research needs to be carried out to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesized relationships among variables. Indeed, they see their model as a starting point rather than a finished product. They contend that they have not described all the variables underlying WTC, and that there could be some other variables influencing one's WTC.

2. ANTECEDENTS OF WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

McCroskey and Richmond (2007) contend that there are some variables that lead to such differences in the degree of willingness to communicate among individuals. They referred to these variables as "antecedents". What follows

is a description of the most significant antecedents of WTC that have been shown in past studies.

2.1 Communication Apprehension (Communication Anxiety)

Communication anxiety is labeled as communication apprehension by McCroskey (1996), who defines it as fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. To Horwitz et al. (1986), communication apprehension is the anxiety that one feels when he or she communicates in his/her foreign language. This component of anxiety is of paramount importance in the process of learning a foreign language since EFL learners usually suffer from inadequate knowledge of vocabulary and have difficulty communicating a message in a foreign language. Research suggests that people who suffer from high levels of fear or anxiety regarding communication often select to avoid or withdraw from communication (Lu, 2007). The original conceptualization that McCroskey (1982) proposed viewed Communication Apprehension (CA) as "a broadly based anxiety related to oral communication" (p. 136). McCroskey (1997) redefined communication apprehension as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 192). With regard to the negative influences that communication apprehension can have on individuals, McCroskey and McCroskey (2002) assert that the four major effects caused by communication apprehension are internal discomfort, communication avoidance, communication withdrawal, and overcommunication. It is also argued that these effects exist in most classrooms, and that their existence can have negative impact on individuals' performance.

2.2 Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Self-perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) is defined as one's evaluation of his or her ability to communicate appropriately in a particular situation (McCroskey, 1982). In a similar definition, McIntyre et al. (1998) defined SPCC as the feeling that one has the ability to communicate effectively at a specific moment. McIntyre (1994) argues that SPCC is a combination of Communication Apprehension (CA) and introversion. He contends that next to CA, SPCC is a key variable that determines one's level of willingness to communicate. In fact, these two variables have the most immediate impact on WTC. When an individual experiences apprehension in a certain context or with a particular person, or when he feels does not feel competent enough, his willingness to communicate will consequently diminish. In contrast, if an event reduces one's apprehension or increases one's perceived competence, WTC will then improve. Lu (2007), too, found out that the major variable having the greatest impact on students' willingness to communicate is their self-perceived communicative competence. Individuals

who feel to be more competent in communication are more confident in interacting with others, hence more willing to communicate. To conclude, one's perception of his/her communication competence can greatly influence his/her degree of willingness to communicate. If individuals do not see themselves as being competent enough to initiate or engage in communication, it is natural that they would feel apprehensive about communication and less willing to communicate. Research (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996; Barraclough et al. 1998; Hashimoto, 2002; Cetinkaya, 2005; Hodis, 2009; Yu, 2009; Weaver, 2010) has also demonstrated a relationship between one's willingness to communicate, self-perceived communication competence and communication apprehension.

2.3 Motivation

Another significant variable that is proved by literature to exert crucial influence on one's degree of willingness to communicate is motivation. MacIntyre et al. (2001) found that motivation positively influenced WTC in L2, which, in turn, resulted in the increased frequency of L2 communication. In Hashimoto's (2002) study, it was shown that language learning motivation was related to willingness to communicate. It was proved that the students who have greater motivation to learn the language are more interested to use the language in the classroom. Yashima (2002) examined the interrelationships among communication variables in Japanese context. A total number of 389 Japanese university students took part in the study. Results demonstrated that motivation has an impact on self-confidence in L2 communication, which in turn increases willingness to communicate in L2.

Lu (2007) examined the relationship between willingness to communicate and motivation among American and Chinese students. In both cultures, motivation was proved to be negatively correlated to willingness to communicate. Such finding is contrast with what the researcher expected. Peng (2007) investigated the relationship between college students' willingness to communicate in an L2 and how it is related to their integrative motivation. A total number of 174 college students completed two questionnaires. Results showed a significant positive correlation between WTC in L2 and integrative motivation. In this study, motivation was found to be the best predictor of WTC, while attitude toward the learning situation did not play any role in determining the degree of willingness to communicate.

It is interesting to note that in another study conducted by Yu (2009) motivation was also found to be the major antecedent of willingness to communicate. The investigation showed that motivation, integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation, and instrumental orientation were all related to willingness to communicate. However, the best predictors of willingness to communicate were found to be attitudes towards the learning situation and language learning motivation

among Chinese EFL learners.

2.4 Personality

Another significant antecedent of WTC is personality. Cetinkaya (2005) contends that personality (extrovert vs. introvert) is an important factor that determines one's degree of willingness to communicate. It was found that extrovert students have a higher perception of their communication competence, which will lead to higher level of willingness to communicate. Such finding is confirmed by Sun (2008) who found out that personality is an important predictor of the degree of willingness to communicate. Chu (2008), too, found a negative correlation between individuals' shyness and their degree of WTC. Recruiting 364 students who were studying in a private university in Taiwan, the researcher administered five self-report scales to the participants. Results indicated that students were willing to communicate in English with their acquaintances and friends in group discussions. Moreover, a negative correlation was found between students' willingness to communicate and their shyness. Put it simply, those who reported to be shy were less willing to communicate than those who perceived themselves as non-shy.

2.5 Content and Context

Two other variables that have been shown in the literature to have an impact on WTC are content and context. Kang (2005) came to the conclusion that learners feel more secure when talking to somebody whom they are familiar with. Moreover, with an increase in the number of participants in a conversation, the participants' security decreased. It was also found that the participants felt more secure when the interlocutor listened to them carefully and with a smile. Finally, the participants felt insecure if the interlocutor was more fluent than they were. Influence of topic was another noteworthy finding of the study. It was found that participants felt more eager to take part in a discussion whose topic was familiar to them and they had background knowledge about the topic, and they were interested in it. Moreover, they like to talk to somebody who helped them with their English language and could improve their level of proficiency. In a similar study, Cao and Philp (2006) found that WTC is determined by such factors as group size, familiarity with interlocutor, the degree of interlocutor(s)' participation in the discussion, familiarity with the topic that is being discussed, and degree of topic preparation. In a qualitative study, Compton (2007) concluded that content and context are two important factors that determine one's level of willingness to communicate in classroom. When students benefit from shared knowledge of the subject, they will be more eager to participate in classroom discussions. When learners feel they have something to contribute, they will naturally feel more interested to take part in conversations.

2.6 Gender and Age

Gender and age are two other variables that are shown to influence WTC. Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) investigated how willingness to communicate varies according to sex and age. Findings show that as males age, their willingness to communicate increases. Females, in contrast, become less willing to communicate with age. In general, females displayed more willingness to communicate as compared to males. The findings concerning the influence of age is confirmed by Lu (2007) who examined the impact of age on one's willingness to communicate, and then found out that with age, people's degree of willingness to communicate increases.

3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Different researchers have attempted to investigate WTC in their own context and the factors that might promote or hinder one's degree of WTC. What can be concluded from the literature is that the researchers working in this area unanimously agree on the importance of willingness to communicate and the key role it can play in fostering one's ability to communicate effectively. If the aim of language pedagogy is to train language learners who become autonomous enough to be able to communicate easily and confidently both inside and outside language classrooms, it is crucial to encourage them to increase their WTC and help them get rid of the obstacles in their way. And as MacIntyre (2007) stresses, it is really necessary to figure out why some language learners are more eager than others to speak up in language classrooms. With such knowledge at hand, teachers get to know the factors that affect learners' willingness to speak and will take measures to develop those factors that encourage communication, while trying to obliterate those that hinder students' willingness to speak. Such being the case, what follows is a list of some techniques and strategies that language teachers can employ in order to enhance learners' willingness to speak in language classrooms.

1st. Teachers play a crucial role in enhancing learners' willingness to speak in language classrooms. They need to constantly encourage learners to use as much English as they can in classroom. To do this, they can ensure learners that making mistakes while speaking is a natural and common phenomenon. If learners make sure that the mistakes they make during their speech is not regarded a negative point by the teacher, they will surely be more motivated to seek out speaking opportunities in classroom.

2nd. With the advent of technology and its widespread use in education, language teachers should get to know that most of the teaching approaches and techniques they are accustomed to using are old-fashioned. Teachers need to go with the stream if they want to remain successful teachers. They need to get equipped with

latest technological advances in their teaching career and try to be as innovative as possible. Sticking to the textbook alone and spoon-feeding the learners with lots of materials is no longer recommended. Teachers need to create opportunities for the students to practice what they learn. This will in turn increase learners' desire to use the language in classroom.

3rd. As proved in the literature, anxiety is a detrimental factor that hinders learners' talking. As such, the burden is on teachers' shoulder to identify sources of anxiety and then make efforts to eliminate them in their classroom. When learners feel relaxed in a stress-free learning environment, they will naturally be more willing to speak. One useful technique to achieve this goal is to run pair- and group-work activities instead of getting students to talk individually in classrooms. Learners are more comfortable with their pairs because they are of the same language proficiency level and hence are not afraid of making mistakes and losing their face.

4th. Teachers need to stress the importance of oral practice in learning a language. They need to emphasize the fact that classroom environment is the best, if not the only, place they can use their language. This occurs more in an EFL environment where learners have little, if any, contact with foreign language outside classrooms. In such an environment, the importance of practicing language in classroom is more evident.

5th. One factor that can cause unwillingness to speak in task difficulty (Hue, 2010). If learners are supposed to do something that is beyond their ability, they will naturally be unwilling to fulfill the task. As such, teachers are recommended to provide students with enough preparation time in oral activities so that they can prepare what they are supposed to discuss. Moreover, teachers need to keep in mind that different students have different needs and abilities. Therefore, it is not fair to expect all students to do a certain task equally well. As such, teachers need to adjust task level to the oral competence of the students so that they can feel improvement in their speaking.

4. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the plentiful number of research carried out in relation to WTC and given the significant contribution of such research, there are still some problems that need to be tackled and some gaps can be seen in the literature which give avenue for further research in the area. One important point that is worth discussing is that in most of the research reviewed in the previous section, the researchers have employed the original WTC measure designed by (McCroskey and Richmond, 1996). Too much reliance on one single instrument and the overuse of this rather old instrument can be a cause for concern among those working in this area of research.

Secondly, most of the studies reviewed have tackled willingness to communicate in its general term, that is willingness to speak as well read and write, not only speaking dimension. In fact, very few studies have dealt with this issue in language classroom environment. The present study is more situation-specific, attempting to investigate willingness to speak in language classrooms specifically, hoping that the results would make language learners more successful in their language learning.

Thirdly, the majority of the past studies have dealt with the issue of WTC quantitatively. Put it simply, they have utilized quantitative research design and self-report questionnaires in order to examine willingness to communicate and its related issues. Some of the researchers have, of course, mentioned this as a shortcoming of their study and hence a suggestion for future investigation.

Finally, most of the studied reviewed have merely investigated WTC or its related issues. Few studies, however, have put forth a set of clear-cut techniques and strategies available to both teachers and learners to tackle the problem and hence be more successful in their learning. Given the fact that a significant role of research is to find a solution to the existing problem and improve the situation, this gap in the literature is noticeable. Bearing in mind such gaps in the literature, one can easily see the necessity of more research to be conducted to tackle the issue.

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