



# Towards a comprehensive concept of Willingness to Communicate: Learners' predicted and self-reported participation in the foreign language classroom

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## ABSTRACT

In modern language teaching, it is assumed that students need to be Willing(ness) to Communicate (WTC) in the second or foreign language in order to learn it, and therefore, students' oral participation in class is a desired – and expected or even required – behavior. However, there are social, contextual and individual variables that influence students' decisions to speak up or remain silent when the situation calls for spoken participation in class. This mixed-methods study investigates L2 use and classroom participation practices of German-as-foreign-language learners; their predictions and expectations regarding their own participation during the foreign language class; and the reasons behind their actions according to their own accounts. Students answered an in-class survey administered at different points during four lessons sampled throughout an academic semester. Using stimulated recall interviews, focal participants were asked to explain their reasoning for speaking or remaining silent at specific moments in the class meetings. Findings revealed a link between predicted and self-reported participation that developed progressively as a result of a combination of factors, such as alignment with classroom norms, the teacher's expectations, students' speaking goals, and motivation among others. These findings provide a new understanding of WTC and bear pedagogical implications for teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Classroom participation is a widely used concept in education and other related fields, and yet, it is rarely defined explicitly (Schultz, 2009). In foreign language (FL) and second language (L2)<sup>1</sup> research, this elusive concept has generally been equated with learners' L2 verbal activity or L2 interactions in class. Indeed, oral L2 production has drawn the attention of much research in modern mainstream studies of second language acquisition (SLA) (Swain & Lapkin, 2000) because it is the most observable – and quantifiable – of L2-related behaviors (Tsou, 2005). As a consequence, classroom participation has been linked to language learning, and speaking in the L2 has been taken to mean more language practice; more practice has then been assumed to lead to higher levels of communicative competence and achievement. In this context, most research has examined participation in

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<sup>1</sup> Although the author acknowledges the FL and L2 distinction, the term L2 will be used throughout the text to refer to the target language. The term FL will be reserved for German as a *foreign language* and the *foreign language* classroom.

the language classroom as evidence of L2 competence in the form of grammatical or lexical complexity, specific forms of feedback and interaction, or the quantity of learners' talk (Delaney, 2012; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000).

Although research on classroom participation strongly and narrowly focuses on oral L2 interaction mostly from a traditional psycholinguistic perspective (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2006), the concept of classroom participation has also been associated with the constructs of Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998), L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and other individual learner characteristics (Dörnyei, 2009; Skehan, 1991). However, only a few studies have looked at participation from the learners' point of view (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Kim, 2008), and these have not explored participation as it originates in learners' minds in classroom settings. Using a mixed-methods design, the present exploratory study seeks to fill that gap in the literature by directly addressing German-as-foreign-language learners' predictions and expectations of their own participation in the classroom and their own accounts of the reasons behind their actions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. FL classroom participation

Research on classroom participation in language learning is a very challenging endeavor as students often have different levels of speaking skills, degrees of previous L2 exposure, language learning goals and expectations, experiences and views on participation (de Saint Léger, 2009). To add to the challenge, classroom participation also depends on students' individual speaking goals; for some students, speaking may be a less important goal and they may prefer not to verbalize their thoughts in class but remain quiet and "listen in order to learn" (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). However, students' goals might not always parallel teachers' expectations about how class members should participate; for teachers, participating in the classroom by speaking in the L2 is, indeed, a desired – and expected or even required – outcome of the learning process (Tsou, 2005). Learners need to accurately infer these classroom norms to ensure successful language learning (Johnson, 1995).

The importance of learners' L2 verbalizations in the L2 learning process is a generally accepted tenet. As a matter of fact, contemporary language teaching approaches emphasize the essential role of L2 output in the classroom (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Underlying these approaches is the premise that L2 competence can only be developed through practice and interaction in communicative activities (Dörnyei, 2013). This predominant focus on the 'active' use of the L2 through learners' oral participation has led to the introduction of an important concept in L2 research and instruction, namely *Willing(ness) to Communicate* (WTC).

### 2.2. Willingness to Communicate in the L2

In an attempt to understand under what circumstances an L2 speaker is willing to initiate oral communication, MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC in the L2 as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). Their model of WTC posits that cognitive, affective, social, and situational variables play a role in a learner's WTC and in his/her actual L2 use. Thus, WTC has been conceptualized as a state of readiness that occurs in a particular moment with its immediate influences being a state of self-confidence (defined by low anxiety and a perception of L2 competence) and a desire to communicate with a specific person.

Research into variables that, directly or indirectly, contribute to WTC offers support for MacIntyre et al.'s model from different perspectives. As a result, WTC has more recently been re-conceptualized as a dynamic process (Cao, 2011, 2013, 2014; Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011), in which situational variables as well as enduring, trait-like dispositions towards language learning interact at all times during communication. These studies have contributed additional situation-dependent as well as situation-independent variables, which are thought to contribute to the dynamic nature of WTC. These variables include: lesson content and context (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011), the teacher (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 2011; Wen & Clément, 2003), the authenticity and naturalness of L2 interactions (MacIntyre et al., 2011; de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009), interactions with peers (Cao, 2006, 2011; Liu & Jackson, 2008; de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009), emotion and perceived communication opportunities (Cao, 2014), and communicative self-confidence (Cao & Philp, 2006; Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, 2002). Additionally, learner motivation has also been found to influence WTC and result in increased L2 communication frequency (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre, Clément, Baker, & Conrod, 2001; Peng, 2012).

More recently, motivation research has moved from its traditional theoretical conceptualization (integrative vs. instrumental) to a conceptualization of motivation as part of the L2 learner's self-system based on the concept of possible selves. Thus, the L2 Motivational Self System, proposed by Dörnyei (2005), is composed of three main constructs: (1) the Ideal L2 Self, which refers to an idealized version of the L2 Speaking Self and represents attributes that one would ideally like to possess, and as such serves as a future self-guide and bolsters learners' motivation to learn a L2; (2) the Ought-to L2 Self, which refers to attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and avoid possible negative outcomes but which may not represent one's own desires; and (3) the L2 Learning Experience, which refers to situated motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience, i.e., the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and the experience of success (Dörnyei, 2010).

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