



Communicating in a second language: Investigating the effect of teacher on learners' willingness to communicate



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ABSTRACT

Previous research on willingness to communicate (WTC) has shown that teachers' attitude, support, and teaching style can influence learners' WTC. This paper reports on a qualitative study that utilized a focused essay technique to explore how teachers can affect learners' tendency to talk in class. Study participants were asked to describe those situations in which teachers influenced their willingness to communicate in English. A total of 97 entries were received for situations in which the students were most willing to communicate and 84 entries for situations in which the students were least willing to communicate. The findings indicate that teachers' wait time, error correction, decision on the topic, and support exert influence on learners' WTC. The possible implications of the study for language teachers are discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

The construct of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was originally introduced by [McCroskey and Baer \(1985\)](#) to account for individual differences in first language (L1) communication and was conceptualized as the probability to engage in communication when given the choice ([McCroskey & Richmond, 1990](#)). The construct has garnered attention from researchers within mainstream SLA over the past three decades. The reason for such interest may come from the pivotal importance accorded to the role of communication and interaction in L2 acquisition within modern language pedagogy ([Kang, 2005](#); [Swain, 2000](#)). Similarly, [Skehan \(1989\)](#) argued that learners need to talk to learn the target language. As a result, a body of research has set out to investigate various individual and contextual variables influencing language learners' L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom context ([Cao, 2011](#); [Cao & Philp, 2006](#); [Kang, 2005](#); [MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011](#); [Peng, 2011](#)).

Given the central role teachers play in pedagogy, one strand of research has focused on those teacher variables that may be involved in promoting or debilitating learners' intention to use an L2. The general impression gleaned from these studies bears witness to the idea that teachers' attitude, involvement, and teaching style exert a significant and determining influence on learners' engagement and WTC ([Cao, 2011](#); [MacIntyre et al., 2011](#); [Peng, 2007](#); [Wen & Clement, 2003](#)). Although these studies have been very helpful in affording insights into important teacher variables, few studies published to date have directly addressed the role of teachers in learners' WTC. The present study, therefore, was prompted by the need to obtain a perspective of those teacher characteristics that may influence learners' willingness to use an L2.

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2. Literature review

2.1. The importance of WTC

Scholars suggested that adding WTC to the literature could help orient theory and research toward authentic communication among individuals from different languages and cultures (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998). The WTC construct, as reported by MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2003), offers an opportunity to integrate psychological, linguistic, communicative, and educational approaches to explain why some individuals seek L2 communication, whereas others avoid it.

Kang (2005) reported that by generating WTC in L2 learners, it can be expected that language instruction can produce more active learners. Learners with higher WTC will be more active learners who are more likely to utilize L2 in authentic communication and are more autonomous in extending their learning opportunities, such as by getting involved in language learning not only inside but also outside the classroom (Kang, 2005). The expected advantages of WTC for success in language learning make it worthwhile for language teachers to know about its construct, the variables affecting it, and possible ways to help facilitate it.

2.2. Trait-like versus situational view WTC

Similar to individual differences in variables such as motivation and anxiety, WTC in L2 is found to display dual characteristics: the trait-like WTC and the situational WTC (Dornyei, 2005). The trait-like view of WTC is based on the works by McCroskey and Baer (1985), McCroskey and Richmond (1990, 1991), who developed the WTC construct with reference to L1 communication and defined WTC as the intention to initiate communication when free to do so. WTC was conceptualized as a trait-like, personality-based predisposition, which tended to be stable across situations and with various receivers. Reflecting the trait-like view of WTC, researchers investigated the effect of other individual difference variables on WTC and found self-perceived communication competence and communication apprehension to be the strongest predictors of WTC (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). Scholars also reported that individual variables such as immersion experience (MacIntyre et al., 2003), motivation (Hashimoto, 2002), self-confidence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003), international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004), gender and age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002) influenced WTC.

The trait-like view of WTC has recently been called into question by a new perspective claiming that there are situational factors that have the potential to affect an individual's WTC. The new perspective was established by MacIntyre et al. (1998), who defined L2 WTC “as a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). They proposed a pyramid-shaped model (Fig. 1) of variables affecting WTC in which WTC is subject to some transient and moment-to-moment influences (immediate situational variables) – desire to communicate with a specific person and state of communicative self-confidence – and some more stable and enduring factors, such as

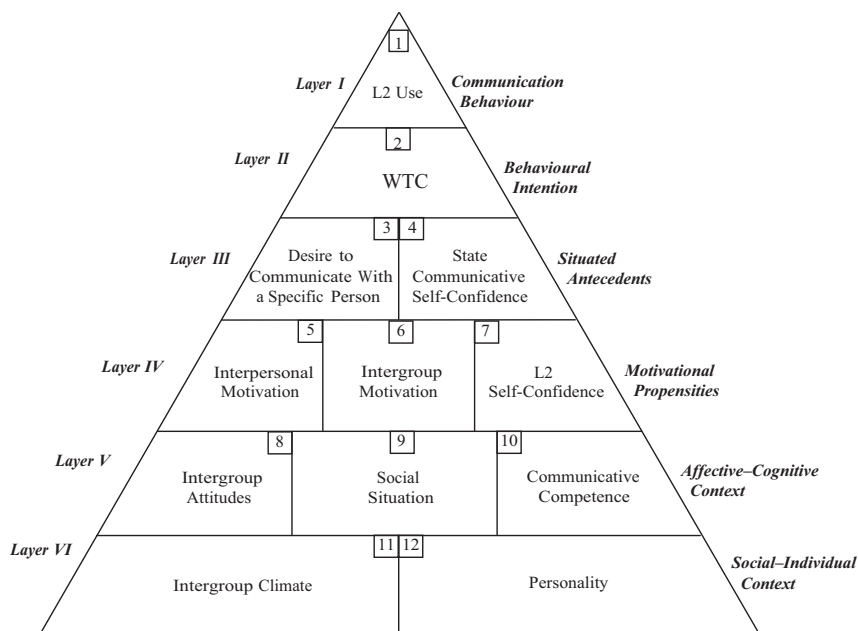


Fig. 1. Pyramid model of WTC by MacIntyre et al. (1998).

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