



To talk or not to talk: A review of situational antecedents of willingness to communicate in the second language classroom



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ABSTRACT

Willingness to communicate (WTC) used to be seen as a stable, trait-like communicative tendency; however, in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), attention has recently shifted to its more dynamic, state-like components. This article systematically reviews the literature on the situational antecedents that might contribute to variation in WTC. It aims specifically at furthering our understanding of the interaction between WTC and the learning situation. After searching major databases (Web of Science, ERIC and the British Education Index), findings of 35 studies were analyzed. Different kinds of situational antecedents of WTC suggested in these studies were then systematically organized into a multi-layered framework. The framework raises awareness of the role of the learning situation, and how the learning situation is perceived by second language learners. The framework has the potential to guide future research by offering a more comprehensive and systematic approach to the study of situational antecedents of WTC and the dynamic processes that underpin WTC.

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1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), willingness to communicate (WTC) has been seen as both a facilitating factor of language development and a nonlinguistic outcome of language learning (MacIntyre, 2007). A large body of research on WTC focuses primarily on its trait characteristics (see [Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017](#), for a recent overview of research on trait WTC) with the assumption that higher WTC brings about better L2 learning outcomes. Whilst selected studies report significant and positive correlations between WTC and L2 learning outcomes (e.g., [Baghaei & Dourakhshan, 2012](#); [Mahmoodi & Moazam, 2014](#)), others report findings to the contrary (e.g., [Joe, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2017](#)). We argue in this article that the inconsistency in the empirical findings indicates that investigating WTC merely at the trait level can only provide an incomplete answer to the problem; hence, the need for research that reflects the dynamic nature of WTC at the state level.

L2 WTC is defined as “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). This definition already alludes to a dual perspective that combines both trait and state levels ([Peng & Woodrow, 2010](#)). At the trait level, a general communicative tendency is assumed that is rooted in an individual's personality, whilst at the state level, an individual's communicative behaviors fluctuate across time and situations. To better understand WTC at its state level, more recent studies have explored whether, how, and why learners show more WTC in some situations than in others (e.g., [Cao, 2014](#); [Kang, 2005](#); [MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011](#); [Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2016](#); [Peng, 2014](#)).

Although a number of situational antecedents (e.g., interlocutors, task, etc.) have been found to affect L2 learners' WTC, they have not been investigated systematically. Most of the situational antecedents that have been studied are the *objective* features of situations, i.e. physical or concrete elements of the situation, such as the persons (who), activities (what), locations (where), and time (when) that constitute a situation ([Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015](#)). For example, [Khazaei, Zadeh, and Ketabi \(2012\)](#) focused on the effect of class size on students' WTC, whilst [Freiermuth and Jarrell \(2006\)](#) compared students' WTC in different activities held in language classrooms, including group discussions, role-plays, and games. By contrast, *subjective* perceptions of situations refer to the learner's idiosyncratic perceptions and interpretations of situations, such as whether they feel supported when engaging in a task. In that sense, subjective perceptions of situations offer a psychological dimension to the study of situations, and it is expected that learners differ inter-individually in their perceptions of objectively similar situations.

Task-interest is an example of the subjective perceptions of situations that might serve as situational antecedents. For example, [Dörnyei \(2009\)](#) regarded interest as a motivator for task participation, and this assertion has been supported by empirical evidence provided by [Eddy-U \(2015\)](#). As [Eddy-U \(2015\)](#) suggests, students' perceptions of a task and their interlocutors are more direct situational antecedents of WTC than the task and the interlocutors themselves or other people's opinions. This finding corresponds with [MacIntyre et al.'s \(1998\)](#) proposition in the original model of WTC, which stresses that self-perceived L2 competence is a more significant factor than actual L2 competence in influencing WTC. However, it seems that subjective perceptions of situations have neither received much attention in the research nor been clearly distinguished from objective features of situations. We suggest that the consideration of individual differences in how learners perceive situations and how these perceptions influence learners' communicative behaviors is essential for further developing our understanding of and ultimately informing our practice in L2 teaching.

The inconsistency in the nomenclature is another challenge to research into state WTC. Previous research has used various terms to represent the same situational variable, or used the same term yet with reference to different variables. For instance, [Peng \(2007b\)](#) reported that students' WTC was influenced by group cohesiveness and classroom climate. In her later article, Peng combined the two antecedents into one called classroom atmosphere, “the mood, emotions, or climate sensed and shared by the class group” ([Peng, 2012](#), p. 208). However, for [Riasati \(2012\)](#), classroom atmosphere is co-created by the class group as well as the teacher.

This review attempts to address the question: What are the situational antecedents (both objective and subjective) that might affect L2 learners' WTC reported in published research? Based on our literature review we will then present a multi-layered framework of the different kinds of situational antecedents of WTC. The framework will contribute to the literature by (a) proposing a consistent terminology for future research on state WTC and its situational antecedents, (b) achieving more

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