The Interplay Among L2 Willingness to Communicate, Speaking Test Anxiety and Speaking Proficiency

Ngo Cong-Lem

Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Taipei, Taiwan.

Nguyen Thi Thu Hang

Le Quy Don – Long Binh Tan High School, Dongnai, Vietnam.

Despite abundant research on willingness to communicate (WTC), few studies have probed into the relationship between L2 WTC and learners’ anxiety in taking speaking test. The current study was conducted to examine the interplay among L2 WTC, speaking test anxiety, and speaking proficiency. Participants recruited for this study were 40 tenth-grade students at a high school in the southern part of Vietnam. The research instruments comprised a speaking-test anxiety and an L2 WTC scale developed by the researchers, tapping into students’ WTC in different communication contexts. The results indicated that L2 WTC was positively associated with the participants’ speaking proficiency and negatively related to their speaking test anxiety. Anxiety was found to negatively impact the learners’ performance on their speaking test. Moreover, students were also found to be more willing to communicate in English in out-of-school situations compared to inside classrooms. No gender difference in L2 WTC was recorded. Pedagogical implications for enhancing EFL learner’ willingness to communicate as well as speaking ability are discussed.

Introduction

Engendering L2 willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) – the decision to speak a foreign language when having free choice (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) – can impact language acquisition process and is one of the ultimate goals for language training (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). It is, however, commonplace that EFL learners, despite having extensive experience in learning English, are usually reluctant to speak the foreign language (MacIntyre, 2007). This is particularly true in Asian context where students tend to be shy and teachers’ authority dominates language classrooms (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

Language teaching nowadays has shifted towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which focuses more on the communication competence of language learners. While in traditional language classes, grammar and vocabulary are commonly the main purposes of the lesson (Wen & Clément, 2003), in CLT classroom, the focus of language training has turned to students’ real-life communication skills. It is, therefore, essential that more research can be done...
to examine factors that influence learners’ L2 willingness to communicate and how L2 WTC could in turn impact their speaking skill acquisition.

Abundant research on WTC has documented factors influencing an individual’s WTC, e.g., personality, motivation, L2 proficiency, L2 communication confidence, and communication anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Peng (2007) advocated for communication confidence and anxiety as the two major factors directly influencing learners’ WTC. A search for past studies pointed out that despite various aspects of WTC have been examined, few studies investigated specifically the relationships among WTC, L2 speaking test anxiety and L2 speaking proficiency. Also, how WTC impact overall L2 speaking proficiency is still inadequately addressed. The current study was conducted to shed light on whether EFL learners’ L2 WTC could reduce their speaking test anxiety, thus influencing their speaking performance.

Literature Review

Willingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Use Anxiety

Of all the potential factors that influence learners’ L2 WTC, language use anxiety is a major one. McCroskey (1997) (cited in Alemi & Pashmforoosh, 2012) referred to the notion language use anxiety as learners’ anxious feelings when they had to use the target language in real life or imaginary situations. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) categorized foreign language use anxiety into three groups: communication anxiety, test anxiety and negative evaluation apprehension. Communication anxiety is “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.127). Learners commonly face test anxiety as they are afraid of failures in accomplishing a given language test. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) particularly drew readers’ attention to anxiety when taking speaking test as it might arise both oral communication and test anxiety for learners. Finally, negative evaluation apprehension is about learners’ fear of being negatively judged by others. This can be extended to different social situations, not necessarily within class-room practice.

Nevertheless, researchers tend to provide mixed support for the association between language anxiety and linguistic performance. Horwitz (1986) indicated foreign language anxiety could adversely affect learners’ L2 linguistic performance, and therefore, negatively influenced their linguistic achievements. Regarding WTC, students who have high level of L2 anxiety tend to be less willing to communicate and consequently, tend to use L2 language less frequently (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). Alemi and Pahmforoosh (2012), in contrast, found no direct relation between WTC and language anxiety. In other words, a student may be anxious about speaking the foreign language, yet he/she is still willing to speak it (Alemi and Pahmforoosh, 2012). This is possible, for example, when a student, being aware of his/her own language anxiety, is willing to engage in speaking practice opportunities to improve his/her confidence and linguistic performance. Further research is warranted to provide more insight into the contradictory results in previous literature.

Willingness to Communicate and L2 Proficiency
In this section, the relationship between WTC and L2 proficiency will be discussed. MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément and Noels (1998) pointed out that L2 proficiency was a predisposition for WTC. To put it another way, as a rule of thumb, a learner must already have some linguistic knowledge before he/she is ready to communicate in that language. Gardner et al (1997) found that higher linguistic proficiency yielded more communicative confidence, i.e., the subjective feelings of being competent in using the foreign language. This self-perceived confidence can positively affect an individual’s willingness to communicate. In the model proposed by MacIntyre (1994), perceived L2 competence and anxiety were predictors of WTC, which in turn predicted frequency of L2 communication. It can be, hence, assumed that WTC can increase individuals’ linguistic performance by increasing their frequency of engaging in the foreign language output practice.

The association between WTC and L2 proficiency has been well-documented in previous research. For instance, Alemi and Pahmforoosh (2012) studied variables that affected 49 Iranian EFL learners’ WTC and found that language proficiency was linked with the participants’ willingness to communicate. In the same line, Biria and Jouybar (2016) examined the correlations among L2 proficiency, L2 oral proficiency and WTC. They recruited 60 Iranian students who were administered Oxford Placement Test and a WTC questionnaire. The findings indicated that students’ WTC was positively correlated with both the participants’ L2 proficiency and speaking ability.

Yashima (2002), in examining 389 Japanese EFL learners’ WTC, in contrast, found no association among L2 proficiency, communication confidence and WTC. This means communicative confidence does not necessarily turn into willingness to communicate and WTC may not lead to improvement in L2 linguistic performance. If the foregoing argument is true, then attempting to improve WTC even at the expense of linguistic performance will not be much meaningful for language learners. This can lead to the argument for whether WTC or actual improvement in linguistic performance should be prioritized in language classrooms. It is, therefore, essential to conduct further research into the impact of WTC on students’ speaking proficiency to better inform language instructors’ pedagogical practice.

The Current Study

As discussed in the above sections, there has been a lack of studies that examined the potential impact of WTC on language learners’ test taking anxiety and consequently, speaking performance. Moreover, a majority of previous studies examined WTC as the ultimate purpose in classroom practice. However, there has also been empirical evidence that language learners’ WTC may not effectively influence their L2 proficiency. It is, thus, warranted more research to provide further empirical evidence of the impact on WTC on EFL learners’ oral achievement.

This study was, therefore, conducted to address the abovementioned issues with three research questions as follows:

(1) Is there a relationship between EFL learners’ L2 Willingness to Communicate and their speaking test anxiety?
(2) Is there a relationship between EFL learners’ L2 Willingness to Communicate and their oral proficiency?

(3) Is there a relationship between EFL learners’ speaking test anxiety and their oral proficiency?

Methodology

Participants
Participants were 40 high school students (19 males) at a high school in the southern part of Vietnam, the majority of whom aged around 16 years old. They have been learning English for approximately seven years.

Data Collection Instruments

L2 Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (WTCQ)

The WTCQ was self-developed by the researchers with five questions in six-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) “extremely unwilling”, (2) “moderately unwilling”, (3) “slightly unwilling”, (4) “slightly willing”, (5) “moderately willing” to (6) “extremely unwilling”. The instruction for the questionnaire was written as “if you can have your own choice, how willing are you to communicate in English in the following situations?”. WTC is a multidimensional construct and should be, thus, examined in relation to other social, cultural and situational factors (Macintyre, Burns & Jessome, 2011). Five situations, i.e., five questions, were designed in the questionnaire included: “1. Talk with your teacher in English”, “2. Talk with your classmates in English”, “3. Talk with your family members in English”, “4. Talk with foreigners in English”, “5. Talk with your acquaintances in English”.

The WTCQ probed into the willingness to speak English in different situations, both inside and outside classrooms (see also Alemi & Pahmforoosh, 2012; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Conrod, 2001). The first two situations reflect inside classroom WTC, i.e., talking to teachers and classmates, whereas the three latter indicate learners’ L2 WTC outside classroom, talking to family members, acquaintances and foreigners.

Unlike previous studies, willingness to communicate involves all of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and speaking) (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Conrod, 2001), the authors in this study only examined the willingness to speak English among the participants.

As a rule of thumb, the level of internal consistency, i.e., Cronbach alpha value, should be at least .70 for the survey instrument to be reliable. The internal consistence reliability of the WTCQ in this study was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha at .83.

Speaking Test Anxiety Scale (STAS)

The STAS included five questions, adapted from the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (from Y-2) by Spielberger (1983). The five items had four-point Likert design: almost never, sometimes, often and always. Changes were made to the original questions to make it easy for high school students to understand the STAS items. Instruction was given to students as “There is no right or
wrong answer. Please check the box indicating the frequency of you having the below feelings when taking an English speaking test”. Five questions in the speaking test anxiety were as follows: “1. I keep being worried”, “2. I feel I am a failure”, “3. I feel overwhelmed with difficulties”, “4. I lack self-confidence” and “5. I feel worried about recent events happening to me”. The reliability of the STAS was recorded at .85 (i.e., also higher than the acceptable value .70).

**Speaking Proficiency**

The participants’ final-exam speaking test scores at the high school were collected as their speaking proficiency scores. The learners took a CEFR Speaking Test, level A1, extracted from a textbook, namely Prepare Book 1, published by Cambridge University Press.

The participants’ speaking was graded by a native speaker who has been trained in speaking assessment. Their speaking performance was assessed on five areas, namely comprehensibility, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The maximum score for the speaking test was 10 points.

**Procedure**

The participants were administered two questionnaires, i.e., Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire and Speaking Test Anxiety Scale, in one session. Their speaking scores were then gathered from the school.

**Data Analysis**

SPSS version 22 was employed for the statistical analysis in this study. First, internal consistency analysis, i.e., Cronbach’s alpha, was performed to investigate the reliability of the study questionnaires. Descriptive statistics was then performed for all of the study variables. Subsequently, inferential statistics, i.e., bivariate Pearson’s correlation, was conducted to examine the relationships among variables.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics for Variables**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables, i.e., students’ willingness to communicate in L2 (L2 WTC), their speaking test anxiety (STA) and speaking ability. As indicated in the Table 1, students’ readiness to speak English is at a medium level (M = 3.99, SD = 1.06). The maximum value for WTC is 6.00, so more can be done to further enhance the students’ L2 WTC. Also, their averaged STA was at 2.36 (SD = .70), indicating a high level of anxiety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking Ability</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>9.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes. WTC: Willingness to communicate; STA: speaking test anxiety

Correlations among L2 Willingness to Communicate, Speaking Test Anxiety and Speaking Ability

Table 2 displays the results of Pearson’s correlation analyses for correlations among the study variables, i.e., willingness to communicate in English (L2 WTC), speaking test anxiety (STA) and speaking ability. As point out in Table 2, L2 WTC was positively correlated with the participants’ speaking proficiency ($r = .40, p<.05$) and negatively correlated with their STA ($r = -.49, p<.01$). Moreover, students’ STA was negatively associated with their speaking ability ($r = -.42, p<.01$).

Table 2. Summary of Correlations Among L2 WTC, STA and Speaking Ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WTC</th>
<th>STA</th>
<th>Speaking Ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking Ability</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. WTC = L2 willingness to communicate; STA = speaking test anxiety; * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

Further independent t-test analysis was conducted to examine whether there was gender effect in participants’ L2 willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) and speaking test anxiety (STA). Table 3 presents the results for mean-comparing analyses in WTC and STA. As revealed in Table 3, although high school boys tended to be more willing to speak English compared to girls (M = 4.28 and M = 3.71 respectively), the difference did not reach statistical significance ($t = 1.75, p > .05$). By the same token, female students tended to show more anxiety when taking speaking test in comparison to male students (M = 2.38 and M = 2.34 respectively), yet the difference was not statistically significant, $t = -.20, p > .05$.

Table 3. Independent Sample T-test Comparing Male and Female High School Students’ L2 Willingness to Communicate and Speaking Test Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. WTC = willingness to speak English; STA = speaking test anxiety

As suggested by previous literature (e.g., Basoz & Erten, 2018), learners’ L2 WTC inside and outside class may differ from each other. However, Basoz and Erten (2018) grounded their support for the potential difference between L2 WTC inside and outside class based on mean value and percentage of responses only. That means the difference might not have reached statistical significance. In this study, the authors aimed to provide more persuasive evidence by performing paired t-test analysis to examine the difference between inside and outside-classroom L2 WTC. A composite score was computed for L2 WTC inside classroom by summing the scores of item 1 and item 2 of the Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire, i.e., “1. Talk with
your teacher in English and “2. Talk with your classmates in English”. By the same token, another composite score was calculated for outside-classroom WTC by totaling the scores of three last items, i.e., “3. Talk with your family members in English”, “4. Talk with foreigners in English”, “5. Talk with your acquaintances in English”.

First, students’ L2 WTC inside and outside were strongly correlated (r = .75, p < .01). Table 4 presents the results of comparing inside-class L2 WTC and outside-class L2 WTC. As indicated in Table 4, the high school learners’ level of L2 WTC outside classroom is significantly different from their inside classroom L2 WTC. In other words, the participants are more willing to speaking English in informal situations, i.e., outside classrooms. This finding is in line with Basoz and Erten’s (2018).

Table 4. Result for Paired Sample T-test Comparing Inside and Outside Classroom L2 WTC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L2 WTC inside</th>
<th></th>
<th>L2 WTC outside</th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ L2</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>-9.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes. L2 WTC = willingness to communicate; L2 WTC = willingness to speak English in class; L2 WTC outside = willingness to speak English outside classrooms.

**p < .01

Discussion

As discussed in the results, L2 willingness to communicate was moderately associated with both students’ speaking test anxiety and their speaking proficiency. These findings were in line with many previous studies that examined the correlation between WTC and language use anxiety (e.g., Hardy, 2007; Yan, Pan & Wang, 2018). However, it also added a specific empirical evidence for the positive impact of L2 WTC on learners’ test-taking anxiety, the association few studies have tapped into. The research finding implied that enhancing EFL learners’ WTC is likely to help to reduce their anxiety when taking L2 speaking test, thus enhancing their speaking performance. The direct effect of willingness to communicate was also identified. Participants who had higher level of L2 WTC were likely to achieve higher scores on their speaking test. Previous studies have indicated that L2 WTC can promote the learners’ frequency of speaking practice (MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). As a result, students who practice their speaking skill more frequently have better chance to learn and improve the language skill (McDonough, 2004; Saeed, Khaksari, Eng & Ghani, 2016).

The negative impact of test-taking anxiety on EFL learners’ speaking performance was confirmed in this study. The students who had high level of anxiety tend to have low speaking achievement (Zhang & Liu, 2013). This bears significant implications for speaking assessment that speaking-test organizers should take into consideration factors that may heighten anxiety level of test-takers and thus, negatively affect their performance. Examiners can help to reduce test-takers’ nervousness by having a warm-up part before their real speaking test. Teachers can also help to reduce learners’ test anxiety by familiarizing the learners with the test format and provide them with plenty of opportunities to practice (Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012).
Furthermore, anxiety level was also found to be negatively associated with the language learners’ L2 willingness to communicate. Regarding pedagogical implication, language instructors should try to create a friendly classroom atmosphere that encourage EFL learners to speak. Using well-designed educational games can be an effective technique to relax the classroom atmosphere and facilitate language acquisition process. For instance, Perveen, Asif, Mehmood, Khan and Iqbal (2016) pointed out that games could assist learners in acquiring vocabulary and phrases in a deep, meaningful way compared to rote learning, thus enhancing their general communicative competence.

The way corrective feedback is performed is also important. For instance, recast, i.e., repeating the incorrect utterance with its correct forms, and using prompts have been found to be effective techniques to facilitate speaking training (Gooch, Saito & Lyster, 2016). Additionally, interrupting the learners’ speaking to provide feedback is not encouraged as it may lead to breakdown in their flow of thoughts. Teachers should then wait for the learners to finish their communicative tasks before giving the corrective feedback (Muhsin, 2016).

Moreover, no evidence for the gender effect on the participants’ L2 WTC and speaking test anxiety, indicating high-school boys and girls had similar level of willing to speak English and anxiety when taking their speaking test. This finding is in line with Ghanbapour (2016). She conducted a study investigating L2 WTC of 188 university students in Iran. No difference between male and female participants was recorded in regard to their L2 WTC.

There was, nevertheless, a significant difference between the students’ L2 WTC inside and outside classroom. Learners tended to be more willing to practice L2 speaking in informal situations, i.e., outside classrooms. The aforementioned finding implies that students’ informal out-of-school speaking practice should be valued and encouraged. For example, language teachers can design interesting projects/tasks that encourage learners to talk to their family members, friends, acquaintances or foreigners in English. This is because there was a strong relationship between informal L2 WTC outside classroom and inside classroom as pointed out in the result section.

**Conclusions and Limitations**

The current study was conducted to examine the relationships among L2 willingness to communicate, speaking test anxiety and speaking proficiency. First, willingness to communicate was found to be associated with both speaking test anxiety and proficiency. Learners who were more willing to communicate in English tended to have higher speaking proficiency and lower test anxiety. In addition, speaking test anxiety was negatively related to speaking performance. Male and female high school students did not differ in their level of willingness to communicate or test anxiety. Participants tended to be more willing to speak English in other informal situations outside classrooms.

Limitations of the study involve the small sample size of the study. Thus, caution should be taken when generalizing the study findings. Also, interview should have been conducted to provide more insights into the high school students’ practice. However, the study was rigorously conducted and bears useful implications for L2 pedagogical practice.
References


Appendix

L2 Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (L2 WTCQ)
If you can have your own choice, how willing are you to communicate in English in the following situations?
1 - extremely unwilling, 2 - moderately unwilling, 3 - slightly unwilling, 4 - slightly willing, 5 - moderately willing, 6 - extremely unwilling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Talk with your teacher in English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Talk with your classmates in English</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Talk with your family members in English</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Talk with foreigners in English</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Talk with your acquaintances in English</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Speaking Test Anxiety Scale
There is no right or wrong answer. Please check the box indicating the frequency of you having the below feelings when taking an English speaking test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I keep being worried</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I feel I am a failure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel overwhelmed with difficulties</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I lack self-confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel worried about recent events happening to me</td>
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</table>