

Vietnamese EFL Students' Willingness to Communicate in EFL Classes

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Abstract — Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a personality trait that specifies the likelihood of engaging in communicative activities when the chance occurs (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). It has gradually evolved as a crucial notion for a more in-depth understanding of second language training. While some students enjoy engaging in communicative activities in the classroom, others try to avoid them as much as possible. The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent Vietnamese EFL students are willing to speak in EFL classes and what factors affect their WTC. The survey questionnaires were distributed to gather data for the study. A total of 112 third-year non-English major students at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam participated in this study. The results showed that the students' WTC was just at the medium level and that communication readiness was strongly influenced by both individual and situational factors.

Keywords — Willingness to Communicate (WTC), level of WTC, factors affecting WTC

I. INTRODUCTION

According to studies on second language communication, some second or foreign language (L2) learners who have a high level of linguistic proficiency remain reserved L2 speakers, whereas those who have a lower level of proficiency can speak nonstop (Baghaei, Dourakhshan & Salavati, 2012). In other words, proficiency in communication does not ensure that learners will perform well or communicate frequently in a second language. Even though they have a high degree of communicative ability, people who tend to avoid L2 communication settings are prevalent, according to Dörnyei (2005, p. 207). In light of the fact that communication is a crucial component of L2 acquisition, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) contend that whatever the goal of language learning may be, such as meeting new people, traveling, experiencing other cultures, or even just for personal development. The WTC construct was initially established by McCroskey and Baer in 1985 to describe the trait-like characteristics that individuals display while speaking in their first language. This construct was later applied to the L2 context to investigate the factors influencing L2 learners' psychological readiness to initiate communication, given that there might be other factors besides language aptitude and competence that would otherwise explain WTC in an L2 (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998).

The current study aims to investigate non-English majored students' level of WTC and factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes. More specifically, it attempts to gain some insights into non-English major students' behavior toward WTC, explore the level of WTC, and factors that might influence their WTC in their practice in EFL classes. It is intended that this research would help students in EFL contexts focus their attention on the significance of WTC and factors affecting WTC in formal English communication. Additionally, this study is significant since it can offer more proof regarding the link between factors affecting WTC and the speaking of EFL students in real-life communication. Finally, the study might offer some useful recommendations to raise the level of WTC and increase knowledge of the factors affecting WTC in EFL settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Willingness to Communicate

2.1.1 Definitions

WTC was originally conceptualized for first language acquisition and seeks to demonstrate the probability that a speaker will choose to participate in a conversation of their own volition (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). WTC is an emergent, dynamically shifting, psychological state of communicative readiness that fluctuates within and between communication events (MacIntyre 2007, 2020).

Traditionally, it was seen as a fixed personality trait that did not change according to context (Shih & Yang, 2017). According to McCroskey (1997,p.77), WTC refers to the likelihood of communicating when given



the chance. WTC is regarded as the stable propensity to talk, a personality trait, and specifically the degree of introversion or extroversion, in the first language. Although many situational factors, such as how the person feels that day, what communication they have had recently with others, who they are, what they look like, what they might gain or lose from communicating, and other demands on their time, can strongly influence communicative behavior, cognitive understanding of human communication is heavily influenced by an individual's personality. Introversion, self-esteem, communication proficiency, communication apprehension, and cultural background are precursors of WTC. Levine and McCroskey (1990) reaffirmed and clarified that the WTC feature is an individual's propensity to begin communication with others in order to further clarify the notion of WTC. WTC was, therefore, initially viewed as a personality- or trait-based tendency that demonstrated consistent individual differences over time and in a variety of contexts. Also noticeable is the concept elaborated by McCroskey and Baer (1985). They state that the term "willingness to communicate" comes from studies on the inability to speak in one's first language, where it was thought to be a trait-like construct that persisted across different communication contexts and interlocutors.

With the consideration of the above-mentioned definitions, it is conceptualized in the present study that WTC is the preparedness to engage in conversation in an L2 with a specific person or people at a specific time. It is a multifaceted construct that incorporates linguistic, affective, social-psychological, and communicative factors that can characterize, explain, and predict the communicative behavior of language learners in a second language (L2).

2.2 The relationship between WTC and speaking skills.

2.2.1 Conceptions of speaking skills

Torky (2006, p. 33) defined "speaking" as "the production of auditory signals designed to produce differential verbal responses in a listener. It is considered as combining sounds in a systematic way, according to language-specific principles to form meaningful utterances". According to Javed Iqbal (2012), speaking skills are regarded as the oral way of language acquisition, which is harder and more complex than the three other language skills of listening, reading, and writing. He emphasizes that speaking involves combining words to create meaningful messages rather than just generating sounds of the syllables. Many other researchers as reviewed by Abd (2016), cite the two-way nature of speaking. In other words, it is the interaction of two or more people in an environment and at a time that they both share.

According to Bailey (2000, p. 25), speaking is an interactive activity where speakers seek to create meaning by generating, absorbing, and processing information. These beliefs suggest that speaking ability and communication go hand in hand. Speaking is the ability to utilize a language effectively to convey one's thoughts, feelings, or ideas in order to impart or receive knowledge from those who engage in communication.

2.2.2 WTC, English speaking Skills, and communication.

Speaking, as shown in MacIntyre (2003)'s study, has both good and negative effects on readiness to communicate. This study's findings are similar to those of Pattapong (2010) and Peng and Woodrow (2010), who discovered that speaking had a positive link with readiness to communicate. Similarly, speaking had a direct favorable effect on accountancy students' readiness to communicate in this study. Furthermore, Peng (2009) found that communication confidence is the biggest predictor of readiness to communicate. This study's findings will contribute to Peng's (2009) assumptions about the role of communication confidence on willingness to communicate.

The ability to communicate plays a crucial role in language learning, including speaking since it is directly tied to the learner's propensity to seek out communication opportunities and involvement in interactions (Cao & Philp, 2006). According to a widely held belief in the L2 sector, WTC plays a significant role in L2 communication behavior and, as a result, contributes to L2 competence (Kang, 2005; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017). WTC has been looked into as a predictor of L2 communication behavior in a few research. According to a study, (Cao, 2014; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014), stronger WTC is associated with more frequent communication in the L2 setting. Additionally, some studies have looked at the connection between WTC and L2 proficiency. WTC has been discovered to have a favorable relationship with L2 performance (Mahmoodi).

2.3 Factors Affecting WTC

Researchers found two categories of characteristics that are thought to influence EFL students' WTC. They are Personal Characteristics including L2 self-confidence and L2 Learning Anxiety; and Situational Variables such as Task Type, Topic of Discussion, and Interlocutors.

2.3.1 Personal Characteristics

L2 Self-confidence: The findings on L2 self-confidence demonstrated that the majority of the students tended to lack self-confidence when speaking English. All of the depicted situations surrounding the students' unwillingness to speak English in some classroom English exchanges are typical of foreign language students with poor self-confidence. According to Rubio (2007), foreign language students who lack self-confidence experience uncertainty and worry when communicating in the target language. On the other hand, students with a high level of self-confidence tend to be more active in class (Cao & Philip, 2006). They are not scared to ask questions, express their opinions, speak in front of the class, or make mistakes while speaking (Mubarok, 2018).

L2 Learning Anxiety: The results of studies related to this aspect revealed that students were fearful of making mistakes when speaking English. These studies also indicated that one of the reasons students are reluctant to speak English in class is fear of making mistakes (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Başöz & Erten, 2019; Azwar, 2021). Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2001) showed that learners become afraid to speak in L2 if they know they would be evaluated formally. Students may be terrified of making mistakes because they are fearful of being mocked by others or receiving a negative evaluation. According to Wen and Clement (2003), one of the reasons foreign language students are hesitant to use the L2 is the fear of losing face if they make mistakes.

2.3.2 Situational Variables

2.3.2.1 Effect of Task Types

Peng (2014) defines tasks as "learning activities organized in a class that is aimed at either structural knowledge or communicative ability". Task types are regarded as noticeable elements influencing students' WTC levels. The nature of the work, level of difficulty, and time given for completion can all influence a student's L2 WTC (Pattapong, 2010). When learners transition from declarative to procedural knowledge through repeated practice, form-focused tasks have been shown to be crucial in helping them automatize language forms (Anderson, 1982). According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and De-waele (2018), learners' levels of enjoyment can be increased by giving them risk-taking, challenging, and unpredictable tasks. The goal-oriented nature of information-gap exercises will probably test students' cognitive abilities and encourage them to take chances when attempting novel linguistic constructions (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004). While the random nature of the interactions created by these activities gives students some control over how to mold the interactions to fulfill task objectives.

2.3.2.2 Effect of the Topics of Discussion

Students may be more eager to converse in English with their peers if they are exposed to familiar themes to discuss, boosting their practice opportunities. Issue familiarity, issue interest, and topic preparation are important elements that might boost students' linguistic self-confidence, which in turn boosts students' WTC (MacIntyre, 1998). Kang (2005), for example, noted that a lack of ideas and a concern about understanding challenges make learners feel less confident in discussing an unknown topic. Furthermore, a fascinating topic on which learners have sufficient underlying knowledge and expertise might heighten their degree of excitement. Similarly, Cao and Philip (2006) asserted that a new topic of discussion can stifle classroom communication because students lack background information on the subject.

2.3.2.3 Interlocutors

Gender: For a thorough understanding of L2 communication, scholars (e.g., Wagner & Firth, 1997, Anderson, 1998, Dobao & Martnez, 2007) focused on the roles of both participants in interaction, or 'both sides of the page,' as Yule and Tarone (1991) put it. In L2 communication, participants' impressions of their interlocutors can greatly influence their pattern of interactional moves (Morris & Tarone, 2003; Sato, 2007). The embarrassment created by making mistakes in front of an interlocutor of the opposing gender causes the speaker to reconsider the correctness level of his discourse.

Familiarity with the interlocutor: One key criterion mentioned by several responders is familiarity with the interlocutor. Four respondents emphasized the significance of this element in their willingness or unwillingness to speak in class. They reported a greater inclination to communicate with someone they know

well and are hence more at ease with. The participation of the interlocutor, particularly in dyadic contact, was considered as a crucial element in shaping WTC. Dornyei (2002) discovered that the motivational disposition of the interlocutor was closely associated to the individual's speaking interaction.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study was designed as a descriptive one that employed the quantitative research approach. Quantitative data were collected through a 27-item questionnaire in this study. The questionnaire was used first to gauge non-English students' perceived level of WTC and second to identify factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes.

3.2 Participants

Participants included 112 non-English majors in their third year at Nam Can Tho University. Out of 112 participants, the numbers of males and females were 65 (58%) and 47 (42%), respectively, and their average age was 20. They had at least 10 years of experience in English language learning, and all of them had completed three courses of general English courses in their undergraduate programs. Information on the participants was summarized in Table I below.

TABLE I
THE PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students' information		Number	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	65	58
	Female	47	42
Experience of English language learning	>=10 years	100	100
Years of studying at university	Juniors	100	100

3.3 Research Instrument

A WTC questionnaire was employed as the main research instrument for the present study. The WTC questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaires by MacIntyre (2001) and Pattapong (2010) in a way that could best fit the research context and assure the research aims. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section one aimed at collecting data about the participants' background information. Section two included 10 items focusing on examining non-English major students' level of WTC, and section three was comprised of 17 items with the aim of identifying factors affecting the WTC of the students in EFL classrooms. Ten items in section two were presented according to a 5-point Likert (i.e., 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, and 5=always). The remaining twenty-two items in section three were categorized into two clusters, namely personal characteristics (7 items) and situation variables (10 items). These items were also presented according to a 5-point Likert (i.e., 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree). In order to ensure that the students participating in the study could understand the questions clearly and could give answers to all the questions, the questionnaire was provided in both Vietnamese and English.

TABLE II
THE WTC QUESTIONNAIRE

Sections	Clusters	Number of items	Items used	Contents
Level of WTC		10	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10	Level of WTC
	Personal Characteristics	4	11,12,14,18	L2 self-confidence
		3	13,19,20	L2 Learning Anxiety
Influential factors	Situation Variables	4	15,22,23,24	Effect of task type
		3	17,21,25	Effect of the discussion topic
		3	16,26,27	Interlocutors
Total		27		

IV. RESULTS

To measure the level and factors affecting the WTC by the participants, a questionnaire with 27 items was used. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked using the *Scale Test*. The result showed that the reliability coefficient of this instrument was high ($\alpha = .91$). The two main sections (i.e., the participants' level of WTC and impacting factors) of the questionnaire were also checked for reliability. The results indicated that they were all reliable ($\alpha = .85$ and $\alpha = .93$, respectively) (see Table III). In addition, seventeen items used to examine influential factors had coefficient values ranging from 0.48 to 0.72. With coefficient values greater than 0.30, these items can be retained for factor analysis. The *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin* test (KMO) was also run to check the sampling adequacy of these items. The result showed that the KMO value was 0.86 ($p=0.00$), which was considered significant. Besides, *Bartlett's* test had a significant level at 0.000. These results indicated that correlations among items were high enough to analyze the observed factors.

The reports on the participants' overall level of WTC and factors affecting their WTC were also presented based on the results of the *Descriptive Statistics test* and the *One Sample T-Test*, and the *Paired-Samples T-Test*.

TABLE III
THE RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

	Number	Cronbach's Alpha	The reliability of each part	
			Section 1	Section 2
The questionnaire	112	.91	.85	.93

4.1 Non-English majored students' level of WTC in EFL classes

The *Descriptive Statistics Test* was carried out to examine the overall mean score of the participants' perceptions of their WTC in EFL classes. The results are shown in Table IV.

TABLE IV
NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' LEVEL OF WTC IN EFL CLASSES

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Level	112	1.00	4.00	2.97	.57

The results indicated that the overall mean score of the participants' level of WTC in EFL classes was 2.97 ($M=2.97$, $SD=0.57$). The *One Sample T-test* was carried out to compare the mean score and the test value 3.6, the accepted mean for the high level. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between them ($t=-11.81$, $df=111$, $p=.000$). The *One Sample T-test* was also carried out to compare the mean score and the test value 2.4, the accepted mean for the low level. The results revealed that a significant difference between them was observed ($t=10.59$, $df=111$, $p=.000$). It could be concluded that non-English majored students' WTC in EFL classes were just at the medium level.

4.2 Factors affecting non-English majored students' WTC in EFL Classes

The *Descriptive Statistics Test* was also carried out to examine the mean scores of non-English students' perceptions of factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes. The results are shown in Table V.

TABLE V
NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR WTC IN EFL CLASSES

Factor	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Influential factors	112	1.00	5.00	3.75	.73
Personal Characteristics	112	1.00	5.00	3.71	.75
Situational Variables	112	1.00	5.00	3.77	.75

As can be seen from Table V, the mean score of the students' perceptions toward factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes was 3.75, the accepted mean score for the high level. The *One Sample T-Test* was run to compare the mean score and the test values 3.4 and 4.5. The results showed that the mean score significantly differed from 3.4 ($t=5.09$, $df=111$, $p=.000$) and from 4.5 ($t=-10.95$, $df=111$, $p=.000$). This could be inferred that the observed factors together strongly affected non-English majors' WTC in EFL classes. To explore whether

there was a significant difference in the influence of the two types of impacting factors, namely personal characteristics and situational variables, the *Paired Sample T-tests* were calculated. The results revealed that there was not a statistically significant discrepancy between them ($t=-1.421$, $df=111$, $p=.158$). Therefore, it could be concluded that personal characteristics and situational variables were found to affect non-English majored students' WTC at the same high level.

4.2.1 Non-English majored students' perceptions on the effects of *Personal Characteristics* on Their WTC in EFL Classes.

As described earlier in this study, '*Personal Characteristics*' factors are comprised of two sub-categories: *L2 Self-confidence* and *L2 Learning Anxiety*. The descriptive statistics for the results of the students' perceptions about these types of factors are displayed in Table VI.

TABLE VI
NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TWO SUB-CLUSTERS OF PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Factor	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
L2 self-confidence	112	1.00	5.00	3.72	.71
L2 learning anxiety	112	1.00	5.00	3.71	.98

According to Table VI, the mean scores for the participants' perceptions of *L2 Self-confidence* and *L2 Learning Anxiety* as factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes were ($M=3.72$ and 3.71 respectively). The *Paired Sample T-Test* was conducted to compare the mean scores of these factors. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in the effect of *L2 Self-confidence* and *L2 Learning Anxiety* on the participants' WTC ($t=107$, $df=111$, $p=.915$). This means that non-English majored students' WTC in EFL was equally affected by *L2 Self-confidence* and *L2 Learning Anxiety*.

4.2.2 Non-English majored students' perceptions of '*Situational Variables*' factors

As described in Chapter 3, '*Situation Variables*' factors are categorized into three sub-clusters: the effect of the *Type of Task*, the effect of *The Topic of Discussion*, and the effect of *Interlocutors*. The results are shown in Table VII.

TABLE VII
NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE THREE SUB-CLUSTERS OF SITUATIONAL VARIABLES

Factor	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Task types	112	1.00	5.00	3.76	.80
Discussion topics	112	1.00	5.00	3.80	.76
Interlocutors	112	1.00	5.00	3.75	.90

The *Paired Sample T-Test* was performed to compare the mean scores of the participants' perceptions of '*Situational Variables*' factors affecting their WTC in EFL classes. The results showed that they did not significantly differ from one another as the significant values were greater than .05. Therefore, it could be concluded that task types, discussion topics, and interlocutors had equally strong effects on non-English majored students' WTC in the EFL classroom.

V. DISCUSSION

According to the study's results, most students appeared to be less inclined to communicate in EFL classes when it came to the degree of their WTC. This denoted a medium WTC level here. The results are consistent with a large body of literature on Asian students, who are frequently stereotyped as timid and submissive in EFL (Kim, 2004). These results concur with some of the findings of other Vietnamese researchers. For instance, Nguyen (2010) reported in his research that Vietnamese students often did not volunteer to answer questions in class and instead waited to be called upon by the teacher. The study's results showed that students had greater issues with situational and individual aspects when it comes to what influences their WTC. The problem might indicate that the students had little opportunity to practice speaking English in high school before entering the university or that they were not taught how to employ communicative tactics. The study's results also showed that contextual elements including the degree of task difficulty, topic discussion, and interlocutors had an impact on students' WTC. These results are consistent with Nguyen's (2010) findings that students would

naturally refuse to complete tasks that were beyond their capacity, and with those found in Kang's (2005) study that students felt more secure when talking about a familiar subject. Naturally, students would feel more at ease and secure participating in a discussion when the topic was relevant to their prior knowledge.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, the participants reported that they were less active in communication, so the level of WTC in their EFL classes was not high, but only average. As also found in this study, the level of WTC of non-English majored students was strongly influenced by different factors categorized as *Personal Characteristics* and *Situational Variables*. In addition to the effects of *L2 self-confidence* and *Learning Anxiety*, the participants' WTC were also affected by *Discussion Topics*, *Task Types*, and *Interlocutors*, which led to the WTC of non-English majored students being at the medium level. It could be inferred that the level of WTC is only average for many EFL learners due to the high level of *Individual* and *Situational* influences. To conclude, the success of each learner in acquiring a language is greatly influenced by their decision to speak or not to speak, hence creating a learning environment that supports WTC is a legitimate goal of L2 education.

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