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## Factors Affecting L2 Willingness to Communicate in Adolescent EFL learners

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# Factors Affecting L2 Willingness to Communicate in Adolescent EFL learners

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## Abstract

Around the world, many studies have investigated Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in language learning. However, few studies have explored adolescent EFL learners' WTC. This study attempted to investigate what factors affect L2 WTC of 135 Japanese junior high school students through regression analyses of quantitative data. A questionnaire was administered to measure their L2 WTC, communication variables (e.g., task attitudes, L2 motivation) and socio-dynamics in L2. Also, the results of English proficiency tests were used to measure their L2 competence. The findings revealed that three enduring communication variables—perceived L2 communicative competence, L1 WTC, and L2 anxiety—predict the participants' L2 WTC, confirming the previous research results. This suggests how well learners perceive they can communicate in an L2 without feeling anxious is vital in sustaining learners' L2 WTC. Also, L1WTC, a personality-based predisposition, was found to play an important role in L2 learners' volitional choice to initiate communication.

**Keywords:** L2 WTC, adolescent EFL learners, perceived communicative competence

## 1. Introduction

Recent approaches to language education have placed much emphasis on providing language learners with active language use opportunities in the classroom, including communicative language activities such as dyad or group discussions and debates. The ideal situation is one that encourages learners to communicate with peers and actively produce as much language output as possible. However, in practice, there are some difficulties that obstruct the above educational ideal. Recent studies have raised the issue of learners who remain reluctant to communicate in second language (L2) in the classroom (e.g., MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Shao & Gao, 2016). In particular, King's study (2013) pointed out Japanese students' silence in L2 classrooms. To address such issues, many researchers have used the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) — "a readiness to enter into discourse

at a specific time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (MacIntyre et al., p. 547) when free to do so. WTC has been widely recognized as a prerequisite for the success of communication and is now regarded as one of the key individual differences affecting L2 learning in addition to personality, ability, attitude, motivation, learning style, and language learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2009). Applying the WTC concept and previous WTC research methods, this study aims to explore what factors affect L2 WTC of adolescent EFL Japanese learners.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Emergence of L2 WTC research

To explore why some people are more willing to communicate than others, researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have paid considerable attention to the WTC concept and have conducted studies in several cultural contexts. In the early days, applying L1 communication approaches that regarded WTC as a person’s stable personality trait demonstrated across a variety of situations (McCroskey, 1970, 1977, 1984), most L2 WTC studies focused on various factors affecting stable, trait-like L2 WTC (e.g., Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2001; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre & Clément, 1996; Yashima, 2002). For example, Baker et al. (2000) and MacIntyre et al. (2001) studied L2 French immersion programs for young learners living in relatively unilingual Anglophone communities in Canada and found that perceived communicative competence (i.e., how competent learners feel about their L2 ability) and L2 anxiety (i.e., being afraid to use the L2) were the main factors affecting L2 WTC. Applying the results of previous WTC research, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a schematic multilayered pyramid model of WTC. In this model, various situational and trait linguistic and psychological variables, including stable personality traits and on-the-spot desire to talk with a specific person converge. This model thus suggested that WTC needs to be conceptualized as both situational and trait constructs and inspired the subsequent WTC studies around the world.

### 2.2 Previous Research on WTC in Japan

Around year 2000, WTC research expanded into other regions of the world, including Japan (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Yashima, et al., 2004) and China (e.g., Peng & Woodrow, 2010), especially in settings where people place great importance on L2 education. The purpose

of subsequent studies was to validate variables shown in the aforementioned WTC model (MacIntyre et al., 1998) in different learning contexts and explore other variables affecting L2 WTC. For example, Yashima (2002), Yashima et al. (2004) and Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide (2008) conducted trail-blazing WTC studies in Japanese EFL contexts. They not only validated existing factors influencing WTC but also established a new construct—international posture, attitudinal construct that captures EFL learners’ openness toward dissimilar others, a willingness to approach them, and interest in an international vocation and global affairs (Yashima, 2014, p. 39).”

Also in Japan, Fushino (2010) examined L2 WTC in college EFL classrooms. She revealed that the key predictor of L2 WTC in group discussions was self-perceived communicative competence in the L2, which was determined by group attitudes; however, the effect of communication apprehension was much smaller. This suggests that as seen in Zhong’s (2013) study, the joint effect of classroom sociocultural factors and learners’ perceived communicative competence boosts (or hinders) learners’ L2 WTC. It also suggests that in an L2 group interaction, a sound sociocultural environment (i.e., positive attitudes toward interlocutors) may be key to fostering learners’ perceived communicative competence, leading to higher WTC.

Further, Freiermuth and Huang (2012) examined the effect of online chat between Taiwanese and Japanese EFL college students on their L2 WTC and task-related motivation. It was found that participation in synchronous online chat tasks with learners of a different culture facilitated Japanese students’ enjoyment of using English and alleviated the pressure they usually felt in face-to-face L2 interactions, leading to heightened L2 WTC. This study suggests that enjoyment of language use for real intercultural contact combined with lower L2 anxiety in the interactional environment encourages L2 WTC.

However, few studies have explored factors affecting L2 WTC of adolescent learners of early language learning stages even though L2 interactions have been extensively researched in SLA field. This area needs investigation. Thus, the objective of the present study is to explore factors affecting L2 WTC of adolescent EFL learners.

### 3. Research Question

To achieve the research objective, the following research question (RQ) was investigated.

*RQ. What affects L2 WTC of adolescent Japanese students in the EFL classroom context?*

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Participants

The participants were 135 third graders (aged 14–15) of one junior high school in an Osaka suburb. Until the investigation period, they had had two years of formal English education in the Japanese public school curriculum.

### 4.2 Procedure and instruments

A questionnaire on learners' trait dispositions, including L2 WTC and attitudes toward learning and using the L2, English, was administered and collected in the English class. The questionnaire items whose reliability has been proven in the previous major WTC studies were adopted. The result of English proficiency tests given by the participants' school was also included in the data. Each is described in detail below, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients where applicable.

#### a) Questionnaire items

**1. L2 WTC (8 items,  $\alpha = .90$ ).** WTC items were adopted from Ryan (2009) which he adapted from McCroskey's WTC scale (1992) for Japanese EFL contexts, using 6-point Likert-type items. This measure captures participants' general tendency to communicate in English when given an opportunity, in various situations inside and outside school (e.g., "Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line," "*Talk in front of class in English*").

**2. L1 WTC (8 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ).** The participants' L1 WTC was also assessed, using modified versions of the L2 items, in order to measure their general personality-based tendency to communicate.

**3. Perceived L2 communicative competence (23 items,  $\alpha = .97$ ).** To determine what verbal actions participants could take in English, 23 can-do type items from the Eiken English proficiency test ([www.eiken.or.jp](http://www.eiken.or.jp)), based on the CEFR can-do assessment, were used to measure perceived communicative competence in the L2. Negishi et al. (2013, pp. 139–140) said junior high school third graders (age 14–15) have a general range in English ability from CEFR Pre-A1 and A1 to A2, thus assessment items for those levels were used. A sample item was "*If I don't understand what the other person says, I can ask him/her a question in English.*"

**4. L2 anxiety (8 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ).** These items from Ryan (2009) assessed students' degree

of communication apprehension in English. A sample item was “*I feel nervous when I speak English in English class.*”

**5. L2 motivation (12 items,  $\alpha = .89$ ).** An L2 motivation measure consists of two subcategories—“L2 learning intensity,” or how much effort learners make to learn L2, and “desire to learn L2,” or how strongly learners want to study L2, was adopted from Gardner and Lambert (1972).

**L2 learning intensity (6 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ).** The original format was altered to a 7-point Likert-type scale; “motivational intensity” was represented by items like “*Compared to my classmates, I think I study English relatively hard.*”

**Desire to learn English (6 items,  $\alpha = .77$ ).** “This includes items such as “*I find studying English more interesting than other subjects.*”

**6. Task attitudes (4 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ).** These items measured the participants’ attitudes toward communicative tasks in English. Two were adopted from Dörnyei and Kormos (2000), for example “I like the tasks in English lessons.” The other two items measured whether the students thought classroom communicative tasks were beneficial compared to their previous grammar-focused English lessons. A sample item was “*I am more motivated to engage in communicative tasks than our regular English lessons.*”

**7. Group attitudes (13 items,  $\alpha = .90$ ).** These items consisted of two subcategories, i.e. perceived group cohesiveness adapted from Clément et al. (1994), and perceived group usefulness, from Fushino (2010). The two subcategories are as follows:

**Perceived group cohesiveness (7 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ).** These items determined the degree to which students felt that the class formed a cohesive group. They were based on items taken from Clément et al. (1994) (e.g., “*I think my group is better than the other groups*”).

**Perceived group usefulness (6 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ).** These items were taken from Fushino (2010) and elicited information about the usefulness of group work (e.g., “*During group work, I learn various opinions and ideas from my group members*”).

#### b) English proficiency tests.

The results of English tests given by the participants’ school were used as a language measure, which showed high Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  (.98). These norm-referenced English tests (see Brown, 2005, p. 7) were given every two months throughout the year. Each test consisted of listening, reading, structure and writing sections, using already learned items from previous years. Each section had the same number of questions. The answer formats always included

multiple-choice questions, fill-in the-blank exercises, and one short open-ended writing question.

## 5. Results of the Analyses

To answer the research question (*What affects L2 WTC of adolescent Japanese students in the EFL classroom context?*), regression analysis through SPSS 23 were mainly used. Here, firstly the descriptive statistics for each variable and the correlation analyses among the variables conducted prior to the regression analyses will be presented. Then, the results of the regression analyses will be discussed.

First, Table 1 shows general descriptive statistics for all the variables. Normality was assessed by obtaining skewness and kurtosis values; following Kline's (2011) suggested cut-off scores of 3.00 as an absolute value for skewness and 10.00 for kurtosis, the data distribution shows normality. Table 2 shows the results of the correlation analyses. L2 WTC is highly correlated with perceived communicative competence in L2 (.68) and moderately correlated with other linguistic and non-linguistic variables (ranging from .56 to .37) and L2 proficiency (.40); however, there is no correlation between L2 WTC and group attitudes (.04).

Secondly, to identify which variables predict L2 WTC, multiple regression analysis (stepwise method) was performed; the dependent variable was L2 WTC, and the independent variables were perceived L2 communicative competence, L2 anxiety, L2 motivation, L1 WTC, task attitudes, and L2 proficiency, all of which were significantly correlated with L2 WTC. As shown in Table 3, the results (coefficient of determination:  $R^2=.62$ ) revealed that three independent variables, i.e. perceived L2 communicative competence ( $t(1)=7.93, p<.001$ ), L1 WTC ( $t(1)=5.97, p<.001$ ), and L2 anxiety ( $t(1)=2.61, p<.05$ ), most significantly predict the participants' L2 WTC. A calculated partial regression coefficient was significant ( $F[3,132]=71.21, p<.001, \eta^2=.62$ ), and acquired partial regression coefficients show that perceived L2 communicative competence (.51) has a stronger influence than L1 WTC (.34) or L2 anxiety (.17). Multicollinearity was not found in a calculated partial regression coefficient (VIF ranged from 1.11 to 1.52).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Variables*

Variables	<i>a</i>	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness
L2 WTC	.90	8	2.51	.92	.29	.18
L1 WTC	.87	8	3.65	.83	.09	-.49
perceived L2 communicative competence	.97	23	3.92	.84	.21	-.03
L2 anxiety	.83	8	2.94	1.14	-.11	.20
L2 motivation	.89	12	4.20	1.09	.23	-.13
learning intensity	.84	6	4.00	1.21	-.06	-.49
learning desire	.77	6	4.41	1.09	-.18	.57
task attitudes	.83	4	3.94	1.03	-.65	-.19
group attitudes	.90	13	3.80	.87	.54	-.53
group cohesiveness	.87	7	3.40	1.04	-.42	.18
group usefulness	.87	6	4.26	.88	-.69	.38
L2 proficiency	.90	1	48.13	21.94	-.80	.39

Table 2

*Correlations among Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. perceived L2 communicative competence	1.							
2. L2 anxiety	.55**	1.						
3. L2 motivation	.7**	.44*	1.					
4. L2 WTC	.68**	.56**	.55**	1.				
5. L1 WTC	.22	.3*	.26*	.50**	1.			
6. task attitudes	.33*	.29*	.39*	.37*	.33*	1.		
7. group attitudes	.05	.06	.14	.04	.17	.17	1.	
8. L2 proficiency	.57**	.23*	.48*	.40*	.09	.08	-.01	1.



Table 3

*Result of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting L2 WTC*

	$\beta$	SEB	<i>B</i>	
perceived L2 communicative competence	0.51	0.57	4.43	***
L1 WTC	0.34	0.06	0.38	***
L2 anxiety	0.18	0.06	0.16	***
intercept		2.64	-7.65	
$R^2$		.62***		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 6. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The results of the regression analyses among all the variables showed that three enduring communication variables—perceived L2 communicative competence, L1 WTC, and L2 anxiety—predict the participants' L2 WTC. In particular, perceived L2 communicative competence, rather than L2 anxiety, was found to be the key factor affecting their L2 WTC.

Past studies have also indicated that both perceived L2 communicative competence and L2 anxiety are the dominant predictors of L2 WTC (MacIntyre & Clément, 1996; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Yashima et al., 2004). However, which of these factors has a larger impact on learners' L2 WTC depends on the amount of L2 exposure they have experienced. Of the two, L2 anxiety more strongly affects L2 WTC in ESL or immersion students, who have high L2 exposure and constant L2 use opportunities in real-life communication. This is because such learners have learned communication apprehension through communication failures in real communication contexts, which tends to negatively affect L2 WTC (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, pp. 312–316). In contrast, perceived L2 communicative competence has a stronger influence on EFL-type students, who have less L2 exposure and use, limited largely to the classroom. As Ortega (2014) argues, students with a little L2 use opportunities are still in the process of developing communicative competence and are most concerned with how well they perceive they can use their L2 in a conversation with an interlocutor. Given these, L2 WTC of the adolescent EFL learners in the present study who have almost no opportunities to real L2 use is affected by how much they feel capable of using the L2 rather than how much they feel afraid of using it.

The second strong predictor for the participants' L2 WTC was found to be L1 WTC,

which is congruent with previous studies focusing on adult L2 learners (e.g., Freiermuth & Ito, 2020; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). L1 WTC is a personality-based predisposition that plays a key role in L2 learners' volitional choice to initiate communication (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, pp. 313–314). According to studies of L1 WTC (McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), several personality characteristics such as communication anxiety, introversion, reticence, and shyness tend to hinder one's initiation to communicate. Given these, the results of the present study suggest that students with higher L1 WTC (i.e., talkative person) are more likely to have higher L2 WTC, namely talkative tendency in an L2, and vice versa. It can be presumed that even adolescent Japanese EFL learners who have such individual characteristics (communication anxiety, introversion, reticence, and shyness) tend to initiate less in English while those with the opposite characteristics are highly willing to speak in English. For example, students who hold the floor in the classroom would be more willing to speak English in English class than those who are usually quiet.

The third, or the least strong predictor for the participants' L2 WTC was found to be L2 anxiety, which also confirmed the past finding (Toyoda & Yashima, 2021a). According to their study, novice junior high school EFL learners with a little or no L2 use experience tend to be afraid of using the L2 due to high concerns for English accuracy, (e.g., grammar, word choice, and pronunciation) which causes less L2 use. However, as the learners assimilated more English use opportunities in the classroom, some of them overcame high concerns for English accuracy and attempted to take more risks (i.e., bravely use the L2 without worrying about making mistakes and misunderstanding). Considering these results, it seems that fostering adolescent EFL learners' perceived communicative competence and alleviating their L2 anxiety and negative individual characteristics (e.g., shyness) are the key to heightening their L2 WTC.

## 7. Conclusion

Before concluding, I need to discuss some limitations of the present study. First, I attempted to explore what individual and classroom-social factors affect L2 WTC of adolescent EFL learners by using a limited number of scales taken from the previous studies. However, there may be other elements that influence EFL learners' L2 WTC. Thus future research needs to capture these through qualitative research methods such as stimulated recall interviews. Also, an extended study targeting a wide variety of EFL learners in

different contexts (e.g., elementary schools and other junior high schools) will allow for deeper insights into the WTC agenda in Japan. For example, elementary school EFL context or another junior high school context in different regions will need to be investigated.

To some extent, this research explored the undeveloped research field of adolescent Japanese EFL learners' L2 WTC. The results confirmed that perceived communicative competence in the L2 and L2 anxiety are important factors that lead adolescent EFL learners to initiate English. The results also revealed that their personality factor, L1WTC, is also associated with their intention to speak English. MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 545) claim that the ultimate goal of language learning is engendering in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate. Hopefully, these results will help achieve this goal of language learning.

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