COLLEGE STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE AND ITS INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN SPEAKING CLASSES

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Abstract:
The problem that learners remain silent and passive in speaking classes is usually attributed to their lack of willingness to communicate (WTC), which is considered a crucial condition determining learners' L2 opportunities for language development and mastery. A number of researchers have conducted research in various contexts; however, it is still a nascent term in the Vietnamese context. This study was conducted aiming to explore college students' perceptions of their levels of WTC and factors affecting WTC in speaking classes. Data was garnered through a 45-item questionnaire, which was administered to 308 EFL students. Results revealed that, from the learners' perspective, WTC remained at an average level. It was also found that among different categories of factors that impacted learners' WTC, interactions with teachers and peers, and learners' self-perception of their anxiety were perceived as the most critical factors.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, influential factors, speaking classes

1. Introduction

The ultimate goal of language learning is to be able to communicate in the target language, and speaking is one of the most essential skills that are commonly prioritized to be mastered by language learners. However, speaking has always been considered challenging for EFL learners as it requires the interactions of mental, articulatory, and social processes (Renandya & Widodo, 2016), in which speakers need to process everything quickly and have no chance to edit or revise what is being said.

In the Vietnamese context, English, especially English-speaking skills, proves its role in the fast process of globalization, internationalization and Internet development. Many teachers and educators have been striving hard to equip their learners with grammatical, phonological, lexical, and discourse knowledge so that they can be able to communicate. However, despite efforts to promote English speaking skills, many learners still admit to having difficulty in making a basic English conversation (Sundkvist

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& Nguyen, 2020) and avoiding speaking English in classes. This could be attributed to many factors, among which learners' WTC has been identified as one of the key ones.

Willingness to communicate has been long viewed as a crucial construct in English language teaching and learning (Loan, 2019), which is defined as "*a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2*" (MacIntyre, 1998, p.547). Another definition is expanded by Kang (2005, p.291), which specifies that WTC is "*an individual's behavior and tendency towards actively communicative acts in some specific situations, which can vary according to topics, tasks, interlocutor (s), and other potential situational variables.*"

In different contexts, studies have been conducted to provide insights into students' WTC and its influential factors. For instance, Groenke and Paulus (2007) reported that interaction patterns have been shown to influence the type and frequency of student talk, thereby influencing students' WTC. Peng and Woodraw (2010) also emphasized the effect of classroom atmosphere on students' WTC. They said that an engaging and positive classroom atmosphere could get students involved, reduce anxiety, and improve students' self-confidence. In another study, Vongsila and Reinders (2016) stated that teachers' support, namely teachers' involvement and immediacy, plays an integral role in fostering students' WTC.

However, little research has been conducted in the context of Vietnam with a focus on exploring this critical aspect in language learning and teaching, particularly with college students and with a clear focus on speaking classroom contexts. The current study addresses this pressing need by exploring college students' perceptions on their WTC levels and students' perceptions of factors influencing college students' WTC in speaking classes.

2. Literature Review

A number of key studies are found in the literature with their focus placed around the topic of WTC. In general, however, these studies are centred around the exploration of factors that either underpin and impact WTC or those that are directly relevant or have correlations to WTC. For example, in 2002, a descriptive research study by Hashimoto was conducted in the Japanese ESL context with 56 participants to examine affective variables as predictors of reported L2 use and variables underlying WTC. Using structural equation modeling (Amos version 4.0), the study indicated that willingness to communicate and motivation have a positive correlation to L2 communication frequency. Also, perceived competence and L2 anxiety were found to have an influence on WTC. It can also be concluded that WTC has motivational properties as the path from WTC to motivation was found to be significant.

In the same year (2002), a quantitative study was conducted by Yashima (2002) on 389 Japanese university students in the same context as in Hashimoto's study to examine the relations between L2 learning and L2 communication variables based on the WTC model (MacIntyre, 1994) and the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985). Data from a

questionnaire including attitudes, motivation, and communication tendencies administered to the participants showed that L2 communication confidence and international posture had a strong influence on WTC and motivation could forecast L2 proficiency.

In 2005, Kang conducted a qualitative study in the Korean context, shifting attention to the situational factors influencing WTC. In his study, Kang viewed WTC as a dynamic construct that can fluctuate during a conversation situation. Using semi-structured interviews and simulated recall with the population of four Korean male students aged 23–25, the study aimed to investigate how situational variables affect WTC in L2 communication situations and how situational WTC changes over the course of communication. The findings show that three psychological conditions of excitement, responsibility, and security co-constructed by interacting situational variables, namely topic, interlocutors, and conversational context, cause the emergence of WTC.

Research related to WTC was also conducted in the context of Vietnam. In 2017, a quantitative study was carried out by Phuong and Nguyen (2017) to investigate students' levels of WTC and the factors affecting students' WTC. Quantitative data collected through questionnaires with 360 non-majored English students from three-level general English classes showed that perceived competence, personality, motivation, and attitudes towards language learning and orientations for language learning are major factors influencing students' WTC.

Similar to Phuong and Nguyen's (2017) study, research by Loan (2019) was conducted with 195 first-year English-majored students and 5 native English-speaking teachers to find out students' WTC, factors affecting their WTC and possible strategies to encourage students' WTC. However, the difference was that a mixed-method design was employed with three kinds of instruments, namely questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The findings revealed that both individual and situational factors influenced students' WTC.

Briefly, findings from previous studies have provided insights on both trait-like and situational factors influencing WTC. However, with a limited number of studies in the context of Vietnam, the findings were still insufficient to be generalized. Second, despite the vast amount of literature on factors affecting WTC, little effort has been devoted to studying factors influencing WTC associated with classroom contextual variables. For the two reasons above, there is a strong need for this current study, which aims to expand the literature concerning WTC and its influential factors.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Questions
The research questions that informed the study include:
- What are students' perceptions of their levels of WTC in speaking classes?
- What factors affect students' WTC?

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 308 EFL students including 205 males and 105 females with ages ranging from 18 to 27 years old. They were selected based on two criteria. First, the participants must be undergraduate students of the college who are currently enrolled in the basic English courses - English 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2 at the time of the study. The second criterion is that they are willing and agree to participate in the research.

3.3 Research Instruments

Data were collected through a 45-item questionnaire, which was divided into 2 main sections regardless of the first section about students' personal information. The first section consists of 10 questions related to students' perceptions of their WTC in speaking classes, in which 6 items were adapted from the 25-item questionnaires of previous research (Cao & Philp, 2006, Peng & Woodrow, 2010) and the other 4 items were added into the questionnaires to address more classroom situations where WTC might emerge. Participants were asked to indicate how much willingness they had to communicate on the 5-Likert scale, ranging from *Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Usually (4), Always (5).*

The second section comprises 35 questions concerning factors affecting students' levels of WTC in speaking classes designed based on the literature of WTC theory and the heuristic model of MacIntyre et al. (1998). Specifically, these 35 items cover 11 clusters, namely self-perceived competence (7 items adapted from Peng & Woodrow, 2010), personality (1 item), motivation (5 items), anxiety (3 items), topics (3 items adapted from Cao, 2011), tasks (4 items adapted from Peng & Woodrow, 2010), interaction mode (1 item adapted from Cao, (2011)), timing (1 item), testing (2 items), interactions with teachers (4 items), interactions with peers (4 items), Participants were asked to give their opinions on the statements based on the format of the Five Likert Scale, ranging from *(1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree.*

Table 3.1: Summary of the questionnaires

Clusters	Items
Students' perceptions of their WTC levels	*(1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10)*
Self-perceived competence	*(11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (16), (17)*
Personality	*(18)*
Motivation	*(19), (20), (21), (22), (23)*
Anxiety	*(24), (25), (26)*
Topics	*(27), (28), (29)*
Tasks	*(30), (31), (32), (33)*
Interaction mode	*(34)*
Timing	*(35)*
Testing	*(36), (37)*
Interactions with teachers	*(38), (39), (40), (41)*
Interactions with peers	*(42), (43, (44), (45)*

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' Perceptions of Their Levels of WTC

The first research question was answered based on data from the first 10 items of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics tests were run to assess the levels of students' WTC. The findings from the first descriptive statistics test calculating the summative mean score of all 10 items showed that the mean score of students' perceptions of their willingness to communicate was 2.9 (Table 4.1). As informed by Oxford's scale (1990) presented in Table 4.2, the overall mean score of WTC is at an average level (M = 2.9, SD = 0.914). This figure indicated that, as perceived by the student participants, their WTC stayed at a relatively average level.

Table 4.1: Students' perceptions on their levels of WTC

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MeanWTC	308	1.00	5.0	2.90	0.914

Table 4.2: Key to understanding the averages

Level	Range
Very high	More than 4.2 – 5.0
High	More than 3.4– 4.2
Average	More than 2.6 – 3.4
Low	More than 1.8 – 2.6
Very weak	1.8 and less

The second descriptive statistics test was run to calculate the mean scores of each item in the 10-item section to provide specific indications of students' levels of WTC (see Table 4.3). The findings indicated that only item 7 got a high mean score of 3.78, while all other mean scores ranged from the lowest at 2.28 to 3.3. Students seemed to be highly willing to communicate in the situation of offering help to their friends. They also appeared to be keen on volunteering to answer their teachers' questions (item 1; M = 3.24) and participating in speaking activities/tasks in class (item 2; M = 3.31). The situations in which students appeared to be least willing to communicate were initiating conversations with teachers (item 5; M = 2.280) and their friends (item 4; M = 2.48).

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics of each item in the WTC questionnaire

Descriptive statistics						
No	Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I volunteer to answer my teachers' questions.	308	1.00	5.0	3.24	1.142
2	I participate in speaking activities/ tasks.	308	1.00	5.0	3.31	1.113
3	I ask questions when I don't understand something.	308	1.00	5.0	2.60	1.211
4	I initiate conversations with friends in English.	308	1.00	5.0	2.48	1.340

5	I initiate conversations with my teachers in English.	308	1.00	5.0	2.28	1.213
6	I volunteer to represent my groups to present in front of other students.	308	1.00	5.0	2.62	1.171
7	I offer to help my friends if I know what they need.	308	1.00	5.0	3.78	1.154
8	I present my own opinions in English in class.	308	1.00	5.0	2.63	1.183
9	I participate in group discussions in class.	308	1.00	5.0	3.06	1.220
10	I help my classmates answer teachers' questions in English in class.	308	1.00	5.0	3.01	1.227

To a great extent, this finding is found to be in line with results reported by Loan (2019) in a study conducted in the Vietnamese context. In particular, the study reported that 50% of the students were not willing to communicate in speaking classes. In fact, it is a common problem for Asian learners who are strongly affected by cultural features such as face-protected orientation and a submissive way of learning (Wen & Clément, 2003). Another important finding from the investigation into different aspects of learners' WTC level is that in general, learners appeared to be quite passive and unwilling in many aspects and situations that can be critical to their language development.

4.2 Factors Affecting Students' WTC

The second research question was explored based on data from the next 35 items from the questionnaire. To analyze the data, first, the sum of each variable was calculated using the compute function of SPSS version 27. Then a descriptive statistics test was employed to examine the mean score of each variable. The result of the descriptive statistics is presented in the table below.

Table 4.4: Descriptive statistics of variables influencing WTC

Descriptive statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teacher interaction	308	1.00	5.0	3.92	0.876
Anxiety	308	1.00	5.0	3.91	0.982
Peer interaction	308	1.00	5.0	3.89	0.891
Competence	308	1.00	5.0	3.88	.850
Tasks	308	1.00	5.0	3.84	0.844
Interaction mode	308	1.00	5.0	3.82	1.031
Personality	308	1.00	5.0	3.80	1.172
Topics	308	1.00	5.0	3.80	0.894
Timing	308	1.00	5.0	3.79	1.090
Motivation	308	1.00	5.0	3.69	0.873
Testing	308	1.00	5.0	3.67	0.980

As can be seen from Table 4.4, in general, the mean scores of all the variables were at high levels because they all ranged from 3.6 to 3.9, which was between the high levels of Oxford's scale (3.4 - 4.2). Of all the clusters, the two highest mean scores were *teacher interaction* and *anxiety*, with M = 3.92 and M = 3.91, respectively. The third highest mean score was for *peer interaction* (M = 3.89), followed by *competence* (M = 3.88), *task* (M = 3.84), and interaction mode (M = 3.82). Closely followed these categories were the three categories of *topic* and *personality* with their equal mean scores at 3.80 and timing at 3.79. The two lowest mean scores were *motivation* and *testing*, respectively with M = 3.69 and M=3.67

Data from the questionnaire concerning factors influencing students' WTC can be summarized into three most significant findings. First, teacher interactions had a significant influence on WTC. This finding is in line with previous research by Wen and Clément (2003), Kang (2005), Cao (2012), (Nazari, 2012). According to these researchers, teacher-related factors such as teachers' attitude, involvement, immediacy, teaching styles, and teachers' selections of topics of discussion, lesson content, activities, teaching methods, teaching materials, timing, and even testing and assessment have long been considered to affect whether students are highly willing to communicate in class or not.

The second major finding is that anxiety had a strong influence on students' WTC, which was consistent with those of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998), stating that when state anxiety increases, one's self-confidence will decrease, thereby negatively affecting one's WTC. This finding; however, contradicts findings from Phuong (2017), which showed that anxiety had no correlation with WTC (p=0). It is also important to highlight the fact that the teachers in the current study appeared to downplay the significance of anxiety and its possible effect on learners' WTC.

Last but not least, according to the students, motivation was among the factors having the least influence on WTC. In other words, the students appeared not to consider their motivation a key factor in determining their level of WTC in classes. This finding totally contradicts previous studies by MacIntyre et al. (1998), Hashimoto (2002), Phuong (2007), and Riasati (2012). Therefore, this finding suggests that teachers should make an effort to help students discover their motivation and realize the influence of motivation on learning in general and on WTC in specific.

5. Recommendations

The current research could also be expanded in many ways. First, to investigate students' levels of WTC, more situations both inside and outside classroom contexts with more types of receivers should be included to provide a better understanding of the students' perceptions of their WTC. Second, classroom observations should also be employed to observe whether there is any mismatch between students' self-perceived levels of WTC and their actual practices in speaking classes. Last but not least, some other prestigious factors could be included in the questionnaire to contribute more to research on WTC and its influential factors.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, although set out as a small-scale case study in a particular setting of a college in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, the study findings, to some extent, contribute to the current literature concerning the topic of learners' WTC. The study, as such, laid a stepping stone in attempts to understand this important aspect of language learners and motivate more efforts to continue shedding light on the issue from a more comprehensive perspective.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Nguyen Thanh Tam is currently an EFL teacher in Vietnam who has been teaching English for different types of learners for almost 5 years. She is passionate about doing research related to English skills especially speaking and its variables.

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Appendix

Part A: College students' perceptions of their WTC level in speaking classes

Instruction: Please check the number, which is true for you. Each number refers to the following description (1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Usually and 5 = Always).

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I volunteer to answer my teachers' questions					
2. I participate in speaking activities/ tasks.					
3. I ask questions in English when I don't understand something.					
4. I initiate conversations with friends in English.					
5. I initiate conversations with my teachers in English.					
6. I volunteer to represent my groups to present in front of other students.					
7. I offer to help my friends if I know what they need					
8. I present my own opinions in English in class.					
9. I participate in group discussions in English in class.					
10. I help my classmates answer teachers' questions in English in class.					

Part B: Factors influencing students' WTC in speaking classes

Instruction: Please check the number, which is true for you. Each number refers to the following description (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree)

	Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
	1	2	3	4	5
11. My self-confidence of my speaking ability affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
12. My speaking ability affects my willingnesss to communicate in class.					
13. My pronunciation ability affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
14. My vocabulary knowledge affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
15. My grammatical knowledge affects my willingness to communicate in class.					

16. My background knowledge of the speaking topics affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
17. My communication strategies affect my willingness to communicate in class.					
18. My personality affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
19. My love for English affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
20. My attitude towards the English-speaking cultures and people affects my willingness to communicate					
21. My plan for future jobs affects my willingness to communicate in class.					
22. The reasons why I study English affect my willingness to communicate in class.					
23. My understanding of what I can do with English affects my willingness to communicate.					
24. My fear of making mistakes affects my willingness to communicate.					
25. My fear of receiving negative feedback affects my willingness to communicate.					
26. My nervousness and anxiety affect my willingness to communicate.					
27. Whether I am familiar with the topic of the lesson affects my willingness to communicate.					
28. Whether I have good background knowledge of the lesson content affects my willingness to communicate.					
29. Whether the content of the lesson is interesting to me affects my willingness to communicate.					
30. The kinds of speaking tasks organized by teachers in the classroom affect my willingness to communicate.					
31. Whether the speaking tasks are life-like/authentic affects my willingness to communicate.					
32. Whether the tasks are interesting to me or not affects my willingness to communicate.					
33. Whether the tasks are well-planned and clear or not affects my willingness to communicate.					
34. The mode of interaction (individual, pair or group) affects my willingness to communicate.					

35. Whether I am allowed enough time for preparation before the speaking task affects my willingness to communicate.					
36. Whether the tasks will appear in the tests or not affects my willingness to communicate.					
37. Whether the task is scored or not affects my willingness to communicate.					
38. Teachers' encouragement affects my willingness to communicate.					
39. Teachers' responses to my answers/performance affects my willingness to communicate.					
40. Teachers' responses to my mistakes affect my willingness to communicate.					
41. Teachers' patience in waiting for my answers affects my willingness to communicate.					
42. My peers' responses to my answers affect my willingness to communicate.					
43. My peers' responses to my mistakes affect my willingness to communicate.					
44. My peers' support when I speak affects my willingness to communicate.					
45. My peers' encouragement affects my willingness to communicate.					