

# Differences in Willingness to Communicate in L2 across Grade Levels

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This study investigates how willingness to communicate in English (L2 WTC) varies among Japanese KOSEN students at different stages of their five-year programme. The participants were 113 students from the first to fifth years, all of who were participated in English classes taught by the author at the time of the survey. Their mother tongue is Japanese, and all of them learned English mainly through the Japanese school system. With the exception of the first-year students, all participants had been a short overseas programme in Singapore in their second or third year, which means that most of them had at least some experience of using English outside Japan.

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire based on MacIntyre's WTC scale, and average WTC scores were calculated for each grade. The results show differences across the five years levels. In particular, fourth- and fifth-year students indicated higher WTC than those in the lower years, while second-year students showed the lowest level. This cannot be explained simply in terms of age or length of study, since all groups had broadly similar educational backgrounds and, in many cases, similar overseas experience.

The analysis suggests that the type of English instruction students were received at the time of the survey played an important role. Whereas second-year students were mainly engaged in grammar-focused classes, fourth- and fifth-year students were taking courses concentrated on general English speaking and presentations. The higher WTC observed in the upper years is therefore interpreted as being closely connected with repeated opportunities for successful communication in class, which leads learners' confidence and readiness to use English. Thus, the author concludes that experience of successful communication in classroom are chiefly responsible, rather than personality alone, for the elevated level of WTC.

## I Introduction

This study seeks to examine how willingness to communicate in a second language (hereafter simply WTC) varies among Japanese learners of English in a KOSEN. The investigation is based on data collected from students participated in a five-year technical college, ranging from the first to the fifth year.

The main purpose of this study is to explore how WTC differs across grade levels and how those differences may be related to the kinds of learning environments students experience.

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire based on MacIntyre's WTC scale, which was administered to students in each year. All of the participants were taking English classes taught by the author at the time of the survey. While English is taught in various forms across the

curriculum, the role played by English differs by grade. First-year students attend a listening-focused course; second-year students mainly take grammar-oriented classes; third-year students study English in preparation for TOEIC; and fourth- and fifth-year students are participated courses focused on speaking and presentations. In addition, with the exception of the first-year students, all participants had previously taken part in a short overseas programme in Singapore in their second or third year, which provided them with at least some experience of using English outside Japan.

The first question addressed in this study concerns the extent to which students' levels of WTC differ across these grade levels. The questionnaire data make it possible to compare average WTC scores between the first, second, third, and upper-year groups, and to see whether any

systematic pattern emerges. In particular, it becomes possible to ask whether students who are taking speaking- and presentation-based courses show higher WTC than those whose English classes are more strongly oriented toward grammar or test preparation.

The second question relates to the role of the learning environment in shaping students' willingness to communicate. Previous research on WTC has identified a range of situational and contextual factors, such as classroom atmosphere, task type, and opportunities for interaction, that influence learners' readiness to speak. Previous research has suggested that classroom environments influence learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Accordingly, by comparing KOSEN students who are placed in different instructional environments, this study aims to elucidate how differences in classroom conditions affect their WTC.

By focusing on both the distribution of WTC across grade levels and the instructional contexts in which those students are learning, the present study attempts to offer a more balanced account of WTC in this setting. Rather than treating willingness to communicate as a fixed individual trait or as something determined only by momentary classroom conditions, it approaches WTC as something that develops through students' repeated experiences of using English in particular types of learning environments. In this way, the study seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of how classroom practices in a KOSEN programme can support—or in some cases constrain—students' readiness to communicate in English.

## II Literature review

### 1.1 WTC as a Dynamic, Context-Sensitive Construct

Growing interest in L2 communication research soon produced a shift in the very concept of WTC. Instead of seeing it as stable, trait-like concept, more and more researchers began to treat it as a dynamic concept which emerges from the concurrence of various factors, above all, competence, situational factors and intergroup tendencies. It soon became clear that in order to understand the processes leading to L2 communication, we should take into account various enduring and situational variables into account and examine their impact. What emerged from this new research into L2 WTC antecedents was a pyramid concept or model of WTC proposed by MacIntyre *et al.* (1998).

In practice, this means that a learner who appears “unwilling to speak” in one class may behave quite differently in another. Yet this point is sometimes lost when WTC is discussed in overly abstract terms. Especially in foreign language classrooms, where communicative opportunities are limited and often highly structured, the conditions under which learners are asked to speak may matter as much as, if not more than, their general disposition.

### 1.2 WTC in Japanese EFL Contexts

there is a set of positive attitudes towards the international community, which have been attributed to Japanese university students as a significant contributing factor of the enhancement of WTC. Yashima (2002) called this set of attitudes “international posture”.

Later work, such as Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008), brought the classroom more clearly into focus. They showed that when classroom interaction is meaning-focused and supportive, learners tend to report higher levels of WTC. At the same time, it is not obvious that these results can simply be extended to all educational settings in Japan. Most of this research has been conducted in universities, and, in many cases, focused on learners who are already highly motivated to study English. Learners' goals, identities, and institutional expectations differ in important ways from those in other educational contexts.

This is one reason why technical colleges (KOSEN) are an interesting, and so far largely neglected, site for WTC research.

### 1.3 Situational WTC and Classroom Practices

Let us first recall that the notion of willingness to communicate as something that fluctuates from moment to moment arose from dissatisfaction with earlier, more static accounts of WTC. Kang's (2005) formulation of situational WTC is often cited in this regard, and not without reason, since it captures learners' changing readiness to speak as classroom interaction unfolds. Her data suggest that factors which may initially appear peripheral—such as who a learner is paired with, how demanding a task is perceived to be, or how risky it feels to speak—can in fact make a noticeable difference to participation.

This point, however, should not be overstated. It is not that such situational factors determine behaviour in

any simple or mechanical sense. Still, it would be equally problematic to dismiss them as trivial. The readiness to speak is not merely a function of general confidence or ability; it is also shaped by the immediate conditions under which speaking is required. Having said that, the extent to which these momentary conditions leave traces beyond the interaction itself remains uncertain.

Peng and Woodrow (2010), working in a different EFL context, report patterns that broadly support this view, particularly in their emphasis on peer relations and teacher support. Taken together, these studies make it difficult to sustain a view of WTC as a wholly stable learner trait. Even so, we are left with an unresolved question. While situational factors clearly matter in the short term, it is still not clear whether repeated exposure to favourable conditions leads to any lasting change, or whether such effects dissipate once the situation changes.

#### 1.4 A Sociocultural and Identity-Based Perspective on WTC

At this stage, one might be inclined to account for these fluctuations primarily in terms of situational variables. Yet this line of explanation, while appealing, remains incomplete. From a sociocultural perspective, learners' confidence and anxiety are not simply attributes that individuals possess; rather, they are shaped through participation in particular kinds of interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Norton's (2000) work is often invoked here, and it is relevant insofar as it draws attention to the relationship between willingness to speak and identity. Learners' readiness to use a second language is tied not only to what they can do linguistically, but also to how they understand themselves, and how they are positioned by others, in specific social contexts. In classrooms where errors are publicly evaluated, speaking may therefore be experienced as a threat to one's identity, even by learners who know perfectly well what they want to say. In more supportive environments, the same learners may feel able to take risks. That said, it remains difficult to specify how these identity-related considerations translate into the moment-to-moment decisions that are grouped together under the label of WTC.

#### 1.5 Grade-Level Differences as Developmental and Institutional Trajectories

Despite the growing interest in WTC, relatively little attention has been paid to how willingness to

communicate changes across school years within a single institution. From a developmental perspective, it would be odd to assume that learners' WTC remains constant as they progress through different stages of their education, yet this assumption is rarely questioned explicitly.

Let us now be specific about the case of Colleges of Technology (KOSEN). In this institutional context, the curriculum becomes increasingly specialised and assessment-oriented as students advance through the programme. English classes in the early years may allow for relatively open-ended communication, whereas later courses tend to focus more heavily on technical reading or examination preparation. These shifts are likely to influence how learners evaluate their own communicative ability. They may also affect, in a less direct but arguably more consequential way, whether learners continue to regard English as a space in which meaningful participation is possible. Exactly how learners negotiate these changes, however, cannot simply be inferred from curricular descriptions alone.

#### 1.6 Research Gap and Relevance of the Present Study

Having reviewed these strands of research, we are now in a position to identify a gap that remains insufficiently explored. It is widely acknowledged that WTC is shaped by a combination of situational, psychological, and social factors. This general claim is no longer controversial. What remains unclear is how these factors interact over time within particular educational settings, and whether their effects accumulate, cancel one another out, or take more complex forms as learners move along an institutional trajectory.

This issue is especially salient in contexts such as KOSEN, which do not fit neatly into either the secondary-school or the university models that dominate much of the existing research. By focusing on different year levels within a KOSEN, the present study seeks to examine how curricular trajectories and classroom practices contribute to changes in learners' L2 self-concepts and their willingness to communicate. Whether these changes are best understood as gradual developments, as points of tension, or as something less easily captured by existing categories is not something that can be settled in advance, and it is precisely this uncertainty that provides the motivation for the present investigation.

### III Methodologies and research questions

## 2.1 Methodologies

Methods employed for data collection in this paper is small qualitative. First, I collect data by sending off the questionnaire to participants and obtaining replies from them. The questionnaire consists of WTC test, containing a set of questions designed to measure levels of WTC.

It contains 19 WTC items. It is the same as that used by Hashimoto (2002), which is a Japanese translation of McCroskey's (1992) WTC items with some modification. 7 of the 19 items are fillers. The remaining 12 items are legitimate items, which consist of four situations (speaking in pairs, speaking in groups of five, speaking in meetings of ten, speaking in public to groups of 30) and three types of recipients (strangers, acquaintances and friends). Each legitimate item represents 12 contexts (4 situations x 3 types of recipients). On the questionnaire, participants are instructed to imagine that they live in an English-speaking country. This is meant for the participants who are in Japan at present, or who are not currently in an English-speaking country. All are invited to indicate the percentage of the time (from 0 % = never, to 100 % = always) when they would choose to communicate freely in English in each context. (See appendix 1 for more details.)

## 2.2 Participants

A total of 113 Japanese students participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in a five-year National Institute of Technology (KOSEN) and were learners of English as a foreign language. Their ages ranged from approximately 15 to 20, corresponding to first- through fifth-year enrollment in the institution. Their first language was Japanese.

They had studied English in Japanese junior high and KOSEN, where the language of instruction is Japanese. Although some students had been exposed to native-speaker instruction through occasional conversation classes, their opportunities to use English for spontaneous communication had been quite limited prior to entering KOSEN, particularly in regular classroom settings. For most students, regular oral communication practice in English began only after entering this institution.

The participants were drawn from five grade levels. Forty-one first-year students, 37 second-year students, 11 third-year students, and 24 fourth- and fifth-year students took part in the survey. All students who completed the questionnaire were taught by the same instructor, which made it possible to compare the groups without the

confounding effects of different teaching styles or classroom policies.

With the exception of first-year students, all participants had experienced short-term overseas study. Second- through fifth-year students had taken part in a three-night, four-day study program in Singapore during their second or third year. Although the program was relatively short, it was their first opportunity to use English extensively in an authentic international setting, and thus constituted a shared overseas experience across these cohorts.

At the time of data collection, the participants were surveyed in different English classes taught by the same instructor. These classes differed in their instructional focus depending on grade level: first-year students were surveyed in a listening-focused class, second-year students in a grammar-oriented class, third-year students in a TOEIC preparation class, and fourth- and fifth-year students in a speaking and presentation-oriented elective course. It should be noted that students at all grade levels were also enrolled in other English courses, such as reading and general English, taught by other instructors.

## 2.3 Research Questions

As explained in the Introduction, this study is concerned with differences in willingness to communicate (WTC) among KOSEN students across grade levels, and with the ways in which these differences may be related to the instructional contexts in which the students use English. More specifically, the present study focuses on how students' WTC varies among first- through fifth-year students who are enrolled in different types of English classes taught by the same instructor.

In order to examine these issues more correctly, the two general concerns are reformulated as the following research questions.

### Research Question 1

(1a) How do the mean WTC scores of KOSEN students differ across the five grade levels (first through fifth year)?

(1b) Which grade level, if any, shows notably higher or lower levels of WTC among the students who participated in the survey?

### Research Question 2

(2a) How are the observed differences in WTC across grade levels related to the types of English classes in which the data were collected (listening, grammar, TOEIC preparation, and speaking/presentation)?

(2b) Which instructional context, if any, appears to be most closely associated with higher or lower levels of WTC among the participants?

Questions (1a) and (1b) can be addressed directly through a comparison of the WTC questionnaire scores obtained from each grade. Questions (2a) and (2b) require a more interpretive analysis, drawing on the characteristics of the different classes and the educational experiences shared by the students, such as their participation in the overseas study program in Singapore.

#### IV. Results

The data collected from the 113 students who answered the questionnaire were processed, and the results are presented below in a concise form. First, I will outline the general contour of the data. The mean WTC scores for each grade level were calculated by averaging the questionnaire responses of the students in that grade. The resulting means were 48.60 for first-year students, 41.10 for second-year students, 46.40 for third-year students, and 56.80 for fourth- and fifth-year students.

There are two notable features in these results. First, the data show a clear difference in WTC across grade levels. The highest mean score was observed among fourth- and fifth-year students, while the lowest was found among second-year students. The difference between these two groups amounts to 15.7 points on a 100-point scale, indicating that students in the upper years are, on average, considerably more willing to communicate in English than students in the second year.

Second, the pattern across the lower and middle grades is not linear. First-year students show a relatively high level of WTC (48.60), but this drops substantially in the second year (41.10). In the third year, the mean score rises again to 46.40, though it does not yet reach the level observed in the first year. This pattern suggests that students' willingness to communicate declines after the first year and then gradually recovers in the subsequent years.

Taken together, these results indicate that WTC among KOSEN students varies markedly by grade level. The particularly low level observed in the second year and the high level in the fourth and fifth years call for closer examination in relation to the different instructional contexts in which these students were studying English at the time of the survey.

#### V. Discussion

The results presented in the previous section indicate that willingness to communicate in English differs considerably across grade levels at the KOSEN. In particular, the notably low level of WTC among second-year students and the high level among fourth- and fifth-year students suggest that these differences cannot be attributed to random variation, but are instead related to the educational experiences associated with each stage of the curriculum. It should be noted is that the participants across all grade levels shared a broadly similar background prior to entering KOSEN. Most students had learned English mainly through Japanese-medium instruction in secondary school and had had only limited opportunities for spontaneous oral communication in English. The relatively high level of WTC observed among first-year students may be interpreted in terms of the nature of their English class at the time of the survey.

The first-year class in which the questionnaire was administered focused primarily on listening. Because of that they may have no time to realised their lack of English speaking skills. That highly possible to maintain their proficiency, which leads to their high score.

On the other hand, 2nd year students have had quite enough time to realise their reality such as grammar -based classes and short-term overseas programmes.

In this third year recovery is possibly caused by small class environment. The class is divided two groups by their English test score, which provide us opportunity to teach and give them feedback intensively.

Upper year students marked the highest level of WTC. In this class, students regularly use English to express their own ideas and to communicate with classmates, and they have repeated opportunities to experience successful communication. Moreover, because the course is elective, the students have chosen to participate in this form of learning. These factors are likely to contribute to higher perceived competence and lower

anxiety, both of which are central components of WTC. From a sociocultural perspective, these findings suggest that students' willingness to communicate develops in close connection with the kinds of communicative activities in which they participate. Rather than increasing steadily as students advance through the curriculum, WTC appears to follow a trajectory shaped by changing learning environments and by students' experiences of success and difficulty in using English. The results of this study thus support the view that WTC is not a fixed personal trait, but a dynamic construct that reflects learners' evolving relationship with the language and with the contexts in which it is used.

## VI. Conclusion

This study has focused on how WTC in English varies among KOSEN students at different grade levels. The results showed that WTC does not steadily increase as students move through the program. There is a clear drop in the second year, after which the scores rise again, reaching their highest point in the fourth and fifth years. This pattern shows that classroom use of English as being more important than age or the number of years students have studied the language. One contrast that stands out is that between the second-year students and those in the upper years. Some students in the second year become more aware of what they cannot do in English, especially after their overseas training, and this can temporarily reduce their confidence. When students move into courses that require speaking and presentations, they begin to have more positive experiences, which seem to strengthen their willingness to communicate.

This study also has several limitations. The analysis is based on average scores by grade, so individual differences within each group are not fully reflected. In addition, the data come from a single institution, and the structure of English education at KOSEN differs in important ways from that of universities or high schools. For this reason, the findings need to be read carefully

\*An AI-based language tool (Grammarly) was used to support English proofreading and stylistic refinement of this paper. All ideas, data, analyses, and conclusions are my own.

## Appendix : The questionnaire

This questionnaire is a WTC test designed to measure a participant's willingness to communicate in L2 (English). This consists of 19 items or questions. This list of questions is an English translation of the set of Japanese questions presented in Hashimoto (2002). The translation is mine. Hashimoto made several changes to McCroskey's (1992) WTC items for her Japanese participants. This is intended to measure each participant's WTC in different contexts.

### Questionnaire: WTC test

Imagine that you live in an English-speaking country and face the following 19 situations. You have completely free choice of communicating or not communicating. Please indicate in the underlined space at the left the percentage of times you would choose to communicate in English in each type of situation. 0 % = never, 100 % = always.

- \_\_\_ 1. Talk with an acquaintance in an elevator.
- \_\_\_ 2. Talk with a stranger on the bus.
- \_\_\_ 3. Speak in public to a group (about 30 people) of strangers.
- \_\_\_ 4. Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.
- \_\_\_ 5. Talk in a large meeting (about 10 people) of friends.
- \_\_\_ 6. Talk with a janitor/resident manager.
- \_\_\_ 7. Talk in a small group (about 5 people) of strangers.
- \_\_\_ 8. Talk with a friend while standing in line.
- \_\_\_ 9. Talk with a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.
- \_\_\_ 10. Talk in a large meeting (about 10 people) of acquaintances.
- \_\_\_ 11. Talk with a stranger while standing in line.
- \_\_\_ 12. Talk with a shop clerk.
- \_\_\_ 13. Speak in public to a group (about 30 people) of friends.
- \_\_\_ 14. Talk in a small group (about 5 people) of acquaintances.
- \_\_\_ 15. Talk with a garbage collector.
- \_\_\_ 16. Talk in a large meeting (about 10 people) of strangers.

- \_\_\_ 17. Talk with a librarian.
- \_\_\_ 18. Talk in a small group (about 5 people) of friends.
- \_\_\_ 19. Speak in public to a group (about 30 people) of acquaintances.

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