

# Reflections on Willingness to Communicate in an EDC Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Given the continuing trend in second language education towards language in use as a desired learning outcome and as a means towards that outcome itself, Willingness to Communicate has become a useful construct to explain students' choice to speak. A reflective journal was kept in a compulsory freshmen English discussion class for five weeks with a specific focus on observing Willingness to Communicate behavioral indicators. The various pedagogical efforts by the instructor to enhance learner behaviors and attitudes are reviewed and situated within a heuristic framework. Lastly, some reflections on the perceived successes and failures of one particular class to achieve a state of behavioral intention to communicate are offered.

## INTRODUCTION

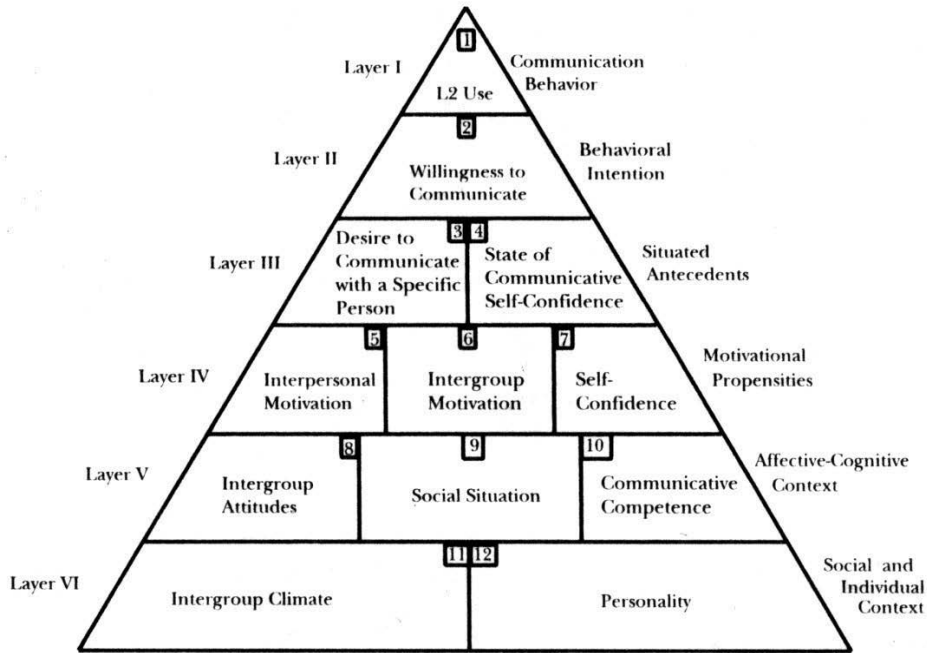
*"...it is only through experience of communicating in a foreign language that one becomes an effective communicator"* (Hurling, 2012, p. 13)

The above quote not only reflects the general aims of one university's communication based language program, the English Discussion Class (EDC) program at Rikkyo University which places a priority on language in use as a learning outcome, but is also representative of the greater trend in second language acquisition theory which emphasizes communication as a necessary component of the learning process itself as well as a goal of learning (Hashimoto, 2002). The implication for the classroom instructor is that factors which affect communication outcomes need to be understood and addressed. Willingness to Communicate (WTC) has emerged as a construct to capture a range of socio affective and intrapersonal variables which have been observed to be indicative of communication outcomes. Simply defined as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (MacIntyre et al., 2001, p. 369), WTC is emerging as a central concern for researchers and classroom practitioners alike.

Numerous theoretical approaches have been offered to examine learner behaviors as predictors of WTC. A quick browse of modern SLA research yields a smorgasbord of ideas and constructs aimed at informing an understanding of learner behaviors that affect WTC. Dornyei (1988) borrowed Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior from behaviorism to look at L2 learner behaviors in terms of group cohesion. Maslow's (1970) ideas about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been widely applied to SLA contexts by too many to mention. Similarly, others have examined motivation in terms of Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model which delineates integrative and instrumental motivations. Young (1999) developed ideas about learner anxiety and L2 self to associate with L2 competence. Horowitz et al., (1986) applied ideas from psychology to flush out communication apprehension. A comprehensive list of the work that has been done to this point is far beyond the scope of this paper. It will suffice for now to say that predictors of language behavior and associated constructs observable in an L2 classroom are neither straightforward nor simple and examining a learners choice to speak is far from an exact science.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) provide a useful theoretical framework for organizing WTC variables (Figure 1).

Figure 1: MacIntyre et al. (1998) heuristic framework for reflecting on WTC variables.



The framework provides a useful reference point for understanding the relationships of WTC variables. Organized in a hierarchical structure, WTC variables are roughly divided into enduring and situational influences with the enduring influences providing the foundation at the bottom of the pyramid. The Layer VI enduring influences are highly stable patterns that predate the individual (MacIntyre 2007) such as the broad social context in which language groups operate and gender differences. Layer V contains affective and cognitive predictors where ideas about group cohesion, like Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model, can be found and Young’s (1999) L2 self begins to manifest itself. Learner behaviors concerning the role individuals play in a group, like Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), land in the Layer IV Motivational Propensities. All of these factors begin to culminate in the Layer III Situated Antecedents where learners are primed to make the choice to speak or not to speak with a specific person. Layer II is the realization of the behavioral intention and Layer I is the desired outcome of Language in Use. The model incorporates a range of individual and social-contextual factors which have been either observed or theoretically postulated to either enhance or reduce WTC.

In one potentially relevant research study, Yashima (2002) applied the MacIntyre (1998) heuristic model to a specific teaching context, Japanese university freshmen in a compulsory English discussion class at a Japanese university, and, through a questionnaire, concluded that many Japanese learners fail to exhibit a desire to integrate to the L2 community and develop a positive Layer VI Intergroup Climate because they are deficient in their orientation to international posture. Therefore, “...lessons should be designed to enhance students’ interest in different cultures and international affairs and activities” (p. 63). Given that the participants in the present paper are of a similar nature, Japanese university freshmen taking a compulsory

English discussion class at a Japanese university, Yashima's (2002) conclusion may be applicable to the student population being observed in this paper.

### **The Participants**

Two EDC classes at Rikkyo University were chosen by the instructor to be the object of reflective journal writings during the first four weeks of the semester. Both classes exhibited a below average level of WTC in the early stages of the class in spite of specifically targeted pedagogical efforts. Having had prior experience working with Japanese learners in a context with language in use as a desired outcome, problems were anticipated. Extensive research has indicated that, in spite of extensive compulsory education in the Japanese school system, Japanese high school students are graduating with a deficiency in language in use competencies. The Ministry of Education has acknowledged the shortcomings of the current system in preparing students for success beyond the classroom and has initiated multiple reform proposals aimed at addressing the interaction inadequacy (Neustupny and Tanaka 2004). Yet, the status quo in the classrooms persists as practitioners continue to over-emphasize grammatical competence. Working from this assumption, pedagogical actions were taken immediately in day 1 of EDC instruction to combat expected issues in the Layer VI enduring influences related to intergroup climate and social context. For example, students were paired and instructed to think of their own classroom rules. Naturally, the bulk of the suggested rules pertained to classroom management concerns. Ideas like "be on time", "don't eat", "don't sleep" were common among all classes. However, the rules that were not suggested by Group 1 and Group 2 reveal more about their Layer VI disposition. More often than not, students will make suggestions like "have fun" or "be nice to your classmates" which can be interpreted as being indicative of behaviors moving towards Layer V Affective-Cognitive Contexts. Group 1 and Group 2 had no such ideas. The teacher's rules that were subsequently presented to the class were specifically designed to address WTC issues and draw attention to the nature of expectations in a discussion class. Rules included: 1. Make mistakes – to mitigate excessive focus on form that may reduce Layer V Communicative Competence, 2. Ask questions – to establish expectations about the Layer V Social Situation, and 3. Help each other – to facilitate Layer IV Intergroup Motivation. Additionally, the first activity in all of the instructor's EDC classes was a name circle activity designed to quickly move the students' mindset towards the Layer III Desire to Communicate with a Specific Person. The name circle is generally fun and students have a laugh as they struggle to remember each other's names and personal information. Students frequently volunteer information not demanded by the activity and use appropriate English expressions such as "nice to meet you" or ask follow up questions. However, Group 1 and Group 2 offered almost nothing beyond what was explicitly demanded by the activity and barely cracked a smile or acknowledged each others' utterances.

The indicators of reduced WTC continued throughout the first four lessons. Both Group 1 and Group 2 exhibited L1 WTC inhibition in the classroom before each lesson started, frequently sitting as far apart from each other as the classroom would allow, not making eye contact, or speaking to each other. This behavior is not uncommon for the first lesson or two but rarely persists into the third or fourth week as it did with these two groups. Also, the Fluency Practice activity was a struggle for these groups. Speakers frequently finished before the allotted time had expired and Listeners rarely gave English reactions (or any reaction of any kind) or asked questions despite repeated encouragement to help their partner in this manner. Discussion preparation activities were frequently treated as a closed-ended task. Pairs would frequently complete the activities without speaking and sit quietly waiting for time to expire. The discussions themselves were marred with extended pregnant pauses, few reactions to content,

negligible follow up questions other than the occasional “why?”, and were more reminiscent of students taking speaking turns to model their pre-planned utterances than discourse level interaction.

In short, the two groups were chosen as the object of a reflective journal about WTC behaviors for their perceived high degree of WTC inhibition. Furthermore, their responses or lack of responses to the specifically targeted pedagogical interventions made them a pedagogical challenge and an interesting case study.

### **DISCUSSION**

Reflective journal entries were written immediately following lessons 5-9. In general, groups 1 and 2 were perceived to have a lower degree of WTC than their counterparts. However, journal entries reveal that Group 2 exhibited slow but continuous progress in enhancing WTC indicators while Group 1 peaked in Lesson 5, bottomed out in Lesson 6 and continued at a low level throughout the remainder of the class. In addition to the persistent focus on promoting group cohesion and constant re-affirmation of communicative competence to promote confidence in individual L2 self that all classes received, both groups received targeted pedagogical interventions specifically intended to address some aspect of WTC behavioral indicators.

Students have their first discussion test in Lesson 5, so an appeal was made to students’ assumed desire to perform well on the test. This motivation could be viewed as instrumental (Gardner 1985) or extrinsic (Dornyei 1998). Either way, it would fall into MacIntyre’s (2007) Layer V Affective-Cognitive Context. After a practice discussion, the students were given a self-check sheet and asked to count how many times they performed each of the desired language behaviors to create awareness about their individual performance. Then, teacher led feedback offered advice about how students can help each other use the desired language. For example, using “if” to talk about possibilities was a targeted language in use outcome in Discussion Test 1. Students were advised to ask an “if” question, and respond with the “if” clause in the answer. An example “if” question from the practice discussion along with a response containing the “if” clause was written on the board. Students were further advised that they can ask everybody in their discussion group the same question so they can all get a point on the test. The intention was to build the Layer V Intergroup attitudes by fostering group cohesion as a means of satisfying their perceived extrinsic motivation of performing well on the test.

A couple of different WTC related pedagogical efforts were made in Lesson 6. First, student attitudes about their own communicative competence and image of L2 self were attempted to be enhanced by giving positive feedback about their test performance. Specifically, individual students were complemented on their ability to perform language features that had been problematic for them. In addition, a brief meta-explanation about the inter-relationship between culture and language was offered. The underlying assumption was that both groups had unresolved language aversion issues due to their perceived lack of integrative motivation (Gardner 1985). In other words, classroom observations had led the instructor to believe that both groups lacked enduring motivating forces such as international friendships or interest in international affairs and, therefore, had avoidance tendencies towards language behaviors that were not positive L1 transfers. In the instructor’s other EDC classes, students would frequently express desire to travel, mention having international friends, or talk about their desire to work in a foreign country. In Group 1 and Group 2, students expressed to indicators of this kind. The lesson 6 target language, paraphrasing, avoidance may have been an example of approach avoidance due to enduring ethnocentric intergroup attitudes. Simply telling another student “I don’t understand” as a precursor to paraphrasing may have been interpreted as face-challenging because it implicitly means the speaker is not communicating well. As an example of the inter-

relationship between culture and language, the instructor talked about learning to use *keigo* when speaking Japanese, making the point that even though westerners don't use *keigo* it is a natural and necessary component of speaking Japanese. Likewise, some of the language behaviors the students are being taught such as simply saying "I disagree" or "I don't understand" are necessary for English communication. One student response in Group 2 was quite revealing. After, this brief meta-explanation a defiant student assertively said "We are Japanese!" The statement could be interpreted as representative of a Layer VI enduring influence of Japanese ethnocentrism.

Again working from the assumption that the Group 1 and Group 2 students were primarily driven extrinsically by the desire to pass the class, another instrumental motivation appeal was made. The students were asked how much a discussion test was worth compared to a regular lesson. The percentages and numbers were written on the board and explicit attention was drawn to the relative value of tests versus regular lessons. The intention was for students to see that performance in everyday lessons was almost as valuable as performance on the tests. Therefore, if they wanted to do well in the class, they would have to make a greater effort in daily lessons.

Perhaps the most enlightening episode occurred during WTC related pedagogical intervention in Lesson 8. As a preparation for a review lesson on follow up questions, students were paired and given 2 minutes to discuss "What is most important to have a good discussion?" It should be mentioned here that group work, helping each other, not worrying about form, and embracing cultural differences were constantly and consistently re-enforced in all EDC classes by the instructor. The degree to which these messages were embraced by Group 1 was clarified by the student responses. After the two minutes was up, the class reconvened as a teacher fronted group and responses were written on the board. The two most common answers among all classes were "help each other" and "ask follow up questions" which is a good indicator that the students had been receptive to the pedagogical efforts and understood that the discussion class format required them to step outside their culturally bound expectations about classroom learning. Only one student in Group 1 said "follow up questions" and not one person said "help each other". The lack of this type of response seems to indicate that they were still mired in their Layer VI enduring attitudes about what language learning involves and what happens in a teaching/learning context. Also, a couple of students gave responses along the lines of "give clear ideas" and "communicate clearly". These kinds of responses give cause to again assume that they are more concerned with form than language in use. It would appear that the instructor's assumptions that the long pauses in between utterances during discussions and in fluency practices were students planning their speech to ensure that it was as grammatically accurate as possible was accurate.

By Lesson 9, Group 2 was performing at an acceptable level but Group 1 was still struggling. The fluency practice began again with a 15-20 second lag before anyone began to speak, students spoke in hushed tones, and speaking turns continued to be marred with long pauses and planned deliberate speech. Having a feeling of failure to achieve group cohesion, an appeal was made to individuals' Layer III State of Communicative Self-Confidence while giving feedback after the fluency practice. Each student was complimented on some aspect of their language performance whether it was warranted or not. Of course, positive feedback on performance is a standard technique for promoting confidence in L2 Self and was used consistently in all classes throughout the semester. In this instance, each individual was targeted. For example, Student A was complimented on English reactions, Student B on follow up questions, Student C on content, etc... The rest of the lesson continued as usual. Pair work was done mostly without language interaction and the first discussion was pocked with silence and

awkwardness. In another affirmation of Group 1's solitary extrinsic motivation, the students sprang to life in the discussion test itself and performed well.

### CONCLUSION

The reflective journal entries were discontinued after Lesson 9 but the instructor continued to monitor performance. Group 2 continued its slow but steady progress. Outside the classroom, before and after class, they continued to exhibit low group cohesiveness and showed little desire to communicate with each other. However, once the class started, they demonstrated an ability to work themselves up to the Layer II WTC and their Behavioral Intention manifested itself in L2 use. It may be that individuals never really developed the Layer III Desire to Communicate with a Specific Person due to underlying enduring influences such as individual personal psychology, but the messages about group cohesion and communicative competence were understood well enough to bring them to a reasonably level of Layer III State of Communicative Self-confidence. Compared to all other classes, Group 2 was performing at a relatively lower level in terms of WTC behaviors, but was managing their inhibitions well enough to achieve the central desired learning outcome of language in use on a discourse level. It is interesting to note that, as a class, Group 2 had been identified through testing as lower proficiency than Group 1. In observing classroom language, the level of Group 1's proficiency did appear to be of a higher skill level than Group 2. Group 1 students would frequently use more specified vocabulary, make multiple clause sentences, and have higher type-token ratios during discussions. At one point in the semester, individual students who had been observed to more proficient were approached by the instructor outside the classroom in an effort break through the Layer VI enduring influence of individual psychology. The students were praised for their English competency and asked to help the instructor by stepping into a facilitator role for the group. The logic was that if the enduring social influences could not be broken down and students had neither a desire to integrate to the L2 community nor any desire to interact with a specific person, they could be motivated on the Layer III Situated Antecedents level as performing a personal favor to the instructor. This tactic seemed to be moderately successful with two of the Group 2 students, but was not embraced by any of the Group 1 students.

Group 1 never realized Layer III Situated Antecedents of any kind. In fact, it appears that individuals in Group 1 were never able to transcend the Layer I enduring influences of Social and Individual Context. First and foremost, Yashima's (2002) ideas about the lack of integrative motivation (Gardner 1985) in Japanese learners appear to be directly applicable. Yashima (2002) used 6 measures of international posture to evaluate students desire to integrate with the L2 community: intercultural friendship, interest in international affairs, approach avoidance tendencies, ethnocentrism, interest in international vocation, and communication competence. When evaluating Group 1 by these measures, a clear pattern emerges. The instructors pedagogical interventions were more focused on Layer V Affective-Cognitive Context behaviors, but the EDC curriculum does provide opportunities to cultivate international posture in the discussions. In retrospect, student content and responses to these topics illuminates their attitudes toward integration. For example, Lesson 2 focusses on studying English and asks "Do people in Japan need to study English?" as a discussion prompt. A number of Group 1 students felt nobody in Japan really needs to study English. This kind of response seems to be another indicator of the ethnocentrism displayed in Lesson 6. In Lesson 3, students were asked to talk about "What countries would you like to visit?" In the Fluency Practice and multiple students answered "no where" or "I only want to travel in Japan." Again, these responses can easily be interpreted as a lack of international posture. Many more example

of this nature could be sighted, and none of the Group 1 students mentioned having international friends.

With the exception of the meta-discussion about the language-culture connection in Lesson 8 to address approach avoidance tendencies and drawing positive attention to communicative competence, it seems that little was done to facilitate international posture. The instructor had quickly recognized Group 1's issues with enduring cultural attitudes and assumed pedagogical interventions of this nature would be futile, opting to try to exploit perceived student strengths. If it is indeed the case that the root of these students' WTC inhibition lies deep in the enduring influence of culturally bound attitudes causing a fear of integration, it begs the question "What can be done?" Of course, providing talking points that concern international posture in the curriculum is a nice starting point, and the EDC curriculum has clearly provided multiple opportunities for students to foster integrative attitudes as Yashima (2002) suggested, but is there anything more an individual instructor can do in the classroom in the instances where whole classes fail to move past Layer VI issues? An interesting path for future research and practitioners action research would be to experiment with classroom techniques and interventions that specifically target integrative desire.

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