

Willingness to Communicate in a Foreign Language: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

"Willingness to communicate," defined as the tendency for an individual to initiate communication when free to do so, is emerging as a concept to account for individuals' L1 and L2 communication. A model constructed for a bilingual milieu suggests that willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 is predicted by communication anxiety as well as perceived communication competence, and results in frequency of L2 communication. This study is a preliminary attempt to investigate Japanese learners' communication in a foreign language using the concept of WTC, and to apply the WTC model to a monolingual social context. Two sets of questionnaires (one on communication in L1, and the other on communication in L2) consisting of WTC Scale, Communication Anxiety Scale and Perceived Competence Scale were administered to 117 college students. The study revealed 1) Japanese students' WTC level was substantially lower than that of American students; 2) perceived communication competence in L2 was a fairly strong predictor of WTC in L2; 3) WTC in L2 was significantly lower than WTC in L1; and 4) WTC in L1 can predict WTC in L2. Implications of these results for English teaching are discussed.

Research in the past several decades have resulted in a deeper understanding of Japanese communication practices. Well-known concepts such as "high-context," "harmony," "homogeneity," "collectivism," and "dependence" have been frequently used to describe features of Japanese communication, and numerous empirical studies have focused on Japanese verbal behavior. Cross-cultural comparison of communication styles show that Japanese are less inclined to talk and less argumentative (Klopf & Ishii, 1990), less assertive and responsive (Ishii, Thompson & Klopf, 1990), and demonstrate more reluctance to self-disclosure (Barnlund, 1975, 1989) than Americans. Further, in studies of the psychological aspects of communication, Japanese were found to have more communication apprehension than Americans, Australians, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos and Micronesians (Klopf & Cambra 1979; Klopf, 1984) and were shown to be more introverted than British people (Iwawaki, Eysenck & Eysenck, 1977). In the field of second language learning, researchers, observing ESL classrooms in American Universities, have reported a quietness and /or reticence on the part of Asian learners in comparison with Western nationals (Sato:1982, Song, 1997). These results are taken to reveal a communication tendency prevalent amongst Japanese people. How this tendency influences the foreign language learning process and communication in foreign languages raises an interesting question.

From a learning input perspective, the advantages of talkativeness are generally accepted for L2/FL learners since the more one speaks, the more practice an individual gets in talking (Rubin & Thomson, 1982; Brown, 1987). Those who can initiate interactions in intercultural communication contexts are shown to be more successful in developing interpersonal relationships and as a result create more chances for L2 language learning (Yashima, 1995, 1997). Yashima and Tanaka(1996) showed in their study of high school students who sojourned in America for one year that L2 communication difficulty and lack of confidence in L2 communication led to reduced interaction and sometimes resulted in withdrawal from social interactions. As this response leads in turn to reduced L2 input, second language acquisition can be hindered, thus resulting in what Scarcella(1990) terms a "vicious cycle." In contrast sociable/talkative students are more likely to initiate input-generating interactions with host nationals or speakers of the target language.

"Willingness to communicate," a personality-based predisposition which has a major impact on human communication behavior, was introduced by McCroskey and Richmond(1985). Willingness to communicate is the intention to initiate communication(in one's L1) when free to do so. MacIntyre(1996) applied this model to the L2 communication context and constructed a model of willingness to communicate in L2 incorporating Gardner's socio-educational model of L2 acquisition. MacIntyre's model is particularly valuable in that it is an attempt to combine knowl-

edge of two separate fields, ie. communication and L2 acquisition. It is a necessary framework to account for people's tendency to communicate in L2 and is of potential use in considering the features of second and foreign language communication of Japanese people. This study is a preliminary attempt to analyze Japanese communication tendency in a foreign language using the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC).

Willingness to communicate in L1

Underlying the willingness to communicate (WTC) construct is "the general assumption that it is a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990, p.23). Although individuals are not equally willing to communicate in all contexts and with all types of receivers, there appears to be regularity in the amount of communication behavior of individuals across situations. A recently developed self-report instrument, known as the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale has proven to have satisfactory content validity and reliability (McCroskey, 1992). The WTC Scale includes items related to four communication contexts: public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups and talking in dyads; and three types of receivers i.e., strangers, acquaintances and friends.

As antecedents of willingness to communicate, self-esteem, introversion, communication competence, communication apprehension (the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons), and cultural diversity were considered. Modest correlations between WTC and self-esteem as well as WTC and introversion were reported while correlations between WTC and perceived communication competence as well as communication apprehension were found to be moderately high (McCroskey, 1990).

The results of cross-cultural studies indicate that United States college students are significantly more willing to communicate than are similar students in Australia (Barraclough, Christophel & McCroskey, 1988) and Sweden (Daun, Burrough & McCroskey, 1988). A later study reports that the WTC level of American students are also higher than those of Micronesians, Fins and Estonians (McCroskey, 1992). McCroskey (1990) mentions that these norms are reflected in "the personality of a culture (p.31)," and adds that although mean willingness may differ substantially from culture to culture, major variations among people in any given culture are to be expected no matter how homogeneous the culture might be.

The willingness to communicate of Japanese has yet to be studied. As Japanese culture is generally regarded as relatively quiet and reserved, we would expect the mean WTC to be somewhat lower than that of North Americans.

Willingness to communicate in L2

MacIntyre(1994) used path analyses to propose a hypothetical structure underlying the relations among the variables which had been identified as antecedents of willingness to communicate (Fig. 1). He demonstrated that the most immediate influences on WTC were communication anxiety and perceived competence, whereas the effects of such influence as self-esteem, anomie and alienation were channeled through communication anxiety and perceived competence.

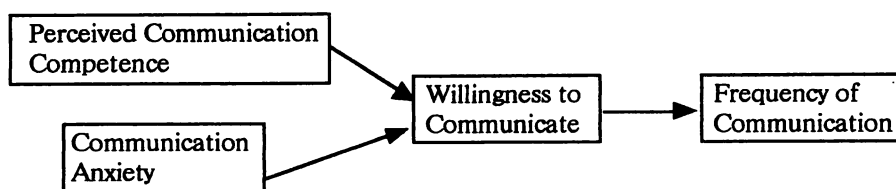


Fig.1 Portion of MacIntyre's (1994) Willingness to Communicate Model

MacIntyre and Charos(1996) applied MacIntyre's WTC model to an L2 situation in studies conducted with Canadian Anglophone learners of French as a second language. In Canada, where both English and French are used as official languages, L2 immersion education (English for Francophones, French for Anglophones)is widely practiced from kindergarten to high school. Given a willingness to communicate, the bilingual social milieu allows both Francophones and Anglophones to communicate in L2 with native speakers of L2. MacIntyre and Charos(1996) attempted to examine the structure of the WTC model while incorporating global personality traits in L2 contexts. At the same time they tried to link this model to Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of L2 acquisition.¹ The results showed that the effects of personality were indirect, channeled through perceived L2 competence and L2 communication anxiety. MacIntyre and Clément(1996) examined this path in various L2 learning situations including junior high school immersion and unilingual college situations. Although some minor differences were observed depending on the subjects, the basic structure of the WTC model was supported by the results.

How can this model be applied to a monolingual social context such as Japan, where English is taught as a compulsory foreign language subject at most schools across the nation but frequen-

¹MacIntyre and Charos (1996) combined MacIntyre's WTC model(1994) and Gardner's(1985) socio-educational model to construct a model of L2 WTC. The portion of the model based on Gardner is not dealt with this paper.

cy of FL/ L2 communication² outside the school context is relatively limited? In a monolingual milieu, frequency of communication may not be regarded as a corollary of willingness to communicate as it is in a bilingual/ multilingual contexts. What are psychological antecedents of WTC in Japan? What is behind the quietness or unwillingness to communicate often observed in college EFL classrooms?

How is the communication tendency in L1 and L2 interrelated? In a situation in which one has to communicate in L2, how does WTC differ from when one can speak in L1? It is hypothesized that WTC in L2 will be lower than WTC in L1, as most learners find it more difficult and have less confidence to speak in L2 than in L1. Does one's willingness to communicate in L1 affect WTC in L2? We would expect that a person who is talkative in L1 would tend to talk a lot in L2. MacIntyre and Clément(1996) nevertheless report a preliminary result with beginning level learners of L2 indicating a negative correlation between L1 and L2 WTC ($r = -.26, p < .05$), which means the more one is willing to communicate in L1, the less he/she is willing to communicate in L2. We would like to examine whether this rather unexpected result will be repeated in Japan.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be investigated.

Research Question 1 Can perceived communication competence and communication anxiety in L2 influence WTC in L2 of Japanese learners of English?

Research Question 2 How does WTC in L1 (Japanese) compare with WTC in L2 (English)?

Research Question 3 How is WTC in L1 (Japanese) interrelated with WTC in L2 (English)?

In addition, the level of WTC in L1 of Japanese students will be compared with the published WTC of American students.

Method

117 Japanese university students (39 females and 78 males) of a coeducational 4-year university participated in the study. All of them had studied English for six years as part of their tertiary education and for at least one year at college. Two sets of questionnaires in Japanese were prepared and administered to the participants in November 1997. The first questionnaire includes items concerning communication in English and the second concerns communication in Japanese. The students were divided into two groups with the first group responding to the ques-

²A distinction between the second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) is sometimes made. While English is a foreign language for Japanese learners, as L2 is used more commonly as an abbreviation especially in contrast to L1, this term will be used in this paper to refer to the most widely studied foreign language.

tionnaire on English communication first and one month later responding to the questionnaire on Japanese communication. The order of administration of the two questionnaires was reversed for the second group to counterbalance the order effect. The questionnaire consists of the instruments described in the next section.

Instruments

The following instruments were translated from English to Japanese by a bilingual translator after which the researcher conferred with several other bilinguals to ascertain functional and semantic equivalence of the Japanese version and the original English version. Instruments administered to the participants were all written in Japanese.

Willingness to Communicate Scale: The WTC scale which is published in McCroskey (1991) was used. The scale consists of 20 items, 12 as mentioned before (related to four communication contexts i.e., public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups and talking in dyads; and three types of receivers i.e., strangers, acquaintances and friends), and 8 filler (dummy) items. (e.g. Item 3: Present a talk to a group of strangers. Item 4: Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line. Item 6: Talk in a large meeting of friends.) The students were asked to indicate the percentage of time he/she would choose to communicate in each type of situation when completely free to do so using a figure between 0 and 100. (The English situation: Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$; The Japanese situation: $\alpha = .90$)

Communication Anxiety: 12 items on communication apprehension/anxiety used in MacIntyre and Clément (1996). The students indicate the percentage of time he/she feels nervous in each situation/receiver with a number between 0 (I would never feel nervous) and 100 (I would always feel nervous). They include four communication contexts: public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups and talking in dyads; and three types of receivers: strangers, acquaintances and friends as in the WTC scale. (The English situation: $\alpha = .94$; The Japanese situation: $\alpha = .87$)

Perceived Communication Competence: 12 items on self-judgment of communication competence also from MacIntyre and Clément (1996). Students were asked to indicate their self-assessed competency in each situation and with each receiver using a number between 0 (completely incompetent) and 100 (completely competent). The situations and receivers are the same as the ones in Communication Anxiety Scale. (The English situation: $\alpha = .96$; The Japanese situation: $\alpha = .95$)

Both the questionnaire on communication in L1 (Japanese) and the questionnaire on communication in L2 (English) include the above three instruments in which the language of communication is specified. In the questionnaire on communication in L2 (English), students were asked to

respond to each item, imagining what they would do or how they would feel if they were faced with the situation described in the questionnaire.

Questions about frequency of L2 use in the past year outside the L2 learning context (a 7-point scale)³ and the number of years spent studying English in and outside school education were also included.

Analyses and Results

Prior to responding to the research questions, Japanese students' WTC in L1 was compared with that of U.S. mainland students as data on Japanese WTC seems to have never been collected.

McCroskey(1991) reports mean total WTC and mean WTC in each situation and for each receiver for 428 U.S. college students. The same computation was made with 115 Japanese college students.⁴ The results are shown in Table 1 together with figures from McCroskey's study.

Table 1 Comparison of the WTC means of Japanese students with normative means of Americans

	Japanese (N=115)			Americans (N=428)		
	Mean	SD	Reliability (α)	Mean	SD	Reliability
Total WTC	54.5	16.8	.90	67.3	15.2	.92
Public	46.7	22.1	.78	56.1	22.2	.76
Meeting	45.0	22.0	.74	60.0	20.9	.70
Group	64.3	19.1	.72	73.4	15.8	.65
Dyed	61.7	16.0	.62	79.5	15.0	.69
Stranger	27.4	16.7	.73	41.3	22.5	.82
Acquaintance	64.6	22.4	.84	75.0	17.9	.74
Friend	71.3	18.5	.77	85.5	13.8	.74

American figures are based on McCroskey (1990).⁵

³The scale was created on a trial base considering the Japanese social context where daily contact with L2 speakers is limited. Changes to the scale will be made after reviewing the data obtained in the current study.

⁴Two students were dropped from the analyses as they left one of the three sections completely unanswewrd.

⁵Gender breakdown was not reported.

Being a preliminary investigation, the number of the subjects was limited. As the number of subjects in the current study differs substantially from McCroskey's, interpretation of the results should be made cautiously. Since McCroskey's data itself was not accessible, no statistical analyses were warranted. Yet, the results quite clearly show that the WTC of Japanese students was lower than that of American students across the board. Although the overall tendency to be more willing to communicate in more informal situations with more familiar receivers was observed with Japanese students, there were some noticeable differences between Japanese students and American students in the ordering of scores. American students are more willing to communicate in meetings than in public-speech situations, while Japanese students are less willing. Another difference is that Japanese are more willing to communicate in a small group than in dyad, while the opposite is observed with American students.

<MacIntyre's Model: Predictability of WTC with communication apprehension and perceived communication competence>

A multiple regression analysis was performed with WTC in English as the dependent variable, and communication anxiety(CA) and perceived communication competence(PC) in English as independent variables. The result is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Result of Regression analysis
 <Dependent variable: WTC in English>

Independent variables	β	r
Perceived communication competence (PC) in L2	.50***	.57***
Communication anxiety (CA)in L2	-.17+	-.39***
Multiple R	.59	
R square	.35***	

*** p<.001 (+ p = .06)

As shown here, WTC was predicted by PC, but not by CA (although the significant level was almost attained). This means those who perceive their English proficiency to be high and are therefore self-confident tend to be more willing to communicate in English than those who do not.

Frequency of communication in L2 was weakly correlated with L2 WTC (r= .20, p< .05).

Frequency of communication in L2 was entered as the dependent variable for regression analyses with WTC, CA and PC in L2, and then as an independent variable because it is also plausible that frequency of contact as measured here will influence WTC. No significant causal relationship was found between frequency of communication and three other variables.

< Comparison of means between WTC in L1 and L2 >

Table 3 shows that WTC in English and perceived communication competence in English are significantly lower than WTC and PC in Japanese, while CA in English is significantly higher than CA in Japanese.

Table 3 Comparison of Mean between WTC, CA, PC in L1 and WTC, CA, PC and L2

	L1	L2	T-value
Total WTC	54.62	32.91	-11.21***
Communication	38.60	58.07	10.73***
Apprehension(CA)			
Perceived Commu- nication competence (PC)	55.02	33.33	-9.56***

*** $p < .001$

< Correlations between WTC in L1 and WTC in L2 >

Pearson's correlations between WTC in English and WTC in Japanese were computed for all situations and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Correlations between WTC L1 and L2

	r
Total WTC	.33***
Public	.36***
Meeting	.40***
Group	.24*
Dyad	.21*
Stranger	.33***
Acquaintance	.30**
Friend	.27**

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

Weak to moderate correlations were admitted between willingness to communicate in L1 and L2 as shown in Table 4. Communication anxiety in L1 and L2 were correlated ($r = .40, p < .001$) and so were perceived communication competence in L1 and L2 ($r = .28, p < .01$). As Table 4 shows in informal situations such as in a group or dyad situations, correlations between WTC in L1 and L2 are lower, while in formal situations such as public and meeting situations, correlations are higher.

Another multiple regression was computed to examine the predictive power of WTC L1. As noted in Table 5, WTC in L1 can predict WTC in L2 although perceived competence in L2 is the superior predictor.

Table 5 Result of Regression analysis
 ‹Dependent variable: WTC in English›

Independent variables	β	r
Perceived communication competence (PC) in L2	.47***	.57***
WTC in L1(Japanese)	.24**	.33***
Communication anxiety (CA)in L2	-.14	-.39***
Multiple R	.64	
R square	.40***	

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$

Discussion

It was found that Japanese students' WTC in all situations studied was lower than that of American students studied by McCroskey(1991). This was expected from the "cultural personality" of Japanese. Second, similar variation depending on the situation and partner was generally observed, indicating that Japanese and Americans share the same disposition to be more talkative in informal situations with closer partners. In two areas minor differences were found between the two groups. The tendency to be less willing to communicate in "a large meeting" than to "present a talk to a group" may be partly attributable to their reaction to the phrase "large group." The tendency to be more willing to initiate communication in a small group than in a dyad situation may indicate the characteristic of modern Japanese youth. Further research with a larger population as well as an ethnographic study of youth interaction is needed to confirm this. Another focus of future research should be cross-cultural comparisons involving a number of different cultures and differences based on gender and age.

Regarding Research Question 1, perceived communication competence in L2 was found to be a fairly strong predictor of WTC in L2, while the role of communication anxiety seems to be relatively small. Although there was weak (yet significant) correlation between WTC and frequency of communication in L2 outside English teaching context, no significant path was found between them. This probably is attributable to the Japanese social context, where L2 communication partners are not readily available outside English learning contexts and therefore one's level of WTC is not directly reflected in frequency of communication in L2. We could say, however, MacIntyre's model was partially supported by the current research conducted in a monolingual social context. Japanese students' willingness to communicate in L2 seems to be affected significantly by how they perceive their L2 competence to be. In other words, the more confident one is of his/her communicative competence in L2, the more he/she will be willing to initiate communication in the language. In order to clarify the relationship between WTC and its behavioral outcome, frequency of communication within the L2 leaning classrooms should be observed as in Chan and McCroskey(1987) and Sato(1986) and used as a variable, or some experimental condition should be created. In Chan and McCroskey(1987), students' communication behavior(classroom interaction) was observed under circumstances where they had free choice of whether to communicate or not. The results show that students' scores on the WTC scale were highly predictive of their actual behavior. L2 learning classrooms are places where a similar condition can be created depending on the kind of teaching style. Study-abroad programs which are gaining popularity among Japanese high-school and college students are another circumstance where students are completely free to initiate interactions with speakers of the target language. These areas should be circumstances where future research could take place.

Research Question 2 focused on a comparison of WTC level between L1 and L2. As predicted, WTC in L2 was substantially lower than WTC in L1, indicating that students are less willing to speak in English than in Japanese. Perceived communication competence in L1 was significantly higher than PC in L2, while communication anxiety in L1 was lower than CA in L2. McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida's study(1985) of Japanese students on communication apprehension using McCroskey's instrument called PRCA⁶ showed that there was no difference between the level of communication apprehension in L1 and that in L2, while they showed Japanese students' CA level was substantially higher than that of American students. The results of the current study seems to contradict McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida(1985), although the instrument used is different and direct comparison is not possible. In the case of Puerto Ricans whose L1 (Spanish)communication apprehension was lower than that of Americans in their L1, communi-

⁶Personal Report of Communication Apprehension with 24 items

cation apprehension in L2(English)was found to be higher than that in L1(McCroskey, Fayer & Richmond, 1985). Judging from often reported EFL teachers' experience at Japanese colleges, the researcher finds the current results plausible.

Research Question 4 centered on the interrelation between WTC in L1 and L2. Significant positive correlations were found between WTC in L1 and L2 in all situations with all partners. This indicates that the personality based L1 WTC can be reflected in L2 communication. In other words those who are willing to speak more in Japanese tend to be willing to speak more in English. Further a regression analyses revealed that WTC in L1 can predict WTC in L2. This result completely differs from MacIntyre and Clément's report(1996) of a negative correlation between WTC in L1 and L2. MacIntyre attributed this to the fact that the participants of his study were beginners and conjectures that those who were talkative in L1 reacted negatively to the situation where they were deprived of the ability to freely express themselves (personal communication, March, 1998). The participants of the current study are regarded as intermediate level learners and this probably accounts for the difference. It is speculated that as one becomes more proficient in the second language, one's personality or L1 communication tendency is more strongly reflected in L2 communication. A study of the relationship between the two as a function of L2 proficiency level will clarify this. Correlations between L1 and L2 are higher in more formal situations than in less formal situations which seems to indicate that personality is more strongly reflected in communication tendency in formal situations whereas situational factors operate more in communication with friends and/or in dyads .

Conclusion

This investigation, although preliminary, reveals some interesting aspects of Japanese students' L2 communication. Repeating the study with a larger population is certainly necessary to confirm the results obtained here and clarify some of the questions raised.

The results of this study demonstrate that perceived communication competence or self-confidence in L2 strongly affects willingness to communicate in L2. How willing one is to communicate in L1 also seems to affect L2 communication. This seems to indicate that students' reticence or lack of communication in L2 which has often been reported partly results from their trait-like disposition regardless of the language used, but probably more importantly stems from perceived communication incompetence or lack of confidence in L2 communication. A higher proficiency level is likely to increase self-confidence. In addition, successful L2 communication experience will surely lead more directly to confidence and willingness to communicate which in turn will result in motivation to learn the language more vigorously. Second/foreign language classrooms should be places where favorable and confidence-building communication experiences are creat-

ed. Further, environments in which students who are willing to communicate in L2 can readily communicate with international partners should be created through enhancing international face-to-face communication opportunities. This could be done by means of 1) well-thought out study abroad programs and exchanges with international students staying in Japan, and 2) fully utilizing ever-expanding multimedia communication techniques.

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