International Journal Of Scientific And University Research Publication

ISSN No 292

Listed & Index with
ISSN Directory. Paris



Multi-Subject Journal

Volum : v(8) | Issue : 4 |

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC AND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PUBLICATION

Research Paper

STRONG INFLUENCERS UNDERLYING OMANI ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE ONLINE: REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF TRAIT-BASED PREDISPOSITION

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ABSTRACT **Behind-the-screen communication can improve learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign/second language (L2). During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, online education gave instructors ample opportunity to observe learners' communicative behaviour. The study reports observations showing that the new situation affected some learners' L2 WTC negatively, and that those unaffected have a high L2 WTC. In a group of 137 Omani English- major students, only 12 students showed WTC in online sessions, as observed by the researchers and validated by 3 instructors. Interviews with 5 of these students suggested that when students major in the L2, their WTC, influenced by different types of motivation, can develop to a predisposition to speak notwithstanding the learning situation/interlocutor types. Communication barriers are overcome by such learners through different learning strategies and the belief that L2 mistakes are acceptable and inevitable. This necessitated revisiting the concept of WTC as a trait-based predisposition from the perspective of learners majoring in the L2.**

KEYWORDS :communication strategies; L2; learning strategies;

INTRODUCTION

The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally used to refer to an individual's communication in his/her first language (L1) and was defined as a person's tendency – a personality-based predisposition – to initiate a conversation/discussion when given the opportunity to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). The subsequent use of the concept in the area of English as a second/foreign language (L2) did not involve considering an individual's WTC in the L2 as a simple manifestation of their WTC in the L1 (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998). Rather, some variables have been identified as having potential impacts on L2 WTC, particularly, self-perceived communication competence, communication anxiety, shyness and motivation (Clément, Baker & MacIntyre,

2003). The socio-cultural dimension, type of language learning program (immersion vs. non- immersion), and level of L2 learning experience were also shown to be variables that have noticeable effects on learners' WTC in the L2 (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000). Other variables identified include the interlocutor type, familiarity of the topic, and conversational context (Kang, 2005). Thus, factors affecting the L2 WTC construct were dealt with as situation-based and/or interlocutor-based, with some studies showing L2 WTC as a fluctuating (rather than a stable) personality-based predisposition.

The present study reports on Omani English-major students' WTC during the online educational situation created due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It shows that while some students' WTC in the L2 was affected negatively by social and affective variables triggered by the new online learning situation, others' L2 WTC remained high. The data suggested that the latter group of students developed (prior to the pandemic advent) a personality-based predisposition to initiate communication in the L2 notwithstanding the learning situation/interlocutor types. Influenced by different types of motivation, these students overcome barriers to communication in the language they love and/or need for their future career through cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (see Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies) – strategies that spring from the determination to master the language and the belief that L2 mistakes form an inevitable part of the learning process. These findings were supported by two additional observations: 1) not all students who showed high WTC had a good command of English and 2) the continuous attempts to motivate inactive students to communicate failed regardless of the conversational context.

The study is structured as follows. Work on L2 WTC is first sketched. This is followed by a summary of work on the effect of motivation on L2 learning in terms of which findings related to the participants' communication behaviour can be described. Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies was then introduced as the framework for discussing findings related to the strategies the participants with high WTC in the L2 use to overcome communication barriers. The remaining parts of the study introduce the research methodology and discuss the research findings revisiting the concept of WTC as a personality-based predisposition, particularly the variables influencing it, from the perspective of Omani learners majoring in English. The study contributes to existing work on L2 WTC by showing that the Covid-19 online learning situation did not provide the conditions that some learners would need to communicate in the L2. The study further shows how L2 WTC develops – through different learning strategies – to a personality-based predisposition in motivated learners specialising in the L2. Such learners' WTC is affected by linguistic and affective barriers in a positive way in the sense that they strengthen their determination to master the L2. The study ends with a summary of points and suggestions for further research.

Willingness to Communicate in the L2

Work on WTC as an L2 construct is rooted in Gardner's (1988) socio-educational model – a model that considers factors affecting L2 learning (i.e. motivational, cognitive, affective, social, and cultural factors). MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998), for example, used Gardner's model as a theoretical foundation for a comprehensive model of WTC in L2 settings. Their model rests on the argument that "it is highly unlikely that WTC in the second language is a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1" (p. 546). To them, L2 WTC needs to be examined from the viewpoints of *transient* and *enduring* influences. Transient influences depend on the specific situation in which an individual functions at a given time (e.g., desire to speak to a specific person and knowledge of the topic). The enduring influences, in contrast, refer to stable and long-term properties of the situation or an individual (e.g., intergroup relations and personality). Thus, in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) study, L2 WTC is conceptualized as both situational-based and individual-based construct (i.e. rather than a personality-based predisposition).

This conceptualisation is consistent with the findings of Kang's (2005) longitudinal qualitative study conducted with Korean learners studying English in an American university. The results indicated that WTC in the L2 emerge under psychological conditions of excitement, responsibility, and security, each of which is created through the role of situational variables in a conversational situation, such as interlocutor, topic, and conversational context. Kang concluded that L2 WTC is a dynamic situational construct (rather than a personality-based predisposition) that changes moment-to-moment.

However, Cao and Philp (2006) examined learners' WTC at situational-level as well as personality-level by adopting a mixed-

method design study. Firstly, interrelationships between personality WTC in the L2 and situational WTC were measured by self-report within the context of whole class interaction, small group interaction, and dyadic interaction. Secondly,learners' perceptions of factors affecting their WTC in classroom contexts were investigated. The results revealed that learners' WTC behaviour in each of the class contexts was influenced both by trait-level and situational-level WTC. Learners' WTC behaviour was also affected by group size, interlocutor familiarity, interlocutor participation, topic familiarity, and interest.

Clearly, L2 WTC has been examined at both situational level and personality level pinpointing the factors that affect the construct at both levels. It has also been considered from the viewpoint of motivation. The section below brings together studies on motivation and learning strategies to pave the way for showing how L2 WTC, influenced by different types of motivation, develops into a personality-based predisposition through different learning strategies, particularly when the situation is stable in the sense that it involves the same interlocutors and educational context (English major). The determination of individual learners to succeed in the language they need for their future career (or, in some cases, status) seems to be stronger than any barriers to L2 WTC.

From Motivation to Learning Strategies

Work on WTC from the viewpoint of motivation is also rooted in Gardner's (2010) socio- educational model. Within this model, motivation is seen as "the driving force in any situation" (Gardner, 2010, p. 89) due to three essential elements: effort, desire, and positive effect. That is, the motivated learner will: 1) expend the effort to learn the language, 2) have the desire to achieve the goal, and 3) enjoy the task of learning the language. However, learners' motivation may be associated with more factors, possibly those outside of the classroom, such as their current or future need for English competence. Individual learners' beliefs about English learning and communication may be attributed to many other factors, such as past experience, learning styles, and social expectations. All factors identified in the literature can be considered under two types of motivation: *integrative* and *instrumental*.

Integrativeness in Gardner's (2010) socio-educational model is measured by three variables: *integrative orientation, attitudes toward the community of the L2,* and *interest in the foreign language learning* (Gardner, 2010). Dörnyei (2005) proposed the notion of the *L2*
Motivational Self to reinterpret the concept of integrativeness and its impact on L2 learning motivation. The notion includes the *Ideal L2 Self* which refers to the language learning and proficiency goals of the individual L2 learner, *Ought-to L2 Self* which concerns the attributes that an L2 learner ought to possess to avoid any possible negative outcomes, and *L2 Learning Experience* which incorporates motives related to the immediate L2 learning environment and L2 learning experiences (Dörnyei, 2005).

In his counterargument, Gardner (2010) asserted that the concept of the L2 Motivational Self notion is not appropriate for the characterization of the integrative motive. He believed that it refers to students' perceptions of the self and has a definite self-determination orientation. Gardner (2001) also extended the concept of integrativeness to refer to an openness to and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life without the necessary intention to assimilate into the L2 community.

As for *instrumentality*, Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) classified the construct into two distinct types: *instrumentality-promotion* and *instrumentality-prevention*. Instrumentality- promotion reflects the regulation of personal goals to become successful. This could include attaining high proficiency in the second language in order to make more money or to find a better job. Instrumentality-prevention reflects the regulation of duties and obligation, such as studying the second language to pass an examination.

The results obtained from this study are consistent with Gardner's extended concept of integrativeness (an openness to and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life without the necessary intention to assimilate into the L2 community) as well as his reinterpretation of Dörnyei's (2005) concept of L2 Motivational Self; specifically, the ideal L2 and the ought-to- L2 components as irrelevant to integrative motivation in the sense that the constructs are based on learners' beliefs about how they should be in the future. This reinterpretation may be reinterpreted further in terms of Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) classification of instrumentality into the two constructs of instrumentality-promotion and instrumentality- prevention. Thus, the study deals with phenomena relevant to the concept of L2 Motivational Self as constructs of instrumental motivation.

Motivated students tend to use learning strategies, such as the ones captured in Oxford's (1990) taxonomy. Figure 1 below sketches this taxonomy.

Figure 1: Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies

As shown below, the participants of this study depended on indirect learning strategies to overcome barriers to L2 WTC. The only direct strategies they mentioned fall under the *cognitive* type of Oxford's learning strategies.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 at the Faculty of Language Studies, Sohar University – a private university in the Sultanate of Oman.

Sequential procedures were employed as qualitative-method strategies to collect the data. The procedures began with observations through which student participations in live sessions, discussions forums, or via email messages were observed and noted down. This was followed by collecting qualitative data through informal instructor interviews to validate the researchers' observations. More qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured student interviews to explore in detail the case of the students with high WTC. The interview questions required students to self-report on their high WTC in English as well as their communication confidence and the strategies they use to overcome linguistic and affective factors.

The student participants (N=137) were overwhelmingly Omani females in their early twenties. They were in their third year of university working towards a Bachelor Degree in English Language Studies. The interview participants were 3 instructors (all are PhD holders) and 5 students. For the instructors, the sampling criterion was 'teachers of the same group of students'; that is to say, teachers who are in a position to assess the validity of the researchers' observations in regard to their students' WTC. As for the students, the sampling criterion was

'students with high WTC. Invitations to attend an interview were sent to all the students with high WTC (N=12), but only 5 students responded. 3 of the students were high achievers (with a GPA of 3.5 and above) and two above average (with a GPA of 2.5 and above). All interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Findings and Discussion

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Moodle was used as the E-learning

platform for course materials and student discussion forums. In addition, two one-hour live sessions were conducted on Ms Teams per week to discuss materials and activities. These were question-answer sessions that prompted students to participate by summarizing points, analyzing examples, reflecting on points, and so on.

Observations

Observations of student participations in online sessions, discussion forums or via email messages are brought into focus below. Figure 2, which summarizes online session participations, shows that the percentages of attendees who participated through spoken communication as fluctuating between 5.84 and 8.76. By contrast, the percentages of students who participated through written communication represent a dynamic increase from 15.5 in

Module 1 to 29.2 in Module 4 (the last course module).

Based on the researchers' observations, the fluctuation in oral participation rates was due to the absence of some students with high WTC from the live sessions. As for the case of written participation, the participation rates increased gradually as students were building up knowledge of and familiarity with the contents. The students who participated in live sessions (either in speaking or writing) had different language proficiency levels. That is, communication competence was not a determining factor behind students' WTC. The construct of instrumentality-prevention (Taguchi, Magid, and Papi, 2009) may explain the participation of weaker students as they raised questions about the exams.

However, the fact that inactive students outnumbered active students in the live sessions indicates that the Covid-19 behind-the-screen learning situation did not contain the filters necessary for triggering students to communicate. In a study of Omani students' WTC that was conducted prior to the pandemic advent, Al-Amrani and Harrington (2020) reported that the online environment was more comfortable and less anxiety provoking than face-to-face environments. It also triggered less social embarrassment as online communication settings reduced social barriers; students were not anxious about losing face if the made a mistake. The online environment allowed students to hide behind their monitors so that interlocutors could not identify them. Moreover, even if other interlocutors could identify them, some students indicated that it was easier to express their points of views in English online as they could communicate from a distance. In the new online learning situation, however, hiding behind the monitor is not equated with anonymity and the platforms used (e.g. MS Teams) identify the participants.

The above finding can be supported by the reluctance of some excellent students to communicate (either in writing or speaking) during live sessions or in discussion forums. Three of these students were high achievers who certainly had the motivation to pass the course and probably other motivations that can be considered under the instrumentality-promotion construct. Yet, they consistently communicated with the instructors in regard to course concepts and exams via email messages. Figure 3 shows the rates of participations via discussion forums and email messages. It is clear from the figure that active students communicated more through email messages than discussion forums. Occasionally-active participants also used emails and the discussion forums to answer questions posted by the course instructors in the discussion forums.

It is clear from the above figures that inactive students outnumbered active students on all the platforms used for teaching the course remotely. To assess the validity of this and the other observations presented above and to gain more insights into the situation, interviews were conducted with 3 instructors teaching the same group of students.

Instructor Interviews

Those were informal interviews that consisted of two parts. The first part sought information on the observed groups' participation in online learning platforms. The instructors' responses confirmed the researchers' observation that inactive students outnumbered active students, and that few students communicated in speaking. An instructor commented that "Students were silent most of the time during live sessions and had it not been for some oral participations and the messages that some students posted, I would have thought I was talking to myself". Another interviewee said, "It was very difficult to improve oral participation rates. I tried everything I could do. I even asked the students who sent me their inquiries by email to raise their questions in the live sessions or to post them in the discussion forums so that other students can learn from them, but they never did". Such comments triggered the question of whether the students low participation rates can be described as interlocutor-based and/or situation-based. All interviewees agreed that it cannot be interlocutor-based since the students have been together and learning through the same instructors for three years. In addition, the interlocutors were overwhelmingly females (N=132/137), which meant that their low participation rates cannot also be analysed from the point of view of gender. However, the following instructor's report suggests that the real reason behind low participation rates during the Covid-19 online learning is situation-based: "A student requested me to delete the recording of the live session because she participated in it". The students' request indicates that the new online learning situation may have affected student participations negatively, not only because the platforms used identify the participants, but also because their participations would form parts of recorded sessions to be uploaded to Moodle for students to be able to replay. This makes the new online learning situation different from other online learning environments in at least the following two respects: 1) it exits the group's circle as the recorded sessions containing the student participations can be replayed in front of anyone outside the group and 2) recorded mistakes can be a source of everlasting embarrassment for students. The same may be said to apply to the discussion forums as students' discussions remain posted for the duration of the course and can be viewed by anyone who has access to the course.

The second part of the interviews inquired about the participation of the specific female students that the researchers identified as having high WTC in speaking. The interviewees confirmed that the same students showed WTC in their classes. This triggered the question of whether these students use effective strategies to overcome communication barriers notwithstanding the situation and interlocutor types. To answer this question, interviews were conducted with a sample of these students.

Student Interviews

The interview questions required the 5 participants to self-report on their high WTC in English as well as communication confidence. Other questions focused on the strategies they use to overcome linguistic and affective factors which can influence their WTC, including fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. The interviewees were also asked whether the new online learning situation had impacted their WTC in the L2. Table 1 provides the interview questions and summaries of responses. This research tool was validated by two experts.

Table 1. Student interview questions and responses

Questions	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5

1.What are the main reasons for having high WTC in English?	➢ Self-growth ➢ Eagerness and tendency to communicate with people sub consciously	➢ WTC is a personality trait ➢ Love for English	➢ Being able to express myself in English better than in Arabic as though English is my L1 ➢ Feeling unique when speaking in English	The motivation to achieve my main goal (to be the best English teacher)	Practicing the language and learning from mistakes to improve communication and self-confidence
2. How do you gain high self- confidence or self-perceived communication competence?	Positive self-talk	➢ The ability to speak in English ➢ Self-reflection helped me to diagnose weaknesses and address them	Developing my language skills	Developing my language skills	Continued to speak in English not caring about mistakes or negative comments until I learnt the language by paying attention to smallest details
3. How do you overcome communication anxiety or apprehension?	➢ Self-motivation ➢ Self-convincing that no one is perfect	Practicing in front of the mirror and family members	By not giving up	I still suffer from communication anxiety, but still speak to achieve my main goal.	Accepting doing mistakes
4. How do you overcome language barriers?	➢ Reading ➢ Writing ➢ Singing along with songs	➢ My competitive nature pushed me to reach the level of fluent speakers ➢ Joining English clubs helped me reach	Learning through courses, movies, communication groups and speaking practice with	Learning through authentic language use (e.g. videos, songs and movies)	➢ Reading ➢ Watching YouTube videos ➢ Building up vocabulary
5. How do you overcome shyness?	Building self-confidence through peers' positive comments	Shyness is inevitable, but it can push you to practice and learn in order to feel more confident when communicating in L2	a high proficiency level ➢ Mistakes are not a barrier. What matters is to identify your mistakes, take the time to correct them and avoid making them in the future	friends and family	
				Still shy but still speaks	English is not my L1 and it is fine to make mistakes
6. How do you overcome the fear of negative evaluation?	Believing that I cannot satisfy everyone	➢ I had this fear when I was at the beginner level ➢ Self-reflection helped me recognise that making mistake is a stage to mastering L2 ➢ I only pay attention to instructors' comments which aim at helping me learn from my mistakes	• I fear mistakes, but I still speak to learn the language I love	•Being optimistic	• I still have this fear but it motivates me to learn from the comments
7. How do you overcome the fear	Preparation and taking risks are key to	Mistakes are inevitable and they	Believing that the mere ability to	Believing that we learn from our	I still have this fear but it motivates

		of developing WTC regardless of the mistakes	developing WTC great achievement	I am not sure, but I participated in all live sessions and in the discussion forums	to learn from mistakes in order to avoid making mistakes
8. How did the online learning experience impact your WTC?	Sometimes, teachers called my name to answer their questions and that improved my self-confidence	It provided me with many opportunities to communicate. I answered teachers' questions when no one else volunteered to speak	I developed self-confidence from situations where no one else volunteered to speak	I am not sure, but I participated in all live sessions and in the discussion forums	It didn't.
9. Any other comments?	None	Motivation and practice can help you overcome all barriers	The main variables affecting the development of L2 WTC are lack of practice and encouragement	If you have high motivation to achieve any goals in your life, you will achieve them.	None

The responses to question 1 indicate that all five students developed their WTC in the L2 prior to the pandemic advent. Although Students 1 and Student 2 see their L2 WTC as a personality-based predisposition, integrative motivation is obvious in their responses as well as the response of Student 3. Self-growth, love for English, and feeling unique when speaking in English are all factors that can be considered under the variable *interest in learning the foreign language* that Gardner (2010) proposed for measuring integrativeness. The response of Student

3 further shows that her WTC in the L2 is influenced by her self-perceived communication competence. The same applies to the response of Student 2 to question 4 where she reveals her belief that she has reached a high competency level in English. The responses of Speaker 4 and Speaker 5 are clear cases of instrumentality-promotions as they indicate that English is the language they need to master to achieve success in their future career. However, regardless of the motives, all five students developed a tendency to communicate in the L2 that became part of their personality as L2 learners. This explains the reason why speakers 1, 2, and 3 equate their L2 WTC with their L1 WTC and/or the ability to speak well in English.

Responses to questions 2-7 show that the interviewees haven't entirely overcome barriers to communication, but they use cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social learning strategies to filter out their negative effects on their WTC in the L2. They practice the L2, plan their learning, and depend on positive comments and self-talk to carry on with their learning journey. Errors and negative comments are learning opportunities that strengthen their determination to learn more and improve their communication skills. These students' communicative behaviour, which springs from the belief that L2 mistakes are acceptable and inevitable, and that practice makes perfect, is consistent with Gardner's (2010) reinterpretation of Dörnyei's (2005) notion of the L2 Motivational Self as having a definite self-determination orientation. In the case of the study participants, however, this orientation was influenced by the fact that they are majoring in the L2 which contributed to turning their keenness to master the language to a personality-based predisposition regardless of the learning situation and interlocutors' types or comments. This may be supported by the fact that the interviewees' WTC in the L2 has not been affected by the Covid-19 online learning situation, as their responses to question 8 show. The situation simply contributed to promoting their self- confidence and provided them with communication opportunities.

The study findings and responses to question 9 confirmed the researchers' observations that, L2 WTC, affected by a complex concept of motivation, develops to a personality-based predisposition, particularly when the L2 is the area of learners' specialization. The findings warrant revisiting the concept of WTC as a personality-based predisposition considering that the interviewees who showed high WTC did not seem to be negatively affected by any of the barriers that were dealt with in the relevant literature as playing determining roles in individuals' WTC. More importantly, the language barrier does not seem to play an important role in L2 WTC since learners do not perceive the ability to communicate in the L2 as being equated with error-free output. This explains the reason why students who showed high willingness to communicate online during the Covid-19 educational situation were of different competency levels.

CONCLUSION

This study examined factors and strategies that shaped learners' WTC online during the Covid-19 pandemic. It showed that the participants, who were Omani English-major students, were differently affected by the new online learning situation. For some, the lack of anonymity and the recording of live sessions were important reasons behind their unwillingness to communicate in these sessions. Those who showed high willingness to communicate however, are the ones who developed – through different learning strategies – a personality-based predisposition to communicate for different motives. The latter group of students is positively influenced by factors affecting individuals' WTC. The study, thus, revisits and draws attention to the need to revisit the concept of WTC as a personality-based predisposition and the factors affecting it, particularly when the foreign/second language of communication is the learners' area of specialization. Now that the post-pandemic education is geared towards blended learning, further research is needed to gain deeper insights into learners' unwillingness to communicate in online learning. Such insights can help educators design better online learning platforms that can help all learners develop their WTC in the L2. One suggestion to achieve this is to add a feature to these platforms that allows students to replace their names with codes (or their student ID numbers).

Plan

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