

# Willingness to Communicate in English in the Study-Abroad Context: Its Complex Relation to the Native/Non-native Issue

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## Abstract

The present study, a case study of an international student at an American university, investigated how the student's willingness to communicate in a second language (L2 WTC) emerged in the study-abroad context. The data were gathered through an interview and observations. The analysis of the interview data suggests that the sense of equality was a psychological antecedent to the emergence of the participant's WTC in English and that equality was determined by interlocutors' attitudes. The analysis of the actual conversation data further demonstrates the intricacy of the relation between the native/non-native issue and L2 WTC. The participant's actual L2 communication behavior was inconsistent with her self-report WTC, suggesting the possibility that the native/non-native issue played a role in shaping her WTC behavior. The present paper concludes by suggesting a perspective that will possibly be helpful in future research on L2 WTC.

**keyword** : second language(L2) communication; situational willingness to communicate(WTC) in L2; L2 speaking; situational variables; equality; identity; native/non-native issue; study-abroad context

## 1. Introduction

Since the notion of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was first adapted to L2 communication and learning by MacIntyre and Charos (1996), many studies have been conducted to explore L2 WTC and its related variables. It is now clear that L2 WTC is a complex construct influenced by a number of different factors, such as perceived competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003), communication anxiety (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2003), L2 attitude or international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004), motivation (Hashimoto, 2002), social support (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001), age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002), gender (MacIntyre et al., 2002; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000), ethnic identity (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003), and cultural values (Wen & Clément, 2003).

However, the majority of these previous studies employed a quantitative approach, that is, statistical analysis based on self-report questionnaire data. On the other hand, Kang (2004) and Cao and Philip (2006) adopted a qualitative approach, gathering data through interviews and observations. Both of these studies drew attention to the dual characteristic of WTC (i.e., trait-like and situational), proposing a new perspective of L2 WTC as dynamic. Compared with L1 WTC, which is conceived of as relatively stable and therefore trait-like (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; MacIntyre, 1994), L2 WTC is more situational and therefore dynamic (cf. also MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Given this nature of L2 WTC, further qualitative studies need to be conducted to investigate its related antecedents and consequences in various settings.

Further, as Baker and MacIntyre (2000) demonstrated (cf. also Clément et al., 2003), the pattern of factors influencing L2 WTC is not fixed but context-dependent. People may possess regular L1 WTC across time and place, but L2 WTC is more dependent on context, especially since “L2 communication is a context-bound phenomenon” (MacIntyre et al., 2002, p. 560). As learning contexts vary, so the array of variables affecting L2 WTC and their relations. Therefore, “a careful examination of what it means to learn a language in a particular context is necessary” (Yashima, 2002, p. 62). However, most of the previous studies of L2 WTC were conducted with students learning French in immersion or non-immersion contexts (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2001; MacIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2003) or with students learning English in foreign language contexts (Yashima 2002; Yashima et al., 2004; Matsuoka, 2009; Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2009). Thus, the paucity of the studies of L2 WTC in second language contexts (Hashimoto, 2002; Kang, 2004; Cao & Philip, 2006) should be noted, calling for further research in this direction. Especially, given the growing number of students on study-abroad programs worldwide, it is critical to gain an in-depth understanding of L2 WTC in the study-abroad context. Most likely the individual’s WTC in a L2 dynamically changes, as L2 identity does (Block, 2007), when the learner moves from the L1 environment to the L2 environment.

As an attempt to address these gaps in existing research, the present study aimed to explore the notion of L2 WTC in the study-abroad context by employing a qualitative approach, that is, by means of interview and observational data. Although some studies applied the WTC construct not only to speaking but to other modes of communication, such as reading or writing activities (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998), the focus of the present study was exclusively placed on spoken communication. Conducting a case study of a Japanese female student at an American university, I was concerned with the relations between L2 WTC and a number of possible factors identified as predictive of L2 WTC. Specifically, the research questions to be addressed were:

- What kind of factors does she perceive as affecting her WTC in English?
- In what ways do these factors influence her WTC and actual behavior?

I begin by briefly describing the participant and the method of data collection. I then proceed to suggest that the sense of equality is a psychological antecedent of L2 WTC on the basis of the interview data. Next I turn to the data gathered through observation and demonstrate the intricacy of the relation between the native/non-native issue and L2 WTC. I conclude by suggesting a perspective that I think will be helpful in future L2 WTC research.

## **2. Method (participant and data collection)**

The present study is a case study of a Japanese learner of English, Lisa (a pseudonym).<sup>1)</sup> Lisa was a 22-year-old college student in America. Born and raised in Japan, she considered Japanese to be her first language, the language she was most comfortable with. She began studying English when she was 12 years old and learned English, mostly written, in traditional classrooms at middle and high school. As is often the case with Japanese classrooms, the main emphasis in the classrooms was on grammar and translation. Thus, having lived in an EFL context, she had few opportunities or needs to use English in everyday life both inside and outside the classroom. After graduating from high school, she attended a private English school for a year to prepare herself for studying abroad. All the teachers there were native speakers of English (NSs) and the students were required to use only English in the classroom. The courses were specifically aimed to improve students' scores of TOEFL with a special emphasis on developing academic skills. Thereafter, she came to the US, enrolled in an American university, and lived in the US for 2 and a half years. The data collection of the present study was conducted in 2010 and she later obtained her BA degree in 2011, which proves that she possessed sufficient proficiency in English to be classified as an advanced learner of English.

For the purpose of collecting data, one semi-structured interview was conducted for about an hour. In the interview, the participant was asked about her demographic information, her experiences in learning English, and her perceptions about interacting in English. The main purpose of the interview was to elicit her perceptions of the factors contributing to her WTC behavior. The questions were as open-ended as possible in order to remove the possibility of restricting the participant's answers: namely, "In what situations do you feel more or less comfortable speaking in English?" In response to the participant's answers, I asked further probing questions. Since the participant and I shared Japanese as our first language, the interview was conducted in Japanese and recorded by a digital voice recorder. Then it was transcribed in Japanese and translated into English. Further, in order to triangulate data, I observed the participant's actual L2 communication. First, since the participant attended the same class as I did, I was able to observe her

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1) All the names in the present study are pseudonyms.

behavior in the classroom. Second, I recorded her conversation with a native English-speaking student during lunchtime and thereafter asked her about how she felt during the interaction, employing stimulated recall to elicit her introspective comments.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

#### **3-1. Interview (the sense of equality and the influence of interlocutors on the sense of equality)**

According to Kang (2005), the psychological conditions under which situational WTC in a L2 emerges are excitement, responsibility, and security. However, the analysis of the interview data suggests that the sense of equality was another psychological antecedent to the emergence of the participant's WTC in English and that equality was mainly determined by interlocutors' attitudes. This finding is all the more significant because it invalidates the traditional dichotomy between friends and strangers or between natives and non-natives.

When discussing interlocutors as a factor influencing L2 WTC, researchers tend to draw a straightforward distinction between familiar and unfamiliar interlocutors or between natives and non-natives. For example, Kang (2005) stated that unfamiliar interlocutors made the participants less secure (cf. also Cao & Philip, 2006) and that NSs made them more excited. In fact, Lisa also testified for the native/non-native dichotomy; as a non-native speaker of English (NNS) living in America, she was very aware of the distinction:

- (1) When I talk with non-native speakers, I feel freer to speak without any worry about pronunciation or grammar. I notice myself speaking in a wrong way, such as saying *do* instead of *does*. Although I notice my errors, it does not prevent me from expressing what I want to say. But I don't really want to talk with native speakers of English. It's easier for me to listen to them and nod along. For example, when I talk with Henry [NS], he speaks 98% and I speak 2%, just saying something like "Yeah" or "Really?"

Lisa further stressed that NNSs, especially Koreans, would guess and understand what she said but that Americans would never understand what she wanted to say without exact words, because they "could not guess (*kumitotte-kurenai*)."

However, such a simplistic picture does not tell the whole story. It would be an oversimplification to claim that she felt more comfortable speaking in English with NNSs or vice versa, because it was not exactly the native/non-native issue that affected her WTC. For example, before the interview began, I noticed her talking cheerfully with her friends, who were NSs. Lisa related:

(2) I can communicate with Kate and Amy naturally. Although they are native speakers of English, I do not care about it so much. I can talk to them, sharing the same perspectives and feelings (*onaji kankaku de shabereru*).

It is worth noting that Lisa further went on to contrast them with Henry, the person whom she referred to as an example of the NSs with whom she was less willing to talk:

(3) For example, although I often talk with other native speakers like Henry, I somehow feel that they are superior to me (*jouge-kankei ga aru*). They are my friends but at the same time they are my teachers. I don't know how they feel, and I know they're not judging me but sometimes I feel that they are. Probably out of kindness they try to teach me many things. They often ask me, "Do you know this? Can you understand the meaning?" I appreciate their kindness, but I didn't like being asked like that in a way. I know they do not look down on me... But when I talk with my friends like Kate and Amy, I feel we are equal (*taito-na kanji ga suru*).

Drawing on the traditional labels, all of the three (i.e., Henry, Kate, and Amy) would be categorized as *friends* or *native speakers*. However, Lisa perceived them quite differently, depending on how they talked to her and how she felt during the interaction. It should be noted that, when talking about the difference between Henry and the others, she used such words as *superior/inferior* (*jouge-kankei*) and *equal* (*taito*). Thus, it can be argued that the sense of equality contributed to her WTC in English, while the sense of inferiority had a negative impact on it. Equality seemed to be mainly determined by the relationship between interlocutors, which was too complex to be described by such simplistic distinctions as *friends/strangers* or *natives/non-natives*. Indeed, among NNSs, Lisa referred to Koreans as more comfortable to talk with than Chinese people. The reason she mentioned was that their way of thinking was "similar (*niteiru*)" (to the Japanese way of thinking). Also, she made the following remarks about her native English-speaking friends: "When I talk with the people whom I consider to be my real friends (*honto-ni tomodachi-da to omotteru hito*), I do not care so much about their being native speakers." The word *real* attached to *friends* tells of a subtle but critical difference. When referring to these real friends, she again used the word *equal* (*taito*):

(4) After I began to speak with natives who were interested in Japan, like Kate and Amy, I felt very differently. Until then I had talked with non-natives only but I was able to get American friends who treated me as their equal.

Here she related the notion of equality to the interest in Japan. Likewise, it is clear from the above-quoted passage (2) that she considered sharing the same perspectives and feelings (*onaji kankaku*) to be of crucial importance. The sense of equality seemed to be determined by interlocutors' attitudes rather than by their native/non-nativeness.

The sense of equality as a predictive factor of Lisa's WTC can further be confirmed by the fact that she made a clear distinction among her classmates according to their status as undergraduate and graduate:

(5) Now many of my classmates are graduates and older than me. So somehow I feel that they are superior (*jouge-kankei ga aru ki ga suru*). When I talk with them, I think I can learn more by listening rather than by talking.

Again it was not exactly the native/non-native issue that affected Lisa's WTC, since the graduate students consisted of both NSs and NNSs.

In this connection it is worth noting here that she did not perceive her spoken competence in good terms; she seemed to be all the more conscious of equality because of this self-perception. She had an inferiority complex about her spoken English even when she was in Japan, comparing herself with her classmates who were returnees:

(6) Although I did well in English at high school, I had a huge inferiority complex towards some of the students at the school. They spoke English very fluently! In fact, some of them were returnees. Many of the students were far more proficient in English than I was. I thought I couldn't compete with them.... I couldn't express myself. I was able to read and listen but I was not good at speaking or writing. Neither am I even now.

At the private language school which she attended to prepare herself for studying abroad, she preferred the reading class to the speaking class. Although "the teacher was a good guy," she disliked giving a speech or presentation in the speaking class and did not feel like speaking English to the point of being given bad grades on the basis of her poor participation in the class. Also, she intentionally avoided taking the internet version of the TOEFL test because she thought that she would not do well on the speaking section of the test. She took the paper-based version of the test and did not take TOEFL since then. In this way, she perceived her spoken competence in bad terms, which seemed to have some influence on how she felt when speaking with NSs. For example, when asked about the situation in which she felt uncomfortable speaking in English,

she narrated the following episode:

(7) When I talked with Andy [NS] the other day, I pronounced a name in a wrong way, I guess. Then he corrected me strongly. He said, "Say it. Say it again." I don't care! I found it really unpleasant. I know that my pronunciation is not perfect, but there was no trouble at that time as far as communication was concerned. I didn't understand the necessity of his correcting me in that situation. Maybe he did it for me, but I wanted him to ignore my error. If someone corrects me when I want to make sure that I am talking in a right way, then I'll appreciate it. But at that moment I talked in a normal situation, so I was irritated by his correcting my pronunciation.

Here the interlocutor's pretentious attitude made her feel inferior, making her less willing to speak in English. It can be argued that she felt all the more irritated by the negative feedback since she herself was very aware that her pronunciation was not perfect.

### **3-2. Observation (the inconsistency between self-report WTC and actual behavior)**

The data gained through observation of Lisa's actual L2 communication further complicate matters. I recorded Lisa's conversation in a casual setting for about twenty minutes. Lisa's interlocutor was a NS, Anne, who I had thought Lisa would find it comfortable to talk with. Anne was a female undergraduate student attending the same university as Lisa did. Lisa and Anne knew each other well, being senior and almost the same age. They also shared similar academic interests (i.e., language and education). In addition, Anne was interested in Japan, learned Japanese, and was able to engage in communication in Japanese to a certain extent. Anne had experiences of studying in Japan for a year as an exchange student, which made her very understanding and sympathetic about the difficulties of international students in America. As far as I could see from my conversations with Anne, she had never shown any pretentiousness whatsoever during conversation. In this sense, Anne fulfilled every criteria to be categorized as Lisa's real friend, or at least someone whom Lisa found to be her equal. In fact, after the conversation, Lisa herself confirmed that Anne was one of the NSs with whom she felt comfortable speaking in English. To use Lisa's words, Anne was "not scary (*kowaku-nai*)."

However, the recorded data of their conversation show that it was actually Anne who dominated the conversation. Since the conversation was conducted on a one-to-one basis, on the surface both of them seemed to be fully involved in the conversation with little sign of awkwardness. However, it is noteworthy that Anne asked almost all the questions during the conversation, initiating new topics. During the whole

conversation it was only once that Lisa asked a question, the purpose of which was not to initiate a new topic but to seek confirmation:

(1)

- 1 Anne: I don't like learning foreign languages, I'm finding. It's like...
- 2 Lisa: Really?
- 3 Anne: Yeah.
- 4 Lisa: How about Japanese?
- 5 Anne: It takes all my energy to do Japanese. I can't do any more.

Dominance in conversation, defined as "one speaker's tendency to control the other speaker's conversational actions over the course of an interaction" (Itakura, 2001, p. 70), can be analyzed by examining such interactional features as overlaps, interruptions, questions and topic initiations (cf. also Itakura & Tsui, 2004). As far as questions and topic initiations were concerned, it was Anne who was the dominant speaker.

Here it is not pointless to be reminded of the inconsistency between self-report WTC (trait-like WTC) and actual WTC behavior (situational WTC) (Cao & Philip, 2006). According to Lisa's self-report, she felt willing to communicate with Anne, whom Lisa found to be an equal friend. In fact, truly Lisa was engaged in a meaningful communication with Anne. However, closely analyzed, the recorded data suggest a more complicated nature of L2 WTC. For example, Lisa answered some of Anne's questions by saying just "I don't know," although certainly she could have said more about the topics; both of the provided topics, writing an academic paper and studying abroad, were of some concern to Lisa:

(2)

- 1 Anne: Now you've been here...how many years?
- 2 Lisa: Almost three years.
- 3 Anne: OK.
- 4 Lisa: Like two and half years.
- 5 Anne: How was paper-writing changed? Like...
- 6 Lisa: Well, I don't know.
- 7 Anne: Because sometimes I think I've gotten a better writer
- 8 and sometimes I'm like... mmmm, "No, I'm not."

(3)

- 1 Anne: Did you find you're just doing well at it?
- 2 Or you started liking it?
- 3 Or like, what made you even decide to come here?
- 4 Lisa: I don't know.
- 5 Like, I don't really know.
- 6 Anne: You're just like "OK. I'm going." ((laugh)) That's fine.

It would be too simplistic to attribute Lisa's relative reticence to one factor. A number of different factors, both situational and enduring, must have played a role in shaping her WTC behavior. But considering Anne's favorable characteristics as an interlocutor, the native/non-native issue should be regarded as a possible factor affecting Lisa's situational WTC. As indicated above, as an international student in America Lisa was very conscious of "the glaring differences between natives and non-natives" (Medgyes, 1992, p. 343) in terms of spoken competence. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to suppose that Lisa perceived her spoken competence as inferior to Anne's on the basis of native/non-nativeness, which had a negative impact on Lisa's situational WTC in English. In fact, in the classroom she usually remained silent except when she had to speak in a group discussion. She rarely volunteered an answer in the class, initiated topics or interrupted in the discussions. When I asked her about the reason for her reticence, she answered that she was not willing to speak in English "in front of all those native speakers."

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present paper, a case study of an international student at American university, was designed to investigate how her L2 WTC emerged in the study-abroad context. I began with a discussion of the sense of equality as a possible psychological antecedent to the emergence of her WTC in English. On the basis of the interview data I suggested that it was the sense of equality/inferiority rather than the issue of native/non-nativeness or the familiarity of interlocutors that affected the participant's WTC in English. Thus the traditional dichotomies between strangers and friends or between natives and non-natives were called into question. I then examined the actual conversation data of the participant, which I hope has further demonstrated the complex nature of L2 WTC. The participant's actual L2 communication behavior was inconsistent with her self-report WTC, suggesting the possibility that the native/non-native issue might have played a role in shaping her WTC behavior.

It is a pity that L2 WTC has scarcely been examined in the study-abroad context. It is a common

observation that international students tend to keep silent in the classroom, which makes engendering their L2 WTC all the more significant. Although the issue of identity, including native/non-nativeness, has been largely neglected in the previous studies of L2 WTC, it is highly likely that identity is a possible factor directly or indirectly affecting L2 WTC especially in the study-abroad context. International, non-native English-speaking students, comparing themselves with NSs surrounding them, are likely to be sensitive to their status as non-natives, as Lisa was. The findings of the present study suggest that the nature of international students' L2 WTC and its relation to the native/non-native issue are not straightforward but complex. It will be of great interest to probe further into how L2 WTC emerges in the study-abroad context, employing a qualitative approach.

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