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WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH: FACILITATING AND INHIBITING FACTORS AMONG FIRST-YEAR EFL STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has increasingly drawn attention in second and foreign language acquisition research as a key predictor of learners' active language use. Despite its recognized importance, little research has examined WTC specifically within Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts, where institutional and socio-cultural factors may shape communication behaviour in distinct ways. This study investigated the factors that either promote or inhibit WTC among 40 first-year English-major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire, semi-structured individual interviews, and classroom observation over one semester. Quantitative results revealed that the majority of participants demonstrated moderate WTC levels, with confidence and perceived teacher support emerging as the strongest positive predictors. Conversely, speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and limited vocabulary were the most frequently cited barriers. Qualitative data further revealed that classroom atmosphere and peer dynamics played a decisive role in shaping students' moment-to-moment communication decisions. These findings suggest that interventions targeting affective climate and scaffolded speaking tasks may be effective in increasing WTC among Vietnamese EFL learners at the first-year level.

Keyword: willingness to communicate, EFL learners, speaking anxiety, teacher support, SFL

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many variables that determine success in foreign language learning, the learner's decision to actually use the target language - even when not required to do so - occupies a central place. MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) coined the term willingness to communicate (WTC) to describe this disposition, defining it as the probability that a learner will initiate communication in a given situation when free to do so. Since then, WTC has become one of the most studied constructs in applied linguistics, largely because it serves as a bridge between classroom language instruction and real-world language use.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, this question carries particular urgency. English is a compulsory subject across all educational levels, yet many Vietnamese university students graduate with limited oral communicative ability despite years of formal instruction (Nguyen, 2011). Studies have consistently noted that Vietnamese learners tend to be reticent speakers in class, often attributing this to anxiety, fear of being judged by peers, and a classroom culture that has historically rewarded passive reception over active production (Tran, 2012; Hoang, 2015). First-year university students, who are transitioning from the grammar-focused secondary curriculum to a skill-based tertiary programme, appear especially vulnerable to these inhibiting forces.

At the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University (TNU-SFL), first-year English-major students are placed into skill-integrated courses from their first semester. Admitted with a CEFR-referenced minimum of B1, these students arrive with demonstrably stronger receptive English skills than their peers at general-education faculties. However, despite this relatively solid linguistic foundation, many show marked reluctance to use English voluntarily in class. Teachers report that even during pair work and discussion activities, students tend to revert to Vietnamese once teacher monitoring diminishes.

Formal assessment data from the 2023-2024 cohort showed that oral performance scores were on average lower than reading and listening scores by approximately fifteen percentage points, suggesting a persistent gap between what students can understand and what they are willing to produce.

This situation motivated the present study. The research aimed to examine WTC levels among first-year English-major students at TNU-SFL and to identify the factors - both internal and contextual - that shape their willingness to use English in class. The following research questions guided the investigation:

(1). What is the overall level of WTC among first-year English-major students at TNU-SFL?

(2). What factors most significantly facilitate or inhibit students' WTC in the EFL classroom?

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of research on affective variables in Vietnamese higher education and carry practical implications for speaking instruction at the tertiary level.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Construct of Willingness to Communicate

WTC was initially conceptualized by McCroskey and Richmond (1991) as a stable personality trait — the tendency to approach or avoid communication across different situations. However, MacIntyre et al. (1998) later proposed a more dynamic, situational model in which WTC fluctuates depending on contextual factors such as the interlocutor, the topic, and the communicative setting. Their pyramid model, now widely cited in the field, positioned WTC at the apex of a hierarchy of variables including communicative competence, self-confidence, motivation, attitudes toward the L2 community, and intergroup climate.

Subsequent research expanded MacIntyre's framework to account for the moment-to-moment variation in WTC that teachers frequently observe in class. Kang (2005) argued that WTC is best understood as a dynamic and context-sensitive state rather than a fixed trait, influenced by situational variables such as topic familiarity, the composition of the group, and the perceived security of the conversational space. This situational perspective is particularly relevant to classroom research, where all of these variables are manageable through pedagogical design.

2.2. Factors Affecting WTC: Internal Variables

A substantial body of research identifies internal psychological variables as primary determinants of WTC. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) - defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) as a complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning - has consistently emerged as one of the strongest negative predictors of WTC. Learners who experience high anxiety tend to avoid oral participation, produce shorter utterances, and self-censor even when they possess sufficient linguistic knowledge (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Self-confidence in L2 communication, understood as a combination of perceived communicative competence and low language anxiety, is arguably the most direct antecedent of WTC in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model. Learners who believe they can communicate effectively are more likely to initiate and sustain conversations. Relatedly, fear of negative evaluation - the apprehension of being judged negatively by peers or teachers - has been shown to suppress WTC particularly in contexts where face-saving norms are strong (Cao & Philp, 2006).

Motivation also plays an important role. Learners who hold instrumental reasons for language learning (e.g., career advancement, passing examinations) or integrative orientations (e.g., interest in English-speaking cultures) tend to display higher WTC scores, though the relationship between motivation type and WTC is not always linear (Yashima, 2002).

2.3. Factors Affecting WTC: Contextual Variables

Beyond the learner's internal state, the classroom environment itself shapes WTC in significant ways. Teacher behaviour, particularly the degree of support, encouragement, and tolerance of errors, has been identified as a critical moderating factor (Zarrinabadi, 2014). Teachers who respond to student errors with corrective feedback delivered in a supportive tone tend to foster higher WTC than those who use more evaluative or punitive approaches.

Peer dynamics also matter. Research by Cao and Philp (2006) found that group size, group composition, and the perceived proficiency gap between learners affect their willingness to speak. Learners tend to report higher WTC when working with peers of similar proficiency and when they feel a sense of solidarity with the group. Task design, including topic familiarity and the degree of structure provided, is another contextual variable: tasks that allow learners to draw on familiar experiences or that provide sufficient preparation time tend to elicit higher WTC (Joe, 1998).

2.4. WTC in Vietnamese EFL Research

Research on WTC in Vietnamese contexts remains relatively sparse compared to the volume of work produced in East Asian countries such as Japan and China, where the construct has been examined across a wide range of educational settings and populations (Yashima, 2002; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The studies that do exist consistently point to a cluster of characteristics that appear to define Vietnamese EFL learners' communicative behaviour: high language anxiety, strong face-saving concerns, and a historically entrenched preference for teacher-led, passive classroom roles (Tran, 2012; Hoang, 2015). These tendencies have their roots in a secondary education system that, until the implementation of the National Foreign Language Project 2020, was heavily oriented toward grammar instruction and test preparation at the expense of communicative production.

Tran (2012) examined speaking anxiety among Vietnamese university students at a general-purpose institution and found that the majority of participants reported high levels of communication apprehension, even when they considered themselves relatively competent readers and writers. Importantly, Tran noted that anxiety was particularly acute in front of large audiences. Hoang (2015) extended this line of inquiry by showing that fear of negative evaluation from peers, rather than teacher judgment alone, was the dominant anxiety-inducing factor among Vietnamese undergraduates - a finding especially salient given Vietnam's collectivist cultural orientation, in which maintaining group harmony and avoiding public embarrassment carry significant social weight.

A noteworthy feature of the Vietnamese higher education context is the distinction between general-education university students and students enrolled in language-specialist programmes. Most WTC research in Vietnam has focused on non-English-major students at polytechnic or business universities, where English is a service subject rather than the central disciplinary focus (Nguyen, 2011; Hoang, 2015). Far less is known about WTC among students who have chosen English as their major - a population that enters university with higher motivation, greater prior exposure to the language, and stronger baseline competence. For English-major students, the source of low WTC may be less about vocabulary or grammar gaps and more about performance anxiety, perfectionism, or classroom norms that discourage spontaneous speech.

At the tertiary level, students admitted to English-specialist programmes at language faculties in Vietnam typically hold a minimum proficiency of B1 on the CEFR scale at entry, with many reaching B2 in receptive skills by the time they complete secondary school. Despite this baseline competence, teachers at these institutions frequently report that oral production in class remains conservative - students tend to wait to be called upon rather than volunteering to speak (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016). This pattern suggests that WTC among English-major students is not primarily a function of linguistic ability but is instead driven by a combination of affective and sociocultural variables.

The institutional context of TNU-SFL adds further specificity to this picture. As a faculty specializing in foreign language training in a provincial city in northern Vietnam, TNU-SFL serves a student population that is linguistically more homogeneous and geographically more constrained in authentic English exposure than students at major urban universities. Students have had relatively limited contact with native English speakers or communicative environments outside the classroom, which may heighten the perceived difficulty of unscripted oral interaction. At the same time, the programme's explicit communicative orientation creates a well-defined opportunity to examine how WTC develops under conditions of moderate-to-high proficiency and clear institutional expectations around oral language use.

The present study builds on this emerging literature by providing empirical evidence specifically from an English-major cohort at TNU-SFL, where the interplay between relatively strong receptive competence, moderate productive confidence, and sociocultural communication norms creates a research context that is both theoretically interesting and practically underexplored.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative evidence from interviews and classroom observation. A mixed-methods approach was selected because WTC, as a dynamic and context-sensitive construct, is best captured through multiple data sources that can triangulate and complement each other (Dornyei, 2007). Quantitative data provided a broad picture of WTC levels and factor loadings across the cohort, while qualitative data allowed for deeper exploration of the reasons behind those patterns.

3.2. Participants and Setting

Participants were 40 first-year students enrolled in the English Language programme at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, during the 2024-2025 academic year. All participants were Vietnamese, aged between 18 and 20 years, and had studied English for a minimum of seven years across primary and secondary schooling. The cohort consisted of 28 females and 12 males. As students admitted to an English-specialist degree programme, all participants were required to demonstrate a minimum B1 level in English upon entrance; based on the faculty's internal placement test, proficiency levels ranged from B1 to B2 on the CEFR scale, with the majority (62.5%) placing at B1+ or solid B2 in reading and listening. Oral proficiency scores were notably lower on average, with most students placing at the lower end of B1 in speaking - a discrepancy that reflects the WTC-related gap this study aims to investigate.

The study was conducted within the Integrated English Skills course, a compulsory first-semester course that incorporates reading, listening, speaking, and writing activities. The speaking component occupied approximately 30% of total class time. All 40 students participated in the questionnaire phase; 12 were selected for individual interviews through purposive sampling to represent a range of WTC levels, genders, and self-assessed proficiency levels. Participation was voluntary and all data were anonymized.

3.3. Instruments

Questionnaire. A 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was adapted from MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Peng and Woodrow (2010) and modified to reflect the Vietnamese university context. Items covered five dimensions: (1) WTC in speaking activities, (2) self-confidence and communicative competence, (3) speaking anxiety, (4) perceived teacher support, and (5) peer interaction climate. The questionnaire was reviewed by two experienced EFL lecturers for content validity and piloted with a separate group of 15 students before administration. Internal consistency was strong (Cronbach's alpha = .87 for the full scale).

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in Vietnamese to ensure participants could express themselves freely. Each interview lasted between 20 and 35 minutes and covered three themes: students' general attitudes toward speaking in class, specific situations in which they felt most and least willing to communicate in English, and their perceptions of factors that affected their decision to speak or stay silent. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Classroom observation. Six classroom sessions were observed over a period of eight weeks. An observation checklist adapted from Cao and Philp (2006) was used to record instances of student-initiated communication, voluntary responses to teacher questions, and use of L1 versus L2 during pair and group activities. Field notes supplemented the checklist data.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and Pearson correlations to examine relationships between WTC and the four predictor dimensions. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 26.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis following the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Transcripts were coded independently by the researcher and a research assistant; inter-rater reliability was calculated at kappa = .81, indicating strong agreement. Observation notes were used to corroborate and contextualize interview themes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overall WTC Levels among Participants

Descriptive statistics for WTC scores across the 40 participants are presented in Table 1. Mean WTC scores ranged from 2.1 to 4.6 on the five-point scale, with an overall group mean of 3.08 (SD = 0.71), suggesting a moderate level of WTC across the cohort. Approximately 35% of participants scored below the midpoint (< 3.0), indicating low WTC, while 22.5% scored above 4.0, indicating relatively high willingness to communicate. The majority (42.5%) fell in the moderate range (3.0-3.99).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for WTC Scores (N = 40)

WTC Level	Score Range	n	%
Low WTC	1.00-2.99	14	35.0
Moderate WTC	3.00-3.99	17	42.5
High WTC	4.00-5.00	9	22.5
Total	-	40	100.0

These results align with findings from comparable Vietnamese EFL contexts (Tran, 2012) and suggest that a significant proportion of first-year students approach speaking tasks with hesitation rather than confidence. Notably, the moderate-WTC group was the largest, indicating that most students are not completely unwilling to communicate but are held back under certain conditions - a finding that carries practical implications for task and classroom design.

4.2. Relationships between WTC and Predictor Variables

Correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between WTC and each of the four predictor dimensions examined in the questionnaire. Results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between WTC and Predictor Dimensions

Predictor Dimension	M	SD	r	p
Self-confidence	3.21	0.84	.68	< .001
Perceived teacher support	3.47	0.76	.59	< .001
Peer interaction climate	3.15	0.91	.47	< .01
Speaking anxiety	3.62	0.88	-.71	< .001

Speaking anxiety showed the strongest relationship with WTC ($r = -.71$, $p < .001$), followed by self-confidence ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) and perceived teacher support ($r = .59$, $p < .001$). Peer interaction climate also correlated positively with WTC, though more modestly ($r = .47$, $p < .01$). Notably, the mean score for speaking anxiety was the highest of all four dimensions (M = 3.62), indicating that this group reported considerable anxiety on average — even students who fell in the moderate-WTC range.

4.3. Facilitating Factors: Evidence from Interviews and Observation

Thematic analysis of interview data identified three primary themes related to factors that increased participants' WTC.

Teacher encouragement and error tolerance. The most frequently cited facilitating factor was the way teachers responded to errors. Students who reported higher WTC consistently described teachers who responded to mistakes with calm correction or encouragement rather than public criticism. One participant explained: 'When the teacher says something like Good try, but maybe try saying it this way, I feel like it's safe to speak. I don't feel embarrassed.' Classroom observations confirmed this pattern: in sessions where the teacher explicitly framed mistakes as part of learning, there were noticeably more instances of student-initiated speech.

Topic familiarity and personal relevance. Students reported significantly greater willingness to speak when the topic connected to their own experiences or knowledge. Interview

data indicated that tasks about daily life, technology, or pop culture elicited more spontaneous language use than abstract academic topics. During observation, the researcher noted that a task asking students to discuss their hometown generated more unprompted English speech than a more formal debate task on environmental policy.

Pair work with self-selected partners. Several students mentioned that working with friends they trusted made them more willing to experiment with English, including using new vocabulary they were not sure about. This finding is consistent with Cao and Philp's (2006) observation that solidarity within the group is a key situational WTC predictor. Students who described low WTC in whole-class discussion sometimes reported relatively high WTC during pair work with close classmates.

4.4. Inhibiting Factors: Evidence from Interviews and Observation

Three themes emerged as the most salient barriers to WTC.

Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This was by far the dominant theme in interviews with low-WTC participants. Students described a cycle in which anxiety led to avoidance, which limited practice, which in turn sustained anxiety. Comments like 'I know the word but I'm afraid I'll pronounce it wrong and everyone will laugh' were representative. Classroom observation showed that in whole-group activities, the same four or five students tended to speak repeatedly while others remained silent even when directly invited to contribute.

Vocabulary limitations and linguistic insecurity. Many students linked their reluctance to speak directly to insufficient vocabulary. Rather than attempting communication with available resources, they preferred to stay silent until they felt more linguistically prepared. One participant's comment was illustrative: 'I have the idea in my head but I don't have the words in English, so I just wait.' This reflects what researchers have described as a form of communication avoidance rooted in perceived competence gaps (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Whole-class and large-group formats. Multiple participants described feeling more exposed and therefore less willing to speak when the audience was the entire class. The larger the group, the greater the perceived risk of public failure. Observation data supported this: the ratio of student-initiated utterances to teacher-directed utterances dropped markedly during whole-class discussion compared to pair and small-group phases of the same lesson.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine WTC levels and the factors that shape them among 40 first-year English-major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The findings reveal a cohort with predominantly moderate WTC, where anxiety and self-confidence are the strongest predictors of students' readiness to communicate in English. Teacher responses to errors, topic relevance, and peer trust emerged as the main facilitating factors, while speaking anxiety, vocabulary insecurity, and large-audience formats were the primary barriers.

These results have several practical implications for speaking instruction at TNU-SFL and similar institutions. First, teachers can contribute meaningfully to WTC by cultivating a low-threat classroom atmosphere where errors are treated as learning opportunities. Second, task design choices — particularly topic selection and group composition — have direct effects on students' moment-to-moment communication decisions and deserve more deliberate attention in lesson planning. Third, targeted vocabulary-building activities that give students linguistic confidence before speaking tasks may help break the anxiety-avoidance cycle described by many participants.

The study has several limitations worth acknowledging. The sample was drawn from a single institution and cohort, which limits generalizability. The observational component covered six sessions, which may not fully capture variability in WTC across different task types and lesson phases over a full academic year. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or experimental interventions to provide more direct evidence for causal relationships among the variables identified here.

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