

# Willingness to communicate in the second language: The influence of self-confidence in the Iranian EFL context

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***Abstract---** Willingness to communicate is defined as the extent to which learners are prepared to initiate communication when they have a choice. Thus, it can be implied that many affective variables influence WTC and that a single affective variable cannot explain an individual's willingness to communicate (Ellis, 2008). The causes of willingness to communicate are multiple, usually involving a series of various social, affective, cognitive factors. One of these variables that may influence WTC is perceived self-confidence. For this reason, this qualitative case study investigates the Iranian EFL students' beliefs about the role of self-confidence in their willingness to communicate. It also explores their' perceptions of their willingness to communicate. For this purpose, data were gathered by various instruments: a questionnaire, interviews, and observations. Participant observations and interviews helped the researcher understand the participant's observed behavior. The results indicated that students' willingness to communicate is related to their perceived self-confidence.*

***Keywords---** Willingness to communicate; affective factors; self- confidence; Individual differences.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The recent world-wide expansion of international trade and electronic communication has generated a renewed focus of attention on the importance of second/foreign language (L2) education. The importance of L2 education encourages Iranian people to develop English proficiency. However, many students in Iran seem to have been less than successful in acquiring English proficiency. L2 researchers have attempted to explore what factors can determine individual differences in the success of SLA (second language acquisition). L2 researchers have hypothesized that affective variables cause individual differences in L2 learning behaviors, which in turn produce individual differences in the success of SLA since some L2 learning behaviors are productive while others are less productive or counterproductive (Rubin, 1975). Several important affective factors, such as personality, attitudes, motivation, self-confidence, and language anxiety, have been identified to explain individual differences in SLA. However, none of these identified affective variables can alone explain individual differences because these factors are interrelated with one another in affecting individual differences in the success of SLA (MacIntyre et al, 1998).

Ellis (2008) says that WTC constitutes a factor that leads to individual differences in language learning. He defined WTC as the extent to which learners are prepared to initiate communication when they have a choice. Thus, it can be implied that many affective variables influence WTC and that a single affective variable cannot explain an individual's WTC. Willingness to communicate has been considered as one of the features shared by good language learners; therefore, understanding those affective variables that affect student's WTC is of crucial importance.

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In communicative language teaching, as Dornyei (2005) asserts, the purpose is to promote the learners' communicative competence in the target language. However, some people avoid entering L2 communicative situations even if they possess a high level of communicative competence. Thus, it can be implied that there is a further layer of mediating factors between having the competence to communicate and putting this competence into practice. As Dornyei (2005) mentions, the "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC) model integrates psychological, linguistic, and contextual variables to describe, explain, and predict second language (L2) communication.

The aim of the present case study is to examine the students' willingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms by using 2 Iranian college students as participants. As it was mentioned, the causes of willingness to communicate are multiple, usually involving a series of various social, affective, cognitive factors. However, the researcher in this study examines the reason of the subject's WTC from the very specific perspective of self-confidence.

#### ***Willingness to communicate in the first language***

Willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally conceptualized with reference to first language communication by McCroskey and Baer in 1985. They referred to the earlier work of Burgoon (1976) and others and conceptualized WTC as the probability of engaging in communication when individuals are free to do so.

McCroskey & Richmond (1987, as cited in Barraclough et al., 1988) advanced the construct of "willingness to communicate" to refer to the individual's general personality orientation towards talking. Talking is central to interpersonal communication; however, people are different in the amount of talk in which they will choose to engage. Although willingness is rather constant across situations, situational variables may impact a person's willingness to communicate at a given time in a given context. Such things as how the person feels on a given day, previous communication with the other person, what that person looks like, or what might be gained or lost through communicating may have a major temporary impact on willingness.

To account for such differences, McCroskey and Baer (1985) proved that individuals' willingness to communicate in one context or with one receiver type is highly related to his/her willingness to communicate in other contexts and with other receiver types. The results showed that the larger the number of receivers and the more distant the relationship, the less willing an individual was to communicate. McCroskey and Baer (1985) believe that whether a person is willing to communicate with another person in a given situation is affected by many situational variables. Thus, WTC is to a major degree situationally dependent.

Although a person's willingness to communicate is affected by many situational variables, people exhibit regular willingness to communicate tendencies across situations. Such regularities in communication behaviors can be indicative of the existence of the personality variable that is called WTC. Such personality orientations explain why one person will communicate and another will not under identical situational constraints (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). McCroskey and Richmond (1990) who treat WTC as a personality trait also argue that even though situational variables might affect one's willingness to communicate, individuals display similar WTC tendencies in various situations. They identified introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension and cultural diversity as antecedents that lead to differences in WTC.

The personality of the individual is considered as the determining factor in a person's willingness to talk or not to talk in a particular situation because WTC is a communication personality construct which permeates every facet of an individual's life and contributes significantly to the social, educational, and organizational achievements of the individual (Richmond and Road, 1992, cited in MacIntyre et al., 2002).

McCroskey and Richmond (1990) studied WTC in the first language in different countries like, Sweden, Australia, Micronesia, and Puerto Rico. They conducted a comparative study and investigated the relations among WTC, communication apprehension, communication competence, and introversion in these countries. McCroskey and Richmond (1990, p. 31) claim that:

One's communication norms and competencies are culture-bound. Recent studies have indicated United States college students are significantly more willing to communicate than are similar students in Australia ... Such norms are reflected in what often is called the "personality" of a culture. Some cultures are seen as quiet while others are characteristically loquacious. Although mean willingness may differ substantially from culture to culture, we would still anticipate major variations among people *in* any given culture, no matter how homogeneous that culture might be. (p. 31)

Thus, as McCroskey and Richmond (1990) assert, the relationship between WTC and its various antecedents may be substantially different in one culture than in another. They found that the degree of WTC, communication apprehension, communication competence, and introversion differed among countries as well as the degree of relations among these variables.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) believe that many variables have the potential to change an individual's WTC: the degree of acquaintance between interlocutors, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, the degree of the evaluation of the speaker, the topic of the discussion, and other factors can influence a person's WTC. However, the most dramatic variable that one can change in the communication setting is the language of discourse. Changing the language of communication may cause a major change in the communication setting because language itself has the potential to affect many of the variables that contribute to WTC.

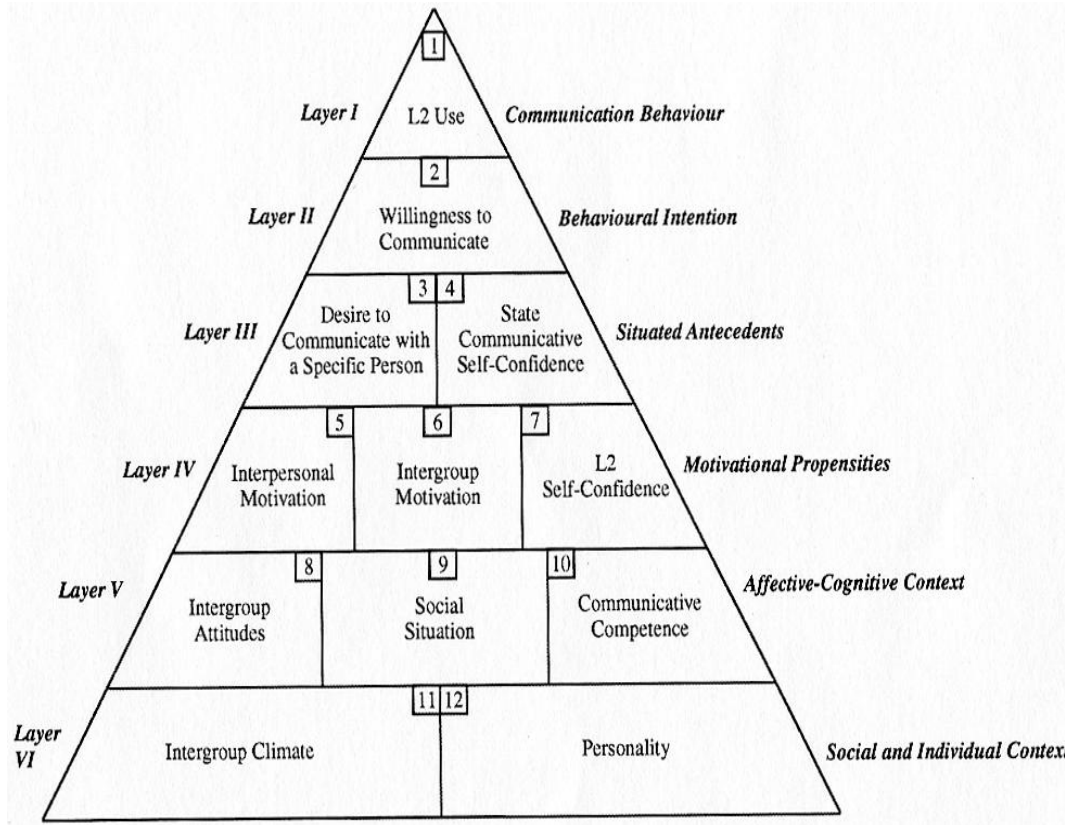
#### ***Willingness to communicate in the second language***

MacIntyre et al. (1998) define L2 WTC as the "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 547). MacIntyre et al. (1998) assert that WTC in the second language is not a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1. There are some differences between L1 and L2 WTC that maybe due to the uncertainty inherent in L2 use that interacts in a more complex manner with those variables that influence L1 WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). For example, there is a greater range among adults in communicative competence in the L2 in comparison with L1. L2 competence level can range from almost no L2 competence to full L2 competence. Moreover, L2 use involves a number of intergroup issues with social and political implications usually irrelevant to L1 use (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

In an attempt to explain the interrelations of affective variables influencing L2 WTC, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a heuristic model of WTC. MacIntyre et al. argued that the heuristic model may provide "an account of the linguistic, communicative, and social psychological variables that might affect one's willingness to communicate" (p. 545). This heuristic model of WTC is a multilayer 'pyramid' model which consists of various linguistic, psychological variables with the intention to explain individual and contextual influences in the choice to initiate L2 communication. This heuristic model is shown in Figure 1. The pyramid shows the range of potential influences on WTC in L2.

The first three layers illustrate the situation-specific influences on WTC at a given moment in time whereas the second three layers represent stable, enduring influences on the process. "Enduring influences" can be defined as long-term properties of the environment or person that may apply to any situation, while "situational influences" can be described as more transient and dependent on the specific context in which a person functions at a given time (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). Situational influences are like the desire to speak to a specific receiver and knowledge of the topic

that depend on the specific context at a given time. The enduring influences represent stable properties like intergroup relations and learner personality that does not depend on a specific context in a given time



**Figure 1:** Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC

From “Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation,” by P. D. MacIntyre, R. Clement, Z. Dornyei, and K. A. Noels, 1998, *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, p. 547.

The first layer is communication behaviour of the learner or L2 use which is the result of complex system of interrelated variables. This layer includes activities such as speaking up in class, watching television, and using the language in daily conversation with L2. The next layer, behavioral intention, is defined as the readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific interlocutor (MacIntyre et al., 1998). If a teacher asks the students a question, many students may raise their hands to answer this question. Those who raise their hands are assumed to feel confident enough to answer the question and thus have a desire to speak. Therefore, the hand-raising is considered a nonverbal communicative event and indicates a student’s self-confidence to answer the particular question. Figure 1 explains that the reason that those students raise their hands is due to their feeling of self-confidence in their answer and with the language. Self-confidence is based on a lack of anxiety combined with a sufficient level of communicative competence that arises from a series of reasonably pleasant L2 experiences (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Layer three, called situated antecedents of communication, shows the individual’s desire to communicate with a specific person and the person’s state self-confidence to communicate. One’s desire to communicate with a specific person results from a combination of inter-individual and intergroup motivations. It is hypothesized that affiliation and control motives foster the desire to communicate. Thus, this desire is influenced by the relationship between the interlocutors. Affiliation often occurs with persons who are physically nearby, encountered frequently, attractive, and similar to us in a

variety of ways. Affiliation can be the most important motive in informal situations with an attractive L2 speaking interlocutor. Interlocutors with greater L2 self-confidence will determine the language of the discourse by voluntarily choosing to use the L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Self confidence includes two key constructs: (1) perceived competence, and (2) lack of anxiety. These constructs represent enduring personal characteristics (Clement, 1980, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 1998). The person's self-confidence to communicate is determined by the person's prior experience in those specific situations that entail more confidence. MacIntyre et al. (1998) distinguished between the trait like self-confidence and the momentary feeling of confidence which might be transient within a given situation that is called state self-confidence. A similar distinction has also been made between its components which are referred to as state anxiety and state perceived competence. Spielberger (1985, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 1998) believes that state anxiety is the transient emotional reaction defined by feeling of tension and apprehension, accompanied by autonomic nervous system arousal. State anxiety is transient and fluctuates over time. Everything that increases state anxiety reduces self confidence, and thus WTC. Different situations like unpleasant prior experiences, intergroup tension, increased fear of assimilation, increase in the number of people listening, and so forth may contribute to the feeling of anxiety.

The last three layers named motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context, and social and individual context at the bottom of the pyramid represent relatively stable, enduring influences on the process of L2 communication.

Layer four consisting of motivational propensities tied to the group and the interlocutor and affective-cognitive context which forms the fifth layer. Self-confidence in L2 in Layer four is somewhat different from the situation-specific, state-perceived competence in Layer three in that self-confidence in Layer three corresponds to "the overall belief in being able to communicate in L2 in an adaptive and efficient manner" (p. 551). Self-confidence can be affected by two components: "the self-evaluation of L2 skills, a judgment made by the speaker about the degree of mastery achieved in L2" and language anxiety when using an L2. Layer six is the social and individual context including variables like personality and inter group climate.

#### ***Communication anxiety, perceived competence, and self-confidence***

L2 anxiety or communication apprehension as well as self-perceived competence have been consistently found to be the most immediate antecedents of L2 WTC (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, 2002). Anxiety has been researched in many fields from three perspectives: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation specific anxiety. (MacIntyre, & Gardner, 1991). Dornyei (2005, p.198) distinguished between two state anxiety and trait anxiety. "Trait anxiety is a 'stable' anxiousness which is experienced in every situation. But, state anxiety is the transient, moment to moment experience of anxiety as an emotional reaction to the current situation".

Researchers have proved that performance in the second language is negatively correlated with language anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) mention that anxious students will have lower levels of verbal production and hence are not willing to express personally relevant information in a second-language conversation. Thus, anxiety is among one of the important factors which influence L2 WTC.

Anxiety is not the only reason why people avoid communication. WTC can also be affected by perceived communication competence (MacIntyre et al., 2002). Research in the area of reticence has suggested a lack of communication skills as the primary reason why some people are less willing to communicate than others (MacIntyre et al., 2002). The construct of reticence refers to a broad range of communicative incompetence, while CA relates to communicative incompetence that is caused by anxiety or fear (McCroskey, 1982). The unwillingness-to-communicate construct that was first introduced by Burgoon in 1976 focuses on a person's unwillingness to communicate with others. In other words, reticence is concerned with the effectiveness in communication; while unwillingness-to-communicate is

concerned with one of the reasons that people may not do so (i.e., they do not want to). Although it is highly associated with ineffective communication, CA is concerned with one of the reasons that people may be unwilling-to-communicate (McCroskey, 1982).

MacIntyre et al. (1998) point out that the theoretical definition of WTC corresponds to the Theory of Planned Behavior conceptualized by Ajzen (1988). According to the theory, the most immediate cause of behavior is the intention to engage in a behavior and the person's actual control over his/her actions. This theory suggests that people can communicate effectively if they believe that they can communicate.

In regard to affective variables influencing WTC, MacIntyre et al. (1998) mention that the L2 student is likely to engage in L2 communication if he/she has enough self-confidence, a combination of a lack of language anxiety and sufficient communication competence. In addition, MacIntyre et al. claim that the L2 student may participate in L2 communication if he/she feels motivated in an interpersonal situation by a combination of affiliation (integrative) and control (instrumental) motives. The distinction between affiliation and control will be discussed in the later section. Social context can explain why a certain L2 is taught, and why L2 students want to learn the L2.

Baker and MacIntyre (2000, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 2002) argue that the perceptions of competence affect WTC. Because the choice of whether to communicate is cognitive, WTC is perhaps influenced by one's perceptions of competence of which one is usually aware rather than one's actual competence (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

### **Research questions**

1. How willing are Iranian college students to communicate in English as a foreign language?
2. How are the EFL students' self-confidence related to their willingness to communicate?

## **II. METHOD**

### **Participants**

Two subjects participated in this case study. They were sophomore students in Islamic Azad University of Mashhad. Their major was English language teaching at BA level. Both cases were 21 years old and both were female. They named Farzaneh and Hedieh. The course they had with me was 'Conversation 3'.

### **Materials**

In this study, qualitative data were gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and observation. The same questionnaire was used in this study to measure students' willingness to communicate, their linguistic self-confidence, their communication anxiety, and their perceived competence in English. Linguistic self-confidence was defined in terms of the lack of communication anxiety and perceived communication competence.

*Willingness to communicate.* McCroskey's (1992) willingness to communicate scale with 20 items was administered with instructions that required the participants to indicate the chances they will initiate a conversation in terms of percentage (0-100%).

*Communication apprehension.* McCroskey's (1992) willingness to communicate with 12 items was used to study students' perceived communication anxiety in each of the situations. The respondents self-assessed their communication anxiety in English by indicating a percentage between 0% (do not feel anxiety at all) and 100% (always feel anxiety). The items covered the same context of communication and receivers as WTC.

*Self-confidence.* This variable was measured by two indicator variables: Communication anxiety in L2, and perceived competence in English. The same questionnaire used in measuring willingness to communicate was used here. The

respondents assessed their self-competence in English indicating a percentage between 0% (do not feel confident at all) and 100% (always feel confident). The items in this questionnaire covered the same context of communication and receivers as WTC.

*Perceived competence.* The same 12 items used in WTC were utilized here. The respondents assessed the extent to which they may feel confident communicating in English. The respondents self-evaluated their English competence by selecting a number ranging from 0% (entirely incompetent) to 100% (entirely competent). In this scale, the context and receivers of communication were the same with the WTC scale.

*Background information.* The respondents answered to a list of questions in interviews. These questions elicited answers about age, gender, whether they had been abroad, how often they communicate with a native or nonnative speaker of English, and how long they had studied English (elementary, middle, high school, institutes).

### **Procedure**

The present study used qualitative approach in collecting data. Thus the researcher used her logic to interpret the data. Since this is a case study, the results cannot be generalized to other contexts. Interviews, participant observation, and the qualitative analysis of students' perception of their WTC in English as a foreign language and their perceived self-confidence helped the researcher to analyze the data. For this purpose, data were gathered in the second semester of Islamic Azad University of Mashhad in spring 2009. The researcher administered a WTC test to the students at the beginning of the semester. During the 16 sessions of this semester, qualitative data were gathered by the researcher. The researcher who was the observed participant recognized the most willing and the most unwilling students to. Thus, observation helped the researcher to select six cases, three with highest level of WTC and three with lowest level. The WTC questionnaire was administered to them and the respondents indicated the chances they will initiate a conversation in each of the 20 situations. Two cases were selected by analyzing the WTC questionnaire, one with highest level of WTC and one with the lowest level.

Then, the researcher interviewed the two cases. Considering the ethics in research, the researcher briefly described the purpose of the interview and the use of the audio-recorder. In order to protect their identities, respondents were asked to choose a pseudonym that the researcher could use to refer to her. However, they didn't choose any pseudonyms. Each interview took approximately 15 minutes and was recorded using an audio-recorder.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

This study explored the willingness to communicate of two Iranian EFL students at Azad University of Mashhad. The purpose of the study was to investigate the participants' willingness to communicate and the influence of self-confidence in their WTC.

The researcher collected data from participant observations, interviews, and WTC test, and questionnaires. First, the background of the students are reviewed.

#### **Farzaneh's background**

Farzaneh was 21. She was from Mashhad. She started learning English at the age of 12. She was a senior student. When she was a teenager, she wished to speak English and to understand English films. These reasons provoked her to start learning English in language institutes. She mentioned that she is the elder sister. This caused her parents to pay a lot of attention to her achievements in English. Her parents always encouraged her to study English. Even after her marriage, they encourage her.

### **Hedieh's background**

Hedieh was 21. She was from Mashhad. She started learning English when she was a child. was a senior student. She indicated that there was no difference between English language and other languages. The reason she studies English is that it is an international language.

1. *Research question 1.* How willing are Iranian college students to communicate in English as a foreign language?

Farzaneh said that she is always eager to talk with people in English. She said that if there is an English native speaker in an institute far from her house, she will go to talk to that person. However, Hedieh said that she would never go out just for communication. She added that she would more important things to do. This shows that Farzaneh seeks to communicate with native speakers. In addition, she worked in a company that required her to talk with foreigners.

Farzaneh speaks English with her classmates. She promised to her friend s to talk in English. On the other hand Hedieh believed that she cannot convey her feelings. Both liked watching movies in English, but Hedieh watched them only in summer while Farzaneh watches them whenever she has time.

Hedieh indicates that when she talks with foreigners, she cannot understand their accent. Even, she doesn't like to study books in English since they are difficult.

During my observations I realized that Farzaneh is highly willing to engage in class discussions. She worked in a company that required her to talk with foreigners. As she put it, this was an 'interesting experience'.

The results of this qualitative case study indicated that willing students seek to create opportunities to talk with foreigners. They were more willing to communicate with friends and acquaintances rather than strangers. Moreover, they preferred to talk small groups. This proves McCroskey and Baer 's (1985) claim that the larger the number of receivers and the more distant the relationship, the less willing an individual was to communicate. Generally speaking, people are least willing to talk in public and most willing to talk during one-on-one conversations. They have low willingness to communicate to strangers but high willingness to talk to friends (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

*Research question 2.* How are the EFL students' self-confidence related to their willingness to communicate?

McCroskey and Richmond (1990) mention that expertise and mastery in the content area affects student's self-confidence to perform a language activity. Thus, it can be implied that if believe that they are not competent enough, they will have low self-confidence. Research in WTC indicates that the two strongest predictors of WTC are perceived communication competence and communication anxiety (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Hashmito, 2002). Perceiving that one has the ability to communicate or having self-confidence, regardless of the actual level of proficiency, can affect the rate of participation. Hedieh believes that her level of proficiency is low and cannot understand native speaker's accent. She also indicate that she is not competent enough to give a presentation in English to a group of strangers.

Hashmito (2002) claims that language anxiety reduces perceived communicative competence. Therefore, less anxious students will be more confident. While some students like Hedieh believe that their English proficiency level is not high enough and therefore experienced anxiety and were unwilling to communicate, others like Farzaneh do not worry about their proficiency level and hence sought communication.

Hedieh and Farzaneh mention that they were more confident when they were talking with friends. They also indicate that their level of anxiety is lower when they talk with friends rather than with strangers. Thus, anxiety reduces perceived communicative competence.

As MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) claim, foreign language anxiety develops due to the negative experiences of language learners during the language learning process. At the early stages of foreign language learning process, motivation and language aptitude are better predictors than language anxiety. However, after experiencing the language



learning process for a while, the learner forms attitudes depending on both her positive and negative experiences. If the learner's prior experiences are negative, she develops language anxiety, and consequently feels nervous and performs poorly. Therefore, one factor that seems to play a role in her perception of communication anxiety is perceived communication experiences. Previous negative experiences may also affect the learners' self-confidence.

In sum, affective variables like self-confidence, anxiety, and perceived communication competence cause individual differences in L2 learning behaviors, which in turn produce individual differences in the success of SLA. This study investigated the influence of self-confidence on L2 willingness to communicate. It is essential that teachers be aware of the factors that affect L2 WTC. The reason is that WTC is a feature of good language learners, and thus, those who communicate more will be more successful. Teachers should also be careful in correcting errors since this may cause negative experience for the students and lead to anxiety, less self-confidence, and low WTC.

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