



ARE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WILLING TO COMMUNICATE IN THEIR LANGUAGE CLASSES WITH TEACHERS?

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Abstract

One of the main goals of foreign language (L2) teaching is to prepare students for authentic communication. Despite the communicative approach and individual approach to learners, language teachers often encounter students' unwillingness to participate in communication with them. This article provides information on research into the students' willingness to communicate during lessons in L2 at the university level. The aim of the project was to obtain feedback from students about the extent to which they are willing to communicate in L2 in the classroom, and what motives they give for communicating with a teacher. We investigated whether students were willing to communicate during lessons in L2, how their level of willingness changed concerning particular language skills. According to MacIntyre [1] variables that influence the willingness to communicate are divided into situational variables (e.g. school classroom climate) and the pupil's characteristics (e.g. communication anxiety, self-assessment of one's communication competence or attitude to the subject). We were concerned about communication in L2 and communication barriers, e.g. anxiety, fear of mistakes. The fear of communicating in a foreign language is defined as the learner's fear and negative feelings caused by learning and communicating in a foreign language in the classroom environment. Furthermore, we focused specifically on communication between a teacher and a student and the reported reasons for communication. Martin, Myers, & Mottet [2] described five reasons for communication with a teacher in class (relationship, practical, participatory, apology and servility reasons). The research was conducted based on a mixed design research methodology. The questionnaire survey, which provided background for a qualitative part, was followed by semi-structured interviews with students. In the qualitative part of the research data was obtained from 238 questionnaires containing two scales, i.e. Willingness to communicate in English lessons and Motives for communication with a teacher in the classroom. Interviews with selected students and a subsequent analysis provided more detailed information on the individual needs of students to communicate in the classroom with a teacher, students' attitudes to L2 communication and communication barriers. It also contributed to the understanding of the students' concept of classroom communication in L2. The research results indicate a difference in the reported level of willingness to communicate among four language skills. Students reported communication for practical reasons as the most frequent reason for communication with a teacher.

Keywords: Higher education, L2, willingness to communicate, motives to communicate.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main objectives of foreign language teaching is the development of communication competence. This project deals with the willingness to communicate (WTC) in English language teaching and asks whether students are willing to communicate in the classroom and whether oral communication with a teacher is an important means for them to improve their communication skills in a foreign language (L2). The research builds on previous research that examined the degree of declared WTC among students (mostly Anglophone students) in relation to situational variables (e.g. classroom atmosphere) and individual differences (e.g. attitude to L2, self-assessment). So far, little attention has been paid to the role of the teacher and the student's concept of classroom oral communication in relation to students' WTC. The results will thus bring new information as well as provide insight into this issue in the context of the socio-cultural environment of the Czech Republic.

Although the development of speaking skills is the aim of most L2 students, teachers face difficulties in managing activities aimed at practising speaking. Typical problems that a teacher has to solve are student barriers associated with verbal expression in the classroom; topics of communication activities (students do not know what to say), the problem of how to spread the time among all students, and the use of the mother tongue [3]. The results of L2 research at the end of the twentieth century pointed to the important role of individual differences as indicators of successful L2 learning. Brown [4] divided individual differences into: self-confidence, inhibitions, risk taking, anxiety and motivation. Dörnyei [5] later offered a more extensive division, and in addition to motivation he mentioned e.g. personality and



attitude to language. With regard to L2 research, he also mentions, for example, learning styles and strategies, anxiety, self-confidence, creativity and WTC.

WTC is a term that answers the question of why some pupils are willing to verbally share their thoughts, knowledge, opinions and others do not. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels [1] adapted the concept of WTC in a mother tongue created by McCroskey and Baer [6] to L2. WTC in a mother tongue appears to be a rather stable personality trait, while in a L2 it is rather a concept that is situationally conditioned [5]. MacIntyre [7] further described WTC in a L2 as a relation between situational variables (e.g. school class climate, teacher-student relationship) and individual pupil characteristics (e.g. self-assessment, foreign language anxiety, attitude to the learning task and internal motivation of the pupil) towards the moment when the student is willing to communicate in a L2. The results of previous researches consistently confirm a positive relationship between the assessment of their language level and WTC in the classroom while foreign language anxiety belongs among the strongest predictors of WTC [8]. As mentioned above WTC is situationally conditioned and the L2 environment as well as integrative motivation has a positive impact on WTC [9], [10], [11]. WTC was also studied in relation to teaching and classroom environment. Khajavy, MacIntyre and Barabadi [12] pointed out the importance of positive feelings students experience during classes and its contribution to the students' WTC in class. Students who experienced positive emotions in the class were more likely to overcome their foreign language anxiety.

The socio-constructivist model of L2 learning considers not only mental processes but also the effects of affective aspects of learning, such as emotions, social processes and environmental impact. Dörnyei [13] proposed a model of motivation focused on learning L2, which takes into account students' goals and behaviour too. The model is divided into three levels: language level (culture, value language), student level (individual differences), and a situational level that includes teaching specificities, teacher and group climate. It is the relationship between the last two levels that is the subject of this project.

The aim of the research was to contribute to the understanding of communication in teaching English between teacher and students. We aimed at obtaining data about students as active participants in class communication. We were interested in what motives students give for communication with the teacher. Further we obtained data about the degree of students' WTC in English (reading, writing, speaking, comprehension) in class and what their concept of communication in teaching is. Furthermore, we focused on finding out what communication barriers students perceive during the lessons.

2 METHODOLOGY

This article presents results of a multi-method design project. Qualitative data provided detailed information that cannot be captured by quantitative methods [14]. The quantitative data provided information on the degree of willingness or unwillingness to communicate in the English classroom, whether the students preferred verbal or written communication, and the reasons they most often give for communicating with their teacher.

2.1 Quantitative part

2.1.1 Participants

The participants of the project were university students ($n = 238$) who attend English seminars at the Language Centre, Faculty of Education of Jan Evangelista Purkyně University (UJEP). They were in their first, second and third year of Bachelor and Master study programmes with other majors than English. These were all full-time students attending English language courses at A2 and B1/B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) between autumn 2019 and autumn 2020.

2.1.2 Measures

To obtain quantitative data two existing scales, i.e. Students' motives for communicating with their instructors [2] and Willingness to communicate scale [1], were selected and adapted for the Czech socio-cultural environment.

Students' motives for communicating with their instructors [2] includes twenty-four items and focuses on the interaction between students and their teacher in a class. On a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1-it completely depicts me to 5-it does not depict me at all) students grade individual statements



relating to five reasons, i.e. relational, functional, excuses, participation and sycophancy. Willingness to communicate scale [1] examines the subjectively perceived level of willingness to communicate in L2 in the class. The range includes twenty-seven items related to all speech skills: classroom speaking, silent reading, writing and comprehension. Students express their willingness to communicate on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (almost never willing) to 5 (almost always willing).

2.2 Qualitative part

Semi-structured interviews with students were designed to provide more detailed information about students' conception of communication and communication barriers in L2 learning and teaching.

2.2.1 Participants

The interviews were conducted with six students who had also participated in the questionnaire survey in the quantitative part of this project. At the end of a semester three teachers selected from their courses two students based on their observation. The criterion for selection was the observable level of students' passivity or activity during classes. The teachers asked for an interview a student who was rather passive and one who rather actively participated in the communication during classes. The choice was therefore deliberate and students confirmed in writing their agreement to record the interview.

2.2.2 Semi-structured interview

A set of questions was designed focusing on students' attitude to foreign languages in general and later specifically on L2 teaching and learning, students' reasons for engaging in L2 communication in the classroom and their reasons for not engaging. We were interested in the feelings they report while speaking in class. An important part of the interview constituted students' suggestions describing conditions for their greater involvement in active communication in teaching L2. The interviews were conducted by the course teacher which proved to be beneficial as it created a positive atmosphere during the conversation and participants seemed to talk about their experience freely and communicated their opinions openly. The recordings were then transcribed.

3 RESULTS

In the project we aimed at describing classroom communication from the perspective of students as active participants with the focus on students' motives for oral communication with their teachers. The research questions we asked concerned the degree of willingness to communicate in English class, students' preference of classroom communication the students would report and the reasons they most often give for communicating with their teacher.

3.1 Quantitative part

Tab. 1 reports the mean, the median, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each factor and standard deviation for Willingness to communicate in L2 in class scale. To explore the participants' level of WTC in English class for individual language skills, descriptive statistics were employed. Although all four language skills reach similar values concerning the mean and the median (ranging from 1 almost never willing to 5 almost always willing), Fig. 1 illustrates in detail the overall tendency of the participants, i.e. their positive self-reported willingness to communicate. As it can be seen in the Tab. 1 the participants reported their willingness to communicate rather through receptive skills (Med = reading 3.97, comprehension 3.85) than productive skills (Med = writing 3.63) while speaking skill receiving the smallest value (Med = 3.18). Majority of the participants reported that they were to a certain degree willing to communicate for reading, writing and comprehension skills (the maximum is at the upper quartile level) while for speaking the results are different. As Fig. 1 illustrates there are students who are not willing or only partially willing to speak in class.

Tab. 2 reports the mean, the median, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each factor and standard deviation for Students' motives for communicating with their instructor. Based on the results the majority of participants reported that they talk to their teacher for functional reasons (the maximum is at the upper quartile level). Example statements loading functional motives are: to clarify the material, to get academic advice or to learn how to improve in the class. Similar results were obtained for motives of participation and sycophancy. Fig. 2 illustrates that the majority of students report that they communicate with their teacher for participation motives (e.g. to receive credit for class participation, to



demonstrate I understand the material) and sycophancy motives (to earn “brownie points”). Data concerning relation and excuse motives show even distribution.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Willingness to communicate in L2 in class

	Mean	Med	α	SD
Speaking	3.18	3.32	.82	1.04
Reading	3.97	4.13	.83	.73
Writing	3.63	3.72	.87	.80
Comprehension	3.85	3.94	.84	.61

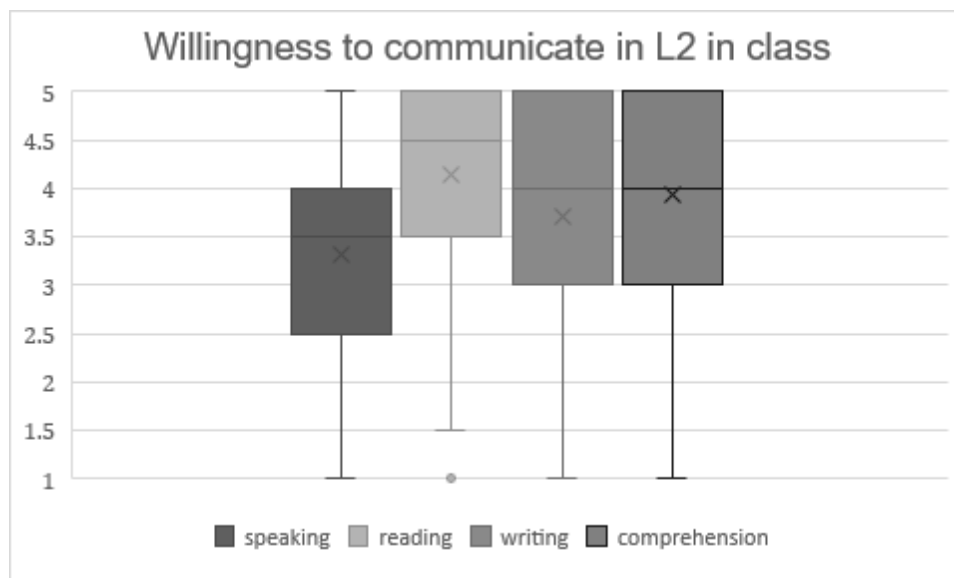


Figure 1. Willingness to communicate in L2 in class

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: Students' motives for communicating with their instructor

	Mean	Med	α	SD
Relational	2.81	2.78	.76	.72
Functional	4.30	4.50	.84	.51
Excuse	2.86	3.18	.84	.92
Participation	3.38	3.41	.70	.75
Syncophancy	2.34	2.46	.87	.48

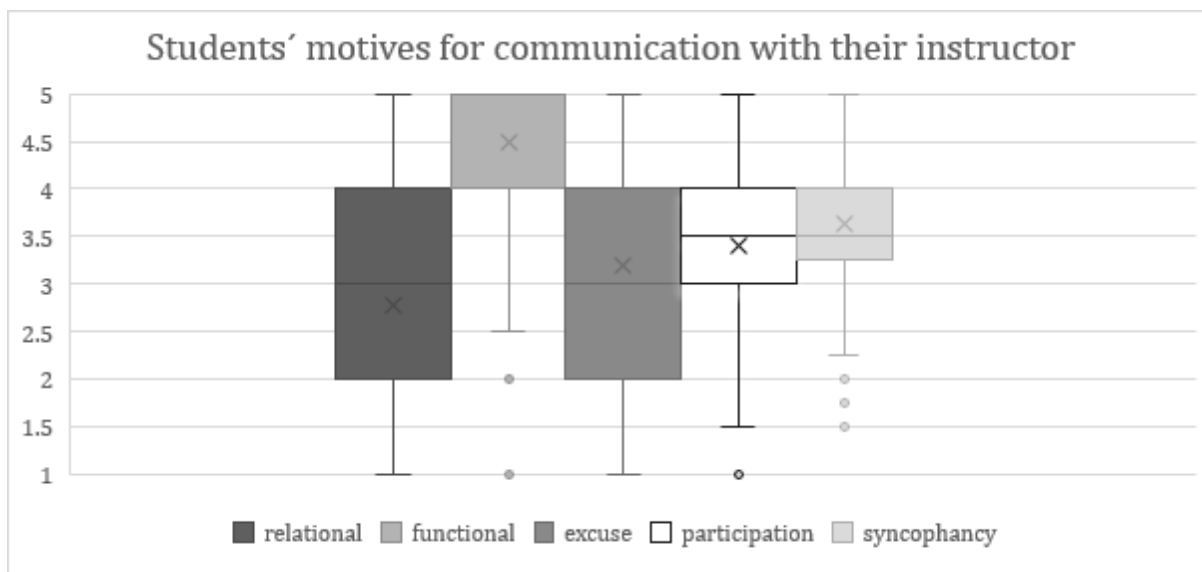


Figure 2. Students' motives for communicating with their instructor

3.2 Qualitative part

Interviews were transcribed for textual analysis using computer program ATLAS.ti. Open coding was performed by two researchers. A coding match was sought and then the coding was unified. Based on the processed data, students are more likely to use a foreign language in situations outside the classroom, while in the classroom there may be various barriers such as fear of a mistake, others' expected negative reactions to a mistake (i.e. a teacher and classmates). The self-confidence of the student in his / her ability also plays a role. The data suggest that the atmosphere in the group and the size of the group can have both a negative and a positive effect on the oral presentation.

The unwillingness to speak orally in class is closely related to the characteristic of a teaching. Students report that they do understand the need to be able to speak L2 outside the classroom. "...if there is a person who doesn't speak my mother tongue, it's the necessity to communicate". On the contrary, barriers to oral communication often arise in a class. This contrast was well illustrated by one of the participants who described a situation when natural communication and educational communication occur in one class. "... maybe I'm sitting next to a girl who doesn't understand Czech, so I have to speak English and try to explain to her simply what I really meant, so I think I use it (L2) fully, but if you ask us, I know I keep silent many times, even if I actually have room to say something." While in real situations the goal of communication is mainly to inform, clarify a problem, convince or entertain others [15] but in a classroom other factors come into play that lead to a lower willingness to communicate. The strongest factor in the interviews was the fear of making a mistake.

".. it is also related to my nature, I wanna stay aside and again it is about making the mistake, the self-doubt ..."

"I guess it's from the primary school that if you make a mistake, you're bad and there's always a note sent home or a warning, and if you don't understand it for the third time, then you're weird ..."

"From my personal life I think that communication between peers who learn the same language is so problematic. I have experience that there are more experienced ... my peers in the English language, and they actually scolded me for some mistakes."

By setting a mistake as a negative factor in teaching, the mistake becomes a tool for evaluation, respectively a reason for a punishment of a student and thus an instrument of power. In our project, the fear of making a mistake was common for passive but also in active students. Based on our analysis the fear stemmed from the reaction of the others to the mistake. Another factor reducing the willingness to communicate connected to making a mistake is L2 low self-confidence. It is not related to the reaction of the others but to the self-evaluation of the student. *"I can't make a sentence. Put the words correctly, so it troubles me. Otherwise I would know how to answer, but I can't put it together."* *"I would be more involved in discussions if.... I spoke better English."* Owing to students' uncertainty, the student does not or speaks very little thus does not practice L2 actively in the lesson. However, an interesting phenomenon, which seems to be a passive student participation, emerged from the obtained data.



"... I listen and it is not that I do any other activity, I listen, but I am not actively involved in the communication. " "... I actually feel involved in the discussion even when I only listen to what they are saying and I understand and in some way I actually formulate what I might say, ... so it's definitely a benefit for me to see the conversation like that, but I don't have the need to join it. "

Although the participant does not get involved in the discussion, she perceives herself as active and learning although the teacher may perceive her as passive.

However, the interviews provide information not only about what limits students in the oral speech, but also what motivates them. As a negative attitude of classmates leads to less willingness to communicate in a foreign language in the classroom, the positive climate, on the other hand, is very motivating to participate in oral speech.

"The good thing here is that we know each other and know our limits and our shortcomings, so when I try to say something, I know that the girls will try to understand me in some way " --- "... actually then maybe I'm always proud of myself in some way to say something at last. "

"And fortunately we now have a small group where I'm not afraid to express myself."

The size also influences positive atmosphere in the group. None of the students favoured a large group where "they were not so much in sight" and in a way were protected. Students clearly prefer a smaller group with a positive atmosphere where everyone can express themselves. Although most students report that they are not making full use the possibility to practice L2 in speaking, oral communication and, in particular, discussion often appear as a welcome activity. One could assume that a student will feel better in a free discussion, when they can decide when and how to express themselves. But it turns out that students speak only when they have to answer or comment on something.

"And when you sit there in that circle, and it's a time to ask a question it's stupid not to say anything, so I'll just say something and then in the end you find that it was nice that you said something that you didn't keep silent. So maybe by saying even a simple sentence, such a coercion could actually contribute to that active form."

"... If somebody calls me well, I'm like the interviewee, I just answer."

Factors that support oral communication in the classroom include a direct question from the teacher who provides students with an opportunity to express their opinions and who can also explain or prompt an answer.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this project was to describe the students' concept of communication in L2 class (particularly English). We wanted to find out to what degree the students are willing to participate in their English class and what language skills they prefer. We further focused on their motives for communication with their teacher and communication barriers students perceive during the lessons. We measured students' reported willingness to communicate in class for each language skill. We found out that the majority of participants report their willingness to communicate in class preferably in reading, writing and comprehension and there is almost even distribution in results for speaking. We can assume that the majority of the participants do not mind reading, writing or listening in class but they mind speaking. There is about half of them who indicated that they are not willing to speak in class. We expected to receive detailed information concerning students' reasons for not willing to speak in class in the interviews. When students communicate with their teachers in class the majority of them do it for functional reasons. They want to receive information concerning the requirements and assignments, they need further explanation or advice. Motives connected to participation in class and being on good terms with teachers had very similar results. We can assume that the participants considered involvement in class and being on good terms with their teacher to be important for them. However, we received different results for relational motives. Half of the students do not identify with these motives (e.g. to build a personal relationship, to learn about him/her personally). There is probably a distinct difference between talking to the teacher in the class and outside the class. We found similar difference between certain features of communication in the class and outside it as reported by the participants during interviews.

Based on the processed data, students are more likely to use a foreign language in situations outside the classroom, while various barriers may appear in the classroom. The strongest obstacle is the fear of a mistake, which appears at multiple levels. It plays a role in the evaluation of his / her own knowledge



by the student himself, but above all in the expected reaction of the surroundings to the mistake of the teacher and classmates. The self-confidence of the student in his / her ability also plays a role. Students who are more passive in the classroom prove less distrust of their knowledge in a foreign language. This distrust is reinforced by the negative experience of responding to the mistake. The fear of making mistake is firmly rooted in students and linked to the class environment. The goal of communication in real situations (e.g. to share our ideas, feelings, attitudes), is replaced by the goal of not making a mistake. In activities such as class discussions, however, it is necessary to use language comprehensively, to choose a variety of language and grammatical means, not only those that are being "taught" and thus the presence of a mistake is inevitable to some extent. Therefore, the fear of making a mistake is reflected in language teaching perhaps more than in other subjects. It is believed that a man's image of his intelligence, education, sophistication is merged with the way he uses a language. Thus, talking in L2, that the student does not command as well as the mother tongue, threatens the man's image. Furthermore, if the classroom atmosphere is set too critically for a mistake, it constitutes a great barrier to speaking.

Furthermore, the data obtained show that the atmosphere in the group and the size of the group can have both a negative and a positive effect on the oral presentation. Students also report that directed discussions and preparation opportunities will encourage them to be more active in speaking. The purpose of discussion / speaking in a foreign language is not only to express opinions but also, perhaps even above all, to use and expand language resources and also to understand the heard. Participation of the student in the discussion through this active listening can be beneficial and can gain greater confidence. Even so, the aim of the teacher should be to bring such students into active discussion over time.

The presented project was a study using multiple methods to obtain data concerning students' concept of classroom communication and communication with their teachers in L2. It indicated that students are mostly willing to communicate in class but prefer reading, writing and listening to speaking. The most frequent communication barrier is the fear of making a mistake which is deeply rooted in students. The role of classroom environment plays a crucial role as feedback from classmates as well as the teacher consequently influences future students' intentions to verbally communicate in class. However, teachers should be aware of the fact that a seemingly passive student participation does not necessary mean that the student does not pay attention. If a student does not get involved in e.g. a discussion, they can perceive themselves as active and learning. What motivates students to participate is their personal and real needs. Either they need further explanations or want to get "plus points" from the teacher or there is somebody present whom they can communicate only in English with. There is no doubt about the differences between communication in and outside the class. In order to support the oral communication in class and make students motivated to speak, communication in class should retain the characteristics of real communication.

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