

## FACTORS AFFECTING SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** This study aims at revealing factors affecting senior high school students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English in the classroom. This study employed a descriptive research design, and was situated in an Indonesian state senior high school in Sumenep, Madura. The data were collected from 57 students by using an adapted questionnaire taken from Riasati & Rahimi (2018), and the result was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the students' WTC in English in class were affected by both individual and situational factors. The individual factors here include L2 self-confidence, L2 self-perceived communication competence, L2 anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Meanwhile, the situational factors consist of task types, interlocutors' effects, topics of discussion, and seating locations. Thus, it was suggested that the English teachers should not only encourage the students' self-confidence in speaking English, or convince them that making mistakes is part of learning, but also should be careful in deciding the type of task given, topic to be discussed, and even the seating arrangements for their students, since all of these affect the students' WTC in English in class.

**Keywords:** willingness to communicate; English classroom communication; spoken communication

### Introduction

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in English is crucial for English students in the process of learning the language. It was reported that students' WTC in English greatly affects their achievement in that target language (Ningsih et al., 2018). Further, MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that the objective of foreign language learning should be to encourage the students to have a higher degree of WTC in the target language, and to make them get more involved in authentic L2 use. Nevertheless, in EFL classrooms, some students voluntarily speak up while some others are reluctant to speak when they are given the opportunity to use the L2 (Riasati and Rahimi, 2018). Regarding this, MacIntyre (2007) stated that various factors encourage or discourage someone to use the L2 in communication. Hence, English

teachers need to understand these factors that affect the students' WTC in English in the classroom, thus they can establish a learning environment that promotes the students' degree of WTC in English.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) hypothesized that one's WTC in L2 is affected by both individual and situational factors. Some later researchers (e.g. Riasati and Rahimi, 2018; Tuyen et al., 2019; Azwar et al., 2021) proved the theory through their research findings that individual factors such as self-confidence, self-perceived communication competence, and fear to make mistakes influence students' WTC in English. Moreover, situational factors such as task types, the topic of discussion, and interlocutors also affect the students' WTC in English. Therefore, the present study used the theory and the findings of the related previous studies as references.

There have been some studies addressing a similar topic. However, those previous studies mostly focused on university students. Senior high school students and university students have different emotional characteristics due to their age differences. Senior high school students, who are adolescents, commonly experience more of a lack of self-esteem compared to older students/adults (Wild & Schwartz, 2012). This lack of self-esteem may lead senior high school students to low self-confidence and shyness, which may hinder them to communicate in English. Hence, the way adolescent students see English communication can be different from how older students see it. Therefore, the present study investigated factors affecting senior high school students' WTC in English. Further, the form of communication which became the focus of investigation in the present study was spoken communication in classroom interactions. Eventually, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What individual factors affect senior high school students' willingness to communicate in English during an English lesson?
2. What situational factors affect senior high school students' willingness to communicate in English during an English lesson?

## **Literature Review**

Definition of willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 can be found in some works of literature. For example, MacIntyre et al. (1998:547) defined WTC in L2 as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2". Meanwhile, Kang (2005, as cited in Tuyen et al., 2019) defined WTC in L2 as someone's behavior and tendency towards communicative act in a certain situation which can vary

according to potential situational variables. Based on those definitions, WTC in L2 can be seen as an L2 learner's decision whether or not he/she will get involved in a certain L2 communication in which such decision making is influenced by the learners themselves and the situational variables that exist.

Regarding factors influencing WTC in L2, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a theory stating that someone's WTC in L2 is not merely influenced by individual factors, but also situational factors. Hence, individual factors such as L2 self-confidence, perceived communication competence, and anxiety, together with situational factors such as interlocutors and the topic of the discussion, are potential to affect one's WTC in L2.

Further, this theory has been supported by some researchers who focussed on WTC in a classroom context (e.g. Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Tuyen et al., 2019). In the classroom context, the individual factors refer to the personal characteristics that each student possesses. Meanwhile, the situational factors represent factors that exist in the classroom as the place where the students learn the target language (Riasati and Rahimi, 2018). It was reported that personal characteristics of the students such as self-confidence, perceived communicative competence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being ridiculed affect their WTC in English. Moreover, situational variables such as the topic of discussion, task type, interlocutor, and even seating locations also influence their WTC in English (Riasati, 2012; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Başöz & Erten, 2019). These findings proved the initial theory by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and give a better understanding, both for the next researchers and English teachers, regarding the factors which potentially affect students' WTC in English in the classroom.

## **Method**

The present study employed a descriptive research design. This type of research is conducted to learn about the attitudes and opinions of people (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). Thus, it was considered to match the main objective of the present study which was to figure out the factors that affect senior high school students' WTC in English in the classroom.

The participants of the present study were 57 students. They were randomly selected by using stratified random sampling. This is a sampling technique in which the researcher divides the population into groups, called strata, and then randomly selects the sample from each group (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In the present study, the population was divided based on their grade level (tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade), then the researcher randomly

select the sample from each grade level. In the beginning, the researcher set 75 as the maximum and 50 as the minimum number of respondents. Hence, at first, the researcher randomly selected 25 students from each grade level to participate. However, until the end of the data collecting process, there were only 57 students filled out the questionnaire. Thus, the present study includes 57 students as participants.

A questionnaire was used as the research instrument. It was adapted from Riasati & Rahimi (2018). It had the function to figure out individual and situational factors affecting senior high school students' WTC in English in the classroom context. Regarding the adaptation that has been made, it includes the change on the scale number, the number of the included items, and the language of the questionnaire. The scale number was changed from a five-point to a six-point Likert scale to give a more graded choice of response and to omit the midpoint. It is because a midpoint is commonly misused by the respondents by quickly selecting it, instead of putting effort into finding the optimal response (Chyung et al., 2017). Next, only 24 items deemed relevant were taken from the original scale. The researcher selected only the items that represent English classroom interactions that can be found in an Indonesian EFL classroom. Further, a new item (item 7) was added with the concern to specifically evaluate the students' WTC in English in classroom social interaction, outside of the teaching-learning matters. Next, considering that the respondents are Indonesians, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia, with the validation of two translation experts. Eventually, the adapted questionnaire was a six-point Likert scale and consisted of 25 items. 11 items were related to individual factors, while the rest 14 items dealt with situational factors potentially affecting students' WTC in English.

The result was analyzed by using descriptive statistics. According to Christensen & Johnson (2014), descriptive statistics were used to convey the essential characteristics of a data set to make it more interpretable. The calculations were done through SPSS.

## **Findings**

The following is the finding of the present study. It is divided into two main parts: individual and situational factors affecting the students' WTC in English.

### ***Individual Factors Affecting Students' WTC in English***

This first classification of factors represents the factors coming from the students themselves which were indicated to affect their WTC in English in class.

### *L2 Self-confidence, L2 Self-perceived Communication Competence, and L2 Anxiety of the Students in Speaking English*

Concerning the individual factors affecting the students' WTC in English in class, the first three factors being addressed in the questionnaire were L2 self-confidence, L2 self-perceived communication competence, and L2 anxiety. The result indicated that the majority of the students experienced low self-confidence to speak English, low self-perception towards their English communication competence, and a high level of anxiety to speak English, which caused them to be unwilling to speak in classroom English communications.

For instance, in item 2 (*Asking a question in English in class*), about 69.9% of the students expressed their unwillingness. Similarly, in item 4 (*Presenting opinions in English in class*), about 68.4% of the students demonstrated a state of unwillingness to do this activity. Next, item 5 (*Trying to talk than listen during an English conversation*) depicts a similar low level of willingness of most students. there were about 57.9% of them who gave negative response to the item. The same thing happened in item 7 (*Using English for social interaction in class*), as about 63.2% of the students expressed their unwillingness. In item 10 (*Giving a speech in English in front of the class*), about 70.1% of the students also expressed their unwillingness doing the depicted activity.

### *The Students' Fear of Making Mistakes in Speaking English*

Fear of making mistakes was another individual factor being covered in the questionnaire. Two items dealt with this issue (item 8 and 9). In item 8 (*Answering in English when I am sure that my answer is correct*), about 77.2% of the students expressed their willingness, indicating that they are willing to speak English if they are sure about the correctness of their answer. Next, in item 9 (*Speaking English when I know my speaking will be graded*), about 23.1% of the students stated that they are unwilling to speak in this condition.

The above result indicated that the students tended to experience fear of making mistakes in speaking English. This was depicted through the finding that majority of the students were willing to answer in English when they are sure that their answer is correct, and in the finding that there were still some students that became unwilling to speak English if their speaking will be graded.

### ***Situational Factors Affecting Students' WTC in English***

This second classification of factors represents the factors that exist in the classroom during the teaching-learning activity, which were indicated to affect the students' WTC in English.

#### *Effect of Task Types on the Students' WTC in English*

The first situational factor being addressed was task types. The result indicated that the students were more willing to speak English in pairs, or in groups, rather than speaking individually. It was depicted in item 12 (*speaking English individually in class*) that about 59.7% of the students stated their unwillingness. However, in item 13 (*speaking English in pairs*), about 59.7% of the students stated their willingness. Similarly, in item 14 (*speaking English in a small group*), about 61.4% of the students stated that they are willing. Next, in item 15 (*speaking English in large groups*), about 59.6% of the students expressed their unwillingness, still slightly better than in item 12. Hence, referring to the statistics, the students were indicated to be more willing to speak English in pairs, or in groups, rather than speaking individually.

#### *Interlocutors' Effect on the Students' WTC in English*

The next situational factor being covered in the questionnaire was the issue of interlocutors' effects. The first two items related to this (item 16 and 17) dealt with the issue of the interlocutor's gender. Meanwhile, the rest two items (item 18 and 19) addressed the issue of the interlocutor's position (teacher compared to peers). In item 16 (*speaking English to a classmate who is of the same gender*), about 61.4% of the students stated their willingness. However, item 17 (*speaking English to a classmate who is of the opposite gender*) showed otherwise, as about 57.9% of the students stated their unwillingness. Next, in item 18 (*discussing a topic in English with my friends when our opinions are different*), about 63.2% of the students stated their unwillingness. Meanwhile, in item 19 (*discussing a topic in English with my teacher when (s)he has a different opinion*), only 50.9% of the students stated their unwillingness.

The above results have revealed two things regarding the interlocutors' effect on the students' WTC in English. Firstly, the students were more willing to speak English to someone with the same gender than with the opposite one. Next, the students tended to be more willing to speak English with their teacher to discuss a certain topic than with their friends.

### *The Effect of Topics of Discussion on the Students' WTC in English*

The next situational factor being covered in the questionnaire was the issue of topics of discussion. There were four items representing this issue (item 20, 21, 22, and 23). These items addressed the students' degree of willingness to speak English about a topic that is familiar, interesting, controversial, and trending in society.

First, regarding the issue of topic familiarity represented by item 20 (*speaking English about a topic I am familiar with*), about 57.9% of the students stated their willingness. Next, regarding the topic interest, item 21 (*speaking English about a topic I am interested in*) showed a pretty similar result. There were about 65.0% of the students who stated their willingness to speak English when the topic is interesting to them. Meanwhile, in item 22 (*speaking English about a controversial topic*), about 63.2% of the students stated their unwillingness. Similarly, in item 24 (*speaking English about a topic that is trending in society*), about 61.4% of the students stated their unwillingness to do this activity.

From the result above, it was found that the students tended to be more willing to speak English about an interesting and familiar topic. On the contrary, they tended to be unwilling to speak English if the topic is controversial, and even if it is a topic that is trending in their society.

### *The Effect of Seating Locations on the Students' WTC in English*

The last situational factor being covered in the questionnaire was seating location. The items dealing with this issue (item 24 and 25) compared the students' degree of WTC in English when they sit in the front rows compared to when they sit in the back rows. In item 24 (*speaking English when I am sitting in the back of the classroom*), about 61.1% of the students stated their unwillingness. Meanwhile, in item 25 (*speaking English when I am sitting in front of the classroom*), about 64.8% of the students also stated their unwillingness. Although the majority of the students stated their unwillingness on both items, the percentages are different. The percentage of students' unwillingness to speak English when they sit in the front rows was higher than the percentage of the students' unwillingness to speak English when they sit in the back rows. In other words, the students tended to be more willing to speak English when they sit in the back rows than when they sit in the front rows.

## **Discussion**

The following is the discussion of the previously stated findings of the present study.

### ***Individual Factors Affecting the Students' WTC in English***

By referring to the findings, the followings are some individual factors that were indicated to affect the students' WTC in English.

#### *L2 Self-confidence, L2 Self-perceived Communication Competence, and L2 Anxiety*

The finding on this concern has revealed that the majority of the students tended to experience a lack of self-confidence to speak English. All the portrayed conditions regarding the students' unwillingness to speak English in some classroom English interactions represent the characteristics of foreign language students with low self-confidence. Rubio (2007) stated that foreign language students with low self-confidence suffer from insecurity and fear to use the target language in communication. On the contrary, students with a high level of self-confidence tend to be active in class (Cao & Philip, 2006). They are commonly not afraid to ask a question, to utter their opinion, to speak in front of the class, and to make mistakes while speaking (Mubarok, 2018).

Further, the lack of self-confidence of the students here can also be the manifestation of these students' low perception of their English communication competence, and their high level of anxiety to speak English. Clement, Baker, and MacIntyre (2003) have stated that high self-confidence in L2 is the manifestation of L2 learners' positive perception of their L2 communication competence and their low anxiety to use the L2. Thus, when students experience a low level of self-confidence to speak English, it can be an indication that these students have a low perception of their own competence in English, and also an indication that they experience a high level of anxiety to speak English.

Eventually, the finding indicated that the students' lack of self-confidence, their negative perception of their own English competence, and their high level of anxiety have led them to be unwilling to communicate in English. In other words, students' L2 self-confidence, L2 self-perceived communication competence, and L2 anxiety affect their degree of willingness to communicate in English. This finding aligns with some previous studies which revealed similar results (Riasati, 2012; Fadilah, 2018; Başöz & Erten, 2019; Tuyen et al., 2019). The finding of the present study is also in accordance with MacIntyre et al. (2002) who stated that students who have a low perception of their own competence in L2 and who experience a high level of anxiety tend to avoid L2 communication.

#### *Fear of Making Mistakes*



The result of the items dealing with this factor indicated that the students tended to be afraid to make mistakes in speaking English. This finding here is in line with some previous studies which found that one of the factors causing students to be reluctant to speak English in class is because they are afraid to make mistakes (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Başöz & Erten, 2019; Azwar et al. 2021). Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2001) managed to show that learners become unwilling to communicate in L2 if they know they are formally evaluated. The reason why the students tend to fear of making mistakes can be because they are afraid of getting ridiculed by others, or getting a negative evaluation. Wen & Clement (2003) stated that one of the reasons foreign language students are reticent to use the L2 is the fear of losing face if they make mistakes.

### ***Situational Factors Affecting the Students' WTC in English***

Based on the findings, the followings are the situational factors that were indicated to affect the students' WTC in English

#### *Task Types*

The finding regarding the effect of task types on the students' WTC in English indicated that task types affected the students' degree of WTC in English. The students were found to be more willing to speak English in pairs or in groups than speaking individually. This is in line with some previous studies (Azwar et al., 2021; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018) which revealed similar findings. Moreover, it also lends support to Cao & Philip (2006) who stated that pair works and group work classroom speaking activities can increase students' opportunity to speak more than in the case of individual speaking tasks.

#### *Interlocutors' Gender and Position*

The finding related to interlocutors effect on the students' WTC in English indicated that the students were more willing to speak English with someone of the same gender than with the opposite one. This aligns with Riasati and Rahimi (2018) and Azwar et al. (2021) who also found that the individuals in their study expressed a higher degree of willingness to speak English to a person from the same gender than to a different gender. This condition might be due to the tendency of people to feel more relaxed and comfortable while speaking to someone from the same gender than to the opposite one. Jamshinejad (2010) stated that people tend to feel the need to speak more carefully while talking to someone from the opposite gender to show their proficiency.

Moreover, concerning the interlocutors' position, the students in the present study were indicated to be more willing to speak English with their teacher than with their classmates to discuss a certain topic. This finding lends support to the findings of a previous study by Riasati and Rahimi (2018), which revealed that the individual in their study stated that a teacher is more preferred as a talking partner than a classmate because a teacher is considered as a more reliable source of information to learn better. Further, such findings in the present study might be the manifestation of the good rapport between the students and their teachers. A good rapport between teacher and students is believed to increase students' willingness to speak English in the classroom (Zarei et al., 2019). Therefore, the students in the present study are not afraid to discuss something in English with their teacher.

### *Topics of Discussion*

Based on the finding regarding the effect of the topics of discussion on the students' WTC in English, the students were found to be willing to speak English if the topic is familiar and interesting, but unwilling if the topic is controversial, and even a topic that is trending in their society. The finding is in line with Riasati & Rahimi (2018) and Azwar et al. (2021) who found that topic familiarity and topic interest affect students' WTC in English in class. Besides, the finding also lends support to some experts who stated that the familiarity and the enticement of the topic of discussion are really important. For instance, Kang (2005) stated that lack of ideas and fear of comprehension issues lead learners to feel less secure to talk about an unfamiliar topic. Further, an interesting topic in which learners have adequate background knowledge and experience can increase the learners' level of excitement. Similarly, Cao and Philip (2006) also stated that an unfamiliar topic of discussion can inhibit communication in the classroom because the learners do not have background knowledge about the topic.

### *Seating Locations*

Regarding the seating locations, the finding has revealed that the students were more willing to speak English if they sit in back rows than in front rows. In other words, the seating locations were found to affect the students' WTC in English in class. The finding here lends support to Riasati & Rahimi (2018) and Azwar et al. (2021) who revealed that seating locations affect the students' WTC in English. The reason why the students in the present study were more willing to speak English when they sit in back rows than in front rows might be because of the level of anxiety they experienced, which determined their level of self-

confidence to speak. Students who sit in front rows have a bigger chance to be observed directly by many other students and their teacher than those who sit in back rows. This condition might lead these students to a higher level of anxiety which results in a lower self-confidence to speak English. MacIntyre et al. (1998) contend that one of the factors that increase one's level of anxiety is the increased number of the audience. Meanwhile, a higher level of anxiety results in a lower level of self-confidence which is seen as a major factor causing unwillingness to speak English (Tong, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The research finding has revealed that the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English in class is affected by individual and situational factors. The individual factors which were identified to affect the students' WTC in English in class include L2 self-confidence, L2 self-perceived communication competence, L2 anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Meanwhile, the situational factors which were identified to affect the students' WTC in English in class encompass task types, interlocutor's effects, topics of discussion, and seating locations.

As the implication, the researcher suggests the English teacher to always support and convince the students that making mistakes is a part of learning, and to always encourage the entire students to help and support each other, not to laugh if their friends make mistakes. Besides, The English teacher should also design more collaborative learning activities such as group work with the ideal number of members and role play. This collaborative learning might increase the students' bravery to speak English since they will not be the only one speaking, or the only one being the center of attention. Further, the English teacher should also decide the topic of discussion carefully. The topic must be something interesting, and the students have enough background knowledge and experience. For example, something close to their life such as discussion or sharing sessions about their hobbies, their holiday experience, and so forth. It is also advisable for the teacher to arrange the students' seats in a horseshoe (U shape) arrangement if it is possible. In a horseshoe (U shape) arrangement, the entire students will technically sit side by side, so that none of them sit in back rows or front rows.

The researcher also provides suggestions for future researchers. It is suggested to conduct a study that includes more participants and utilize multiple instruments. More participants will allow better generalizability of the findings towards the broader people and context. Meanwhile, multiple research instruments will be useful to obtain more detailed

information from the students. It is also advisable for future researchers to investigate the students' perspective about the strategy that should be used by an English teacher to motivate the students to have a higher degree of willingness to communicate in English. This will give a better insight into what the students want from their teacher to make them more active, more confident, and less anxious in speaking English.

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