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Seeking Out Challenges to Develop L2 Self-Confidence: A Language Learner's Journey to Proficiency

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Abstract

As one constituent of second language (L2) motivation, L2 *self-confidence* has been shown to be a significant predictor of language proficiency. More recently, L2 self-confidence has been studied as part of the *willingness to communicate* (WTC) construct. Less is known, however, about the processes by which learners develop self-confidence in their second language. This study explored the process of L2 self-confidence development in an advanced learner of English since his arrival in Australia. Two qualitative semi-structured interviews separated by a period of two years were conducted, using the WTC model and Clément and Kruidenier's (1985) model of the self-evaluation of proficiency as a theoretical framework. Findings highlight the important role played by the individual's perception of *control* in a range of communicative settings. Results also suggest that listening comprehension skills, together with an awareness of other carriers of meaning, are central to the development of linguistic self-confidence. For this learner, a cyclical interaction between L2 self-confidence, WTC, and L2 proficiency was evident. These findings have implications for language teachers and learners, providing important insights into the way that critical events and decisions in the participant's learning journey may contribute to the development of self-confidence.

Introduction

The construct of linguistic self-confidence in a second language (L2) has been investigated in many studies over the years and constitutes one aspect of the motivation construct, which comes under the umbrella of research into individual differences in second language acquisition (SLA). The importance of the L2 self-confidence construct and its relevance to learners both inside and outside the language classroom is self-

evident. Confident learners are more likely to participate meaningfully in class activities (Cao, 2011) and seek opportunities to communicate in their L2 outside the classroom (Xu, 2011; 2012). Their exposure to input and interaction, which are important factors in achieving proficiency gains, is thus greatly enhanced. Although L2 self-confidence has been shown to be important, little is known about how learners actually acquire this confidence. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to understand how the relationships between emerging L2 self-confidence and proficiency can operate at the level of the individual. We examined these constructs through the journey of a highly successful non-native English speaker who was living and working in Sydney, Australia. Our intention was to focus on a single learner's journey and the opportunities, obstacles, events, and decisions that the learner identified as salient from the perspective of his emerging L2 self-confidence. To achieve this aim, we conducted two in-depth semi-structured interviews, separated by a period of two years, focusing on the period since the learner's arrival in Australia.

Literature Review

L2 self-confidence “corresponds to the overall belief in being able to communicate in the L2 in an adaptive and efficient manner” (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 551). In the 1980s, Clément and Kruidenier used linguistic self-confidence as a key element of their model setting out the socio-motivational factors that determine communicative competence (Clément, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1983, 1985; Clément, 1986). It has been proposed (e.g., Clément, 1980; MacIntyre et al., 1998) that self-confidence includes two key components: *acognitive* component (i.e., self-evaluation of L2 skills) and an *affective* component (i.e., anxiety or discomfort associated with the use of the L2), as shown in Figure 1. This conceptualisation defines self-confidence as “self-perceptions of communicative competence and concomitant low levels of anxiety in using the second language” (Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996, p. 248).

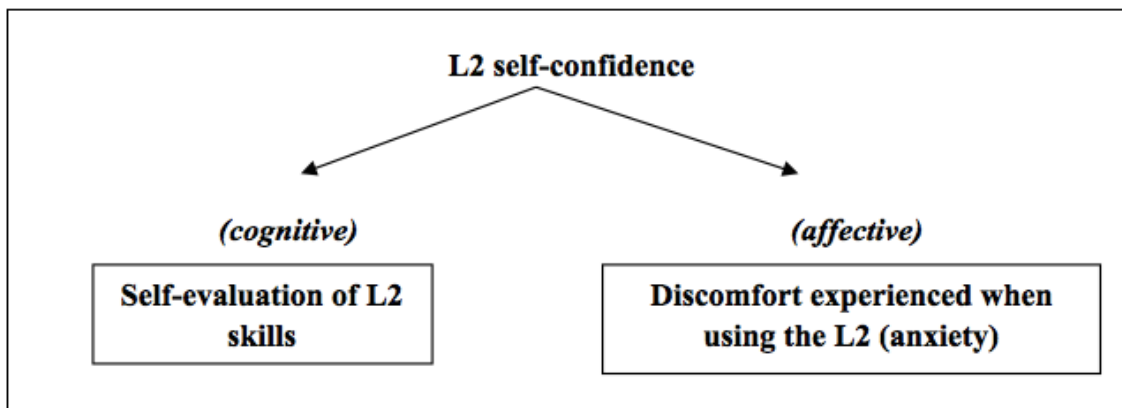


Figure 1. Components of L2 self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 551)

Clément concludes that self-confidence is in fact “the best predictor” of language proficiency (Clément, 1986, p. 286). He suggests that his participants’ frequent (daily) contact with English helped to develop their self-confidence, which played a major role in improving their second language proficiency. Dörnyei (2005) points out that this view of linguistic self-confidence is primarily a socially defined construct – albeit with a cognitive component (perceived L2 proficiency) as noted above – as it is derived from the quality and quantity of contact with the target language community and influences learner motivation.

The relationship between the two constituent elements of L2 self-confidence – anxiety and self-evaluation of L2 skills – has also been of interest to researchers. A negative correlation between language anxiety and both actual and perceived L2 proficiency has been observed (Clément, Gardner & Smythe, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997), and anxiety tends to decline as speakers gain experience and proficiency (Gardner, Moorcroft & Metford, 1989) although individuals vary greatly in this respect. MacIntyre et al. (1997) describe a “vicious cycle” whereby the presence of anxiety makes learners reluctant to speak, meaning that they lose opportunities to reassess their competence and miss opportunities to practice that would eventually lead to gains in their actual competence.

More recently, linguistic self-confidence has been researched as part of the willingness to communicate (WTC) construct. Originally developed as a first language (L1) construct by McCroskey and Baer (1985), it was adapted and applied to L2 communication by MacIntyre and colleagues in the mid-1990s. In its L2 iteration, WTC can be defined as the “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). As part of the overarching WTC construct, MacIntyre et al. propose that there exist two aspects of self-confidence. One aspect is transient and momentary, and is known as *state communicative self-confidence*, while the other more ‘enduring’ form is *L2 self-confidence*. Figure 2 shows how these elements fit into MacIntyre et al.’s model of the variety of possible factors which may affect WTC in the L2. This pyramid shows that several elements may interact to determine L2 self-confidence (Layers V and VI), and in turn L2 self-confidence may combine with the other factors specified in Layer IV to influence state self-confidence, which in turn can govern the extent to which a learner is willing to communicate (Layer II).

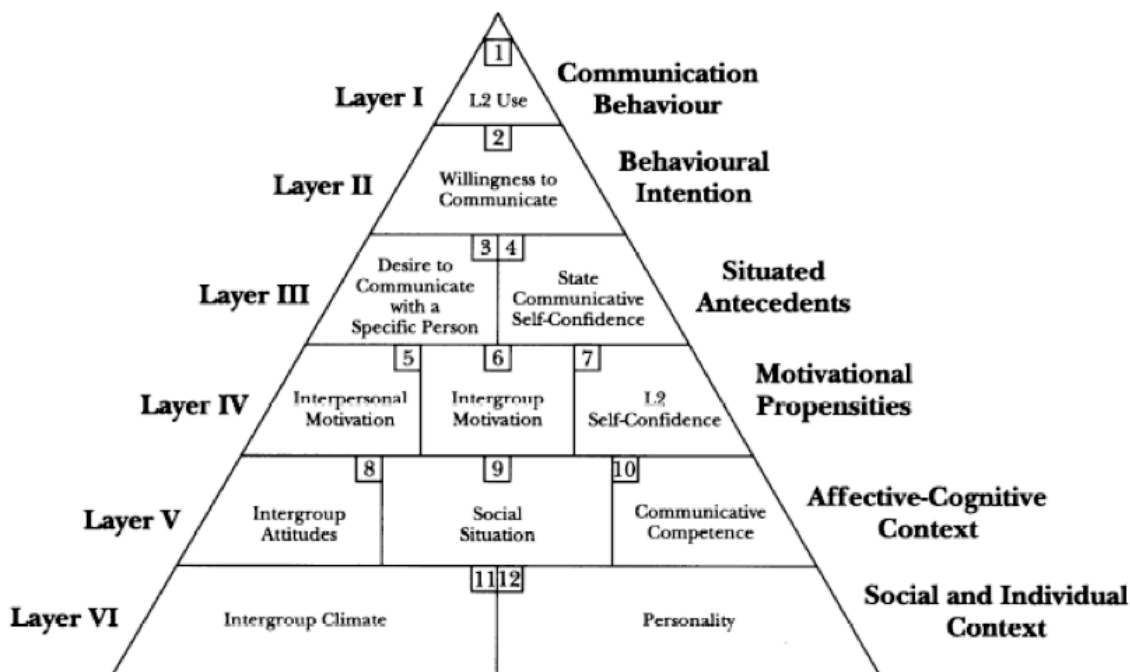


Figure 2. Model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547)

Much of the L2 WTC research to date has been conducted in second language settings, where a community of target language speakers is present and opportunities for direct interaction exist. Other studies have examined international students from countries such as Korea, Japan and China studying English in a country where English is widely spoken (e.g., Cao, 2011; Kang, 2005; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). A few studies have been conducted in foreign language settings, such as Yashima (2002), which examined English language learners in the Japanese EFL context, and Peng (2007), which focused on students in an intensive English program in China.

In more recent research, MacIntyre (2007) used the WTC model to call attention to the micro-level processes that can influence an individual's decision to communicate or not communicate in a particular situation at a particular moment in time. While Layers IV, V and VI represent the more stable and enduring factors that govern a willingness to communicate, Layer III makes a transition to situational influences such that "the sense of time is coming to focus on the here and now" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 568). It is notable that the state of self-confidence at the moment in question is (together with the desire to communicate with the specific person) the crucial factor that determines whether the L2 user is willing to initiate communication. Following Dörnyei and Ottó (1998), MacIntyre (2007) invoked the metaphor of "crossing the Rubicon" to represent the point of no return, or the moment at which an individual commits to initiating communication. Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) use this metaphor to describe the threshold between the 'pre-actional' and 'actional' phases of their Process Model of Motivation, the point at which an individual commits to taking action directed at advancing their language learning. MacIntyre's (2007) use of the term refers to an analogous activity but

on a different time-scale: the moment in time where an individual commits to communicative action.

As Dörnyei (2005) notes, much WTC research has been quantitative in nature, such as Yashima (2002), Yashima et al. (2004), and Peng (2007). However, qualitative studies have begun to appear, enabling a focus on “situational WTC” (e.g., Cao, 2011; Kang, 2005; Peng, 2012) that aligns well with MacIntyre’s (2007) “micro-level processes” discussed above. In her case study of four Korean students studying English in the United States and participating in a conversation partner program, Kang (2005) found that situational WTC in the L2 emerged from the joint effect of three interacting psychological conditions, which were security, excitement and responsibility. These conditions were co-constructed by situational variables that included topic, interlocutor(s) and conversational context. Of most relevance to the present study is Kang’s concept of security, which is comparable to “state self-confidence” because it reflects a lack of anxiety in a communicative situation. However, Kang makes a clear distinction between security and state self-confidence. She suggests that the former is a product of the interacting situational variables in an actual conversation, while state self-confidence (as defined by MacIntyre et al., 1998) is determined in large part by an individual’s previous experiences in similar communicative situations, as well as language knowledge and skills.

Both Cao (2011) and Peng (2012) viewed WTC from an ecological perspective, the former investigating the nature of WTC among 18 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students in New Zealand, and the latter among 4 EFL students in China. In each context, WTC was seen to be construed by the complex interaction of many different factors, both individual (such as personality, emotion, and self-confidence) and sociocultural or environmental (e.g., the classroom atmosphere). The current study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating WTC in a more natural communicative setting, rather than in the classroom.

Although it is acknowledged that an individual’s experiences are central to building self-confidence over time in various communication settings, there is little information in the literature on the processes through which self-confidence develops (in a cumulative sense) in second language learners/users. This is the focus of the present research. One recent study that does examine these processes is Xu (2011), which investigated the way in which self-confidence was both socially and discursively constructed in two advanced Chinese users of English living in Australia. Xu considered self-confidence as a socially-constructed concept, drawing on the work of Norton (1997, 2000) and social identity theory, which focuses on the intersections between identity, power, and language use/language learning. The present study sought to complement the initial work that has been done in this area, adding new insights to our understanding of the processes by which linguistic self-confidence develops. Since this paper humanises the constructs of WTC and L2 self-confidence through the description of a single learner’s journey, language learners and teachers alike should be able to consider where parallels exist between our participant’s experiences and their own, or those of their students.

Method

Participant

The participant, Vishal (a pseudonym), is a Mauritian male who arrived in Australia in 2003 to study. By the time of this study (2010-2012), he was an Australian citizen and a proficient user of English. Table 1 provides demographic information about the participant.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participant

Pseudonym	Vishal
Age	31
Gender	Male
Nationality	Australian (recently acquired); Mauritian (nationality of birth)
First language	Creole (a Mauritian dialect based on French)
Second language(s)	English (receptive and productive), Hindi (receptive use only)
English learning background	He first studied in a formal bilingual setting at school in Mauritius, then studied computer science at an English-medium university (BSc level) in Singapore. Finally, he completed PhD level work and learned English in work and social settings in Australia.
Arrived in Australia	In 2003, as a PhD student of Computer Science in Sydney
Profession	IT Developer

Vishal was chosen for this study primarily for two unusual reasons listed in his profile: his L2 proficiency level and his self-confidence. First, he achieved an overall International English Language Testing System (IELTS) band score of 9.0. This score represents the maximum possible score on the test and denotes an “expert user” with “fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding” (IELTS, 2011, para. 4). Second, he was known to have challenged himself from a linguistic self-confidence perspective in novel ways, which are discussed later in this paper. For a study that sought to put the relationship between the development of L2 proficiency and the development of L2 self-confidence under the microscope, it seemed that Vishal’s experiences could shed light on how these variables interact in language learning. More importantly, we saw the potential to put a ‘human face’ on models of self-confidence and language proficiency, so that we could see how they played out in the learning journey of one language learner.

The specific research questions that we sought to address were as follows:

1. How do the cognitive and affective components of L2 self-confidence (perceived L2 proficiency and anxiety) interact on a day-to-day basis as the individual engages in communication with others in the target language community?

2. What social processes underpin the development of L2 self-confidence as the learner's proficiency (objectively assessed) reaches more advanced levels?

Study Design

Prior to the study, institutional ethics clearance was sought and obtained from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee. At the time of the initial qualitative semi-structured interview, Vishal had already reached high levels of self-confidence and language proficiency. This meant that the first interview relied on retrospective accounts from the participant on his learning journey to that point. The questions for the initial interview were designed with reference to MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) definition of the components of L2 self-confidence, as well as some aspects of their WTC model. We also used some elements of Clément and Kruidenier's (1985) model, which divides self-evaluation of proficiency into self-rating of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and understanding). The list of questions used in the interview is provided in the Appendix, and the constructs that each question intended to explore are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Constructs and corresponding 2010 interview questions (see also Appendix)

Construct		Question numbers
L2 confidence:	in general	2, 9, 10
	cognitive	1, 8
	affective	3, 4, 11, 12
State self-confidence		5, 13
Willingness to communicate		6, 7, 14, 15

The interview was semi-structured so that elements of the participant's responses could be followed up if relevant as the interview proceeded. The interview was conducted by the first author, digitally recorded, transcribed, and then analysed recursively to identify emerging themes.

After completing the first interview, we were curious as to how such an apparently highly motivated and confident learner would approach his on-going language development. In particular, would what appeared to be 'endpoints' in the areas of proficiency and self-confidence prove to be just that, or would he continue to make gains in L2 proficiency and self-confidence? A second interview was thus conducted two years after the initial interview. In this second session, the themes identified in the first interview were revisited, and Vishal was asked to comment on further developments, goals, and insights since the earlier interview. This follow-up provided a longitudinal dimension to the study.

The aims of this study aligned with several of the criteria that Rubin and Rubin (2005, pp. 47-48) identify in determining the suitability of qualitative interviews as the preferred mode of data gathering. The first of these criteria is a desire to understand

how prior events shaped present situations. In this study, we aimed to track the development of Vishal's L2 self-confidence and his language proficiency, and the relationship between the critical moments and events he identified at different points along his journey was thus of central interest. Another feature of qualitative interviewing is a desire to "explain the unexpected" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 48). Vishal's very high level of L2 proficiency certainly represents an unexpected outcome, which this study aimed to explore. Finally, the concern with "nuance and subtlety" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 47) to achieve a deeper understanding of the way in which linguistic self-confidence developed in this learner was a research goal that interviews could allow us to realise.

Findings

First interview (2010)

The initial session focused on Vishal's experiences in the seven-year period between his arrival in Australia in 2003 and the time of the interview in 2010.

Interestingly, Vishal attributed much of his low linguistic self-confidence upon arrival in Australia to difficulties in understanding an unfamiliar accent. Although he was born and completed his primary and secondary schooling in Mauritius, he came to Australia from Singapore, where he completed an undergraduate degree. However, as he had many Mauritian friends there, he reported that his use of English for social encounters was limited prior to his arrival in Australia:

...and the main problem was understanding the accents of, of the Australians, I found it very hard

...Yeah listening was the most difficult. Of course, reading was the same, there was no change. But listening was a big problem. And even when I was speaking, they didn't understand my accent...and uh then, they didn't understand me, I didn't understand them, the uh, I wasn't really feeling too confident [sure] in, in communicating in English.

When he first arrived in Australia, Vishal shared a house with roommates from a variety of countries. English was the language that they used to communicate, but unlike the university where he needed to speak with others whom he did not know well, Vishal found communication much easier at home:

...my housemates were all foreigners ... but with them it was all right because I could take my time, and if they didn't understand they would ask what did I mean and if I didn't understand I'd ask them. So it was much less, much more relaxed...

Vishal identified a critical point in the development of his linguistic self-confidence in Australia during the second semester of his PhD studies. As part of his scholarship, he was required to do some teaching related to his subject area. His initial response to this requirement was to avoid the need to front a whole class:

...I was meant to teach in English, um, to a class, but I tried to take the easy way out and I was teaching the deaf-blind student so that I don't have to speak in front of many people, in front of a class

...so that was the time I started to feel more confident about it, because I was his tutor, so I had to teach him, so that already gave me the power (...) so I was more like in control

Here we see that the opportunity (or more accurately requirement) to teach a subject that was familiar to him allowed Vishal to develop confidence working with this particular student (with the assistance of an interpreter). The familiar subject matter and the individual nature of the tutoring work allowed him to feel “in control” and after a year, he had developed to the degree that he felt ready to take on greater communicative challenges. He reported:

...and then actually after a year I kind of specifically asked that I want to get a bigger class ...so that I can develop my public speaking skills... so it was kind of my initiative, to try to improve

This commitment to action (asking to be given a larger class) corresponds to the bridge between the pre-actional and actional stages in the Process Model of Motivation that Dörnyei and Ottó (1998, p. 50) refer to as “crossing a metaphorical ‘Rubicon’”— by ‘putting his hand up’ for a larger class, Vishal in effect signed up for communication that would require him to lead a group that he knew would probably contain Australian English speakers. Notably, he explicitly linked this to a desire to improve.

At the time of the first interview, Vishal was a PhD graduate working in the field of information technology development. At that point, it appeared that he had moved beyond a stage where language itself (i.e., the need to communicate in his second language, English) was associated with a lack of self-confidence. At work, he noted occasional momentary misunderstandings in conversations with colleagues that he attributed to his accent, but claimed that these were always easily clarified. On an IELTS test that he took when applying for Australian residence, he received an overall band score of 9.0, which he takes as confirmation that his English “is pretty much like a native speaker”.

Despite these gains in confidence, Vishal did report anxiety associated with speaking in public settings, an experience that is of course not confined to learners or users of a second language. Recognising the value of being able to speak confidently in front of groups of people, Vishal chose an innovative approach to challenge himself and stated:

...actually I've even done stand-up comedy. So I took a class, and on my graduation night I had to do a talk, a comedy show, for five minutes in front of an audience, a paying audience. And I was very nervous, but I think that was because of public speaking not because of my accent...

When asked about his reasons for taking a stand-up comedy class, Vishal linked his decision with future career aspirations:

...yeah, well, I think it was mainly because I thought it would help me with my career aspirations somehow, if I want to become a team leader or anything like that (...) the ability so that I can speak in front of so many people would give me a lot of confidence, and not only speak in front of them but make them laugh as well...

Second interview (2012)

The second interview took place in November 2012, exactly two years after the first interview. This follow-up interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions on the themes that had emerged from the first interview: (1) the role of listening comprehension; (2) seeking out challenges to develop language proficiency and confidence; (3) feelings of 'control' in various communicative situations; (4) communicative situations associated with anxiety.

Since the previous interview, Vishal reported that his motivation for improving his English language proficiency had become fuelled by his goal to be a leader in the workplace, so his aim was to be able to communicate effectively at a professional level. One element of this was his aim to strengthen his command of the more "technical" aspects of the language, relating to his work as an IT developer:

I'm trying to improve myself because, uh, my goal is to be a team leader and (.) eventually a manager or CTO, so in that sense my language has been improving, mainly when it comes to technical aspects

His communicative goals in the workplace domain appeared to go deeper than this, however. He seemed to realise that leadership requires high-level communication skills that attend to the relational goals of communication as much as to the transactional goals that come with technical competence. In particular, he was striving to develop skills in giving advice without sounding condescending, and to motivate others without coming across as "aggressive:"

'communicating [.] in a very professional way [.] in a motivating way, that's my primary goal.'

In relation to Vishal's perceived second language proficiency, a shift to a focus on career and communication in the workplace was thus evident. When asked about any changes in his linguistic self-confidence over the past two years, Vishal once again focused his answer on the work context, where he claimed that confidence gains had occurred:

Yeah, my confidence when it comes to English is, like in certain situations, I think, I wouldn't say it has changed a lot [.] it's more about (.) in work and what I have been doing, so in that sense it has increased a lot, so before I was just staying away from hot debates, for example, like in work if I heard two guys talking, debating about which way to approach, to solve a problem, before I had a passive role, and just be there and not say much, even if I thought of a better way we could solve a problem...

He went on to talk about the importance of being able to "win people over" when debating a point, as well as some of the "tricks" that people use when they sense that they are losing a debate, or need to defuse a tense situation:

People use a lot of clever English words [:]. So in a sense, vocabulary [.] in that situation is very important and [.] if you're kind of losing a debate, and somehow turn it around to using humour or whatever, you defuse the situation.

Although he reported that his confidence in handling such situations had increased, Vishal admitted that he was “still getting there” in terms of the linguistic resources required.

A major theme that emerged from the first interview was Vishal’s perception of listening comprehension as a key element in developing linguistic self-confidence. When asked specifically about gains in listening comprehension over the past two years (since the earlier interview), Vishal was able to articulate specific developments. These developments concerned both his self-reported levels of listening comprehension in English, and also the way he thought about the notion of comprehension:

I’ve learnt over the last few years that listening to words is not enough, you obviously have to see the body language as well and also the tone of voice.

Compared with his comments two years earlier, it was clear that he saw ‘comprehension’ in a much more holistic sense. In elaborating on his answer, Vishal once again drew on examples from work-related domains of his life. For instance, he credited his increased awareness of individual differences in prosody and body language to the fact that he works with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. He also cited an example of a job interview that he attended, where the “body language” alone of the interviewer led him to believe that his responses to a particular question were not in line with what the interviewer was expecting:

So, then I, (.) I thought of a solution [.] and from the, from the body language of the interviewer I could tell that that was not a good answer.

As had been his practice in his first seven years in Australia, in 2012 Vishal continued to seek out opportunities to improve his English proficiency. For example, he had recently volunteered on several occasions to lead informal brown-bag presentations during lunch breaks, which connects back to his motivation to improve himself professionally in English:

So in a way, I mean, I don’t really have to do this, but in a way for me it’s [.] a good challenge to be able to explain and give other people advice. And also it [.] gives me a very good image in the company, so that people see me as being knowledgeable and, uh, an expert in my field.

Finally, when asked about communicative situations that precipitate anxiety, Vishal identified situations such as job interviews where he did become anxious. This anxiety sometimes seemed to have a negative effect on his confidence levels, which in turn probably impacted upon his language performance:

...all of a sudden I felt under so much pressure and I couldn’t remember anything, and [.] I started stuttering and I mixed tenses [.] and [made] so-called beginner mistakes, which I don’t normally make, but I think it’s all about being relaxed and confident in a given situation, then all the words flow freely...

He attributed the anxiety that he experienced in job interview situations to the fact that the interviewer was expecting him to communicate in a clear and articulate manner in English, but also (and possibly more importantly) to demonstrate a high level of technical knowledge.

then if I feel like I'm in control, [...] I don't think I'll, uh, feel anxious. But, uh, let's say I'm up against somebody who's a native speaker and on top of that he's got more experience than me, then if I don't really know my stuff very well, then it's, yeah, I'm definitely gonna to feel anxious then.

As was the case in the initial interview, there was once again a clear relationship between the level of control and level of anxiety that Vishal experienced in communicative situations.

Discussion

Our findings are consistent with definitions of L2 self-confidence (e.g., Clément, 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998) as a construct composed of a self-evaluation of L2 proficiency component, and an anxiety component. As Vishal's anxiety about using English decreased, and his rating of his own level of proficiency increased (influenced by his ability to communicate with others), it appears that his L2 self-confidence was also boosted. The findings reported here also build on those of recent qualitative WTC studies such as Kang (2005), Cao (2011) and Peng (2012), to highlight the complexity and range of the individual and environmental factors that combine to construct a second language user's WTC. Additionally, the findings are consistent with previous studies showing that both language proficiency and self-confidence are likely to improve over time spent in a target-language environment if the individual has regular contact with speakers of that community and is either "forced" or seeks out opportunities to use the language. Indeed, the current study provides new insights into the processes by which such opportunities can (a) deepen a learner's understanding of their own abilities to comprehend communicative situations in a holistic way, and might (b) allow them to develop the capacity to feel "in control" of communicative interactions. They provide a powerful demonstration of the important role that the workplace can have in this regard, particularly if the individual aspires to leadership roles and is aware of the key role that communication plays in successful leadership.

Contact with target language speakers

Clément and Kruidenier (1985) suggest that the self-confidence construct *only* operates in contexts where contact with members of the second language group is recurrent, and claimed that in such settings self-confidence is "the most important determinant of motivation to learn and use the second language" (p. 24). In a later study, however, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1994) demonstrate that L2 self-confidence can sometimes be an important factor even in contexts where there is little contact with the L2 community. The findings of the current study suggest that ever-increasing (positive) contact in a variety of settings with members of the Australian community (both native *and* non-native English speakers) certainly helped Vishal to develop his L2 self-confidence. In the first interview, Vishal described how regular and relaxed contact with non-native speakers (but communicating in English) initially played a vital role in the development of his self-confidence. Two years later, he noted that the opportunity to work with people from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds had deepened his understanding of the importance of paralinguistic carriers of meaning (body language and 'tone of voice') in communication.

Cao's (2011) results show some interesting parallels to Vishal's case. In Cao's study, the identity of the interlocutor seemed to have a considerable impact on the EAP students' WTC, and these participants mentioned their enjoyment of learning about different cultures by talking to foreigners, just as Vishal did. However, the EAP students were generally not keen to converse with interlocutors from their own countries, perhaps showing their determination to seek out new experiences and language practice by conversing with English native speakers in this learning context, New Zealand. Vishal was equally as determined, but benefited from interaction with both native and non-native speakers in Australia.

Vishal initially felt more "relaxed" with his non-native English speaker housemates than with native English-speaking members of the L2 community. As he indicated, he was more willing to communicate with them, which helped initially to develop his L2 self-confidence. MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Conrad (2001) also note that when interacting with friends, learners are likely to feel less anxious and more self-confident, which in turn makes them more willing to communicate. Their study showed that the more social support learners have from friends, the more willing to communicate they will be outside the classroom. The existence of such support for Vishal appears to have been a key factor in determining his future L2 self-confidence and success. And like the participants in Clément's (1986) study, Vishal had himself chosen the "language context" (Australia, in his case) as a place to live and study. He had to use English every day while studying for his PhD and socialising, but received no formal English instruction at that time. Clément (1986) concludes that in such a context, frequent contact with members of the L2 community in everyday life and the resulting L2 self-confidence can increase L2 proficiency more than any other factors.

From listening comprehension to holistic comprehension

One idea that has received limited attention in the L2 self-confidence literature is the role that *listening* plays. When L2 self-confidence is examined as part of the willingness to communicate construct, it is generally discussed in terms of a willingness to initiate a spoken interaction; the importance of being able to comprehend the contributions of others is somewhat overlooked. Engaging in communication, however, entails engaging in a co-constructed event where confidence in one's ability to convey meaning is only part of the process. The lack of confidence in understanding the contributions of the other speaker(s) may also make an individual less likely to initiate communication or seek out opportunities to use the target language.

As reported above, Vishal attributed much of his low self-confidence upon arrival in Australia to his difficulties with an unfamiliar accent. In one of a series of studies focusing on learners' self-efficacy in listening, Graham (2011) investigates the role of learning strategies that specifically target listening skills. She makes the point that effective listening "depends on learners' self-efficacy for listening, on their confidence in their ability to make sense of the input to which they are exposed" (Graham, 2011, p. 113).

In the later interview, Vishal emphasised his realisation that comprehension was more than understanding accents and vocabulary, but involved an awareness of, and

sensitivity to, all carriers of meaning. In the two-year period between the interviews, his commentary shifted from a focus on listening comprehension to a more all-encompassing view that we have termed “holistic comprehension.” Holistic comprehension refers to a learner drawing not only on the linguistic elements of a communicative setting to understand the message, but also on all the carriers of meaning, including body language and facial expressions. MacIntyre et al. (1997) point out that comprehension is a public and “ego-involving” activity in that language learners will often feel self-conscious about admitting their comprehension difficulties and the need to interrupt the conversation to ask for clarification (p. 279). In some settings, one can simply remain silent and pretend to understand, but in situations which require a response, this is not an option. The lack of self-confidence is likely to lead to avoidance of situations which require an engagement in communicative activities. At work, Vishal admitted taking a passive role in debates or discussions even when he felt he had knowledge to contribute to avoid the risk of losing the argument. His emerging willingness to communicate in such situations was probably aided by his capacity to interpret facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Evidence for this is his discussion of the importance of being able to defuse tense situations at the right moment, which obviously demands high-level holistic comprehension skills.

“Control” in communicative settings

It is interesting that Vishal identified his experience tutoring a student as a milestone in the development of L2 self-confidence in English. He emphasised that he felt “in control” in this particular setting, which allowed him to feel increasingly confident. Looking at WTC from a situational perspective, Kang (2005) found that her participants’ feelings of security were influenced by the topic, the interlocutor and the conversational context. These elements also seem to apply in the individual teaching setting in which Vishal found himself in the tutor’s role. The topic (computer science) was one for which Vishal was the expert in relation to his student, and because there was only a single interlocutor (as opposed to a whole class) working with the aid of an interpreter also appears to have contributed to the sense of control that Vishal reports. Finally, the conversational context (i.e., a teaching session) necessarily constrained the structure and nature of the contributions of Vishal and his student, providing a high degree of predictability.

While a sense of control seems to have been an important factor in the development of Vishal’s self-confidence in English, it is interesting that he deliberately chose to take himself out of the zone of control by taking a course in stand-up comedy. This venture required him to perform in front of a group of unfamiliar individuals and assume the full burden of making the conversation with this audience work, with likely responses being either laughter or silence. Seeking out theatrical training in the form of stand-up comedy to develop one’s L2 self-confidence has a particular logic about it because as Spolin (1973) points out, the basic techniques of the theatre are the techniques of communication. Various forms of theatrical training have been used as part of second language programs to enhance fluency (Butt, 1998), as well as in the training of interpreters to manage stress (Bendazzoli, 2007) and reduce anxiety and improve self-confidence levels (Cho & Roger, 2010) in learners. Vishal chose to pursue stand-up

comedy of his own volition, rather than being introduced to it as part of a language program or course. In addition, he made this choice at a point where his self-perceived L2 competence in his Australian environment (one component of self-confidence) had reached a healthy level, but where he still experienced anxiety communicating in front of groups of people. In this sense, it appears that he had completed the transition from “learner” to “user” of English, to the extent that such a distinction can meaningfully be drawn. His motivation to increase self-confidence in public settings was thus perhaps analogous to that experienced by first language speakers of the language and could be seen as an effort to gain control of a high-risk form of communication.

Attempting to master the art of stand-up comedy in one’s second language could be seen as a marker of advanced levels of linguistic self-confidence. Our second interview with Vishal, however, revealed that it was just one step along the way to achieving the levels of control that he deemed central to his career goals. His references to skillful uses of humour that he had observed among his colleagues illustrate some unexpected links between stand-up comedy and the general seriousness of workplace communication. While challenging himself to demonstrate expertise in the realm of technical communication by volunteering to offer lunchtime presentations, he also seemed to recognise the great importance of relational dimensions of communicative interactions at work. Both are essential, in his eyes, for the kinds of leadership positions to which he aspires. Although he reported on-going gains in these areas, he continued to seek out opportunities to challenge himself and develop further.

Implications for Practice

In the spirit of the good language learner studies originally sparked by the work of Rubin (1975), Griffiths (2008) reminds us that “Good language learners have much to teach us...” (p. 6). There are several important practical implications of the current research that are likely to be of relevance to language learners and teachers in many contexts.

Linguistic confidence as a developmental process

Perhaps most importantly, learners should be aware that developing self-confidence in a second language is a process that will probably continue over many years as one accumulates communicative experience. Our follow-up interview with Vishal indicates that although he has achieved generally high levels of L2 self-confidence, the workplace domain remains an area of challenge for his self-confidence in English. This may in part be due to his aspirations to leadership positions at work and a realisation of the role that communication plays in determining the success or failure of leaders in organisational settings. This illustrates that even advanced learners who achieve very high scores on language proficiency tests (as Vishal has) might not be equally confident linguistically in all domains. Learners at lower levels of proficiency can therefore take comfort from the fact that they are not alone in experiencing moments where their self-confidence is shaken. By continuing to seek out challenging opportunities that take them out of their comfort zones, our study of Vishal demonstrates that learners can continue to make gains in confidence long after very high levels of proficiency have already been reached.

Holistic comprehension skills

Vishal's experience also highlights the significance of listening comprehension in developing L2 self-confidence. Most language teachers are no doubt aware of the benefits of using authentic texts and developing strategies in the classroom (e.g., pre-listening strategies such as predicting and activating schemata, as well as listening for gist and key words during the interaction). Many teachers, however, may not make the link between listening comprehension and L2 self-confidence. Vishal's experience shows us that skills in following English spoken with many different accents can bolster one's confidence, and language learners can therefore benefit from practice with fellow learners both in and out of the classroom. In addition, developing a sensitivity to other carriers of meaning (e.g., prosody, body language and gesture) can help to maximise comprehension and (by extension) L2 self-confidence.

Achieving control

This study has shown that having "control" over a language situation helps learners to gain confidence, which can in turn boost their motivation and consequently their language proficiency. This suggests that teachers could facilitate the development of L2 self-confidence by handing over control to learners on a regular basis in the classroom, (e.g., asking students to prepare and give presentations on topics in which they have expertise). Promoting peer teaching and focusing on individual learner strengths are further possible techniques. In both interviews, Vishal identified the key role that communication with non-native speakers of English (e.g., friends, housemates and co-workers) has played in the development of his linguistic self-confidence. This finding has implications for learners who believe that only communication with native speakers of the target language will assist them in achieving their goals.

Becoming part of the wider community

Finally, an important point raised by Pae (2008), which is reflected in the results of this study, is that a language learner needs to feel part of a community and interact successfully with its members in order to fully develop their L2 self-confidence. In a second language context, this sense of community can be achieved by encouraging learners to join clubs, take part in organised social activities, or find a part-time job which requires them to use the target language for authentic communication. Again, the knowledge that misunderstandings and moments of embarrassment are part of the process of achieving control and confidence in various communicative interactions may help learners prepare to move outside their comfort zones. Normalising these experiences may help to reduce the anxiety associated with them so that learners do not respond by avoiding communicative encounters in their target language.

Limitations

As this is the study of one language learner, it is not possible to generalise from our findings. These findings do, however, highlight the complex relationships between L2 self-confidence and a range of other factors. In addition, the participant could be considered an advantaged language learner, since he benefited from a bilingual education in Mauritius, followed by an English-medium university education in both Singapore and Australia. This background allowed him to attain a level of proficiency

that few language learners are able to, which in turn would have helped to increase his L2 self-confidence. Nevertheless, a growing number of ESL learners from around the world are choosing Australia for their university education and often remain in the country afterwards to work. In this way, Vishal's experiences are similar to the experiences of these international students.

Additionally, our study relies on the participant's recollections of his affective responses to various situations, and it is possible that some fading of the affective memories could influence the accuracy of these retrospective accounts. The interview questions were designed to elicit narratives that target this particular dimension. However, it is possible that other factors explaining Vishal's developing L2 self-confidence and proficiency may have been overlooked in this study. For instance, a full exploration of his motivation (including the notion of integrativeness and an exploration of his feelings towards Australian people and culture) was not undertaken for the purposes of this study, although some elements of motivation did emerge naturally in the course of the interview. In this sense, Dörnyei (2005) describes integrativeness (including contemporary reconceptualisations of the construct) as one of the most important factors determining effort and choices made by the learner.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of one learner by describing part of his language learning journey and his perceptions of the development of his L2 self-confidence since his arrival in Australia. We will now summarise the results in relation to our two research questions. The first research question asked how the cognitive and affective components of L2 self-confidence (i.e., perceived L2 proficiency and anxiety) interact on a day-to-day basis as the individual engages in communication with others in the target language community. Figure 3 provides a summary of the way in which this has occurred in the journey of our participant:

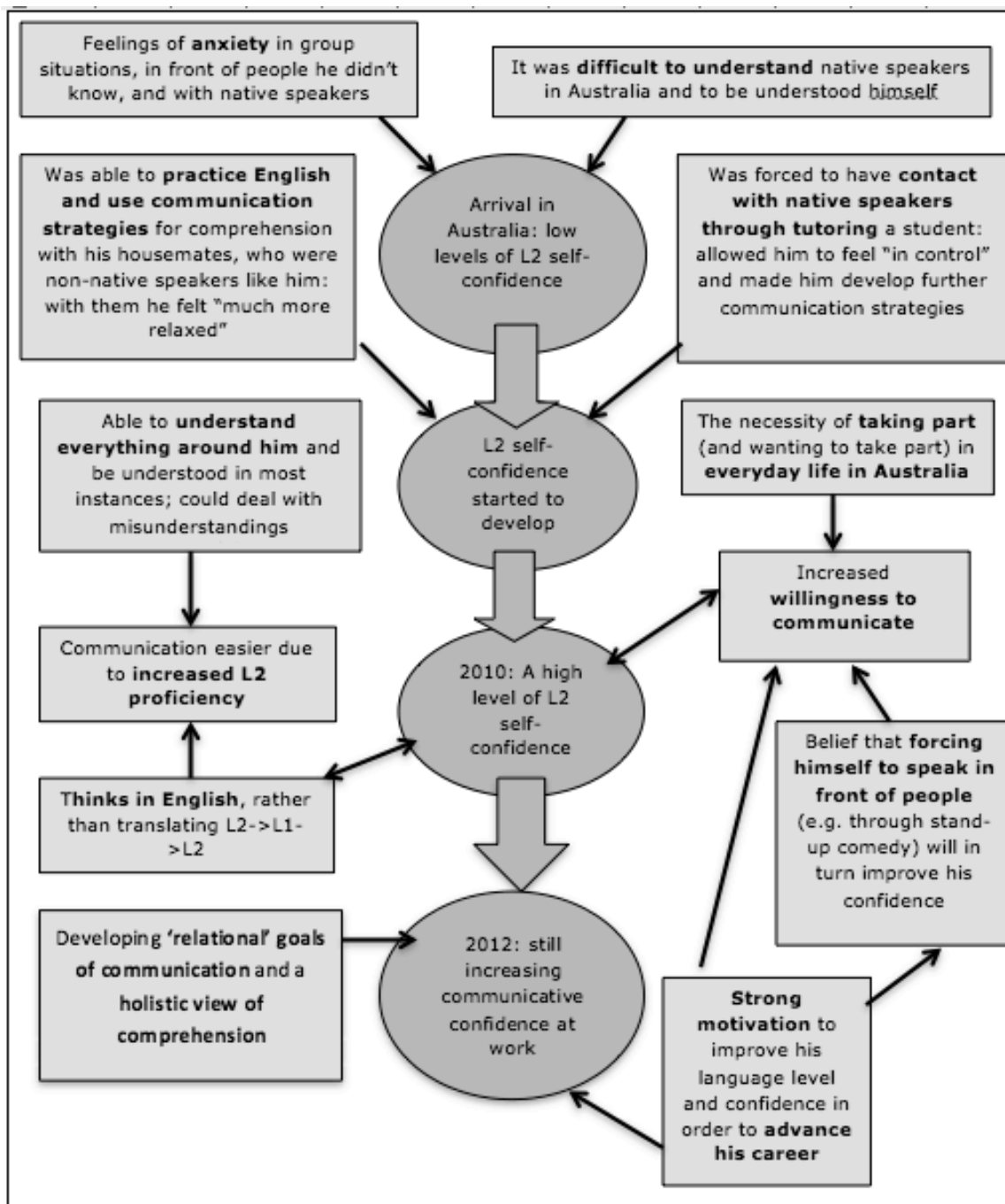


Figure 3. Key factors affecting Vishal's developing L2 self-confidence

It is clear that there is a complex network of factors determining and influencing L2 self-confidence. Clément et al. (1994) explained that L2 proficiency is both directly and indirectly affected by L2 self-confidence "through the students' attitude toward and effort expended on learning English" (p. 441). Increased linguistic self-confidence therefore often helps to improve language proficiency. In turn, improved linguistic competence will often result in higher self-confidence in the language. It is likely that higher L2 self-confidence will mean a learner also has more WTC. MacIntyre et al.

(2001) proposed that as long as WTC results in more opportunities to practice the L2 authentically (as it should do), “one would expect it to facilitate the language learning process” (p. 382). While the WTC model of McIntyre et al. (1998) includes both state communicative self-confidence and L2 self-confidence as variables (antecedents, in effect) influencing willingness to communicate, it is clear that increased L2 self-confidence also follows from increased WTC. As our study illustrates, greater WTC means greater willingness to practice, leading to proficiency gains that in turn enhance L2 self-confidence. Therefore, L2 proficiency, self-confidence and WTC can be expressed as having a cyclical interaction, as shown in Figure 4. Vishal’s account of his language journey since arriving in Australia is consistent with this cyclical relationship, and puts a “human face” on the interaction between these concepts as described in the literature. The findings of this study are significant for second language acquisition researchers as well as second language teachers, who play an important role in building their learners’ self-confidence and willingness to communicate, both inside and outside the classroom.

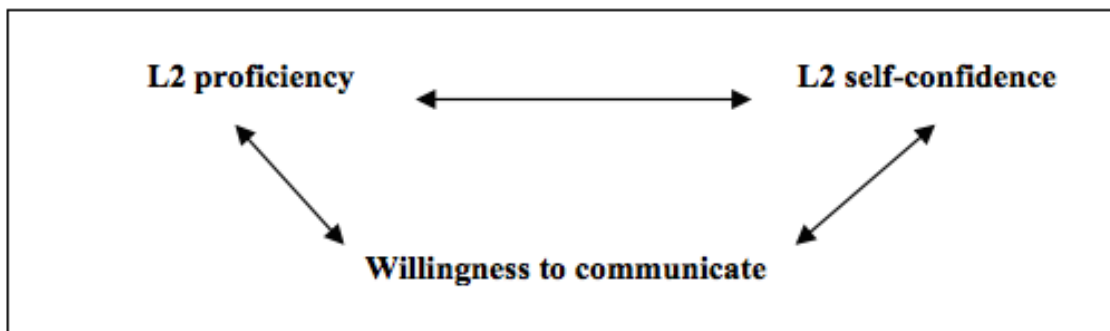


Figure 4. Cyclic interaction among constructs

Our second research question asked what social processes underpin the development of L2 self-confidence as the learner’s proficiency reaches more advanced levels. This study illustrates that an individual may still perceive the need to continue addressing the anxiety component of self-confidence even after they have reached very high levels of L2 proficiency. Both Vishal’s reports of his own recent communicative experiences in the workplace and his high IELTS score are testament to his achievement of very high proficiency levels, but this does not mean that all anxiety evaporates. L2 self-confidence (and thus willingness to communicate) can therefore continue to develop even after L2 proficiency is taken out of the equation. Through stand-up comedy and presentations for his colleagues in the workplace, Vishal had put himself in performance situations where he was forced to display a high willingness to communicate in front of an audience, with the express goal of improving his linguistic self-confidence more generally. His L2 self-confidence journey since arriving in Australia was characterised by decisions to seek control in increasingly “high risk” communicative contexts, which he linked to the prospects of career advancement in his adopted country. It will therefore be beneficial for teachers of advanced or near-native proficiency second language learners to continue encouraging their learners to seek out such high risk contexts in which to communicate or perform, as this may help them develop their

linguistic self-confidence and achieve life or career goals in their second language context.

Future Research

Our study has provided an overview of the development of L2 self-confidence in a language learner over a period of several years. Follow-up research could take an ecological approach to focus on the more dynamic and situation-specific elements of self-confidence. Such a study would parallel and complement the work of Cao (2011) and Peng (2012) on the dynamic elements of the closely-related WTC construct. MacIntyre (2007) suggests that focusing on the moment-to-moment processes that can either lead to or prevent action will be useful in our understanding of the factors that govern whether or not communication takes place at a given moment in a given situation. Such research will enhance our understanding of the way in which state self-confidence plays a role in the development of more enduring forms of L2 self-confidence that have been explored in the current study.

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Appendix

Interview Questions (2010)

(1) What was your level of English around the time that you arrived in Australia? In your own opinion (self-evaluation) and from proficiency tests or proven abilities to use English?

-> (1a) How well could you understand English (your listening and reading skills)?

-> (1b) How well could you produce English (your speaking and writing skills)?

(2) Would you have described yourself as confident when using English at that time? Why or why not?

(3) In general, did you feel self-conscious or anxious about using English (i) in social situations, and (ii) with classmates or colleagues?

-> (3a) What factors do you think were responsible for those feelings?

(4) Did you feel comfortable around native speakers of English?

(5) Can you remember any specific situations in which you felt particularly confident, or particularly anxious, when using English?

(6) Did you seek out situations in which to use or practice English?

(7) Did you try to avoid any situations in which you needed to perform in English?

(8) How has your level of English developed since arriving in Australia? What is your level now? Self-evaluation / proficiency tests / what do you use English for now?

-> (8a) How well can you understand English (your listening and reading skills)?

-> (8b) How well can you produce English (your speaking and writing skills)?

(9) Would you say you are confident using English now? Why or why not?

(10) How do you think your confidence in your English has developed over your time in Australia, and what factors do you think have influenced this development?

(11) Do you feel self-conscious or anxious about using English in any situations nowadays? Can you explain why?

(12) Do you always feel comfortable around native speakers of English?

(13) Can you think of any recent specific situations in which you felt particularly confident or anxious when using English?

(14) Do you now seek out situations in which to use English or perform in English?

(15) Do you tend to avoid any situations in which you need to perform in English nowadays?

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