

Why an Indirect Measure of L2 Learner's Willingness to Communicate in L2 Writing Requires Cautious Inferencing

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In *Exploring the dynamics of willingness to communicate (WTC) in written communication*, Choe's (this issue) preliminary case study explores an area of WTC that has not been fully addressed by WTC scholars: an analysis of WTC in written communication. In 1998, MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément and Noels stated regarding WTC, "We propose to extend WTC to influence other modes of production [other than oral], such as writing and comprehension of both spoken and written language" (p. 546). However, since 1998, there has been little research conducted on WTC in L2 writing. Originally conceptualized as an L1 construct, WTC has been defined as the probability of initiating, continuing, and expending on oral communication with an interlocutor. The underlying psychological assumption was that the probability of WTC episodes reflected one's internal motivation and willingness to communicate orally, which was viewed as a fixed, trait-like variable closely associated with one's congenital nature such as sociable personality or degree of extroversion (MacIntyre et al., 1998). When the concept of WTC was applied to the L2 context, a negative correlation between L1 WTC and L2 WTC revealed a different nature of L2 WTC. L2 WTC was found to be fluid and dynamic, open and interactive with L2 learning context and a host of other factors both learner internal and external that self-organizes to emerge a changing WTC orientation that is situation-specific. In light of this, according to the *Complex Dynamic Systems Theory* (CDST) approach to second language acquisition (SLA), L2 WTC features layers of potential factors that comprise situation-specific influences at a given moment-in-time as well as stable, enduring influences that are more resistant to change. In short, in CDST, L2 WTC is seen as an emergent property of both the stable, intrinsic nature of the learner and the dynamic nature of the learner's external conditions.

Naturally, SLA researchers and practitioners are interested in L2 WTC for reasons that are rather self-evident. L2 WTC is seen as a logical prerequisite for oral communication practice, and a factor that needs to be encouraged and fostered in the L2 classroom by L2 language instructors (Vongsila et al., 2016). In addition, studies have shown strong and positive correlations among WTC, perceived competence, L2 proficiency, and L2 achievement (Imran et al, 2014; Mahmoodi et al., 2014). WTC is a strong predictor of L2 success that demonstrates a motivated, autotelic behavior and a strong desire to learn the target language, which points to an underlying integrative motivation for L2 acquisition.

In Choe's study, the dynamism of Belinda and Michelle's WTC through email correspondences was analyzed in relation to topic, lexical complexity, article accuracy, and article form-function mapping. Using an inductive approach, the author measured WTC indirectly by assuming that at the macro-level, the amount of words an individual was willing to produce in each correspondence adequately measured her WTC in writing. At the micro-level, a similar approach was used to assume that the proportion of words an individual was willing to write under a topic was proportional to her WTC on the same topic. The author's attempt to use this indirect method was the only feasible option, given her inability to directly question Belinda and establish the NNS's level of WTC through methods such as interviews and questionnaires. The author fully acknowledged this limitation and such limitations notwithstanding, she has done an admirable work in her attempt to explore WTC in L2 writing. Nevertheless, I would like to

revisit the assumptions of the indirect method used to measure the latent psychological construct in question.

There are several reasons to believe that in the absence of other data, the number of words used alone may not actually measure WTC. First, as previously defined, WTC is one's willingness to actively initiate communication when the option to remain silent is equally available. Thus, it is not so much about one's quantity of production that matters, rather it is the *frequency* of attempts made to initiate and engage in communication that matters more. This is why in earlier conceptualizations, WTC was viewed in probabilistic terms, and greater weight was given to the overall frequency with which the learner initiated communication. A better picture of Belinda's WTC might have been to measure how many times Belinda initiated the communication during a set period of time for a specific topic, or how many times Belinda introduced, changed, continued, or initiated a topic of discussion throughout her correspondence with Michelle. This is because in a one-to-one email correspondence, or in any interaction, almost anyone is likely to respond to a direct question, but many will hesitate to initiate or continue interaction. As such, some responses may end up being longer due to the nature of the question or the topic, and not necessarily due to one's WTC. Additionally, the correspondence between Belinda and Michelle was part of a school project that required interaction, and this makes it harder to ascertain how much of their interaction was voluntary exchange of information in spite of an alternative to remain silent on the matter, which in this case, may not have existed.

The second reason why an indirect measure of WTC raises doubts about its validity is that the method may actually measure a different construct altogether. This is because a measure of the total number of words produced in a given time period closely mirrors how writing fluency is measured. One measure of writing fluency according to Skehan (2003) is length of production. Other measures of writing fluency include number and length of t-units and sentence length, all of which are directly proportional to total number of words (Abdel Latif, 2013). There are indicators in the study that the measure of WTC may have actually been a measure of writing fluency or that WTC may have been conflated with fluency. During period 5, Belinda's measure of WTC was the highest, but her measure of complexity and accuracy were at their lowest. A comparison of Figure 1 and Figure 5 shows that in general, a rise in WTC coincided with a decline in complexity and accuracy. Periods 3 to 5 show high WTC but low and trending decline in accuracy and complexity. Period 6 shows a sharp decline in WTC coinciding with a sharp increase in accuracy and complexity. To conclude that this indicates a correlation between WTC and accuracy and complexity or that certain topics produce worse linguistic performance is to overlook a simpler explanation. That is, perhaps what was really being measured was the 'trade-off effect' between fluency versus accuracy and complexity and not necessarily WTC. Readers may recall that according to Skehan's model of task performance, due to the L2 learner's limited capacity for processing input/output (Limited Capacity Hypothesis), it is difficult for the learner to address both meaning and form. Depending on the context, the learner will prioritize one over the other and end up either focusing on meaning (fluency) or form (accuracy and complexity). Although according to Skehan, greater fluency may be accompanied by greater accuracy or complexity but not both, Robinson's approach argues that resource-directing dimensions of tasks result in greater focus on form that leads to increases in both accuracy and complexity (Ellis et al., 2005). In light of this, the negative correlation found between WTC and accuracy and complexity, and a strong positive correlation between accuracy and complexity may be viewed as support for Robinson's position that accuracy and complexity correlate but not with fluency.

Thus, one of the conclusions that accuracy and complexity are connected growers may be explained as a function of focus on form over meaning rather than a CDST phenomenon. This would also provide a possible explanation to the question posed by the author: why the correlation between complexity and accuracy was much higher for Belinda ($r=.79$) compared to Michelle ($r=.69$). Since Michelle is a NS of English, her capacity to process both form and meaning is not as limited as Belinda's; consequently, her complexity and accuracy are not as strongly correlated.

WTC measurement validity notwithstanding, the author's findings are still very informative as studies have shown that there is indeed a strong correlation between WTC and fluency, showing a close relationship between the two constructs. A study by Wood in 2016 showed that high WTC correlated with high fluency and low WTC with low fluency. And due to this close association between WTC and fluency, the possibility of conflation or misdiagnosis exists, especially when written WTC is indirectly measured as a function of word count alone. Latent psychological constructs such as WTC are by nature directly unobservable and even interviews and questionnaires are viewed as somewhat indirect methods, given that no one can directly observe the workings of the mind. This is why as researchers we mustn't infer or interpret too much based on the product alone when the object of our inquiry is a latent psychological variable such as one's willingness to communicate.

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