The Mediating Effect of Culture on the Relationship Between FL Self-assessment and L2 Willingness to Communicate: The Polish and Italian EFL Context

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Abstract The study reported in this chapter verifies the assumption that the strength of relationship between self-assessment of foreign language (FL) skills and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a FL is determined by the cultural background of the students. Since self-assessment is said to be culturally-bound (e.g., Lockley, 2013; Mercer, 2011), variation in the link between the two variables found in different countries may be significant. To explore this phenomenon, a pilot study was conducted among 35 Polish and 35 Italian high school learners of English as a FL, representing the same level of proficiency (B1 +/B2 according to Common European Framework of Reference). The data for the study were collected with the use of three questionnaires, which had the form of self-report surveys. One of them, that is, the FL Self-Assessment Measure, consisted in the participants evaluating their level of different subskills in English, such as grammar and pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary range, and fluency. The two other batteries - the Measure of WTC in the FL Classroom and Measure of WTC outside the FL Classroom (Baran-Łucarz, 2014) - diagnosed the participants' eagerness to speak in a FL in these two different settings. The outcomes showed that the Italian participants not only assessed their level of English subskills significantly higher than the Polish students, but also that they were more willing to communicate in both settings. Moreover, the results suggest that the Polish participants were more concerned about their level of English when speaking in the TL than the Italian learners. While in the case of the Polish respondents, moderate to strong relationships (Spearman rho) between self-assessment of English skills and WTC both in the classroom and naturalistic setting were found, in the case of the Italian participants the correlations were either weak or non-significant. Most of the differences between the paired correlations computed for particular subskills and L2 WTC for the Polish and Italian participants were statistically significant.

Keywords Willingness to communicate · Cultural background · Self-assessment of FL subskills · Formal and informal setting

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1 Introduction

Few would disagree that at present times—times of intensive globalization—the vast majority of learners struggling to master foreign languages (FLs) aim first and foremost at communicative proficiency, which would allow them to become active citizens of the global world. At the same time, many SLA researchers stress the fact that speaking is not only the most important target of FL students but also a means of reaching satisfactory communicative skills (e.g., Savignon, 2005; Skehan, 1989; Swain, 1995). Although nowadays, FL learners are provided with more opportunities to use the target language (TL) in authentic conversations taking place in naturalistic contexts, it is still the classroom that for many FL learners constitutes the main setting for communicative practice in the TL, not only at early but also later stages of learning (see e.g., Kuciel-Piechurska, 2011; Pawlak, 2011). Needless to say, the two contexts—formal and informal (classroom and naturalistic)—are governed by their own unique principles, which usually does not allow to generalize observations from one setting to another. It seems, however, that in both contexts, the student's decision to take part in a conversation in the TL is based, among others, on his or her more or less conscious analysis of potential gains (e.g., raising communicative skills by practising speaking in the classroom, successful exchange of ideas, opinions and information both in and outside the classroom) and losses (e.g., losing one's face due to producing erroneous utterances, unsuccessful communication or losing one's genuineness). MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) corroborate the fact that indeed speaking in a FL which one does not have full control of carries the risk of not only decreasing one's FL self-efficacy but also of fearing that one may lose his or her face if the communicative situation is characterized by pitfalls and communication breakdowns. The arousal of such negative emotions is determined not only by several situation cues and characteristics (Rauthmann et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018) but also by trait-like factors, such as personality (e.g., MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998) or motivation (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002). There is also evidence for self-perceptions being important antecedents of the decision to join in or initiate a conversation in an L2 (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2015; Kuciel-Piechurska, 2011). Self-assessment, in turn, has been found to be cultural-dependent (e.g., Lockley, 2013; Mercer, 2011). Some studies have already shown that the approach to speaking in a FL is indeed culture-specific (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Peng, 2014; Wang & Clément, 2003). Such reflections are shared frequently by teachers with a rich experience in teaching FLs across the globe. As they claim, learners of presumably comparable levels of the TL representing different cultures often vary in their eagerness to communicate in the TL (see e.g., Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017). It seems, however, that more data are needed to examine whether indeed the link between students' self-perceptions related to FL learning and their approach to communication in a FL may vary across cultures. In order to shed more light on this matter, a study comparing the strength of the relationship between

willingness to communicate in a foreign language (L2 WTC[1])—the most immediate determinant of initiating or joining a conversation—and FL self-assessment of learners representing two different countries, namely Poland and Italy, was carried out and is reported herein.

The chapter consists of two major parts. The first one focuses on providing theoretical grounds for hypothesizing about the existence of cultural variation in the link between FL self-assessment and willingness to communicate in a FL. Thus, the construct of L1 WTC is introduced and the role of culture in L1 communication is briefly discussed. What follows is a discussion on how the effect of culture has been understood and examined in reference to L2 WTC. Finally, special attention is drawn to self-assessment as an antecedent of WTC, viewed again through the perspective of cultural differences. The second part of the chapter reports the conducted mixed-method study,[2] opening with research questions, followed by methodology (subjects, instruments, data collection and analysis procedures), and presentation of quantitative and qualitative outcomes. The chapter closes with a discussion of results and some brief pedagogical implications.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Culture and L1 Communication

According to Hall (1959, p. 169), "culture is communication and communication is culture," while Risager (2006, p. 11) further explains, "languages spread across cultures, and cultures spread across languages". The view that the three phenomena—culture, language and communication—are interlinked has been accepted for decades (see e.g., Kramsch, 1998; Salzman, 1998). Mitchell and Myles (2004) put forward a claim that language and culture are inseparable and acquired in tandem, with the growth of one being automatically supported by the development of the other. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that culture shapes a person's eagerness to engage in communication in first language (L1) (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). These cultural specifications have also been observed to function sometimes as "restraining forces on communication, which can affect intercultural communication as well as impinge on L2 learners' behaviour inside and outside the classroom in monolingual settings" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 572). Consequently, culture has been taken into account not only in the explanation of variation in willingness to communicate in mother tongue (L1 WTC), but also considered one of the antecedents of L2 WTC.

[1] Although both for Poland and Italy English is not a second but foreign language, the typical abbreviation of *L2 WTC* is used in reference to the participants' willingness to communicate in English throughout the entire chapter.

[2] The study reported in this chapter was presented at the 14th Annual Worldwide Forum on Education and Culture, taking place in Rome (3–4 December, 2015). The meetings were initiated in 2002 by Professor Bruce Swaffield, who passed away in 2016. Thank you, Bruce.

On the basis of numerous studies (e.g., Burgoon, 1976; McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982, 1987; Mortensen et al., 1977), L1 WTC - an inclination to initiate, join in or avoid communication when given a choice - was conceptualized as a personality-based trait-like variable, characterized by a relatively stable level, irrespective of the communication setting and interlocutors involved in a conversation (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982, 1991). Next to extraversion, which was found to correlate positively and highly with levels of eagerness to communicate in mother tongue, McCroskey and Richmond (1991) considered self-perceived communicative competence and communication apprehension significant antecedents of L1 WTC. What captivated the attention of researchers in their identification of predictors of WTC in L1 was also culture. Empirical data (e.g., Barraclough et al., 1988) evidently showed that L1 WTC varied significantly from culture to culture. Studies conducted among learners representing various countries, such as Puerto Rico (McCroskey et al., 1985) Australia, Micronesia, Sweden, America (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990), and Finland (Sallinen-Kuparinenet et al., 1991) lent further support to this claim. As Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2017, p. 4) put it, summarizing the observations of McCroskey and Richmond (1991), "… although communication as such is a universal phenomenon, there exist certain norms and required skills in this respect that appear culture specific … Cultural divergence seems to have a considerable impact on a speaker's WTC". This may be explained, among others, by the fact that personality traits are nurtured by particular cultures and thus are more likely to be found among members of some communities than others. Aida (1994), for example, notes that extraversion—a variable positively correlating with WTC—is more characteristic among Americans than the Japanese.

Much in the same vein, Engelbert (2004, p. 204) clarifies that "individuals of one culture show a concentration of behaviour patterns which in another culture are not observed with the same frequency, meaning that the observed features exist, normally distributed, in both cultures under comparison, but with a different strength of emphasis". This dissimilarity in the distribution of particular features across cultures may be due to it having stronger and deeper historical and cultural roots in some communities than others. For example, Bogdanowska-Jakubowska (2011) observes that one of the traits cultivated for generations in Poland is modesty. Although after 1989, the quality is not believed to be the "top value" by the younger generation of Poles anymore, "modesty was, and still is, considered by some Poles one of the fundamental values that should be acquired by young people" (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2011, p. 170). Revealing an appropriate level of modesty by the application of particular strategies seems to be prescribed in the norm of the Polish self-presentation style. Among these strategies is not only avoiding direct boasting about one's private or career successes, (e.g., Grybosiowa, 2002; Jakubowska, 1996) or lowering one's gaze, but also "timidity and lack of assertiveness visible in responses to compliments and congratulations (which are often played down or even rejected) (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2011, p. 171)". Though indirectly, modesty may be expected to affect the content of a conversation, the manner in which it is held, and even the decision on whether to initiate or join a conversation or not. The decision might result from the speaker's perceptions not only of situational characteristics (Rautmann et al.,

2015) but also of his or her self-perceptions, which again may be filtered through such cultural traits as modesty.

2.2 Culture in the Model of L2 WTC

Numerous studies have shown that WTC in a FL is "not a simple manifestation of WTC in L1" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). In fact, some researchers have even observed a negative correlation between L1 and L2 WTC (e.g., Charos, 1994). All this suggests that L2 WTC is a unique construct, governed by its own peculiar rules and that "the change of language imposes a 'dramatic' transformation of the communication setting" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). The change may lead to high levels of anxiety and withdrawal, caused by difficulties with opening oneself to new cultures, experiencing destabilization of one's self-concept acquired prior to encountering a new culture (Gardner, 2001), or by considering one's genuineness to be threatened when interacting with others in a language that has not been fully mastered (Horwitz, 2017).

Defining L2 WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2," MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) put forward a heuristic pyramid model of the construct. It has been suggested that L2 WTC and its actual use are shaped by a range of interrelated linguistic, communicative and socio-psychological factors (Peng, 2014). While some of these antecedents can be considered typical situational variables (layers I-III of the model), e.g., desire to communicate with a specific person, state communicative self-competence or anxiety, others are more distant and stable variables (layers IV-VI), such as motivation, communicative competence, personality, and intergroup climate. Many studies have lent support to the heuristic model of MacIntyre et al. (1998). What has attracted particular attention of many researchers are the more distant and stable variables of L2 WTC. Studies exploring the nature of the construct from a macro-perspective have proven, for example, that anxiety (e.g., MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011), self-perceived communicative competence (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2002), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002), ideal L2 self (e.g., Ryan, 2009), beliefs related to FL learning (e.g., Peng, 2007), and attitudes (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000) are indeed significant antecedents of L2 WTC and its use. Further research, though initially less popular, have examined the more dynamic nature of the construct, focusing on the immediate situational factors, just to mention task-interest (e.g., Eddy-U, 2015; Dörnyei, 2009), familiarity with the interlocutors (e.g., Cao & Phil, 2006), group cohesiveness and classroom climate (e.g., Peng, 2007; Riasati, 2012) or class size (Cao & Phil, 2006; Khazaei et al., 2012). A framework offering a "comprehensive and systematic approach to the study of situational antecedents of WTC," in which a clear distinction between situational cues (objective features of a learning situation) and situational characteristics (a student's subjective perception of the learning situation) is made, has been forwarded recently by Zhang et al. (2018). Finally, Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2017) have managed to

combine the macro- and micro-perspectives, not only verifying the stable dispositions of L2 WTC but also providing a look at how it may fluctuate over time in particular situations.

When the role of culture in the model of WTC is concerned, initially it was discussed and examined in reference to intergroup climate. Placed at the very bottom of the heuristic pyramid model (Box 11) together with personality (Box 12), it was considered the "basis or platform on which the rest of the influences operate; the foundation on which the pyramid is built" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 54). Usually it has been viewed through the perspective of *ethnolinguistic vitality* and *subjective group vitality* (Giles et al., 1977). The latter, which has appeared to be more important in SLA studies, is related to how L2 students perceive the economic and social importance, and power of their own and the TL culture. Observations show that for some nations, for example Poles, English—a native language of high status countries—has always been attractive. The perspective of achieving a good command of English has usually been more or less directly associated with the possibility of joining a more prestigious society and the perspective of more open access to attractive and better-paid employment, perspectives for self-development, or interesting social connections (see e.g., Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Consequently, as the example shows, culture can shape, among others, motivation to learn a FL, one of the significant antecedents of L2 WTC.

Culture is also perceived as a filter through which several situational factors determine L2 WTC. For example, Zhang et al. (2018) explain that the way certain situation characteristics and cues, such as task-usefulness or teaching style, are perceived by the students depend upon the culture the students were brought up in. An analogous view was also held by Wen and Clément (2003), who called for a need to design a Chinese indigenous model of L2 WTC that would differ from the pyramid model of L2 WTC built on the basis of learner behaviours typical for Western countries. Having observed that in the case of Chinese learners, the desire to communicate does not straightforwardly lead to the readiness to speak, they suggested modifying the original model by relocating some of its variables. According to the researchers, the state of being ready to communicate may be hindered directly by the classroom societal context (group cohesiveness and teacher support), personality factors (risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity), motivational orientation (affiliation, task-orientation), and affective perceptions (inhibited monitor and positive expectation of evaluation). As they sum up, "Confucian cultural values are the dominant force shaping the individual's perception and way of learning, which is manifested in L2 communication" (Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 18).

The specificity of the Chinese cultural influence on L2 WTC was also examined by Peng (2007). On the basis of her observations, she concluded that culture affected both internal learner variables, such as communicative competence, language anxiety, and risk-taking, as well as external factors, namely group cohesiveness, teacher support and classroom organization. In her later work, Peng (2014, p. 29) forwarded four aspects of "Chinese culture of learning and communication" that would shape the L2 WTC of Chinese students. Among them are respect for the teacher and the teacher-centered classroom culture, which traditionally do not allow the student to take

initiative or ask questions unless encouraged to do so. Learning through memorization and imitation rather than interaction is the second characteristic of FL classroom learning/teaching that can explain students' lower levels of WTC. The third aspect is related to modesty and humbleness, typically observed in Chinese culture (e.g., Gao, 1998), which "may predispose individuals not to be assertive" or display reserved behavior in the classroom (Peng, 2014, p. 31). The fourth aspect related strongly to Chinese culture is face protection. Caused by the fear of being ridiculed or negatively evaluated by others, it typically leads to silence or limited communication in the classroom. Relying on observations of Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), Peng (2014, p. 31) clarifies, "Chinese people are sensitive to their public image and concerned about what others think of them. 'Losing face' will bring disgrace and humiliation on a person and even reduce him or her to being unaccepted socially".

Culture-specific rules and behaviours that could affect L2 WTC were also observed in other countries. For example, Pattapong (2009) reported WTC in an EFL classroom setting of Thai learners to be determined by cultural mentalities that shaped both classroom practices and the students' perceptions related to FL learning. It is also Matsuoka (2006) who considered difficulties with speaking in a FL to be culture-based. As she explained, limited L2 WTC of Japanese students can be accounted for by their inborn "predisposition against verbal behaviour" (Peng, 2014, p. 29).

2.3 The Link Between Self-assessment and Culture in the Model of L2 WTC

Among the most immediate antecedents of L2 WTC is self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998)—a construct proposed originally by Clément et al. (Clément, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985) in their social context model. The model is based on the premise that motivation to master an L2 and the final level achieved are shaped by self-confidence, which in turn is mediated by ethnolinguistic vitality and frequency of contact with the target language. Self-confidence is said to comprise an affective and cognitive component. While the former concerns L2 anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), the latter—self-evaluation of learners' L2 skills. Some studies (MacIntyre et al. 2003) have shown that the two can differ in their "relationship with L2 WTC" (Peng, 2014). Most data, however, suggest that they are interrelated variables working in tandem, namely, that students having a high opinion about their communicative skills would reveal at the same time lower levels of anxiety, and the other way round (e.g., Fushino, 2010; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 1999).

Self-confidence, entailing perceived competence and a lack of anxiety, has been found to positively correlate with levels of L2 WTC in several cultural settings, for example in Canada (Clément et al., 2003), China (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), Iran (Ghonsooly et al., 2012), Japan (Fushino, 2010; Yashima, 2002), Korea (Kim, 2004), or Turkey (Cetinkaya, 2005). It has, however, also been observed that self-confidence in L2 use is culture-related, with it revealing significantly higher levels

in some countries than in others. For example, on the basis of a large-scale survey study conducted among 2156 university learners of English in Hong Kong, Liu and Littlewood (1997) concluded that East Asian students' passiveness and inclination to stay silent in the FL classroom was due to their "lack of confidence in their English competence" (Zhang et al., 2018, p. 232). At this point it is worth underlining the fact that "since the choice of whether to communicate is a cognitive one, it is likely to be influenced more by one's perceptions of competence (of which one usually is aware) than one's actual Foreign Language competence (of which one may be totally unaware)" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991, p. 27).

The perceived competence of a L2 learner entails his or her self-assessment. Usually, however, self-assessment in reference to L2 WTC has been considered from the perspective of the so called *self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC)*, regarded as "self-perception of adequate ability to pass along or give information; the ability to make known by talking or writing" (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988, p. 109). Thus, to diagnose perceived competence of FL learners, an instrument (or its adaption) designed by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) was most frequently applied. It consisted in the respondents reflecting on how competent they believed they were in speaking a FL/L2, with the level of acquaintance with the interlocutor(s) and type of speaking task functioning as mediating variables (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; Mystkowska-Wietelak & Pawlak, 2017). An alternative approach to FL self-assessment was used in a study conducted among Polish high school learners of English (Baran-Łucarz, 2015). This time the participants did not evaluate their general ability to communicate but were asked to assess their level of particular target language subskills, such as fluency, interactive skills, competence of and actual abilities to use English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary correctly. Not only did the data show that the self-perceptions of particular FL sub-skills were significantly correlated with the levels of WTC in and outside the FL classroom. The outcomes also suggested that Polish students were very much concerned about their accuracy at the phonetic, grammatical and lexical levels, and that they evidently feared being negatively evaluated by teachers and their interlocutors and on the basis of these criteria, which in turn shaped their L2 WTC in and outside the FL classroom. Further studies, however, are evidently needed to verify whether this is a universal or rather culture-specific trend.

Many researchers (e.g., Lockley, 2013; Mercer, 2011) posit that indeed self-evaluation—an umbrella term embracing self-assessment—is cultural-dependent. Such a view is shared by Heine, Lehman, Markus and Kitayama (1999), who clarify that self-evaluation includes "self-criticism, self-discipline, effort, perseverance, the importance of others, shame and apologies, balance and emotional restraint" (p. 769), all of which are deeply rooted in and shaped by the culture we are brought up in. It seems that while some cultures are more prone to over-estimate their FL skills, others under-estimate them. Data adding support to this claim have been provided by the Eurobarometer (2012). It shows, for example, that while 90% of the Dutch respondents believe they could speak English well enough to have a conversation, only 33% of the Polish respondents and 34% of Italians held such an opinion. The

discrepancy may be due to, among others, modesty—a concept discussed briefly above.

What may constitute a basis for hypothesizing that the link between learners' FL self-assessment and their L2 WTC varies across cultures is also the typology of cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (1980). Having conducted comprehensive studies in over 70 countries representing different national cultures, aimed at distinguishing preferences and values across which cultures diverge (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010), six dimensions have been identified. Two of them might be worth having a closer look at in reference to the problem dealt with in this chapter. One of them is uncertainty avoidance, which denotes the degree to which members of national cultures are tolerant of ambiguity and the way they deal with uncertainties caused by unknown, novel situations filled with unexpectancies, which do not allow to follow pre-set rigid rules. Such situations and contexts appear to be more anxiety-breeding and threatening to some cultural communities than others (Hofstede et al., 2010). Social groups scoring high on this dimension attempt to minimize the potential chances of experiencing such situations and aim to introduce a feeling of security by creating rigorous codes of behavior, beliefs and rules. Their tendency to avoid ambiguity might be seen also in communication, especially in a language other than L1. The situation of speaking in a language that has not been not fully mastered is already threatening to the L2 speaker due to it being full of unexpectancies and the discomfort caused by one's genuineness being endangered (Horwitz, 2017). The negative feeling can be expected to be boosted when one's FL subskills are perceived as inadequate and insufficient to manage the task successfully (communicate effectively), without being evaluated negatively by interlocutors and losing one's face. For the sake of the study reported further in this chapter, it is important to mention that Poland scores higher in this dimension (93 out of 100 possible points) than Italy (75 points out of 100) (Cultural Dimensions, Poland, 2010; Cultural Dimensions, Italy 2010).

The other dimension that can be a rationale for assuming that speakers of different cultures would vary in the concern about their TL proficiency level in respect to L2 WTC is long-/short-term orientation. It refers to how particular societies link with their past and deal with the challenges of the present and future. Observations show that various cultures prioritize these two targets differently. Those who score low on this dimension (short-term oriented cultures) are inclined to respect traditional norms and ways of thinking, remaining careful and even suspicious about the future, and focusing on achieving fast results. High scorers (long-term oriented cultures) reveal more of a pragmatic approach, and value effort and thrift as a means of preparation for the future (Hofstede et al., 2010). What differentiates the two types of culture in communication is particularly "respect for tradition", "protecting one's 'face'", and "fulfilling social obligations … regardless of cost," which is appreciated by the short-term oriented societies, and "focus on exemplary standards, such a politeness, obedience, and honoring elders" in the case of long-term cultures (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011, p. 237). As observations show, Italians evidently surpass Poles in their long-term orientation, with the former scoring 61 points and the latter 38 points (Cultural Dimensions, Poland 2010; Cultural Dimensions, Italy 2010).

The theoretical considerations and earlier studies presented above encourage to speculate that the relationship between FL self-assessment and WTC in both classroom and natural settings can vary significantly depending upon the cultural background of the students. The dissimilarity may be observed not only in the case of learners coming from remote continents, such as Europe, America, or Asia, but also among students of different European countries, which usually adopt the same approach to FL teaching (communicative approach), and follow the same principles set by CEFR. Despite these analogies, every country will have its own unique culture, including the "culture of learning" (Peng, 2014, p. 30). As mentioned earlier, the latter may shape students' perceptions of the importance of L2 correctness and proficiency in various subskills. Thus, it seems also worth examining which self-assessed subskills are more significantly related to L2 WTC in various countries. Since nowadays communication in English among members of different European more or less distant countries has become more probable and takes place on a daily basis, examining the dissimilarities in the link between self-assessment and L2 WTC among speakers of these countries is particularly relevant. Aiming to shed more light on this matter, a study involving Italian and Polish students was conducted with the main research questions as follows:

1. Is there a significant difference between the self-perceived levels of English subskills and of L2 WTC in and outside the FL classroom of the Polish and Italian participants?
2. Is there a significant difference in the strength of relationship between self-assessment of English subskills and WTC in English in and/or outside the FL classroom observed in the case of the Polish and Italian learners?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants—Socio-Demographic Information

An attempt was made to find students of two different national cultures learning English as a foreign language, representing a comparable English proficiency level, age, and having an analogous English learning experience in terms of duration and type of provided instruction. Two representative groups fulfilling most of the criteria set for selecting the participants were chosen, with one coming from the south west of Poland (Wrocław) and the other—from Northern Italy (Reggio Emilia). All the participants attended a lyceum,[3] had 3 lessons of English per week, were from 17 to 19 years old and were considered by their teachers to be representing a B1 +/B2 level of English according to the CEFR (2011). They had been studying English as a FL for an average of 9,7 years in the case of Polish subjects and 11,3 years in the case of

[3]In both countries, lyceum is a comprehensive secondary school attended by students aged from about 15–18 who intend to continue studying different majors at universities. It ends with final exams, among others in a FL (usually in English) at B2 level.

Table 1 Information about the participants of the study

Characteristic	Poland	Italy
N	35	35
Type of school/form	'Liceum'/II	'Liceo'/IV and V
Age	Mean = 17.5; min = 17; max = 18	Mean = 17.8; min = 17; max = 19
Gender	M = 12/F = 23	M = 9/F = 26
Proficiency level	B1 +/B2	B1 +/B2
Years of learning English	Mean = 9.7; min = 7; max = 13	Mean = 11.3; min = 9; max = 13
Visits/stays in other countries	51%/0%	68%/0%
Contact with English	YouTube (76%), movies (62%), songs (83%), gaming (68%), occasional contact with English-speaking peers (70%) systematic contact with English-speaking peers (14%)	YouTube (70%), movies (56%), songs (72%), gaming (57%), occasional contact with English-speaking peers (65%) systematic contact with English-speaking peers (8%)

Italian subjects. None of them declared having stayed in a foreign country for longer than 2 months. Some, however, (51% of Poles and 68% of Italians) had paid at least one short vocational visit to another country. In the case of both groups of students, most of their everyday contact with English outside the classroom was limited to watching short films on YouTube, movies in their original versions (usually with subtitles), listening to English songs, and interactive Internet gaming with people of other nationalities. Although occasional contacts (up to 3 times a year) with speakers of English were reported by many respondents (70% of Poles and 65% of Italians), only a few students (14% of the Poles and 8% of the Italians) would meet with English-speaking peers regularly (i.e., a few times a month).

While the Polish participants attended one of four groups taught by two different teachers, the Italians belonged to two classes run by the same teacher. After rejecting a few students who provided incomplete data or represented other nations than Italian or Polish (e.g., Romanian and Ukrainian), 35 participants representing each national culture were taken into consideration in further data analysis. The basic information about the participants are summarized in Table 1.

3.2 EFL Learning Experience of the Participants

To verify whether the students involved in the research were provided with a comparable type of instruction in the FL classroom in high school, information about the teaching/learning process was gathered with the use of a 9-item questionnaire filled out by the high school teachers, who had been running classes with the

study participants for two (in the case of Polish students) and three (in the case of Italian students) years. The questions addressed the following matters: the prevailing teaching method(s), the proportion of L1 and L2 used in the classroom, time spent on practising different FL skills and aspects, types of exercises and materials used to develop speaking skills, and approach to errors produced by the students. While 6 items had the form of open questions (e.g., those inquiring about time spent on each subskill during the lessons, the method/approach used, and proportion of L1 and L2 used), the remaining (referring to tasks and materials used during the lesson) provided the respondents with options to choose from, allowing them to add further suggestions. The question addressing the approach to error correction consisted of 5 different statements that the teachers were asked to agree/disagree with using a 4-point Likert scale. The information about the treatment offered to the Italian and Polish learners is summarized in Table 2.

The answers seem to suggest that all the students were taught following the principles of the communicative approach, in which speaking was the priority, practised via various kinds of information gap activities and with the use of different materials and resources. There are, however, some discrepancies, consisting in the approach to errors, amount of L1 used during the lesson, and distribution of time spent on particular TL skills and subskills. While the Italian teacher reported correcting errors mainly when they hindered meaning, usually by encouraging self-correction, the Polish teachers claimed to be correcting errors either always or usually, and not only those that could cause misunderstandings. The errors were corrected mainly by means of teacher correction, with one of the teachers reporting to be using also peer and self-correction. Moreover, it appears that the Italian teacher encouraged more TL use in the classroom (80% of the lesson) than the Polish teachers (60–70% of the lesson). Finally, comparing the answers provided by the teachers, in the Polish lessons there was more time devoted to grammar and vocabulary and less to speaking and pronunciation than in the Italian ones.

3.3 Instruments

Besides the teacher questionnaire mentioned above, which allowed to view the characteristics of the teaching offered to the participants, three other batteries were applied to enable answering the research questions, namely, a *Measure of FL Self-Assessment (MFLSA)*, a *Measure of WTC in the FL Classroom (MWTC-IFLC)*, and a *Measure of WTC outside the FL Classroom (MWTC-OFLC)*. All of them had the form of self-report questionnaires with a 6-point Likert scale. They were prepared in two language versions—a Polish and Italian one—so as to limit the risk of the participants misunderstanding any of its fragments. The Polish versions of the batteries were designed and distributed among the Polish participants by the author of this paper. The translation of instruments into Italian and coordination of all the data collecting procedures was taken care of by an academic and researcher from the

Table 2 Comparison of treatment offered to the polish and italian participants during their english lessons

	Poland	Italy
Number of Ts	2	1
Teaching experience of Ts	15–16 years	30 years
% of English used during the lessons	60–70	80
Teaching method/approach	mainly CA, eclecticism	CA, "functional CA"
Minutes per week: Writing Speaking Listening Reading Vocabulary Grammar Pronunciation	W: 20 S: 20–30 L: 20–25 R: 20–30 V: 30–45 G: 30–45 P: 0–10	W: 20 S: 40 L: 20 R: 30 V: 20 G: 30 P: 20
Types of speaking exercises	Discussions, picture discriptions, role plays, info gap activities, presentations of projects,	Discussions, picture discriptions, role plays, info gap activities, presentations dedicated to literary and daily topics,
Materials used to practise speaking	Coursebook, other speaking resource books, blogs, websites, YouTube, songs	Coursebook, other speaking resource books, blogs, web sites, magazines, newspapers, YouTube, songs
Approach to errors	• Corrected almost always when produced. • Self-correction rarely/usually used. • Peer correction rarely/usually used.	• Corrected mainly when hindering meaning, not any time when produced. • Self-correction usually used. • Peer-correction rarely used.

Ts—teachers; CA—communicative approach

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. The three instruments are described in a detailed manner below.

Measure of FL self-assessment. The MFLSA, aimed at examining the participants' self-perceived level of particular English subskills, was adapted from an earlier version of a battery designed by the author of this paper for another study (Baran-Łucarz, 2015). This time, however, new items were added to raise the level of internal consistency of each subscale. After introducing the amendments, a pilot version of the instrument written in Polish was filled out by a group of 12 high school learners. The feedback on the questionnaire provided by the students resulted in excluding two items and reformulating three others. In the final form, the instrument consisted of 28 items, with the first two subscales referring to pronunciation (12 items) and grammar (9 items). The next two subscales concerned respectively

vocabulary appropriacy and range (4 items), and fluency (2 items). The questionnaire, complemented with a few modifications and requests for further necessary changes that would address difficulties encountered specifically by Italians when learning and using English, was emailed to Italy in its English version. After the cooperating Italian researcher introduced a few other amendments and translated the survey into Italian, it was distributed to a group of English majors studying at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia to check its clarity. They found the instrument clear, though suggested reformulating a few statements.

The Polish and Italian participants' task was to assess not only their theoretical knowledge of English in with regard to particular subsystems/subskills (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), but also the level of accuracy and correctness of these subskills in their speech. The level was estimated by the respondents on a 6-point Likert scale, in which 6 denoted a '*very high*' and 1 a '*very low*' level of knowledge or practical competencies in particular subskills. Eventually, every participant had one total score for each aspect, which was the result of adding up the values (from 1 to 6) chosen by him or her for the items within every subskill. The more the subject scored, the higher his or her level of self-assessment for particular aspects subskills was considered to be.

The items in the pronunciation subscale addressed the following matters: general level of pronunciation; pronunciation at word level, embracing such areas as suffixes (e.g., *–ate*, *-ous*, (*able*), phonetically difficult words caused by interference from spelling (e.g., *seize, fruit, meadow*), overgeneralization of rules (*e.g., recipe, blood*), selected letter sequences *(e.g., -ough*, (*ought*, *-eign*), pronunciation of proper names (e.g., *Thames, Edinburgh, Turkey, Madrid, Japan*), word stress of cognates (e.g., *success, guitar, museum*) and of frequently mispronounced longer vocabulary items (e.g., *determine, development*). Other pronunciation aspects self-assessed by the participants were the pronunciation of weak forms, proper use of different intonation contours; pronunciation of vowels (distinction between long and short vowels, and between ash,/e/and/ʌ/) and consonants (velar n, interdentals), and consistency in using either the British or American accent. Most of the pronunciation aspects selected for the battery were those that are considered to cause difficulties to all learners of English, irrelevant of their L1 (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015; Derwing & Munro, 2015). However, two items were modified in the pronunciation subscale of the Italian version of the MFLSA. First of all, two statements addressing the pronunciation of velar/n/and interdentals were combined into one, leaving place for a new item. Secondly, the pronunciation of the/h/sound was added to this statement, which is often treated as a silent sound by Italians (e.g., Hudson, 2013; Modesti, 2015). Finally, the free slot enabled forming a new item concerning a common habit of Italians, consisting in adding a schwa to word final voiced obstruents (e.g., Hudson, 2013; Modesti, 2015). Examples of items used in this subscale are as follows: *'Using consequently one accent, e.g., British or American English'* (for both language versions), *'Pronunciation of words ending with a consonant, as in the sentence—'I ate soup for lunch' (stopping with the final consonant, without adding an extra vowel.)'* (for the Italian version). The internal consistency of the pronunciation subcomponent of

MFLSA, estimated with Cronbach alpha, reached a satisfactory level of .93 for both the Polish and Italian versions.

In the grammar subscale there were items addressing grammatical competence in general and grammar correctness in speaking, the use of the auxiliary 'do', word order, articles, proper usage of present, future and past tenses, modal verbs and more complex structures (relative clauses and conditionals). While all of these are structures used frequently in everyday situations, many of them are difficult to master by FL learners irrespective of their L1. In the Italian version, separate items referring to the use of the subject pronoun *('The proper use of pronouns in spoken sentences, as in "It's impossible!"'*) and the present perfect tense were formed, since these aspects are considered particularly challenging for Italian learners of English (e.g., Bogart, 2007). The reliability of the vocabulary subcomponent of MFLSA was .94 for the Polish version and .90 for the Italian version.

When the vocabulary subscale is concerned, next to a general statement about the range of vocabulary, there were items concerning the use and understanding of idioms. Among the items was the following one*: 'The use of idioms, such as "You're pulling my leg!" "It's not my cup of tea!'" in speech.* Other items referred to the use of colloquial expressions (e.g., *'What's up, mate?', 'How's it going?'*), and false friends in conversations. In the case of the last aspect, the examples provided in the Italian and Polish versions of the instrument were not exactly the same. In the Italian version, the item *bravo, library, sympathetic* were used (e.g., Nicholls, 2004), while the Polish version had the following examples: *dress, actually, and sympathetic* (e.g., Wiktionary n.d.). The Cronbach alpha achieved for this subscale was .89 for the Polish version and .82 for the Italian version.

Finally, in the last two items the participants were to try to evaluate their level of fluency, represented by (1) the rate of speech and (2) the amount and length of pauses made within sentences when speaking. The reliability of this subscale reached .93 in the case of the Polish version and .87—the Italian version.

Measures of L2 WTC. Since formal and informal FL settings are governed by their own unique rules, the level of L2 WTC was measured separately with respect to these two different contexts. Thus, although a well-validated measure of L2 WTC is available (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2001), a decision was made to apply independent instruments—one addressing eagerness to join in or initiate conversations specifically and exclusively in the FL classroom and the other tapping into willingness to speak a FL in a naturalistic setting. Moreover, unlike the standardized battery of MacIntyre et al. (2001), the instruments applied in this study focused entirely on oral communication, rather than other skills.

The *Measure of WTC in the FL classroom (MWTC-IFLC)* consisted of 12 statements referring to various speaking activities that are commonly used in FL courses, such as debates, prepared presentations, role-plays, information-gap tasks. The participants were to specify their usual extent of eagerness/willingness to take part in them, by choosing a value from 1 to 6, where 1 meant *'very reluctant'* and 6—*'very willing'* in the case of each item. Consequently, the higher the participants scored, the more willing to communicate in the classroom they were considered to be. The

values chosen for the 12 items were summed up for every participant and denoted his or her general degree of WTC in the formal setting.

Borrowing the idea from McCroskey's (1992) instrument measuring L1 WTC, two additional criteria were followed when designing the statements, namely (1) the degree of acquaintance with and affection towards the interlocutor/s (A: a close friend, B: a liked classmate, C: a classmate the respondent did not know well nor spent time with him/her after school) and (2) the number of interlocutors involved in the speaking tasks, naturally resulting from their types (dyads for role-plays, small groups for information-gap tasks, medium-sized groups for debates, and large groups for presentations). All four types of activities appeared three times in the battery, each time in reference to (an) interlocutor(s) liked to a different extent. A considerable thought was given to most possible combinations of grouping arrangements that the speaking tasks might take place in during a typical FL lesson. Thus, while the role-play performed in a dyad appeared in the instrument in three versions, addressing separately the situation of talking to a close friend, a liked classmate or a student the respondent did not know well nor spent time with after school, the other speaking tasks referred to various probable task settings performed in the following mixed configurations: A + C, A + B+C or B + C. Here are a few examples of statements from the *MWTC-IFLC* with an indication of the grouping arrangement pattern provided in brackets:

- *Explaining the rules of my favourite game to about 3-7 liked classmates and students I don't hang out with after school.* (B + C)
- *Delivering a prepared talk to about 15 or more classmates, among whom there are close friends, liked classmates and students I don't hang out with after school.* (A + B+C)
- *Convincing a close friend to purchase a particular item.* (A)
- *Taking part in a debate with about 8-14 classmates, among whom there are close friends and students I don't hang out with after school.* (A + C).

The internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) of the instrument in both language versions appeared to be satisfactory, namely .90 in the case of the Polish version and .89 in the case of the Italian version.

Similarly to the WTC classroom instrument, the *Measure of WTC outside the FL classroom (MWTC-OFLC)* contained 12 items. This time, however, the items addressed potential real-life situations in which the participants could be faced with an opportunity to use spoken TL. Since WTC refers to an act of volition to participate in conversations (MacIntyre et al., 1998), the items addressed situations in the participants' home country, in which initiating or joining a talk with a non-L1 speaker was possible, rather than in a foreign country, where using the TL is rather a must enabling active participation in everyday life, normal functioning or even survival. Since in naturalistic situations it is both native speakers of English and people of other nations that the participants were assumed to be able to have a conversation with, 6 of the items of the MWTC-OFLC addressed WTC with native speakers (NSs), and 6 with non-native speakers (NNSs). As before, the participants were asked to agree/disagree with to a various extent with the provided statements, by choosing an option from

1 to 6, where 1 denoted '*strongly disagree*', while 6—'*strongly agree*'. The values chosen for each of the 6 items referring to WTC-OFL with NSs were summed up individually for every respondent to denote his or her level of WTC outside the classroom with native speakers of English. The same procedure was followed when estimating the participants' degree of WTC-OFL with non-native speakers. Finally, the points achieved for WTC-OFL with NSs and NNSs were added for each student to represent his or her general (total) level of WTC outside the classroom. As in the case of the battery diagnosing L2 WTC in the formal setting, higher values denoted higher levels of eagerness to speak English outside the classroom. Here are a few examples of the items addressing WTC-OFL:

- *I would be willing/eager to make a free tour of my city with a few native speakers of English.*
- *If I was introduced to a non-native speaker of English, I would be happy to have the opportunity to talk to him/her.*
- *When having a conversation with a native speaker of English, I would most probably be looking for a chance to finish it as quickly as possible.*

In the case of the last example of the statement, which was repeated with reference to a conversation with a non-native speaker, a reversed scoring key was used. Cronbach alpha showed satisfactory levels not only for the total measure of WTC-OFL in both language versions (i.e., .93 for the Polish version and .87 for the Italian version) but also for the WTC-OFL with NSs subcomponent (i.e., .87 for the Polish version and .83 for the Italian one) and the WTC-OFL with NNSs subcomponent (i.e., .88 for the Polish version and .82 for the Italian version).

3.4 Procedures

The empirical data were collected in September and October 2015. In both countries the questionnaires were distributed among the participants during one of their English lessons. They were informed that the study would help explain various aspects of FL learning and teaching, were warranted anonymity and allowed to resign from filling out the forms. None of students present during the lessons objected to participating in the research. The participants were instructed on how to fill out the forms, with special attention drawn to giving sincere responses both in the questionnaires and to open questions. Completing all the pen-and-paper tests took approximately 20 min. All the batteries were printed out on two sides of one piece of paper, so as to eliminate the risk of any data being confused or lost. The form opened with a few inquiries concerning socio-demographic information (age, years of learning English, level, visits and stays in FL countries). Then the MFLSA proceeded, followed by an open question about potential reasons for reluctance to speak in English in the FL classroom. Next, the MWTC-IFLC was filled out, succeeded by another open question—this time about possible reasons for reluctance to take part in conversations in English in real-life settings. Finally, the participants completed the MWTC-OFLC questionnaire.

The analysis of data gathered among the Polish and Italian students[4] was divided into two phases—a quantitative and qualitative one. When the former is concerned, it started with feeding the achieved raw scores into Excel. What followed was computing the means achieved by each participant for self-assessment of particular subskills (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency) and for general (total) self-assessment, diagnosed with the MFLSA, and for L2 WTC in the classroom and L2 WTC outside the classroom in general (total) and separately for L2 WTC with native speaker and non-native speakers. Then the means were transferred to SPSS, in which all the further calculations were carried out. First, descriptive statistics were computed (means, SD, min. and max. values) separately for the data provided by the Polish and Italian participants. Before checking whether the data provided by the Italian and Polish participants were significantly different, the assumptions underlying the tests comparing two independent samples were verified. By examining the kurtoses and with the test of Shapiro-Wilk, the normality distribution assumption was checked. Then the homogeneity of variances was verified with Leven's test. When the two assumptions were met, the t-test was computed. If at least one of the assumptions was violated, the non-parametric test for examining the significance of differences among two independent samples (Polish and Italian) was used, namely U Mann-Whitney's test. Then the strength of relationship between self-assessment of different subskills and L2 WTC in and outside the classroom for the Italian and Polish samples was examined by the use of Spearman correlation. Finally, to find out whether the links between self-assessment of particular subskills and L2 WTC in and outside the classroom were significantly different for the Polish and Italian participants, the Fischer z-score transformation was applied.

When the qualitative part of the study is concerned, it seems worth mentioning that the open answers were provided by the participants in their mother tongues and translated into English by the author of this paper (in the case of the responses provided by Poles) and the Italian cooperating academic (in the case of the Italian responses). The answers were then compiled separately for the two cultures. On the basis of the answers provided by the respondents, several codes were established representing different reasons for reluctance to speak in English. Finally, an attempt was made to find common trends within and across the cultural groups, by observing the frequencies with which certain responses occurred.

4 Results

In this section the outcomes of the research are presented. It is divided into two parts. While the first part reports the quantitative data, the second—the qualitative findings.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the outcomes of the Measure of FL Self-Assessment achieved by the Polish and Italian participants. The last column

[4]Scans of the questionnaires filled out by the Italian students were sent to the author of this paper by the cooperating Italian academic.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and results of the independent T-test and U Mann-Whitney's test computed for the self-assessed English subskills of the Italian and Polish participants

		Mean	Min.	Max.	SD	$t(68)/U(68)$
Total *(max = 168)*	IT	126.80	92.00	158.00	15.50	$U = 857$***
	PL	99.77	53.00	147.00	24.02	
Gram. *(max = 54)*	IT	44.97	32.00	56.00	5.56	$U = 901{,}500$ ***
	PL	33.07	16.00	54.00	9.76	
Voc. *(max = 24)*	IT	16.77	11.00	24.00	3.03	$t = -2.752$**
	PL	14.30	6.00	24.00	4.29	
Pron. *(max = 66)*	IT	56.97	41.00	72.00	7.51	$t = -4.497$ ***
	PL	46.17	23.00	65.00	47.00	
Fluency *(max = 12)*	IT	8.31	4.00	10.00	1.57	$U = 790$ ***
	PL	6.23	2.00	11.00	2.42	

Note ***$p < .001$, **$p < .005$
IT—Italian participants; *PL*—Polish participants; Gram.—grammar; Voc.—grammar; Voc.—vocabulary; Pron.—pronunciation

reports the results of either the parametric or non-parametric tests, namely the independent t-test or U Mann-Whitney's test, depending upon whether the normality distribution and homogeneity of variances assumptions were met or not.

The results of the t-tests and U Mann-Whitney's tests show that the self-perceived levels of the English subskills of the Polish and Italian participants differed significantly. What can be easily noticed is that in the case of each subskill, the scores of the Italian learners are higher than those of the Polish students, which suggests that the former considered themselves to be more competent in English than the latter. Unfortunately, since no tests diagnosing the actual level of the self-perceived L2 subskills of the participants were conducted, it is not possible to state whether indeed the Italians outperformed the Poles in all the inquired TL subskills. It is, however, worth stressing the fact that it is the perceived rather than the authentic level of the subskills in English that is of our interest and needed for further analysis in this study. A more careful examination of the data allows an observation that the biggest difference in scores obtained by the Polish and Italian learners were found with regard to grammar and pronunciation, with the Poles achieving in both cases an average score of approximately 60% and the Italians over 80% out of the possible total score for self-assessment of these particular subskills.

Figure 1 depicts divergences in the level of WTC in and outside the FL classroom between the Polish and Italian participants of the study. The tendency is analogous to the one observed earlier, that is, the scores of the Italians reach higher levels than those of the Polish students.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics and results of comparing the outcomes achieved by the Polish and Italian participants on the measures of WTC in and outside the FL classroom.

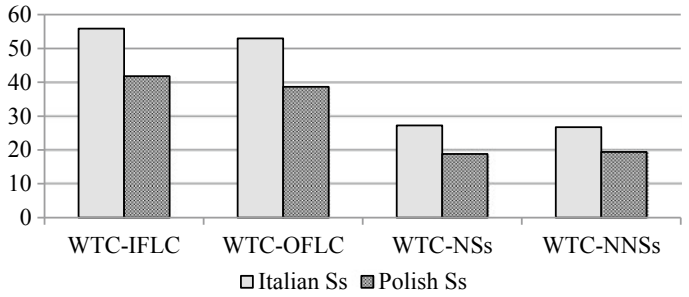

Fig. 1 Mean scores for the MWTC-IFLC and MWTC-OFLC achieved by the Italian and Polish participants. *Note* Ss—students; IFLC—inside the FL classroom; OFLC—outside the FL classroom; NSs—native speakers; NNSs—non-native speakers

Table 4 Descriptive statistics and results of the independent T-test U Mann-Whitney's test computed for the outcomes of the MWTC-IFLC and MWTC-OFLC with native (NSs) and non-native (NNSs) speakers achieved by Italian and Polish participants

		Mean	Min.	Max.	SD	$t(68)/U(68)$
WTC-IFLC	IT	55.87	37.00	67.00	7.17	$t = -6.372$ ***
	PL	41.82	24.00	60.00	10.15	
WTC-OFLC	IT	52.97	29.00	67.00	9.51	$U = 922{,}500$ ***
	PL	38.63	24.00	70.00	10.53	
WTC-NSs	IT	27.27	16.00	34.00	4.70	$U = -879{,}500$***
	PL	19.80	10.00	42.00	6.86	
WTC-NNSs	IT	26.77	16.00	34.00	4.70	$t = -6.181$***
	PL	19.43	11.00	35.00	5.60	

Note ***$p < .001$

Both the parametric and non-parametric tests show statistically significant differences between the Polish and Italian levels of WTC in and outside the EFL classroom. Though this time not verified by statistical tests, the scores achieved by the two nations for WTC in the FL classroom do not seem to differ significantly from those obtained for WTC in the naturalistic setting, though they are somewhat higher in the case of the former. Similarly, the discrepancies between WTC with native and non-native speakers within the two cultural groups do not appear to be meaningful, which at first glance suggests that for the Italian and Polish learners involved in this study, the cultural background of the interlocutor does not seem to determine their decision to join in or initiate a conversation in English.

The final step of the quantitative data analysis addressed the second and most important research question - it focused on comparing the strength of relationship between the level of self-assessed English subskills and L2 WTC in and outside the FL classroom of the Polish and Italian participants. Since, as Tables 3 and 4 presented, the scores on some subscales were not normally distributed, a decision

Table 5 Spearman rho correlation coefficients computed between self-assessment of FL subskills and WTC in and outside the FL classroom for the Polish (PL) and Italian (IT) participants; results of comparing z-scores (U)

		Total	Gram.	Voc.	Pron.	Fluency
WTC-FLC	IT	ns.	ns.	.42*	ns.	ns.
	PL	0.65***	0.33***	0.70***	0.64***	0.65***
	U	–	–	-1.61	–	–
WTC-OFLC	IT	0.41*	0.46*	ns.	0.34*	ns.
	PL	0.66***	0.61***	0.48*	0.61***	0.37*
	U	−1.37	−0.81	–	-1.36	–
WTC-NSs	IT	0.42*	0.49*	ns.	ns.	ns.
	PL	0.66***	0.58***	0.57***	0.64***	0.41**
	U	−1.32	−0.48	–	–	–
WTC-NNs	IT	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
	PL	0.53**	0.56**	ns.	0.46**	ns.
	U	–	–	–	–	–

Note ***p < .001, **p < .005, *p < .05
df for IT = 33
df for PL = 33

was made to compute Spearman correlation. The results are these calculations are displayed in Table 5.

What immediately draws our attention in Table 5 is the number of non-significant correlations found in the Italian group (14 out of 20). As for the Polish results, only two altogether were found non-significant. In all the cases in which significant correlations are matched with non-significant correlations, the differences between these outcomes can be considered statistically significant. The most visible differences between the correlations of participants representing the two different cultures can be found in the case of the classroom setting. When the Italian scores are concerned, only the self-assessed level of vocabulary is linked to WTC ($r_s. = .42$, $p = .021$).

In the case of the Polish outcomes, significant moderate/high relationships have been found, with self-assessment of particular subskills explaining 49% (vocabulary), 42% (fluency), 40% (pronunciation), and 11% (grammar) of variance in WTC in the classroom context. Interestingly, the quantitative data suggest that for both the Italian and Polish participants, the self-perceived level of vocabulary seems to be the subskill most importantly related to their WTC in this setting. Although the correlation coefficient achieved for vocabulary and WTC-FLC is high (.70, $p < .001$) for the Polish group and only moderate (.42, $p < .05$) for the Italian group, the *U* value calculated on the basis of Fischer z-score transformations suggests that the difference between these two coefficients is non-significant ($df = 1$, $p < .005$). This may imply that for both cultural groups the self-perceived level of vocabulary is an equally important correlate of WTC in the English classroom.

With regards to WTC outside the classroom with NSs, there seems to be an agreement between the participants representing the two different cultures in how their self-assessment of grammar relates to their eagerness to talk in these particular circumstances. In fact, this is the only subskill whose self-perception is linked to WTC-OFL with NSs in the case of the Italians. The correlations computed for the Polish participants are all statistically significant of moderate/high strength, with the coefficient being the highest ($r_s. = .64$, $p < .001$) for pronunciation self-assessment, explaining 41% of variance in WTC with native speakers of English. Finally, when WTC with NNSs is concerned, in both cultural groups no links were found with fluency and vocabulary. However, while self-assessment of grammar and pronunciation were found to be significantly linked to WTC for Poles, the self-perceptions of Italians concerning these subskills did not reveal any systematic relationship with WTC-OFLC with non-native speakers of English.

The outcomes presented in Table 5 may suggest that for the Polish students taking part in this study, the self-perceived levels of their subskills were more important antecedents of initiating or joining a conversation in English than for the Italians. This seems to be true not only when WTC in the classroom (with the exception of self-assessed vocabulary) is concerned, but also in reference to taking to NSs in informal settings (with the exception of self-assessed grammar) and to NNSs (with the exception of self-perceived level of fluency and vocabulary). Since, however, correlation analysis does not allow us to draw conclusions about causality, it is worth complementing and verifying the achieved quantitative results with qualitative data, which might shed some more light on the problem under investigation.

The presentation of qualitative data gathered from the Polish and Italian participants with the use of open questions preceding the measures of WTC in and outside the EFL classroom has two major parts. First, the responses concerning WTC in the formal setting are analysed, then answers provided in reference to WTC in informal setting are discussed.

Reasons for reluctance to speak in the FL classroom. The analysis of qualitative data opens with a focus on potential reasons of being reluctant to speak in the FL classroom offered by the Italian respondents. Usually the students offered a few possible explanations for their unwillingness to speak in this context. The most popular answer, provided by 24% of the participants, referred generally to the fear of making mistakes, without specifying in which area the erroneous language is probable to appear. The second most common source of unwillingness to speak in class (17%) was discomfort caused by making grammar mistakes specifically (e.g., *"Gross grammar mistakes," "When improvising it's hard to create a well-structured sentence"*.). While 14% of the participants blamed their poor vocabulary range and use (e.g., "*Lack of appropriate and specific vocabulary," "I can't remember the vocabulary while speaking," "I think faster than I can speak, consequently I can stumble over words"*.)—the only subskill whose self-assessment was found to be linked to WTC in the quantitative analysis—only one student referred to his or her pronunciation, worrying about being ridiculed when speaking with a good accent (i.e., "*I may be laughed at if I imitate a pronunciation with an appropriate accent"*.). Moreover, 4 students (11%) claimed to feel insecure when speaking in the

FL classroom due to their perceived low level of fluency (e.g., "*…the anxiety and will to deliver a fluent speech,*" "*I can't speak fluently*".). However, the most frequent argument, provided by approximately 35% of the subjects, seemed to relate to their personality, since it referred to the general feeling of shyness and embarrassment experienced when speaking (e.g., *"Shyness", "I am generally reluctant to speak," "Lack of self-confidence and shyness," "I am not able to speak in public, especially in English," "I feel observed"*.). The frequency of occurrence of this argument can be considered surprising, taking into account the high level of extroversion and outgoingness ascribed to the Italian nation (e.g., Janni & McLean, 2003). As could be expected, the feeling of shame was also mentioned several times in reference to some FL deficiency (e.g., *"I can't speak fluently and I don't know many words, so I feel ashamed," "Feeling embarrassed to say something wrong"*.). The other responses touched upon the issue of discomfort caused by the feeling of being judged by other students (14%) and the teacher (5%), by the boring topic (8%) or fear of being misunderstood or not understanding the interlocutor (5%). Finally, while one participant observed that there are "*Too few conversation hours and possibilities of intercultural exchange,*" another one stated that he or she simply did not like the teacher.

When analyzing the frequencies of particular reasons for being reluctant to speak English in formal context provided by the Polish participants, what was the most striking was the more common occurrence of responses than in the case of Italian students referring to concerns about students' deficiencies in the TL competence and use. Approximately 20% of the participants mentioned the discomfort accompanying speaking resulting generally from the fear of making mistakes, without specifying its cause. The most frequent cause of unwillingness to join in a speaking task, shared by 37% of the subjects, was the worry about their pronunciation, e.g., *"I fear that others might laugh when I mispronounce a word," "I think I sound weird speaking English," "When I'm uncertain about how to pronounce a word, particularly if it is spelt in a strange way"*. As many as 31% of the answers touched the matter of poor vocabulary (e.g., *"Sometimes I lack vocabulary. Then I prefer to stay silent"*.). Finally, 26% of the subjects mentioned their lack of fluency, while 23%—problems with grammar, which were often mentioned in reference to the feeling of discomfort caused by being corrected by the teacher (e.g., *"I know I make grammar mistakes and don't like the teacher correcting me in the presence of others"*.). Moreover, while about 20% of the participants mentioned their general tendency to avoid talking in public (e.g., *"I'm always shy to speak aloud"*.), 11% of them complained about the boring topics or unchallenging exercises.

The open answers concerning eagerness to join in or initiate communication in the FL classroom not only suggested trait-like (personality) and a few situational antecedents (the rapport with the teacher, level of acquaintance with the interlocutors, attractiveness of speaking tasks) of WTC-FLC, which were not diagnosed in the quantitative part of this study. They also seemed to lend support to the importance of vocabulary self-assessment in WTC and might suggest cultural divergence with regards to the approach of learners towards grammar, pronunciation and fluency.

Reasons for reluctance to speak outside the FL classroom. The common patterns found in the qualitative data on WTC in naturalistic context do not always mirror the quantitative outcomes. The two sets of data—quantitative and qualitative—vary particularly in the case of the Italian outcomes. The first trend that emerges from the responses provided by this group (found in 17% of answers) is their reluctance to initiate conversations with strangers (e.g., *"I don't like to speak with people I don't know," "I make mistakes when talking to people I don't know," "If I don't know my interlocutor, it's hard for me to initiate a relation with him/her*".). As before, the comments of the participants, denoting their reservation towards unknown speakers, do not corroborate what can be expected from this nation. Moreover, although there were again several statements referring to the fear of making mistakes in general (14%), only 4 Italians (11%) mentioned deficiencies in grammar as potential causes of their reluctance to speak (e.g., *"Afraid of making grammatical mistakes and being corrected"*.), which was the only correlate of WTC with native speakers in the case of the Italian subjects. Surprisingly, what was provided more frequently (20% of responses) as an argument for unwillingness to speak was poor vocabulary (e.g., *"Not confident about words".).* The Italians referred also to shyness, embarrassment and/or anxiety resulting from lack of self-confidence (11%), potential problems with understanding the speaker and being unable to respond to questions in the conversation (6%), lacking fluency (2%), and fearing of leaving a bad impression on the interlocutors (6%) or of being judged by them (8%). Finally, one student raised the matter of his or her low level of pronunciation as a source of reluctance to speak. Additionally, there was a respondent that shared a positive remark, stating *"It can be funny if you make a mistake"*.

When the answers to open questions about WTC outside the classroom provided by Poles are concerned, they were far more compatible with the quantitative data presented in the tables above than the Italian ones. Analogously to the WTC in the classroom setting, about 20% of the participants mentioned the discomfort caused by the general fear of making mistakes, without specifying its type, which would lead them to the feeling of embarrassment. As far as the most popular cause of being reluctant to talk in naturalistic context is concerned, it was shared among the concern about making pronunciation mistakes (31%) and grammar (29%) mistakes. Representative examples of worries related to poor pronunciation are as follows: "*I'd feel silly and embarrassed 'cause I know my accent is far from English-like. I know probably nobody would correct me, but still…"; "I think it would be a bit easier if the interlocutor was not a native speaker. I wouldn't be so shy, assuming that he/she also has some accent"*. Many shared the opinion of another participant, whose unwillingness to speak would derive from him or her "*being uncertain about the tenses that should be used in specific situations"*. Moreover, about 23% of the Polish participants acknowledged to being uncertain about vocabulary, which, as they noticed, could easily lead to misunderstandings, e.g., "*My vocabulary is rather poor and I would be ashamed not understanding what the other person was saying to me"*. Around 14% of the Polish respondents confessed that it is their lack of fluency that would take the blame for their reluctance to speak, e.g., *"I try my best. I'd be definitely more willing to speak, if I didn't have to think so long about how to say*

something. At the moment I think both me and the people I'd talk to would find the conversation with me a bit straining". Finally, as in the case of Italian responses, there were a few (20%) referring to personality and not being eager to start a conversation with a person who is a stranger to them. Although some positive remarks were also provided (i.e., *"When I have something to say, I simply start talking. I realize my English is far from perfect, but after all, we all make mistakes, and the aim is to communicate, isn't it?"*), these were found very rarely (6%).

5 Discussion

Earlier observations have suggested (e.g., Heine et al., 1999; Lockley, 2013; Mercer, 2011) that self-assessment is culture-related. The quantitative data, showing statistical differences in the levels of all the self-perceived English subskills and of WTC in English in and outside the FL classroom of the Polish and Italian participants, who were said to represent a similar proficiency level, imply that important discrepancies can be observed not only among representatives of remote countries, such as the USA, Japan, Korea, China, Canada, but also across Europe. Moreover, the quantitative and qualitative data imply that the cultural background of the participants can be a variable significantly mediating the link between the level of WTC in and outside the FL classroom and the learners' FL self-perceptions. This has appeared to be true not in the case of students' self-perceived communicative competence, most often observed in WTC studies, but their self-assessment with regards to particular FL subskills, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency. The statistically higher correlations between L2 self-assessment and L2 WTC of the Polish learners and their open responses might signify that these participants were more concerned about their potential inaccuracies and deficiencies in English and more prone to filter their decision to join in or initiate a conversation in English through the self-perceived level of their language competencies and skills than the Italian participants.

What can help in explaining the different results achieved by the Polish and Italian students are the dissimilarities in selected cultural dimensions, as depicted by Hofstede et al. (2010) and introduced briefly in the theoretical part of the present paper. Having a higher degree of uncertainty avoidance than the Italian learners, Polish FL students may be by nature less willing to experiment and take risks, which speaking in a FL that has not been fully mastered evidently requires. What comes on top of that is their lower level of long-term orientation in comparison to Italians, revealing itself among others in the attempt to protect one's face and keep traditions. As mentioned above, one of the traditionally nurtured features of Poles is modesty, which may hold a learner back from speaking, if his or her level of particular subskills is considered by him or her insufficient to hold a successful conversation. It is necessary to add that certain cultural characteristics, though usually deeply rooted in the nation, may have a dynamic nature. For example, due to economic and political changes and more opportunities for contact with members of other

nationalities, Poland has recently started revealing more characteristics of individualist than collectivist societies (Bokszański, 2007). Furthermore, as Bogdanowska-Jakubowska (2011, p. 179) explains, the "Polish face, i.e., the self-image created by Poles … is in transition", with traditional hierarchy of values, which modesty is a part of, "undergoing some changes". If this is so, it is also changes in self-assessment and its link to L2 WTC that may be expected to appear in the future.

Additionally, it may be hypothesized that the fear or shame of using erroneous FL in speaking, which might keep one away from joining in conversations in a FL, can be intensified when one's country is considered by a learner to be representing lower ethnolinguistic vitality than other countries, whose representatives one might be trying to communicate with (e.g., Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). The significant moderate correlations between self-assessment of different subskills and WTC with native and non-native speakers achieved for the Polish participants may corroborate the importance of subjective group ethnolinguistic vitality with reference to WTC. We may risk a hypothesis that Germany, France or Holland, provided in the *MWTC-OFLC* questionnaire as countries other non-native speakers of English might come from, were considered by the Polish participants of this study to have an equally high level of ethnolinguistic vitality as the English-speaking countries, probably higher than that of Poland. Contrastively, for the Italian participants, other European countries which their potential interlocutors might be coming from, may not have been assumed to represent a higher status and prestige than their own country. Thus, while the natural discomfort of the Italian participants deriving from making mistakes at grammatical level in front of a person for whom it is a mother tongue might have introduced some reluctance to speak, the concern about making mistakes in front of other non-native speakers may not have discouraged them from speaking (all the coefficients were statistically non-significant) (for the importance of subjective group vitality in communication see e.g., Johnson et al., 1983; Yagmur & Enhala, 2011).

It is important to add that anxiety and reluctance to speak may be particularly high when not having experienced frequent real-life conversations outside the classroom. Successful communication could not only raise self-efficacy of the learners, but also show them that native-speakers are far less critical of non-native speakers' FL attempts (see e.g., Foote & Trofimovich, 2016) than they might think they are. Moreover, contact with other non-native speakers might show them that all learners make mistakes and struggle the same way as they do when speaking a language other than their mother tongue. Such a claim seems to be supported by FL users who gain more courage in speaking after having experienced an opportunity to meet a speaker of other cultures representing a level of FL similar to their own (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2017; Lee, 2018). It is worth drawing attention to the fact that indeed fewer Polish participants of the present study had a chance to visit foreign countries in which English could be used than the Italian students, which might have resulted in the former being less confident L2 speakers.

The evident cultural difference in the strength of relationship between FL self-perceptions and WTC in the classroom may also result from variation in beliefs that learners hold concerning the teaching and learning of FLs. In a study conducted among Polish and Italian advanced students on views about different aspects of

form-focused instruction, Pawlak (2011) observed, among others, that the Polish participants "appeared to be more aware of the importance of grammar in communication" than the Italian subjects, for whom grammar was rather an aspect of accuracy. This may shed some light on why a significant link appeared between self-assessment of grammar and L2 WTC-FLC in the case of the Polish participants, while the link was non-significant for the Italian group. Some differences may also be detected in the case of attitudes of the students representing different cultures towards pronunciation learning. Although studies show that both Polish learners (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2009, 2014; Bryła, 2006; Nowacka, 2012; Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005) and Italian students (e.g., Nowacka, 2012; Modesti, 2015) reveal high concern for EFL pronunciation, some observations have implied that Poles are more motivated to achieve highest levels in pronunciation than the Italians. For example, Nowacka (2012) observed that the effort put in pronunciation self-studying of Italians was lower than that of Poles (81% of the Polish and 58% of Italian respondents declared to be practising pronunciation outside the classroom). It must, however, be stressed that while the data concerning motivation and attitudes of Polish learners towards learning this aspect and its importance is rich and consistent, not many studies report the approach of Italian students towards this aspect. It is worth adding that the ranking of subskills that the Polish learners showed particular concern about in reference to WTC were analogous to those identified in an earlier study (Baran-Łucarz, 2015), with self-assessment of pronunciation being in both cases at the top of the list.

Finally, in attempting to explain why the Italian and Polish results varied in the magnitude of link between the perceived self-assessment of FL subskills and WTC in the classroom, it is necessary to consider the specificity of formal instruction that the participants received. As Table 2 depicted, although the communicate approach was reported to be used both by the Italian and Polish teachers, several differences in the teaching could be observed. The excessive concern about vocabulary, overuse of immediate error correction, limited or lack of pronunciation instruction and practice despite interest in this aspect, and fewer opportunities to develop speaking skills allowing to improve fluency provided by the Polish teachers in comparison to the Italian teacher cannot be disregarded. It is also worth mentioning the general tendency in Poland, which we could consider one of the aspects of the Polish "culture of learning" (Peng, 2014), to overfocus on accuracy and to offer too little speaking practice to students from the earliest years of learning (Wawrzyniak-Śliwska & Andrzejewska, 2017). Such an approach can be expected to shape students' views about the importance of particular subskills and competencies and to determine their WTC in and outside the FL classroom.

6 Conclusion

The study reported in this chapter aimed at providing answers to two research questions. The first one addressed the issue of whether self-assessment of FL subskills

and L2 WTC in classroom and naturalistic settings of students representing a comparable proficiency level but coming from two different European cultures would differ significantly. The second inquiry concerned the matter of culture functioning as a mediating variable of the relationship between L2 self-perceptions and L2 WTC in the two contexts. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered among Polish and Italian comprehensive school students suggest positive responses to both research questions.

It must be, however, made clear that due to the relatively small number of participants representing the two cultural groups, the final conclusions ought to be drawn with caution. The research can be treated as a pilot study, encouraging further observations in this area, spread across more numerous groups representing other cultures. The outcomes achieved with these particular participants, suggesting culturally-based divergence in L2 self-perceptions and in the strength of link between L2 WTC and self-assessment of different subskills may imply that some variation may be needed in the FL teaching approaches and techniques, which ought to be carefully planned and adjusted to particular nations. Not only might some cultures benefit more than others from training leading to opening the students to communication, encouraging risk-taking and raising their self-worth as a nation, but also from changing the culturally-based attitudes towards and views upon the importance of learning particular subskills. The intervention, in turn, ought to be based on well-grounded contemporary SLA theories and latest classroom-oriented research results. It would be interesting to observe whether such well-planned treatment would indeed affect students' L2 self-perceptions and the their L2 WTC in classroom and naturalistic settings. To ensure a better understanding of the nature of L2 WTC, another step worth taking might be examining (e.g., with the application of multiple regression) the importance of L2 self-perceptions for L2 WTC in comparison to other antecedents, such as situational cues and characteristics for different cultural groups.

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