In-Class Willingness to Communicate in English Among Third Agers: Results of a Questionnaire Study

Anna Borkowska

Abstract The main objective of the paper is to present the results of the study conducted among third-age learners regarding in-class WTC. The instrument adapted for the purpose of this study was a questionnaire comprising biodata items, and a 10-item Peng and Woodrow's (2010) tool. The analysis revealed that senior learners' WTC were relatively high, particularly in the case of meaning-focused tasks. The participants were more willing to communicate in dyads rather than in front of the class. They also reported readiness to translate a spoken utterance from Polish into English. The most significant components of classroom instruction facilitating in-class WTC were a teacher's helpful attitude, a friendly atmosphere, as well as cooperation with a partner, and gentle error correction. The informants emphasized that the teacher was a key figure in the classroom, and he or she played an eminent role in creating a supportive classroom climate which positively influenced WTC. By contrast, third agers acknowledged that their readiness to interact was hampered by insufficient lexical resources. Similarly, fear of making mistakes was considered to be a predictor of low WTC. Surprisingly, only a small number of the participants admitted that memory decline could negatively affect their in-class readiness to speak English.

Keywords Willingness to communicate · Senior learners · Individual differences · Classroom atmosphere

1 Introduction

One of the cornerstones of contemporary second and foreign (L2) language pedagogy is promoting communicative behaviors among language students. Before actual communication occurs, however, a learner ought to be eager to participate actively in interaction. Willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language (L2) is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or

A. Borkowska (✉)
Podhale State College of Applied Sciences, Nowy Targ, Poland
e-mail: anna.borkowska@ppuz.edu.pl

M. Pawlak (ed.), *Investigating Individual Learner Differences in Second Language Learning*, Second Language Learning and Teaching,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75726-7_5

persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). L2 WTC has been intensively studied in university and high school students (e.g., Cao, 2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2018; Yashima, 2002). Yet, to the best of the present author's knowledge, there are no publications explicitly referring to senior learners' WTC in English and their perceptions of factors which may influence L2 WTC. The present study, therefore, was prompted by the lack of empirical research regarding WTC among older citizens. It attempted to investigate third-age learners' in-class WTC in English, as well as identify factors which—from the participants' perspective—facilitate or inhibit WTC in the educational context. For the purpose of the article, seniors are defined as individuals fifty-five years of age and older (cf. Gabryś-Barker, 2018; Ramírez Gómez, 2016; Stuart-Hamilton, 2012).

2 L2 Willingness to Communicate

Originally, the notion of WTC was developed with reference to the first language (L1), and it was perceived as a trait-like concept referring to a person's general predisposition towards entering into verbal communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). By contrast, L2 WTC was conceptualized at dual levels, namely as personality and situation-based variables (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The current multi-layered pyramid model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998) involves "constructs commonly employed in the L2 literature according to proximal-distal continuum that captures the dimensions of time and specificity with a distinct intergroup flavor" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 567). As explained by MacIntyre et al. (1998), the most distal layers (Layer V and VI) are devoted respectively to *the social and individual context* (i.e., intergroup climate and personality) and *the affective context* (i.e., intergroup attitudes, social situation and communicative competence). Layer IV comprises *motivational propensities*, subcategorized into interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation, and self-confidence. The most proximal determinants of L2 WTC are located in Layer III, known as *situated antecedents* with two components: desire to communicate with a specific person and state communicative self-confidence. The construct of WTC as such is found in Layer II (*behavioral intention*), and it is understood as the final step before actual L2 communicative interaction. Finally, Layer I contains *communication behavior* related to L2 use in different contexts. What needs to be highlighted here is that the lowest levels of the pyramid (IV, V, VI) represent permanent, trait-like variables whereas the highest levels (I, II, III) appear to be linked to situational stimuli. Likewise, trait-like and situational components are found to complement each other, and the top layers are affected both by immediate as well as long-term variables situated in the bottom layers. The personality-based variables prepare learners for interaction by creating a tendency to react orally in situations whereas situational WTC influences a decision to initiate communicative behaviors in particular situations (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1999; Zarrinabadi, 2014).

3 In-Class WTC

It goes without saying that WTC is of paramount importance for encouraging communicative engagement in an educational context, and, as stated by MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 545), it ought to be "the primary goal of language instruction." It is noteworthy, however, that early L2 WTC research made no distinction between in-class and out-of-class WTC. For instance, Macintyre et al. (2001) measured four language skills both inside and outside the classroom in the immersion context. Importantly, interactions referred to "strangers" or "friends" with no reference to specific professions. The most significant modification was made by Weaver (2005), who developed a scale measuring L2 WTC in both speaking and writing tasks, and in situations normally occurring in an L2 class, such as writing a paragraph or doing a role-play. A study conducted by Peng and Woodrow (2010) among university students in China, on the other hand, investigated L2 WTC in various activities between three types of interlocutors, namely a teacher, a peer, and a group of peers. The study used selected items from Weaver's scale (2005), and paid due attention to students' readiness to engage in meaning-focused and form-focused exercises. Chinese university students were more willing to communicate in controlled situations than in meaning-focused tasks as they were likely to represent exam-oriented goals, and, for that reason, scoring well in written examinations was of much significance to them (Simpson, 2008). Peng (2014) acknowledges that, as opposed to Western classrooms, Chinese educational settings are more teacher-centered, and silence is an indicator of respect for the teacher who is recognized as an authority in the classroom (Liu, 2002). Moreover, speaking up during classes may contribute to being criticized as a "show off" (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Students in China also tend to avoid linguistically demanding situations because, as emphasized by some scholars, it may pose a threat of losing face or being ridiculed (e.g., Peng, 2014; Wen & Clément, 2003).

At this juncture, equally interesting should be Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak's study (2016). The researchers developed a research tool and conducted a study among university students in Poland measuring WTC and relationships between its various underlying factors. In-class L2 WTC was based on Peng and Woodrow's (2010) instrument with Likert-scale items adjusted to the Polish classroom setting. The high value of standard deviation in in-class WTC showed that individual difference variables had a considerable impact on classroom WTC. Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2016) concluded that learning styles, personal agendas for studying English, learning strategies, personality and anxiety were likely to attribute to such discrepancies between the results.

4 Variables Influencing WTC Inside the Classroom

It is worthwhile to mention here that there is a rich body of research on L2 WTC which has indetified a whole range of different factors affecting in-class WTC (e.g., Cao,

2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017; Peng, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Riasati, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Cao (2011), for instance, stresses the importance of topic and task type. It is well established that students tend to engage more in discussions of topics which are more interesting and attractive in terms of familiarity since learners are likely to possess sufficient of vocabulary, as well as essential background knowledge to share with peers (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). Also, interlocutors play a crucial role in sustaining L2 WTC. Typically, learners enjoy communicating with group members they know well, and those who are cooperative and actively involved in the task (e.g., Kang, 2005; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). Nevertheless, as pointed out by De Saint Léger and Storch (2009), classroom interaction ought not to be dominated by only talkative students as it dramatically decreases L2 WTC and discourages less secure students from communication.

In educational settings, classroom atmosphere also appears to be of unquestionable importance for L2 WTC. Several researchers (e.g., Cao, 2011; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018) have suggested that a positive climate enhances general cooperation, and lowers the fear of speaking by alleviating learners' anxiety. To a large degree, an encouraging classroom atmosphere is created by the teacher who promotes communicative behaviors by providing numerous opportunities for language interaction (e.g., Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Sheybani, 2019). As evidenced in the study of Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2017), students appreciate a teacher who is actively engaged in monitoring tasks performed in dyads since, obviously, it motivates them to make better use of interaction. It is evident that teacher immediacy, that is, his or her verbal and non-verbal behaviors (e.g., smile, encouragement, praising), as well as teacher support reduce the distance and facilitate a good rapport with learners (e.g., Cao, 2011; Wen & Clément, 2003). Zarrinabadi (2014), for example, demonstratedthat L2 WTC is affected by the teacher's time devoted to task preparation, topic selection, and error correction. Errors ought to be corrected in a non-threatening manner since feedback is considered to be a factor exerting an influence on students' WTC (MacIntyre et al., 2011). Gentle correction helps students to feel confident and more eager to participate whereas immediate error correction may enhance their anxiety and discourage them from active involvement in future conversations (Zarrinabadi, 2014). Interestingly, fear of making mistakes was reported to be lower when students talked with interlocutors they did not know or were indifferent to (e.g., Baran-Łucarz, 2015).

Much in a similar vein, classroom interactional patterns in a conversational context are believed to influence WTC. Apparently, students prefer small group or dyad to whole-class exercises as teacher-fronted interaction is perceived as anxiety-provoking (e.g., Cao, 2011; Fushino, 2010; De Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). Learners with lower language competence identify turn-taking in pairs as less competitive and daunting (e.g., Cao, 2013; Cao & Philp, 2006; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016). When it comes to the comparison between activities performed individually and in pairs, Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2014) found that students preferred monologues to dialogues, in spite of the fact that high WTC in monologues tended to drop during the task while in dialogues the initial low WTC was likely to increase in time.

In the light of these considerations, it is justifiable to highlight the individual dimension of WTC which refers to internal psychological and affective components possessed by each language student. Cao (2011) mentions such variables as perceived opportunity to communicate, personality, self-confidence, and emotion. Personality is regarded to either facilitate or inhibit L2 WTC as, for instance, students who tend to be more risk-taking are more prone to engage in communication and are willing to talk when a suitable opportunity arises (Cao & Philp, 2006; Wen & Clément, 2003). Self-confidence is understood at dual levels, namely, as the overall belief in being able to communicate, and as state self-confidence which is "a momentary feeling of confidence" which fluctuates at certain moments (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 549). This finding is echoed in a study by Peng and Woodrow (2010), who indicated that students with high self-evaluation of L2 competence were likely to be more willing to enter into communication. What should also be underscored is a diverse range of emotions in educational settings. As presented by Cao (2011), they may include positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment and satisfaction), and negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, boredom, frustration, embarrassment and anger). In line with this finding, Piechurska-Kuciel (2018) argues that a positive attitude to L2 may lead to a significant degree of L2 WTC. The author conducted a study among secondary school students in Poland whose aim was to investigate the role of openness to experience as a predictor of WTC levels. In brief, the results showed that higher levels of openness led to focusing on positive emotions, which contributed to higher WTC. Rather unsurprisingly, the lack of openness to experience puts learners in "a far worse position" where they are constantly faced with unpredictable, tension-generating communicative situations (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2018, p. 196).

The key factors presented above, namely learner-internal (e.g., personality, self-confidence and emotion), and learner-external (e.g., topic, task, teacher, interlocutors and classroom atmosphere) are of great value in the case of younger adults' in-class readiness to communicate. In this context, however, it seems critical to concentrate on older adults' communicative behaviors inside the language classroom.

5 The Significance of WTC in Senior Learners' Language Classroom

As mentioned earlier, WTC among older citizens has not been scrutinized in the literature. Nevertheless, it may be reasonable to hypothesize that third agers' WTC ought to be relatively high as they have a clear sense of language learning aims, as well as a strong desire to affiliate in classroom settings (e.g., Derenowski, 2018; Jaroszewska, 2013). Despite the fact that speaking is a major source of in-class discomfort experienced by third-age learners, this skill is considered to be the most fundamental in second language learning (cf. Grotek, 2018; Matusz & Rakowska, 2019). What seniors mainly seek in a language classroom are opportunities that, on the one hand, allow them to establish or maintain social contacts, but on the other

hand, help them gain and improve oral skills (Niżegorodcew, 2016; Oxford, 2018; Pawlak et al., 2018; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018).

In actual teaching practice, the present author's numerous observations of senior language learners as English students have shown that active participation is of significant interest to older adults who are eager to be absorbed in various types of classroom interactions. Interestingly, teaching seniors may become a challenge when it comes to maintaining discipline during communicative tasks since they seem to be overenthusiastic about using the L2 in speech. Very frequently, third agers answer a question all together although a teacher directs that question to a particular student. This might suggest that they wish to take advantage of all the available opportunities to speak English, which indicates their readiness to communicate in-class. What lends some support to such an interpretation are, for instance, Jaroszewska's (2013) and Ramírez Gómez's (2016) studies. The researchers have evidenced that people at a senior age primarily attend foreign language classes with a view to developing speaking abilities essential for independent communication abroad. Therefore, the teacher ought to have a flexible approach as older adults could be capable of negotiating the curriculum and take an active part in the teaching and learning processes (cf. Larrotta, 2019; Ramírez Gómez, 2016).

With this in mind, the teacher appears to play a vital role in the seniors' language classroom since he is perceived as the authority by older students (e.g., Derenowski, 2018). As such, the teacher has a major influence on promoting age-advanced learners' desire to communicate inside the classroom because he or she may offer a wide range of oral tasks in real-life patterns of interaction. This is in accordance with the view held by Pawlak (2015, p. 49) who aptly states that "conducting language lessons in such a way that language interaction exhibits the features of out-of-class communication is a sound proposition."

By the same token, the authors of the original model (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547) point out that WTC is recognized as "a proper objective for L2 education." As a consequence, a mindful teacher should attach utmost importance to in-class WTC and a classroom environment that mirrors forms of communication that may naturally occur outside educational settings in daily verbal exchanges. In-class communicative opportunities are deemed to give rise to older citizens' readiness to enter into communication voluntarily, which increases the likelihood of active engagement in real-life interactions. As concluded by MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 558), WTC is "the final step in preparing the language learner for communication, because it represents the probability that a learner will use the language authentic interaction with another individual, given the opportunity."

6 The Study

6.1 Aims and Research Questions

The overall aim of the study was to investigate third agers' in-class WTC in English in meaning-focused and form-focused tasks, as well as to identify factors which increase and decrease WTC. More specifically, the research was conducted to address the following questions:

1. What is the older adults' WTC in English in the classroom setting?
2. Which components of classroom instruction, according to the participants, are considered to foster in-class readiness to communicate?
3. Which factors are deemed to hinder in-class WTC from the older adults' perspective?

6.2 Participants

The informants were twenty-eight students (27 females and 1 male) of the Third Age University in Nowy Targ who had been regularly attending English courses (2 contact hours a week) at Podhale State College of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ. They all were taught by the same teacher (the present author). When asked about the place of residence, most of the learners (89%) reported living in a town, and 11% in a village. The mean age was 64, with the youngest student being 56 and the oldest 72. The majority of the participants (68%) represented the A1 level whereas 32% were at the A2 level according to CEFR. On average, the respondents declared to have been learning English for 7 years throughout their life. When it comes to English courses for senior learners, the average length of participation was 3 years. As regards their education, 57% of the participants reported having graduated from a university, and 43% admitted having secondary education. The most fundamental reason for learning English in the third age was by all means communication (79%) during trips abroad, a stay abroad, as well as conversations with English speaking friends and family. Also, 18% of the participants highlighted the prominence of self-realization.

6.3 Research Instrument and Procedure

The instrument adapted to this study was a questionnaire (Appendix) comprising biodata items, one multiple choice question, two open-ended questions referring to the identification of factors which facilitate and inhibit in-class WTC, and a 10-item Peng and Woodrow's (2010) tool offering insights into the participants' in-class WTC. The scale was intended to measure L2 WTC in various activities between three

types of interlocutors, namely a teacher, a peer, and a group of peers, and it paid due attention to students' readiness to engage in meaning-focused (Appendix, item 2, 4, 5, 6), and form-focused exercises (Appendix, item 7, 8, 9, 10). In the present study, the in-class tool was designed as a 6-point Likert scale (from 1—*I strongly disagree* to 6—*I strongly agree*). Some items on the scale are as follows: "I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class" or "I am willing to ask my group mates in English of word I do not know." One item needed modification with regard to a cultural context: "I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Chinese into English" was obviously adapted to the Polish context as "I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Polish into English." The following two items were removed: "I am willing to give a short speech in English to the class about my hometown with notes" and "I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thought in my mind." It is worth noting at this point that the present author's intention was to add statements which could reflect the focus on general in-class WTC in English specifically among senior learners. As a result, two new statements were constructed: "I am willing to communicate in English during classes" (item 1) and "I am willing to share my knowledge in English during the classes" (item 3).

The questionnaire was written in Polish, and Peng and Woodrow's (2010) tool was translated to reduce the risk of the items being misunderstood by the respondents. From a technical point of view, the survey was prepared to accommodate specific seniors' needs, that is, to reduce difficulties resulting from potential visual impairments. Therefore, the font size was 14 points, and in-between line space was 1.5 points (cf. Ramírez Gómez, 2016, 2019). All the participants agreed to complete the questionnaire which was administered during regular class time, and it took the respondents approximately 15 min to answer all the questions.

Once the questionnaires were collected and coded, Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the total means and standard deviations for In-class WTC scale, as well as for each individual item. Also, the total means and standard deviations were separately calculated for meaning-focused tasks, form-focused activities, and general statements. This was followed by both tallying Cronbach's alpha for In-class WTC scale, and for meaning-focused exercises, form-focused tasks and general statements. The data regarding components of classroom instruction were collected through an open-ended question (Appendix, Questions H). The data was divided into the aspects of classroom instruction that were most commonly mentioned and then calculated. In a similar vein, information concerning factors hampering in-class WTC was also gathered through an open-ended question (Appendix, Question I). The data was categorized into the most frequently mentioned variables and the responses were calculated. The informants' responses and excerpts from them were all translated into English by the present author.

6.4 Findings

6.4.1 In-Class WTC Among Third Agers

As illustrated in Table 1, Cronbach alpha for in-class WTC scale was satisfactory (0.72), both for meaning-focused (0.75) and form-focused tasks (0.71). The internal reliability for general statements was not acceptable, and thus item 1 and 3 were excluded from further analysis. WTC in English in meaning-focused activities was much higher ($M = 4.89$) than in form-focused activities ($M = 3.85$). This might suggest that less weight was given to tasks principally based on accuracy. When meaning-focused activities were performed, participants not only showed higher WTC but their responses were relatively also more homogenous (SD = 0.77). This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that older adults' major goal was real-life communication. Also, on the basis of the data given in Table 1, one may say that the standard deviation in form-focused activities was rather high (SD = 1.60). A possible corollary of this situation could have been divergences between the respondents' approach to the inability to comprehend utterances or individual, unknown lexical items.

When it comes to means and standard deviations for particular items, the data revealed that older adults were generally willing to use English in the educational setting ($M = 4.37$). As can been seen from Table 2, the total standard deviation (SD = 1.19) was relatively high, which suggest high variability in participants' responses. The highest mean ($M = 5.14$) was obtained for item 6 which was related to the translation of a spoken utterance from Polish into English. It is worth emphasizing that a role-play as such was perceived to be done much more eagerly with one's peer ($M = 5.00$) rather than in front of the class ($M = 4.75$). One plausible explanation for this is that the participants simply felt more secure and less anxious during interaction in dyads since they helped each other with the task and spoke with a partner who was potentially at the same proficiency level.

The age-advanced learners' in-class WTC was the lowest in statement 10 which was intended to gauge the informants' readiness to ask group mates in English about the pronunciation of a word ($M = 3.64$). Such a relatively low result might derive from the fact that most of the students represented the A1 level and they may have been aware that their peers lacked sufficient linguistic knowledge. Another possible interpretation could be that the older adults might have viewed the teacher as the only

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and Cronbach alpha values for in-class scale, including meaning-focused tasks (MFT), form-focused tasks (FFT) and general statements added by the author (GS)

Scale	*M*	SD	Cronbach alpha
In-class WTC	4.51	1.09	0.72
MFT	4.89	0.77	0.75
FFT	3.85	1.60	0.71
GS	5.08	0.69	0.32

Table 2 Means and standard deviations for in-class WTC scale ($N = 28$)

No.	Item	*M*	SD
2.	I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.	4.64	0.78
4.	I am willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant).	4.75	0.93
5.	I am willing to do a role-play with at my desk, with my peer.	5.00	0.67
6.	I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Polish into English in my group.	5.14	0.71
7.	I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn't understand.	3.82	2.00
8.	I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of word I do not know.	4.11	1.40
9.	I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.	3.82	1.47
10.	I am willing to ask my group mates in English how to pronounce a word in English.	3.64	1.54
Total		4.37	1.19

authority in class. In a similar vein, the third-age learners seemed to be less willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat an utterance that had not been understood ($M = 3.82$). What also needs to be stressed is that their responses were the most diverse here (SD = 2.00). It could be surmised that the seniors felt fearful to admit that they were incapable of understanding the teacher since they wished to avoid the risk of public humiliation.

6.4.2 Aspects of Classroom Instruction Facilitating in-Class WTC

Table 3 presents the most significant components of classroom instruction fostering in-class WTC among the third agers. The analysis revealed that the teacher was a

Table 3 The most vital components of classroom instruction increasing in-class WTC among the participants

No.	The most crucial components of classroom instruction mentioned by the respondents	No. of students
1.	Teacher's helpful and supportive attitude	13
2.	Friendly and positive atmosphere	13
3.	Cooperation with a peer	12
4.	Gentle error correction	8
5.	Using technology	5
6.	Interesting tasks	4

key figure sustaining the older adults' WTC and he or she played an eminent role in maintaining a positive atmosphere. Thirteen informants indicated that they were eager to communicate in a friendly classroom climate which was created by the teacher's supportive and helpful attitude. When asked about factors which facilitated in-class WTC, some respondents elucidated: "The teacher creates a friendly atmosphere which motivates me to learn (…)" (S5); "She [the teacher] can motivate and listen to our opinions and views" (S8); "The atmosphere during classes enhances communication" (S27).

Also, the participants placed an emphasis on gentle error correction (8 responses) which might boost their in-class WTC: "(…) even if one makes a mistake, you aren't criticized" (S27); "The teacher is a supportive person who corrects my mistakes patiently" (S21); "(…) the teacher reacts to our mistakes in a very gentle manner" (S11). It is worthwhile to note here that pronunciation was of particular significance for the seniors, and they found it essential to have their mistakes corrected in a conversational context. Error correction while speaking seemed not to have a negative influence on communicative behaviors, and, paradoxically, it was identified as a crucial variable which fostered WTC: "(…) the teacher controls my pronunciation in a friendly way and corrects mistakes each time and I like it" (S4); "It's important for me that the teacher corrects my pronunciation while speaking" (S2).

Much prominence was given to cooperation with a peer (12 students) as well. In this respect, the participants mentioned tasks in the form of dialogues, and some pointed out that asking and answering questions might increase their WTC. Likewise, the senior learners appreciated interaction with a partner during classes since, as stated by one of the respondents, there should be "(…) a lot of classes when students are forced to create dialogues between each other" (S18). It may be concluded that due attention was paid to dyadic communication because the respondents realized that in order to communicate effectively in English outside the classroom, they needed to be actively involved, and practice real-life interactions in a classroom environment.

Another noteworthy component of language instruction which, according to the third agers, may enhance in-class WTC, is new technology utilized in class. The participants reported that presenting didactic materials by means of multimedia equipment facilitated active engagement and helped them to revise new vocabulary. This ought to be interpreted as a positive sign of the seniors' openness to modern teaching methods which may, hopefully, inspire them to use computer-mediated communication or seek other multimedia channels to interact in English with foreigners. The data also suggested that WTC could be sustained by interesting tasks performed during classes which stimulated the senior learners' constant involvement in language interaction.

6.4.3 Factors Hindering in-Class WTC

When it comes to variables that negatively impacted in-class WTC, the analysis yielded vital insights into heterogeneity among the older adults. In one sense, their

Table 4 The most substantial factors inhibiting in-class WTC among the third agers

No.	The most significant factors mentioned by the respondents	No. of students
1.	Insufficient lexical resources	9
2.	Fear of humiliation	4
3.	Fear of making mistakes	4
4.	Memory problems	3
5.	No contact with foreigners	2
6.	Anxious classroom atmosphere	2

individual answers proved fruitful, but in another sense, they were rather diverse as each participant had his or her own views based on lifelong learning experience.

As can be seen in Table 4, insufficient vocabulary resources turned out to be the most important factor which might negatively influence in-class WTC. As mentioned earlier, the majority of respondents (68%) were A1 students, and thus it may come as no surprise that they might feel insecure to express themselves adequately in all classroom situations: "(…) too few words to feel free to communicate" (S13); "(…) the lack of vocabulary needed to communicate at a particular moment" (S4). To a large degree, insufficient lexical items were linked to fear of humiliation and making mistakes. The participants (9 responses) suggested that poor knowledge of vocabulary hampered their WTC as they felt anxious and stressed while speaking. Four learners acknowledged that fear as well as an anxiety-inducing classroom climate (2 students) could significantly reduce a desire to enter into communication, and as a result, it was a predictor of low WTC. As pointed out by the participants, they were mainly fearful of incorrect pronunciation and inability to retrieve necessary vocabulary. One student admitted: "I don't always remember a certain word or a sentence and I feel ashamed that I don't remember that" (S6). It is justifiable to note here that learners in the third age are typically conscious of their advancing age and potential memory capacity decline. Therefore, memory problems (3 respondents) appeared to hinder WTC particularly in the context of vocabulary retrieval. The data also revealed that a rather small number of students reported that a key to fostering their readiness to speak English were opportunities to communicate with foreigners. It ought to be made plain that seniors—as the most mature and experienced learners of all age groups—recognized the L2 not as academic knowledge but as a means of communication outside the classroom.

7 Discussion

The present study set out to examine in-class WTC among senior students, and identify factors deemed to facilitate and inhibit willingness to speak inside the classroom. What should be highlighted first and foremost is that, generally, third agers' WTC was relatively higher than in-class WTC investigated among university students in

Poland (e.g., Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016). Certainly, younger adults majoring in English principally aimed at using English at work both in oral and written contexts whereas older adults are primarily concentrated on improving their speaking abilities (e.g., Gabryś-Barker, 2018; Jaroszewska, 2013). When it comes to WTC in English in meaning-focused and form-focused activities, the present findings are not in line with Peng and Woodrow's (2010) study. The researchers demonstrated higher WTC in form-focused activities among Chinese students. This current study, however, indicates that the senior students were more willing to speak in meaning-focused activities. The reason for the inconsistency is that, as discussed above, younger adults in China are exam-oriented students, and as such, they principally gain English academic knowledge necessary to achieve good exam results (e.g., Peng, 2014; Simpson, 2008).

In light of the findings of this research, WTC in English was higher in dyadic interaction. As shown in other studies, students tend to prefer working in pairs as it is considered to be less competitive than teacher-centered tasks (e.g., Cao, 2013; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017). At this juncture, it is vital to mention that in the case of older adults, the social aspect of learning may also be of particular relevance since they give high priority to improvement of interpersonal bonds and a sense of belonging to a group (e.g., Derenowski, 2018; Jaroszewska, 2013; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018). Therefore, as shown in the analysis of the answers to the open-ended question, dyadic cooperation was identified as a significant component which fostered older students' readiness to speak, and gave an opportunity to share their linguistic knowledge and experience with a partner.

It is also essential to note that the teacher plays an eminent role in enhancing in-class WTC. This research echoed previous findings which indicated that the teacher's behaviors and attitudes are crucial in creating a supportive classroom atmosphere and enhancing relationships with students (e.g., Kang, 2005; Lee, 2009; MacIntyre et al., 2001). In addition, it is the teacher's duty to prepare interesting tasks that are of unquestionable importance for seniors. As evidenced in the studies conducted by Cao (2013) as well as MacIntyre and Legatto (2011), tasks and topics which students find attractive reduce a potential difficulty of conversation and facilitate WTC. In this regard, one may say that older adults associate interesting exercises with using multimedia equipment during classes. This seems to echo the view held by Krajka (2011), who underscores that new technology ought to be utilized as an educational tool while teaching older adults as some of them are advanced enough to appreciate its usefulness not only in class but also outside educational settings.

It was also found that error correction is a pertinent factor increasing seniors' WTC. As shown in the analysis, the teacher was expected to correct primarily pronunciation mistakes mostly because the seniors found it essential to improve their communicative abilities. As a matter of fact, the results are inconsistent with MacIntyre et al.'s (2011) study where immediate error correction was reported to reduce WTC. Some third agers claimed that there was an urgent need for correcting each mistake during interaction. Interestingly, on one hand, the seniors wanted to have their mistakes corrected, but on the other hand, fear of making mistakes was deemed to inhibit in-class WTC. It is therefore necessary to stress that errors ought to

have been corrected in a gentle and non-threatening manner. This finding is echoed in a study by Kang (2005). The researcher found that a method of delivering error correction affects in-class WTC. Basically, when the teacher creates a stress-free learning environment, learners feel less anxious and insecure about making mistakes. Notably, the teacher's supportive attitude towards mistakes may by far reduce the risk of public humiliation that could discourage older students from speaking English in the future.

Finally, as demonstrated in the current study, insufficient lexical resources appeared to be the strongest predictor of low in-class WTC among the third-age learners. A similar view has been presented by Cao (2011), who indicates that in terms of language production, poor vocabulary knowledge may negatively affect WTC among university students. The inability to express one's thought in English could lead to reliance on L1 and hence this situation hampers WTC. Also, one needs to point out that seniors may have difficulties with the recollection of vocabulary. This fact is strongly related to potential memory problems and processing speed issues (e.g., Jagodzińska, 2008; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Ramírez Gómez, 2016). The prime cause of age-related decline is working memory (e.g., Baddeley, 1986, Stuart-Hamilton, 2012). For instance, vocabulary retrieval requires more time as senior citizens experience the decline of general cognitive functioning (cf. Hasher & Zacks, 1988; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). In consequence, the process of recollection is interfered with by irrelevant information, which reduces the capacity of working memory (e.g., Jaroszewska, 2013; Singleton, 2018). Needless to say, effective communication essentially means adequate reaction to oral stimuli at a given time. In this regard, older adults realize that memory decay at an advancing age may hamper their in-class WTC in English. In order to help them with lexical retrieval, a great number of revision tasks ought to be planned on a regular basis. Such an approach may not only help seniors notice what has already been acquired, but it also gives them a sense of learning success which motivates them to engage in further language practice (cf. Kozerska, 2016).

Although the present study has surely contributed to a better understanding of age-advanced learners' in-class WTC in English, it is not without limitations. Its major weakness was the relatively small sample as well as the location of the third age university. Nowy Targ is a town in the south of Poland. Because a substantial number of its residents emigrated to English speaking countries, the participants are likely to have their friends and family abroad. As a result, senior citizens from Nowy Targ may have more opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. Therefore, this study was limited by the absence of older adults from different regions of Poland with dissimilar background experiences. What also seems unfortunate is that the study did not include seniors taught by different teachers representing diverse teaching styles. It is by all means certain that language instructors' approaches towards students and the teaching process itself could vary considerably and thus it might affect third agers' level of in-class WTC in English.

8 Conclusions

In spite of its limitations, this small-scale study provided valuable insights into the nature of in-class WTC in the case of third-age learners. The data gathered by means of a questionnaire indicated that seniors' in-class WTC was relatively high, and the participants were eager to interact in English in the educational setting. Certainly, their lifelong learning experience helped them to determine prominent factors which may push or drag WTC.

The pedagogical implication is that a thoughtful and supportive teacher positively impacts seniors' readiness to speak mainly because he or she creates a safe classroom environment. In a similar vein, senior language learners attach great importance to interaction during classes, which may testify to their full awareness of the fact that before real-life communication, it is necessary to be willing to practice speaking in the classroom. Therefore, dyadic tasks have a great deal of influence on boosting WTC as this pattern of interaction stimulates one of the most common forms of communication outside the classroom. In actual teaching practice, a prerequisite for high in-class WTC is basically the planning of a large number of communicative activities and bearing in mind that third agers place much emphasis on correction of pronunciation errors. As evidenced in this study, in order to avoid potentially negative emotions, which might ruin a good atmosphere, the teacher ought to correct errors without a sense of being judgmental or critical. Seniors realize that good pronunciation may facilitate their WTC in real-life settings as well as helping them be a more successful English speaker. Overall, it is apparent that readiness to communicate starts inside the classroom with a language teacher who promotes various interactions, and third-age learners who surely appreciate all opportunities to speak a second language during classes.

It ought to be noted at this point is that future investigations into third agers' in-class WTC in English would be beneficial. Further research might identify the relationship between in-class WTC, classroom environment, and teacher immediacy establishing whether group cohesiveness or teacher support would be a more powerful determinant of older adults' WTC. Also, future studies could explore seniors' readiness to speak English during meaning and form-focused task performance. This dynamic approach could help compare levels of WTC between those two kinds of communicative activities and identify types of activities that might have a more positive effect on in-class WTC in English. Further empirical research would be of great significance for language educators working with senior learners on a regular basis as it could provide crucial implications for everyday teaching practice.

Appendix

In-class WTC questionnaire for seniors.

A) **Gender:**

☐ female ☐ male

B) **Age:** …….. years old

C) **Place of residence:**

☐ village ☐ town up to 50 000 residents ☐ town/city with more than 50 000 residents

D) **Education:**

☐ tertiary ☐ secondary ☐ primary

E) **How long have you been learning English throughout your life ?** …… years

F) **How long have you been learning English in the Third Age University** …… years

G) **Why are you learning English? Choose <u>the one</u> most important reason.**

☐ communication in English (during trips abroad, your stay abroad, conversations with English-speaking friends, family)

☐ self-realization

☐ memory improvement

☐ to maintain a rapport with groupmates, for company

☐ no reason

☐ other reason (what?) …….

1. **I am willing to use English to communicate during classes.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

2. **I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

3. **I am willing to share my knowledge in English during the classes.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

4. **I am willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant).**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

5. **I am willing to do a role-play with at my desk, with my peer.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

6. **I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Polish into English in my group.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

7. **I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn't understand.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

8. **I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of word I do not know.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

9. **I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

10. **I am willing to ask my group mates in English how to pronounce a word in English.**

☐ I strongly agree ☐ I agree ☐ I slightly agree ☐ I slightly disagree ☐ I disagree ☐ I strongly disagree

H) **Which factors, according to you, facilitate in-class willingness to communicate in English?**

_____
_____
_____

I) **Which factors, according to you, inhibit in-class willingness to communicate in English?**

_____
_____
_____

References

Baddeley, A. D. (1986). *Working memory*. Clarendon Press.

Baran-Łucarz M. (2015). Foreign language self-assessment and willingness to communicate in and outside the classroom. In E. Piechurska-Kuciel & M. Szyszka (Eds.), *The ecosystem of the foreign language learner. Second language learning and leaching* (pp. 37–57). Springer.

Cao, Y. (2011). Investigating situational willingness to communicate within second language classrooms from an ecological perspective. *System, 39*(4), 468–479.

Cao, Y. (2013). Exploring dynamism in willingness to communicate: A longitudinal case study. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 36*(2), 160–176.

Cao, Y., & Philp, J. (2006). Interactional context and willingness to communicate: A comparison of behavior in whole class, group and dyadic interaction. *System, 34*(4), 480–493.

Derenowski, M. (2018). Identifying the characteristics of foreign language teachers who work with senior learners. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 145–160). Multilingual Matters.

De Saint Léger, D., & Storch, N. (2009). Learners' perceptions and attitudes: Implications for willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom. *System, 37,* 269–285.

Dewaele, J.-M., & Dewaele, L. (2018). Learner-internal and learner-external predictors of willingness to communicate in the FL classroom. *Journal of the European Second Language Association, 2*(1), 24–37.

Fushino, K. (2010). Causal relationships between communication confidence, beliefs about group work, and willingness to communicate in foreign language group work. *TESOL Quarterly, 44*(4), 700–724. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.235993

Gabryś-Barker, D. (2018). Introduction: The background. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 8–16). Multilingual Matters.

Grotek, M. (2018). Student needs and expectations concerning foreign language teachers in universities of the third age. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 127–144). Multilingual Matters.

Hasher, L., & Zacks, R. T. (1988). Working memory, comprehension, and aging: A review and a new view. In G. H. Bower (Ed.), *The psychology of learning and motivation* (pp. 193–225). Academic Press.

Jagodzińska, M. (2008). *Psychologia pamięci. Badania, teorie, zastosowania.* Helion.

Jaroszewska, A. (2013). *Nauczanie seniorów języków obcych w Polsce.* Impuls.

Kang, S. J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *System, 33,* 277–292.

Krajka, J. (2011). Cel kształcenia językowego – umiejętność posługiwania się technologia informacyjną i komunikacyjne. In H. Komorowska (Ed.), *Nauka języka obcego w perspektywie ucznia* (pp. 104–120). Oficyna Wydawnicza Łośgraf.

Kozerska, A. (2016). Uczenie się w okresie późnej dorosłości jako przedmiot badań. In A. Kamińska (Ed.), *Pedagogika* (pp. 239–248). Oficyna Wydawnicza Humanitas.

Larrotta, C. (2019). *Narratives of adult English learners and teachers.* Multilingual Matters.

Lee, G. (2009). Speaking up: Six Korean students' oral participation in class discussions in US graduate seminars. *English for Specific Purposes, 28*(3), 142–156.

Liu, J. (2002). Negotiating silence in American classrooms: Three Chinese cases. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 2*(1), 37–54.

MacIntyre, P. D. (2007). Willingness to communicate in the second language: Understanding the decision to speak as a volitional process. *Modern Language Journal, 91*(4), 564–576.

MacIntyre, P. D., Babin, P. A., & Clément, R. (1999). Willingness to communicate: Antecedents & consequences. *Communication Quarterly, 47*(2), 215–233.

MacIntyre, P. D., Baker, S. C., Clément, R., & Conrod, S. (2001). Willingness to communicate, social support, and language learning orientations of immersion students. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 23*(3), 369–388.

MacIntyre, P. D., Burns, C., & Jessome, A. (2011). Ambivalence about communicating in a second language: A qualitative study of French immersion students' willingness to communicate. *Modern Language Journal, 95*(1), 81–96.

MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal, 82,* 545–562.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Legatto, J. J. (2011). A dynamic system approach to willingness to communicate: Developing an idiodynamic method to capture rapidly changing affect. *Applied Linguistics, 32*(2), 149–171.

Matusz, Ł., & Rakowska, M. R. (2019). Self-reported difficulties in learning English as a second language for third-age students in Poland. *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition, 5*(1), 113–130.

McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (1987). Willingness to communicate. In J. C. McCroskey & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Personality and interpersonal communication* (pp. 129–156). Sage.

Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A. (2016). Dynamics of classroom WTC: Results of a semester study. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 6*(4), 651–676.

Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A., & Pawlak, M. (2014). Fluctuations in learners' willingness to communicate during communicative task performance: Conditions and tendencies. *Research in Language, 12*(3), 245–260.

Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A., & Pawlak, M. (2016). Designing a tool for measuring the interrelationships between L2 WTC and confidence, beliefs, motivation, and context. In M. Pawlak (Ed.), *Classroom-oriented research, second language learning and teaching* (pp. 19–37). Springer.

Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A., & Pawlak, M. (2017). *Willingness to communicate in instructed second language acquisition: Combining a macro- and micro-perspective.* Multilingual Matters.

Niżegorodcew, A. (2016). Studying English in senior years: A psycholinguistic perspective. In D. Gałajda, P. Zakrajewski, & M. Pawlak (Eds.), *Researching second language teaching. Studies in honor of Danuta Gabryś-Barker* (pp. 87–104). Springer.

Oxford, R. (2018). A developmental perspective on third-age learning. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 3–18). Multilingual Matters.

Pawlak, M. (2015). Teaching foreign languages to adult learners: Issues, options, and opportunities. *Theoria et Historia Scientiarum, XII,* 45–65.

Pawlak, M., Derenowski, M., & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A. (2018). The use of indirect language learning strategies by third-age learners. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 76–90). Multilingual Matters.

Pawlak, M., & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A. (2015). Investigating the dynamic nature of L2 willingness to communicate. *System, 50,* 1–9.

Peng, J. E. (2014). *Willingness to communicate in the Chinese EFL university classroom: An ecological perspective.* Multilingual Matters.
Peng, J. E., & Woodrow, L. (2010). Willingness to communicate in English: A model in the Chinese EFL classroom context. *Language Learning, 60*(4), 834–876.
Pfenninger, S. E., & Polz, S. (2018). Foreign language learning in the third age: A pilot feasibility study on cognitive, socio-affective and linguistic drivers and benefits in relation to previous bilingualism of the learner. *Journal of the European Second Language Association, 2*(1), 1–13.
Pfenninger, S. E., & Singleton, D. (2019). A critical review of research relating to the learning, use and effects of additional and multiple languages in later late. *Language Teaching, 52*(4), 419–449. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000235
Piechurska-Kuciel, E. (2018). Openness to experience as a predictor of L2 WTC. *System, 72,* 190–200.
Ramírez Gómez, D. (2016). *Language teaching and the older adult: The significance of experience.* Multilingual Matters.
Ramírez Gómez, D. (2019). Developing a foreign language geragogy: Teaching innovations for older learners. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.), *Innovation in language teaching and learning: New language learning and teaching environments* (pp. 161–184). Palgrave Macmillan.
Riasati, M. J. (2012). EFL learners' perception of factors influencing willingness to speak English in language classrooms: A qualitative study. *World Applied Sciences Journal, 17*(10), 1287–1297.
Riasati, M. J., & Rahimi, F. (2018). Situational and individual factors engendering willingness to speak in English in foreign language classrooms. *Cogent Education, 5*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1513313
Sheybani, M. (2019). The relationship between EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and their teacher immediacy attributes: A structural equation model. *Cogent Psychology, 6*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1607051
Simpson, S. T. (2008). Western EFL teachers and east-west classroom-culture conflicts. *RELC Journal, 39*(3), 381–394.
Singleton, D. (2018). Really late learners: Some research contexts and some practical hints. In D. Gabryś-Barker (Ed.), *Third age learners of foreign languages* (pp. 19–30). Multilingual Matters.
Stuart-Hamilton, I. (2012). *The psychology of ageing* (5th ed.). Jessica Kingley Publishers.
Weaver, C. (2005). Using the Rasch model to develop a measure of second language learners' willingness to communicate within a language classroom. *Journal of Applied Measurement, 6,* 396–415.
Wen, W. P., & Clément, R. (2003). A Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 16*(1), 18–38.
Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal, 86,* 54–66.
Zarrinabadi, N. (2014). Communicating in a second language: Investigating the effect of teacher on learners' willingness to communicate. *System, 42,* 288–295.
Zhang, J., Beckmann, N., & Beckmann, J. F. (2018). To talk or not to talk: A review of situational antecedents of willingness to communicate in the second language classroom. *System, 72,* 226–239. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.01.003

Anna Borkowska is a lecturer and a teaching practice supervisor in Podhale State College of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ, Poland. For the last four years she has been collaborating with members of the Third Age University in Nowy Targ and promoting the idea of teaching English to seniors by trainee teachers. Her main area of interest is foreign language pedagogy, especially glottogeragogics.