Correlates and Predictors of L2 Willingness to Communicate in Polish Adolescents

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Abstract The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 denotes "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). In the early model of L2 WTC, there are two main variables influencing its levels: perceived communication competence and communication anxiety (MacIntyre 1994). WTC is now considered a fundamental goal of second language education (MacIntyre et al. 2003) because it offers L2 learners "greater chances for L2 practice and authentic L2 usage" (MacIntyre et al. 2001, p. 382). Students taking the risk of initiating communication in a language they do not know well are likely to become more proficient and knowledgeable in comparison to those who fear taking such opportunities. The basic aim of this study is to investigate the role of predictors shaping L2 WTC of Polish adolescents (N = 621) learning English in the context of secondary grammar school. Its results show that the most powerful predictors of L2 WTC are levels of self-perceived foreign language skills and language anxiety (they explain almost 40 % of L2 WTC variance). Variables of secondary importance are final grades and teacher support, as well as knowledge and friend orientations. Gender and place or residence appear of extremely limited value (1 %).

1 Introduction

Talking is central in interpersonal communication (McCroskey and Richmond 1990). The desire to interact with others fulfills the human need for forming intimate and significant bonds that serve the purpose of attaining optimal well-being. It can be achieved by means of satisfying three psychological needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy (Hargie 2011). The first need concerns the individual's desire to carry out actions in a proficient and effective manner, while relatedness

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denotes the wish to form and maintain good relationships. The autonomy need entails a want to be in charge of one's own destiny, instead of being controlled by others. The interplay of all these factors enables the formation and expression of identity, which is the kernel of communication. This is the reason why the amount of communication in which interlocutors decide to engage is of critical importance for creating relationships and interpersonal influences. It is also assumed that communication is vital for learning, so it constitutes a prerequisite for successful second language acquisition. Therefore, the amount of communication in which interactants are willing to engage in a foreign language constitutes a springboard for foreign language achievement.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the phenomenon of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the context of the Polish foreign language classroom from the point of view of an ecological framework. It enables us to view WTC from a larger perspective of a series of nested systems (Bronfenbrenner 1995). At the centre of the model, there is the individual affected by his or her own characteristics (i.e. biosystem). In the case of the present research, this is the student's *gender*. It is surrounded by the outer layer of his or her immediate social and physical environment (i.e. microsystems of school and home). The educational microsystem is represented by variables directly connected with the foreign language learning process in the formal context: *language learning orientations*, *language anxiety*, *teacher support*, *self-assessment of FL skills, and grades*. The exosystem of indirect influences is represented by the individual's *place of residence*.

2 Willingness to Communicate

The use of language is instigated by the individual's predilections towards talking or a general tendency to approach or avoid communicative situations (Avtgis 1999). Traditionally, communication research has followed two main lines of inquiry. One of them is connected with forms of communication anxiety and avoidance. It concerns studies on several distinctive cognate constructs: communication apprehension, reticence, predispositions toward verbal behavior, shyness, and unwillingness to communicate.

Communication apprehension is viewed as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey 1982, p. 137). A construct originally synonymous to it, *reticence*, is now understood as incompetent communication connected with one's belief that "it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish" (Keaten and Kelly 2000, p. 165). On the other hand, the concept of *predispositions toward verbal behavior* was formerly connected with positive feelings (Mortensen et al. 1977 in Bostrom and Harrington 1999), yet is now defined as "the tendency to be timid, reserved, and most specifically, talk less" (McCroskey and Richmond 1987, p. 133). Another negative aspect of communicative behavior is *shyness*, viewed as "a tendency to avoid social interaction, to fail to participate appropriately in social

situations" (Pilkonis 1977, p. 858). Finally, *unwillingness to communicate* is understood as "a chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication and to view the communication situation as relatively unrewarding" (Burgoon 1976, p. 60). These concepts pertain to a presumed trait-like predisposition to communication.

Such considerations can be summed up with an observation that people are stable in the amount of communication, which is an individual's characteristic operating within the constrictions of individual situations. It follows that people differ quantitatively and qualitatively in the talking in which they decide to engage (Barraclough et al. 1988). Studies on *willingness to communicate* (WTC) evolved on these grounds, proposing that the individual's predilections towards talking may be viewed from the perspective of both approach to and avoidance of communicative situations. More specifically, it is associated with constructs related to apprehension or anxiety about communication, as well as with the constructs associated with a behavioral tendency referring to talking frequency. It encompasses the individual's general personality orientation towards talking (Barraclough et al. 1988, p. 188). Particularly, it denotes "a person's predispositional preferences with regard to communication" (McCroskey 1992, p. 20). It is also defined as "a personality-based, traitlike predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers" (McCroskey and Richmond 1982, p. 134). It follows that the construct pertains to a stable tendency within an individual to initiate or terminate communication (McCroskey 1992), which is one's readiness to talk, seen as an individual's general attitude toward initiating communication with other people (McCroskey and Richmond 1987). Aside from its personality-oriented character, the concept of WTC is also believed to be situation-dependent. Situational variables may impact a person's willingness to communicate at a certain point of time in a given context (e.g. one's mood or previous experience with communicating with a specific person or a probable gain or loss evoked by the specific communication act).

The communication studies described above refer to monolingual contexts only. However, when a foreign language learning environment comes into play, it may be difficult to consider WTC identical with its L1 counterpart. There may be several reasons for this observation. First of all, in second language acquisition studies the primary assumption is that the change of the language of communication induces a "dramatic" transformation of the communication setting (MacIntyre et al. 1998, p. 546). As a result, various confounding consequences may follow. One of them is connected with the specificity of second language acquisition, demanding not only studying its subject matter (e.g. systems and subsystems), like in any other school subject, but also skills (i.e. speaking, writing, listening, and reading). Apart from that, learning a foreign language requires studying various aspects of another culture, which, again, is not characteristic of other school subjects (Gardner 2001). This is why, it "is essentially a socially oriented process (…) linked with the wider cultural and cognitive processes" (Foley and Thompson 2003, p. 62). Needless to say, the interplay of the social, cognitive and cultural dimensions of the language learning process becomes even more complex, providing for its affective aspect. From this point of view, language learning is connected with the necessity to rely

on one's unskilled language abilities, which induces a considerable threat to the learner's "self-perception of genuineness in presenting themselves to others" (Horwitz 1999, p. xii). This destabilization gives way to a range of negative emotions that accompany the prolonged process of the formation of a new, flexible self-concept. For these reasons, the unique experience of foreign language learning is inevitably "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" (Guiora 1983, p. 8), causing unclear and wayward consequences for an individual.

The complexity of L2 learning is further enhanced by the necessity to actively use the language, because one must talk in order to learn a second language (Skehan 1989). Yet, understandably, communication in an L2 depends greatly on a psychological readiness to use the language, so best learning effects may be expected when the student is ready to take an active part in the communication process in spite of the fact that they do not know the language very well. Unfortunately, it certainly is an unlikely phenomenon due the much greater difference in communicative competence in most L2 learners in comparison to L1 speakers.

From this point of view, it may be unlikely that "WTC in the second language (L2) is a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1" (MacIntyre et al. 1998, p. 546). More purposefully, the definition of L2 WTC must acknowledge the role of the language used for communication. Therefore, it is defined 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). It is proposed that it is a product of the action control system, adjusting preplanned actions to sudden changes. It enables the student to commence a task, to focus on it, and to follow it through to completion (MacIntyre and Doucette 2010). It means that L2 learners initiating communication need to be sure that they are able to send an understandable message they are capable of responding to.

The L2 learner's decision to initiate communication (WTC) is largely shaped by two basic groups of influences encompassing personal predilections towards talking and the specific variables shaping the communicative event: situational (changeable or variable), as well as more constant (stable) factors influencing voluntary communication initiation (MacIntyre et al. 1998). These factors are incorporated in a heuristic (pyramid) model of L2 WTC proposed by MacIntyre and associates (1998) (for a thorough discussion of the model see the chapter by Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pietrzykowska (this volume).

3 The Study

The basic aim of this paper is to present the results of empirical research into willingness to communicate in L2 with a special focus on its correlates and predictors in the context of the Polish secondary grammar school. It is speculated that WTC levels may be largely attributed to this culturally specific environment, because cultural differences may facilitate or debilitate communication. The way an individual communicates is deeply rooted in his or her culture, because "the amount

of talking in which a person engages would be dependent, at least in part, on that person's cultural orientation" (Barraclough et al. 1988, p. 187). Consequently, the cultural background of the interlocutors appears to have a considerable influence on the quality and quantity of the communication act. As the ultimate goal of foreign language learning is authentic communication between people of different languages and cultures, foreign language learners must be equipped with a strong communicative target enabling them to overcome these cultural differences, which is willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al. 1998). It will help them to overcome any lack of skills of effective communication within the L2 context, irrespective of successful L1 skills, caused by cultural divergence.

The study aims at investigating the most significant correlates and predictors of L2 WTC, which come from various nested systems surrounding the learner's biosystem. At the centre of the model, there are individual characteristic of *gender*. So far, L2 WTC research shows that girls generally manifest more confidence and greater WTC, when compared to boys (Kristmanson and Dicks 2010). However, significant gender differences in WTC are not observed past the junior high level (Donovan and MacIntyre 2004). It is also demonstrated that girls have greater levels of WTC inside the classroom, whereas boys are more willing to use L2 outside it (Baker and MacIntyre 2000). It must be noted that this variable is placed at the base of the pyramid model, which means that it belongs to enduring tendencies.

Likewise, the variable of *residential location* can be placed within the same group. Yet, from the point of view of the ecological framework by Bronfenbrenner (1995), it can be accommodated in the student's exosystem surrounding the learner's microsystems of school and home. Although language acquisition is eminently bound to a social context (Clément 1986), to date empirical research has disregarded the importance of this variable. Hence, the present study seeks to establish its value for L2 WTC levels. It is speculated that a town or city offers greater chances for mastering foreign languages, with language school or cinemas showing films in the original language. A physical distance from a conurbation may considerably diminish chances for such contacts. Besides, rural areas remain connected with lower economic standards of living (Rybczyńska 2004), which means that parents are unable to invest in educational resources or hire tutors. Rural adolescents' academic achievement is lower (Roscigno and Crowley 2001), also in respect to the foreign language learning process (Piechurska-Kuciel 2008), hence their L2 WTC may also display lower levels.

The microsystem of school is represented by several variables, due to the fact that it is the immediate environment for L2 WTC. *Language learning orientations* traditionally are a key component of motivation (instrumental and integrative), yet "orientation refers to a class of reasons for learning a second language" (Gardner 1985, p. 54). They underpin the student's motives for learning the language. They can be divided into some basic groups: job-related, travel, friendship, and knowledge (Clément and Kruidenier 1983). They can be supplemented with one more group, specifically referring to the school context, that is school achievement (MacIntyre et al. 1998). Empirical research proves that the friendship, knowledge and school achievement orientations are significantly correlated with WTC both

inside and outside the classroom in a positive manner, while job-related orientations are correlated with WTC outside the classroom (MacIntyre et al. 1998).

Another variable placed within the school microsystem is *teacher support*. The rationale for including it is that teachers are able to help their students achieve success through their perceived strong support (Patrick et al. 2007). Teachers provide knowledge, but also a positive classroom climate, which leads to higher achievement. It is also expected that in the FL classroom teachers are able to help their students achieve success through their perceived strong support. Consequently, better support is expected to lead to more safety in this environment (Abu-Rabia 2004) and higher L2 WTC levels.

Grades are another factor directly related to the foreign language classroom context, including foreign language achievement. It is hypothesized that they reveal the teacher's assessment of student general language abilities. Although this variable has not been included in the empirical research on L2 WTC, an assumption is made that their level may be correlated with the construct under investigation mainly due to the fact that foreign language learning requires the student's active participation in the lesson. Hence, final grades are believed to expose teacher summative assessment of the student's progress.

Language anxiety is an important variable meriting a thorough investigation in L2 WTC studies. In the early model of L2 WTC, aside from perceived communication competence, it is proposed to be a key factor influencing student willingness to communicate (MacIntyre 1994). Specifically, more frequent communication in L2 is induced by greater WTC, stimulated by high levels of perceived competence in combination with low levels of anxiety that influences the perception of competence. Hence, it is speculated that language anxiety has a double effect on WTC: direct and at the same time indirect through affecting one's perception of competence. Research proves that it is negatively correlated with WTC in various cultural samples (e.g. MacIntyre and Charos 1996; Hashimoto 2002; Yashima 2002).

Last but not least, *self-assessment of FL skills* must be taken into consideration. In monolingual WTC research, greater willingness to communicate is associated with higher self-perceived competence in L1 (Barraclough et al. 1988). Similarly, perceived competence is a key factor in predicting WTC in L2 (Baker and Mac-Intyre 2000; Yashima 2002). Also, increased perceived competence has been found to lead to increased motivation, which in turn affects frequency of L2 use in the classroom (Hashimoto 2002). Generally, it is proposed that both self-assessment of FL skills and language anxiety have the strongest predictive power in the WTC context, which is also revealed in the heuristic model by placing them among proximal antecedents of WTC. From this point of view, it seems justified to propose the following hypothesis:

H: *The strongest predictors of WTC are self-perceived FL skills and language anxiety levels.*

Alongside searching for evidence corroborating the above hypothesis, the study aims at identifying the most significant correlates and predictors of L2 WTC in the setting of the Polish language classroom.

4 Method

Below there is a description of, and justification for, the chosen methodology and research methods used in the study.

4.1 Participants

The cohort participating in the study comprised 621 students from 23 classes of the six secondary grammar schools in Opole, southwestern Poland (396 girls and 225 boys) whose mean age was 16.50. They were first grade students taking 3–6 h a week of English instruction. Their level of proficiency in English was at an elementary to intermediate level. Their other compulsory language was French or German (two lessons a week). The sample mostly included urban students (N = 408; 286 from the city of Opole, 122 from neighboring towns), and 213 from rural regions.

4.2 Materials

The basic instrument used in the study was a questionnaire. It explored demographic variables, such as age, gender (1—*male*, 2—*female*), place of residence (1—*village: up to 2500 inhabitants*, 2—*town: from 2,500 to 50,000 inhabitants*, 3—*city: over 50,000 inhabitants*).

Also used was the *Willingness to communicate in the classroom* scale (MacIntyre et al. 2001) adopted for the use of English (WTCI). The inventory included 27 items, assessing students' willingness to initiate communication during class time within the four skill areas. There were eight items measuring WTC in speaking, six in reading, eight in writing, and five in comprehension (listening). Sample items in the scale were: "A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first?" or "How often are you willing to read personal letters or notes written to you in which the writer has deliberately used simple words and constructions?" The participants indicated the frequency of time they chose to use English on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never willing*) to 5 (*almost always willing*). The minimum score was 27, the maximum: 135. The scale's reliability was measured in terms of Cronbach's alpha, showing very good reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$).

The next scale was *Willingness to communicate outside the classroom* (MacIntyre et al. 2001), assessing the participants' willingness to communicate outside the classroom in the four skill areas (WTCO). It was composed of the same items as the previous scale, adapted to the out-of-school context. Its reliability was $\alpha = 0.96$.

Another scale applied in the study was the *Language Learning Orientations* inventory (MacIntyre et al. 1998). It included five subscales measuring orientations for language learning (i.e. job-related, travel, friendship, increased knowledge about the TL group, and school achievement). Sample items in the scale were: "English will be useful in getting a good job or English will help me get into better universities later". They were assessed on a Likert scale: 1—*I totally disagree* to 5—*I totally agree*. The minimum number of points on the scale was 20, the maximum: 100. The scale's reliability: α = 0.87

The *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (Horwitz et al. 1986) was used in order to estimate the degree to which students feel anxious during language classes. Sample items on the scale were as follows: "I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class" or "I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am". Again, a Likert scale was used (1—*I totally disagree* to 5—*I totally agree*). The minimum number of points was 33, the maximum: 165. The scale's reliability was α = 0.94.

Teacher support was assessed on the basis of a part of the school and classroom climate scale, called the *School Climate-Social Action-Instrumental* (Griffith 1995). The scale was adopted to measure aspects of the English teacher's expressive support. The scale was composed of nine items assessed against the 5-point Likert-format scale from 1—*I totally disagree* to 5—*I totally agree*. The sample items in the scale were: "My English teacher can tell when things are not going right for me" or "My English teacher cares about me as a person". The minimum number of points was 9, while the maximum was 45. Its reliability was 0.90.

Finally, two types of assessment tools were used: external (grades) and internal (self-assessment of the foreign language skills). As far as *grades* are concerned, the participants gave the final grades they received in lower secondary school, and the first semester of the upper secondary grammar school. They also included the grade they expected to receive at the end of the school year. All these grades were assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*unsatisfactory*) to 6 (*excellent*), and later aggregated with the reliability of 0.87.

The last measurement used in the study was a scale estimating *self-perceived levels of FL skills* (i.e. speaking, listening, writing and reading). It was an aggregated value of separate self-assessments of the FL skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*unsatisfactory*) to 6 (*excellent*) (α = 0.86).

4.3 Procedure

The data collection procedure took place over the months of March and April 2010. In each class, the students were asked to respond to the questionnaire. The time designed for the activity was 15 to 45 min. The participants were asked to give true answers without taking too much time for reflection. A new set of items in each part

of the questionnaire was preceded with a short statement introducing it in an inconspicuous manner.

The design of the study was non-experimental and correlational—it quantified the relationship between the main variable (the aggregated value of WTCI and WTCO) and other variables introduced in the first part of the paper (e.g. language learning orientations or language anxiety). As this design type does not allow for drawing causal inferences (Graziano and Raulin 1993), the basic procedure enabling the interpretation of the results obtained in the present study was multiple regression. More specifically, a hierarchical approach to multiple regression, where predictor variables (independent) are introduced in blocks (each block represents one step in the hierarchy), was applied in order to predict their influence on the criterion (dependent) variable, i.e. WTC.

There are two kinds of variables identified in the study. The dependent one was the aggregated value of the WTC measurements in and out of the classroom (WTCI and WTCO). The independent variables were constituted by gender, place of residence, language learning orientations, teacher support, language anxiety, self-perceived levels of the four skills, and final grades. All the variables were operationally defined as questionnaire items.

The data were computed by means of the statistical program STATISTICA, with the main operations being descriptive statistics; i.e. means, standard deviations (SD), and correlation, represented by a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient r, as well as by a coefficient of determination r^2 indicating the percentage of variability in L2 WTC levels. Additionally, an inferential statistics procedure was included, i.e. step-wise hierarchical regression. The indicator of significance of variables inserted in consecutive blocks was the range of the explained variance R^2 (the unique contribution of new predictors), as well as the value and significance of the β weights (they show how strongly each predictor variable influences the criterion variable, i.e. WTC). Nevertheless, as R^2 has a tendency to overestimate the appropriateness of the model when applied to the real world, so an *Adjusted R^2* value taking into account the number of variables in the model and the number of observations (participants) was calculated. It is treated as a most useful measure of the success of the model.

5 Results

The basic descriptive results show that the WTC distribution is slightly negatively skewed (-0.0499) and kurtosis equals -0.2456. As far as language learning orientations are concerned, it seems that the most prominent reason for studying English was the desire to travel, which was also confirmed by greater homogeneity of the responses ($M = 18.01$, $SD = 2.76$). Teacher support results ranged the mean level of 30.92 ($SD = 7.45$), while in the case of language anxiety $M = 83.96$ ($SD = 23.88$). As far as self-perceived levels of the four foreign language skills are concerned, their mean equaled 15.75 ($SD = 3.51$), while in reference to final grades

Table 1 Summary of the descriptive statistics results

Variable	M	SD
WTCI	80.64	21.87
WTCO	78.78	24.85
WTC (aggregated)	159.42	45.46
Gender	1.64	0.48
Place of residence	2.18	0.89
Travel orientations	18.01	2.76
Job orientations	17.99	2.89
Friend orientations	17.50	3.02
Knowledge orientations	15.84	3.20
School orientations	17.36	3.20
Teacher support	30.92	7.45
FL skills	15.75	3.51
Grades	12.21	2.33
Language anxiety	83.96	23.88

the results were $M = 12.21$, $SD = 2.33$, respectively (see Table 1 for the summary of the descriptive statistics results).

In the next step, the WTC scores were correlated with the independent variables' results (for this purpose only the variables placed on interval scales were selected). The results clearly show that all the variables are correlated with WTC in a statistically significant manner (their scattergrams show linear relationships). Nevertheless, among the ones related to the WTC scores in the strongest manner there are two types of language learning orientations (to have friends and to know more about English language countries), as well as self-perceived levels of FL skills (see Table 2 for the summary of the calculations).

Table 2 Summary of the WTC correlations results

Variable	R	r^2
Travel orientations	0.39***	0.12
Job orientations	0.30***	0.09
Friend orientations	0.45***	0.20
Knowledge orientations	0.44***	0.19
School orientations	0.28***	0.08
Teacher support	0.11**	0.01
FL skills	0.46***	0.21
Grades	0.36***	0.13
Language anxiety	0.38***	0.14

* denotes $p \leq 0.05$
** $p < 0.01$
*** $p < 0.001$)

Finally, in order to compute the predictive value of the independent variables for assessing WTC levels, step-wise multiple regression was performed. In the first step, the items chosen for predicting the WTC level were gender and the place of residence. It can be seen that both variables show weak, though statistically significant predictability of the WTC results. In the case of gender the results were $\beta = 0.04^{**}$, while in reference to the participants' place of residence it was $\beta = 0.04^{*}$. Together, these two variables were responsible for about 2 % of the WTC variability with $F\ (2,\ 618) = 5.48^{**}$.

In the next step, a block of five variables was introduced into the equation—the language learning orientations. Two of them—the orientation to have English-speaking friends and to know the English-speaking countries turned out to be strong predictors of the WTC results. In the case of the first one, the results were: $\beta = 0.29^{***}$, while in the second: $\beta = 0.28^{***}$. They were responsible for 25 % of the WTC variance with $F\ (7,\ 613) = 29.87^{***}$.

In Step 3 teacher support and grades were entered in one block. Both turned out to be significant predictors of the WTC score with teacher support ranging $\beta = 0.12^{**}$ and language anxiety equaling $\beta = 0.21^{***}$. Together, these variables explained 33 % variance of the WTC results with $F\ (9,\ 611) = 31.82^{***}$.

Finally, in the last step the most powerful variables were entered: language anxiety and self-perceived levels of FL skills. Their value was acknowledged in the theoretical model by MacIntyre (1994), as well as in many empirical researches. Indeed, their predictive value turned out to be most powerful in predicting one's WTC levels by their ability to explain 38 % of its variance. In the case of language anxiety $\beta = 0.09^{*}$, while in the case of self-perceived FL skills levels it was $\beta = 0.26^{***}$. In this way a significant model of L2 WTC emerged with $F\ (11,\ 609) = 34.65^{***}$. The summary of the multiple regression procedure can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Hierarchical regression predictors of WTC levels in polish adolescents (N = 621)

Variable	Adjusted R^2 change	β	p
Step 1[*] Gender Place of residence		0.04 0.04	0.00 0.04
Step 2 Travel orientations Job orientations Friend orientations Know orientations School orientations	0.24	0.03 −0.10 0.29 0.28 −0.01	0.61 0.09 0.00 0.00 0.82
Step 3 Teacher support Grades	0.31	0.12 0.21	0.00 0.00
Step 4 Language anxiety FL skills	0.37	0.26 −0.09	0.00 0.03

[*] *Adjusted R^2 = 0.01*

6 Discussion

The main aim of this study was to define most powerful correlates and predictors of L2 WTC in the context of the Polish secondary grammar school. As far as correlates are concerned, the results demonstrate that all the variables chosen for the study are significantly correlated with L2 WTC. Such a result cannot be surprising, mostly due to the fact that they come from the school microsystem. This means that the idea of "who learns what in what milieu" (Clément and Kruidenier 1983, p. 288) must underlie the concept of L2 WTC, because all these variables are rooted in the learning context.

Following the rule of the thumb of ignoring correlations of less than 0.30, indicating "little, if any, relationship between variables" (Hinkle et al. 1994, p. 120), it may be suggested that among the variables correlated with L2 WTC in the most reliable manner there are language learning orientations (i.e. travel, friends, and knowledge), together with self-perceived FL skills levels, final grades and language anxiety.

As far as language learning orientations are concerned, travel appears secondary in comparison to the other two (friends and knowledge), whose coefficient of determination power shows their ability to relate to the L2 WTC variance at the 20 % level. This means that students who desire to have friends who speak English, and who want to acquire the target language in order to understand people of other nations and to know themselves better, show an inclination to initiate communication in the foreign language in the classroom and outside it.

Final grades and language anxiety levels are moderately correlated with L2 WTC scores, with the coefficient of determination ranging 13–14 % of the variance in L2 WTC. It follows that students who are ready to communicate in a foreign language at the same time obtain higher final grades and display lower language anxiety levels. This finding undisputedly demonstrates the importance of positive emotions for the learning process, leading to the conclusion that positive emotions are prerequisite for one's desire to interact with others, irrespective of the language. In consequence, such behaviors are rewarded with better grades, which in turn induces more confident communicative performance.

Last but not least, one's willingness to communicate is inextricably connected with one's perceived competence. It has been proven that the perception of one's own communication skills is more important than the skills themselves in predicting one's WTC, as proposed by McCroskey (1992) in reference to the L1 context, as well as by MacIntyre (1994) in reference to the L2 environment. Also in this study the variable turns out to be correlated with L2 levels in the most significant manner, when compared to other factors.

The results of the correlational investigation enable the formulation of general characteristics of a foreign language student who displays high levels of L2 WTC. First of all, the person is convinced about their high levels of FL skills, and has a strong desire to have friends speaking English. Such students are determined to know more and study hard. Secondly, they want to travel abroad, while their final

grades obtained in the FL course are also high. This is connected with the fact that the student's experiences with negative emotions in the process of FL study are scarce, as reflected in low language anxiety levels. However, it must be remembered that correlations are computed for independent sets of WTC relationships, hence the characteristics of a student with high L2 WTC levels must be seen as separate entities, not related to one another.

Then again, the ultimate aim of the study is to determine the most influential predictors of L2 WTC in Polish secondary grammar school students. The main hypothesis formulated for this purpose proposed that: *the strongest predictors of WTC are self-perceived FL skills and language anxiety levels.*

It is understood that one's L2 WTC levels do not develop in isolation, but are influenced by a combination of several factors. Thanks to the multiple regression procedure, the L2 WTC score can be best predicted on the basis of the scores on several other variables. Its results prove that the best predictors of L2 WTC levels are self-perceived levels of FL skills and language anxiety scores. It can be inferred that when a student estimates his or her language abilities at a high level, it is possible to predict that their WTC levels will also be high, and that such a learner is very likely to be keen on initiating communication in the foreign language in and outside the classroom. The theoretical model of WTC, as well as empirical research, confirm the predictive power of this variable. Therefore, higher levels of self-perceived FL skills allow the learner to confront communicative situations with greater self-confidence, boosting their WTC. In this situation, students are secure in taking risks and freely enter interactions in a foreign language, they are positive about linguistic and social abilities, and take chances to constantly improve them. On the other hand, low levels of self-perceived FL skills are connected with withdrawal from any potentially dangerous situations of a social nature that may take place in the classroom. Those learners who do not trust in their linguistic abilities may ultimately deprive themselves of opportunities for language improvement.

Another significant predictor of L2 WTC levels is language anxiety, which obviously influences the individual's choice of whether or not to communicate in various situations. An apprehensive student may avoid the language class or speaking activities, withdraw or—when forced to communicate—speak hesitantly and unintelligibly. On the other hand, a student who is more willing to communicate in a foreign language undoubtedly feels safe, and is thus ready to take risks in initiating discourse in spite of the fact that they may not know the language very well. Generally speaking, the most disastrous effects of language anxiety consist in the impediment of language processing, leading to behaviors endangering successful in-class communication. This is why, the necessity of using the unknown language in reference to an unfamiliar and unclear cultural context leads to greater anxiety which, in turn, induces lower WTC levels.

In the case of the researched sample, the predictor variable of language anxiety demonstrates lower β levels, which implies that it is a weaker L2 WTC predictor, when compared to the self-perceived FL levels. This finding can be explained by applying the model of language anxiety development, which proposes that anxiety has a tendency to diminish alongside with growing mastery of the foreign language.

It can be understood that the Polish adolescents investigated in this study already possess a working knowledge of English, and they have also familiarized themselves with the language learning environment and the FL teacher's expectations (the study was carried out 6 months after the beginning of their secondary grammar school experience). On these grounds, it can be speculated that their language anxiety levels have already decreased, causing their greater safety in the language learning context. Altogether, the variables of self-perceived FL levels and language anxiety scores are responsible for over one-third of the L2 WTC variability, which means that in the above WTC model, they allow for a very precise estimation of the learner's WTC.

A set of slightly weaker predictors of L2 WTC is constituted by final grades and teacher support, which explains less than one-third of L2 WTC variability. Of these two, grades are a more reliable predictor of the criterion variable, i.e. WTC. Hence, it can be expected that as there is a high degree of correlation between the instructor's grades and students' perceptions of their abilities (cf. Singh and Terry 2008); high-achieving students, like the ones who rate themselves highly, can be predicted to demonstrate higher L2 WTC scores.

Teacher support appears to be a slightly weaker predictor of L2 WTC. It can understood that the teacher's supportive behaviors, consisting in showing understanding, empathy and consistency, help the students to start forming an identity that will assist them in coping with negative emotions in their language learning process. Thereafter, by creating a safe atmosphere in the classroom, teacher support levels are a clear predictor of elevated L2 WTC. By contrast, when students cannot count on the instructor's help, advice, assistance, or backing, they are not able to manage the learning process successfully. As a result, they will be less inclined to initiate communication in a foreign language, and avoid exposing themselves in the face of danger caused by communicative demands.

Language learning orientations constitute even a weaker set of L2 WTC predictors. Among them, only the orientations to have English-speaking friends and to know more have a power to predict the magnitude of one's readiness to communicate in a foreign language, by explaining one-fourth of WTC variability. Reasons related to the acquisition of knowledge and friendship belong to the integrative motivational subsystem, as proposed by Dörnyei (1990); hence, it may be presumed that only internally-driven reasons for learning a language can predict the way in which a student will approach the task of initiation communication in an L2. Moreover, the connection between integrative reasons for language acquisition and willingness to communicate can be explained on the basis of the individual's choice. Both WTC and the orientations to have English-speaking friends are volitional, so it can be inferred that one's desire to have English-speaking friends and to know more are a reliable predictor of their wish for engaging in L2 communication.

The demographic characteristics of the learner—their gender and place of residence—can be treated as very weak predictors of L2 WTC, because they can explain as much as 1 % of its variability. As such, they can be disregarded due to their low predictive power.

Overall, the multiple regression model designed for the purpose of this study demonstrates that among the most valuable predictors of one's L2 WTC several variables can be placed. The strongest ones are self-perceived levels of FL skills and language anxiety levels. Further, with slightly less predictive power, final grades and teacher support can be proposed. Finally, the language learning orientations focusing on one's desire to have English-speaking friends and to know more play a role when calculating potential WTC levels. All these variables come from the student's school microsystem, which can be explained by the fact the Polish adolescent's WTC is mainly shaped by the classroom context, with scarce opportunity to use the foreign language outside school.

On this basis, a clear set of characteristics for the Polish student with low WTC levels can be proposed. Mainly, they are low achievers with low self-perceived foreign language skills. Learning a foreign language is an ordeal evoking strong negative feelings, such as elevated levels of language anxiety. The fear to learn and use the foreign language is worsened by the fact that students are convinced about the teacher's indifference towards them. Their feelings of alienation are accompanied by their lack of interest in having English-speaking friends or to know more. This, sadly, creates a vicious cycle hampering their harmonious development as language learners and human beings.

7 Conclusions

Willingness to communicate is one of the factors contributing to one's successful existence and well being. High WTC levels are correlated with better evaluation in different contexts, such as school, organization and social contacts. On the other hand, individuals unwilling to communicate are burdened with a communicational dysfunction that can reduce their social and emotional happiness (Richmond and McCroskey 1989). For this reason, WTC is now believed to be a major goal of second language education (MacIntyre et al. 2003). Moreover, it offers foreign language learners "greater chances for L2 practice and authentic L2 usage" (MacIntyre et al. 2001, p. 382).

As such, implementing behaviors inducing higher WTC levels while teaching a foreign language are of utmost importance. This can be done through creating more opportunities for learning and using a FL within the Polish cultural context, as well as through pursuing intercultural communication. The teacher's primary goal should be enhancing students' interest in different cultures and international affairs. However, one cannot forget about the importance of managing negative emotions during the foreign language learning process. It follows that the teacher is the person whose guidance and support may be the key to reducing anxiety and building confidence in communication. This can be done through allowing students to exercise control over their own learning and developing their self-assessment skills, as well as through the creation of a collaborative classroom, where knowledge and decision-making are shared by both parties—the teacher and the students.

The study is not free from limitations that must be addressed. Although the selection of variables performed for the purpose of the multiple regression procedure allowed for effective predicting of the student's levels of L2 WT, one must bear in mind the fact that the study was carried out in the Polish educational context. The way a person communicates is deeply entrenched in their culture, because "the amount of talking in which a person engages would be dependent, at least in part, on that person's cultural orientation" (Barraclough et al. 1988, p. 187). It follows that specific communication demands and expectations are a function of the culture in which one is raised. From this point of view, the research context is very special and hence its results may not be generalized to include other cultural environments. Another drawback of the study can be attributed to the fact that the role of language experience is unclear. It can be presumed that all the research participants were at a similar level of language proficiency. Yet, it would be interesting to establish if the length and intensity of one's experience with the foreign language might be a reliable predictor of L2 WTC. This can be caused by the fact that it may be correlated with one's language proficiency level, as well as with language anxiety, the most powerful predictors of L2 WTC.

Communication is a vital aspect of one's life. If indeed, as the results of this investigation suggest, learners' willingness to communicate can be predicted mostly on the basis of their perceived levels of FL skills and language anxiety, it is necessary for FL educators to discover new ways of boosting learners' well-informed confidence in their abilities, and reducing language anxiety. More importantly, it is also proposes that the affective aspects of the foreign language process cannot be ignored, and should be acknowledged both in everyday teaching and scientific research.

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