Perceived Competence and Communication Apprehension – the Affective Variables of Willingness to Communicate in L1 and FL

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Abstract

Based on the literature, willingness to communicate (WTC) can be defined as "the probability that an individual will choose to initiate communication, more specifically, talking, when free to do so" [1]. Two crucial factors directly influencing one's willingness to communicate in both L1 and FL are perceived communication competence together with communication apprehension [2]. Perceived communication competence refers to self-reported verbal activity and ability [3] while communication apprehension is described as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" [4]. Since communication is the basis of interpersonal relations, the recognition and validation of the above-mentioned variables may have a profound influence on language teaching and learning as well as studies in SLA.

The paper explores the extent to which perceived competence and communication apprehension are the causes of students' willingness to communicate as hypothesized by MacIntyre [5] and found by MacIntyre and Charos [6]. Three types of questionnaires were used to investigate the relations among the above-mentioned variables. The subjects of the study were first-year students of the English Department at the University of Silesia, Poland. The students completed WTC Scale [7], Self-perceived Communication Competence Scale [8] and Personal Report of Communication Apprehension [9]. All three instruments were administered to two groups of students, altogether 50 subjects. Results show that a combination of perceived competence and communication apprehension strongly impact willingness to communicate. In the following presentation primary attention is devoted to questionnaire results. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Authentic communication seems to be the core of learning a foreign language. In order to explain different communicative behaviours, individual differences in communication tendencies should be explored in greater detail. Personality-based variables such as self-perceived communication competence and communication apprehension interact with each other and influence learners' choice whether to communicate when the opportunity arises or not. Therefore, willingness to communicate (WTC) is regarded as a significant variable which is the basis of individual communication processes [10].

2. Defining willingness to communicate (WTC), communication apprehension (CA) and self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC)

The way people vary in their talking behaviour seems to be rooted in the personal variable called willingness to communicate (WTC) [11]. As suggested by Maclntyre et al. [12], willingness to communicate can be defined as "the probability of initiating communication, specifically talking, when the opportunity arises" [12]. The question is why some people communicate while some others do not under the same or virtually the same constraints. WTC is believed [13] to be a trait-like predisposition and a situational variable. As defined by McCroskey [14], communication apprehension is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". Communication apprehension is a state of anxiety held by many individuals. It is expected that a person with high communication apprehension will tend to avoid the majority of communication acts. Since majority of events in human life depend on interaction with others, people who are reticent tend to lose the opportunity to get a job or socialize. Those who feel tension, discomfort, nervous system arousal, fear or uneasiness tend to withdraw from the communicative situations and interlocutors. Communicatively competent behaviour may be inhibited not only by cognitive skills but also by affective orientations such as (un)willingness to communicate, communication apprehension and self-perception [15]. Self-esteem is the indicator how people perceive their self-worth. People who have low self-esteem tend to be less willing to communicate and more anxious. As a result, such people prefer to avoid communication...
since they are afraid of negative feedback.

3. Research design
The study focuses on the contribution of two variables, namely self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC) and communication apprehension (CA) to the construct of willingness to communicate (WTC). Thus, the research endeavours to find the answers to one research question: *In what way do self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC) and communication apprehension (CA) contribute to willingness to communicate (WTC)?* Research results suggest [16] that individual willingness to communicate is influenced by a combination of self-perceived communicative competence and the level of communication apprehension; therefore, the question is to what extent willingness to communicate is conditioned by the two variables.

3.1 Subjects and data collection tools
The group of 50 informants took part in the study. They were all first-year students of the English Department at the University of Silesia doing their major in translation. The research was conducted during the conversation classes which lasted for one semester. The subjects' participation in the study was free. The study applied three types of questionnaires: Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale [17] together with Self-perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) Scale [18] and Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) [19].

The aim of WTC Scale is to assess to what extent the subject is willing to communicate in a given situation and language context. In the present study WTC Scale was combined with SPCC Scale which measures subject's self-perception of the ability to communicate. The third questionnaire, Personal Report of Communication Apprehension examines the level of anxiety experienced when communicating. All scales included statements connected with L1 (14 statements) and FL (14 statements) communication in the university context. Sample items on the scales were as follows: *Talk to a lecturer during the oral exam* or *Communicate with a university friend during a task.*

Before filling the questionnaires in, the students were asked to define the notions of *willingness to communicate, self-perceived communication competence* and *communication apprehension.* After resolving ambiguities connected with the terms and summing up the discussion on the notions, the students were given the questionnaires. The students were asked to assess the percentage of time they would choose to communicate in L1 (Polish)/ FL (English) in all 14 situations. A score of zero per cent indicated "not being willing to communicate" while one hundred per cent equaled "always being willing to communicate". The scales used in the research were conducted in English. They were based on McCroskey's questionnaires, however, a few changes in terms of the statements were made to make it more appropriate for Polish context.

4. Data analysis
For the sake of the article, data analysis focuses only on FL context. The statements used in the questionnaires were divided into those referring to formal FL context (communicating with a lecturer and speaking to a group) and informal FL context (communicating with a university friend, acquaintance and stranger).

4.1 Formal context
On the basis of the results it can be said that the students are rather unwilling to speak to a lecturer in all enumerated contexts. It seems that they feel quite competent to communicate with a lecturer, however, they are afraid of communicating with him/her. The results proved that communication with a teacher is a major problem for the students. They are usually threatened by teacher's authority and his/her superior position which results in a high level of communication apprehension. The data obtained from the subjects suggest that the students are unwilling to speak in public regardless of the degree of acquaintance between communicators or group size. Despite feeling quite competent while speaking to a group of acquaintances, the subjects are rather afraid of doing it. People are unwilling to speak in public for numerous reasons. Usually they do not feel competent enough and/or anxious when talking to more than two, three people. Moreover, it seems that the subjects feel more anonymous in a bigger group of people they hardly know.

4.2 Informal context
Subjects' answers indicate that the students are willing to talk with a university friend in private, communicate
with him/her during a task and ask him/her a favour. The students feel very competent to communicate with a university friend in all three contexts, however, they may be afraid of communicating during a task or asking a university friend a favour and talking with him/her in private. What seems interesting is the fact that the subjects expressed their positive attitude towards communication with a friend in FL. According to subjects' answers, the students quite like talking with a university acquaintance in private and during a task as well as asking him/her a favour. They know how to ask a university acquaintance a favour and talk with him/her about personal matters. The subjects feel absolutely competent to work with a university acquaintance during a task. The students are less willing to communicate with a university acquaintance than with a university friend. They also feel less competent when talking with an acquaintance, however, they assess themselves as absolutely competent when working with him/her on a task.

As far as communication with a stranger is concerned, the subjects feel much afraid of communicating and unwilling to talk to a stranger in all mentioned contexts. They don't feel competent to talk to a stranger in private or ask him/her a favour, however, they feel very competent to work with a stranger during a task. The more the subjects know each other, the more willing to communicate they become. In the case of communicating with a stranger, the students feel incompetent apart from the situation when they have to cooperate during a task.

5. Answers to the research question
The data show that both communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence contribute substantially to one's willingness to communicate in both formal and informal FL university contexts. Almost all of the statements assessed by the subjects proved that positive self-perception of one's communication competence accompanied with a low level of anxiety leads to stronger willingness to communicate in a FL context. In all situations assessed by the subjects in the questionnaires, high apprehension corresponded with a low level of willingness to communicate and the other way round. Moreover, it can be assumed that high apprehensives display lower self-esteem and because of that they often avoid or withdraw from communication. To summarize, the study proved conclusively that both self-perceived communication competence and communication apprehension contribute equally to an individual level of willingness to communicate in FL university context.

6. Conclusion
The collected data aid in formulating some concluding remarks. It may be claimed that the degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality and type of the situation are the variables which may have the potential to change individual's willingness to communicate. Communicatively competent behaviour may be inhibited not only by affective orientations such as communication apprehension, but also by the formality and type of the situation in which communication takes place. Finally, willingness to communicate may be affected by the language of communication. Research results demonstrate that FL may inhibit one's willingness to engage in communication but not in terms of communicating with a friend or acquaintance where the level of WTC proved to be reasonably high. The question is whether it is a matter of a language used or rather a general tendency to communicate willingly with people who are not complete strangers. The relation between the language used in communication and willingness to communicate requires further research and consideration.

References


