WTC in English Among Swedish EFL Learners in the Upper Secondary School

A Quantitative Study on the Concept of Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a well-known concept within the field of educational research and has been used to investigate what factors make language learners more or less likely to engage in oral communication. This is a topic of great importance considering the positive correlation between output and proficiency. In fact, it has been argued that one of the main goals of language teaching should be to bolster students' WTC. This paper aims to fill a research gap by offering a much-needed insight into the WTC of Swedish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the upper secondary level. Two research questions are used to investigate 1) how often Swedish EFL learners are willing to communicate, and 2) the WTC as experienced in various classroom situations. Thirty-seven students filled out a questionnaire administered at a Swedish upper secondary school. On a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from *never* to *very often*, the mean result for these particular respondents was 3.28. This indicates that the respondents were fairly, or occasionally, willing to communicate. Furthermore, the number of interlocutors, who the interlocutor is, and the topic of discussion were found to have a great impact on their WTC. It is also suggested that there are several explanations for the various degrees of WTC. Based on the findings, we recommend that teachers pay careful attention to, for instance, group size and topic. Due to the small sample size, additional research is needed to gain a further understanding of why students choose to engage in communication or not.

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1 Introduction

A primary concern of language teachers is the lack of oral communication in their classrooms. When given the opportunity to speak, many students choose to remain silent. This speech avoidance is not unique to one type of learner; in fact, even highly proficient learners refrain from entering into communication (Dörnyei, 2005). For teachers, having students engaged in communication can prove to be a massive challenge, but nevertheless an important one. This is especially true in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) since the classroom could be one of few places where learners are exposed to the target language (TL).

Using a construct known as willingness to communicate (WTC), researchers have spent several decades attempting to explain what makes learners more or less likely to engage in communication. Essentially, the idea is that a person who is willing to communicate will choose to do so when an opportunity presents itself (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Baker, Clément & Noels, 1998).

The correlation between output and proficiency has been widely investigated; it is well established from a variety of sources that students who are more willing to communicate produce more TL output, and consequently develop greater oral proficiency than those who do not (e.g. Seliger, 1977; MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997; Gałajda, 2017). This correlation can be explained by the so-called comprehensible output hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, having to engage in communication makes the learner notice where he or she has limited language abilities, which prompts the learner to modify his or her speech. As a result, greater language proficiency will be developed (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

In view of this correlation –and in relation to the present study– it would be problematic if EFL students do not want to engage in communication. It would be problematic not only because this reluctance may stunt them in their language development, but also because the aim of the English subject in the Swedish school dictates that the teaching should enable them to develop certain communicative skills (Skolverket, 2011a). Thus, and as argued by MacIntyre et al. (1998), fostering willingness to use the language is paramount.

While there is an extensive body of research published on WTC, few studies have paid attention to the context of younger FL learners. To date, the vast majority of the published research studies focus on advanced university learners. In addition, and as will be explained in more detail shortly, previous research suffers from methodological flaws. As such, it is clear that much more can be learnt about WTC in the FL classroom. Thus, the present study aims to fill this research gap by addressing the context of Swedish upper secondary learners of EFL.

2 Background

The research population in the current study is limited to Swedish EFL learners at the upper secondary school, and so it is necessary to understand what the Swedish curriculum for English is grounded on in terms of beliefs and ideas about what it means to know a language. As such, the following subsection offers an historical overview of language teaching approaches in Sweden (2.1). This is then followed by a more in-depth description of the term willingness to communicate (2.2). Finally, section 2 concludes with the aim of the study (2.3) and an overview of the study (2.4).

2.1 Historical Overview of Language Teaching Approaches in Sweden

Historically, language teaching was grounded in structuralist and behaviouristic theories where language learning was seen as the practice of grammatical rules as isolated activities (the grammar-translation method) and the creation of habits (the audio-lingual method). If any sort of oral production occurred it was in the form of imitation and repetition of teacher utterances (Tornberg, 2015). Over time, focus shifted from language learning being seen as an isolated skill to being considered as connected to, for instance, context, prior knowledge, and other skill sets. Broadly speaking, this paradigm shift took two slightly different directions: According to the cognitivist perspective, cognitive processes and contextual knowledge *precedes* language production, meaning that learners draw from previous experiences when attempting to produce language (Piaget, 1973, as cited in Tornberg, 2015); the sociocultural perspective, on the other hand, argues that language learning occurs *alongside* the development of social skills and cognitive processes (Vygotsky, 1996, as cited in Tornberg, 2015).

Both the cognitivist and sociocultural perspectives have heavily influenced the FL education of our modern times. Today, to know a language entails more than habit-formation and grammatical rules, and most present-day teachers would argue for the importance of meaningful language production and interaction. This is very much in line with the goal of promoting communicative competence: The ability to adapt the language according to the context, situation, and purpose. This is not to say that grammatical competence, for instance, is unimportant, but rather that a broader perspective has been adopted of what it truly means to know a language. First introduced by Hymes in 1972, the ideas behind the concept have

come to lay the foundation of the communicative teaching approach that dominates today's EFL classrooms (Tornberg, 2015).

This historical, albeit brief summary of early language learning theories, shows that language teaching approaches have always reflected changing beliefs about what it means to know a language and for what purposes. The theory underpinning the aims and goals of curricula today is that the language needs to be practised and used in order to be learnt (Tornberg, 2015). To support that argument, one does not need to look much further than the steering documents published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket).

Indisputably, foreign language (FL) education in Sweden is very much influenced by the ideas of communicative competence and, by extension, teachers adopt a communicative approach. Certainly, today's teaching approach is a far cry from the historically exclusive focus on sentence translations, drilling of grammatical rules, and set dialogues. Instead, students are to "through the use of language in functional and meaningful contexts […] develop all-round communicative skills" and "[t]he ability to express oneself and communicate in English in speech and writing" (Skolverket, 2011a, pp. 1-2).

However, even if students possess the adequate competence, this is not a guarantee that they will choose to use that competence for the purpose of communication (Dörnyei, 2003, as cited in de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). Consequently, if students are to reach the aims and goals of the curriculum, teachers need to understand why and when students are willing to communicate. To that end, we need to return to the question of WTC.

2.2 Willingness to Communicate

The term WTC was first used by McCroskey and Baer (1985) to represent an enduring personality trait and is in the literature often referred to as trait WTC. According to the authors, WTC is a "personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is fairly consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers." (p. 1) To measure this predisposition, McCroskey (1992) created a 20-item scale (henceforth referred to as the L1 WTC scale) where participants were to indicate how willing they would be to communicate in different situations and with various interlocutors. Examples of situations include "[p]resent a talk to a group of friends", and "[t]alk with a garbage collector." (p. 18)

As can be inferred from these situations, *communication* means oral production. While this may seem obvious, some scholars with the aim of making a distinction between oral and written communication have opted for other terms and acronyms, namely willingness to talk

(WTT) (Hsu, 2006) or willingness to speak (WTS) (Riasati, 2018). Considering the fact that WTC is the most commonly used term, that is the only acronym that will be used going forward. The reader should keep in mind that WTC and communication in this paper refer to oral communication only.

It is also important to address the fact that the L1 WTC scale was not designed with a language learning context in mind. The WTC construct stems from the field of psychology and, more specifically, was originally used to measure verbal behaviour, a variable connected to characteristics such as shyness, communication apprehension, and introversion (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). Moreover, and as can be inferred from the situations listed in McCroskey (1992), the L1 WTC scale measures an individual's verbal behaviour in his or her daily life, using the L1.

Recognising the need for a definition that would suit an L2 language learning context, MacIntyre and associates (1998) created a pyramid model that outlines the enduring and situational variables that form L2 WTC (L2 in this paper refers to both second and foreign language). Commenting on McCroskey and Baer (1985), the authors of this now seminal article argued that "[i]t is highly unlikely that WTC in the second language (L2) is a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). Instead, it was proposed that the enduring variables of WTC indicate a *general* tendency towards communication, whereas situational WTC is what ultimately affects the decision to communicate in the given situation. Additionally, in order for a person to engage in communication, he or she will need to have the self-confidence to do so, a confidence that comprises perceived communicative competence and a lack of anxiety.

While recognising the unique situation of the L2 learning context, this does not mean that the more enduring, trait-like characteristics are negligible, but rather that they do not fully explain L2 behaviour. To exemplify this, MacIntyre et al. (1998) reasoned that when a generally confident person finds him or herself in an unfamiliar situation, this will negatively impact that person's self-confidence, and WTC will consequently decrease. Similarly, different tasks require different competencies, which would explain why someone with the necessary topical expertise might be able to overcome his or her overall anxious tendencies in a specific situation. In other words, there is a complex interplay between enduring and situated variables that the original definition of WTC and the L1 WTC scale do not cover.

Despite the 1998 definition of L2 WTC, researchers would for many years to come rely heavily on the L1 WTC scale. Numerous researchers (e.g. Cao & Philp, 2006; Peng, 2013;

Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016) have questioned this, the main reason being that the scale might not be applicable to L2 contexts.

2.3 Aim

The aim of the current study is to examine WTC among Swedish upper secondary students of EFL. More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1) How often are Swedish upper secondary students of EFL willing to communicate?

2) In what situations are Swedish upper secondary students of EFL most and least willing to communicate?

2.4 Overview of Study

The paper begins with a discussion and critical evaluation of previously published WTC research. More precisely, the literature review contextualises the present study by identifying how it not only extends current knowledge, but also fills a research gap. The paper then goes on to give an account of the methodological framework. Next, the fourth section presents the results of the study. Possible explanations and interpretations of the results are then discussed in relation to previous findings, focusing especially on the second research question. Following this is an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study, as well as an outline of potential areas for further research. The paper concludes by suggesting some pedagogical implications.

3 Literature Review

Bearing in mind the aim and research questions of the study, the literature review strives to answer the question of which variables influence learners' WTC. To that end, the review is divided into two parts. The first part (3.1) offers a research background and general overview of the research to date, focusing especially on the limitations of previous research as well as areas where there is a paucity of research. The second part (3.2) is more specifically tied to

the research questions in that it centres on research where the purpose was to investigate and explain the causes and amount of WTC as experienced in the classroom context.

3.1 Researching WTC: Methodology and Limitations

McCroskey (1992) stressed that the L1 WTC scale measures the respondents' free choice. Needless to say, in a situation such as "[t]alk with a stranger while standing in line" (p. 18), such a choice can be presumed to be free. However, a number of researchers have accounted for the difficulties encountered when attempting to transfer this generic scale to instructional contexts where a free choice might not be an option. In addition, the nature of the TL and language learning context might make a questionnaire that is suitable in one context, unsuitable in another (Yongqi Gu, 2016).

Owing to this, the following pages will discuss the weaknesses of two commonly used WTC scales, scales that have sometimes been used in lieu of better options (3.1.1). Apart from the scales, the context of the present study will also be compared to that of other commonly investigated contexts in terms of educational stage, teaching approach, and geographical context (3.1.2).

3.1.1   Choice of Method

The L1 WTC scale has gained a strong foothold in the WTC research area. It has been used in studies conducted with university-aged learners (e.g. Hashimoto, 2002; Ghonsooly, Khajavy & Asadpour, 2012) and adolescents (e.g. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004; Joe, Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2017); beginners (e.g. MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), intermediate learners (e.g. Cao & Philp, 2006), and advanced learners (e.g. Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014); in second language contexts (e.g. MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Cao & Philp, 2006) and in foreign language contexts (e.g. Yashima, 2002; Ghonsooly et al., 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, a foreign language "has no established functions inside the learner's community but will be used mainly for communicating with outsiders" (Littlewood, 1984, p. 54), whereas a second language (SL) "has communicative functions inside the community where the learner lives" (ibid). That is, SL learners are frequently exposed to the TL both inside and outside of the classroom. This is important to note given the fact that the L1 WTC scale contains situations that do not occur in a FL context; in a SL context where the TL is readily available both inside and outside of the classroom, situations such as "[t]alk with a police officer" (McCroskey, 1992, p. 18) are more likely to occur. As

such, the studies with an explicit aim of investigating the WTC of FL learners and that have used the L1 WTC scale to that end have compromised validity (Peng, 2013). Concerning the Swedish participants in this study, it could be argued that they, similarly to SL learners, are exposed to the TL outside of the classroom; admittedly, English is not a FL in the same way as, for instance, French or German, but the commonly used L1 WTC scale still does not adequately capture WTC in the classroom.

Recognising the difference between the L1 and L2 instructional context, MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Conrod (2001) designed the *Willingness to communicate in the classroom scale* which consists of situations such as "[a] stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first?" and "[s]peaking to your teacher about your homework assignment." (p. 385) Although more akin to a classroom context, the scale is remarkably similar to the L1 WTC scale (Weaver, 2005, as cited in Peng, 2013).

What is more, research suggests that neither scale manages to predict students' actual classroom behaviour. In a study in the Polish university context, no correlation was found between the WTC classroom scale and students' WTC when engaged in communicative tasks (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014). In like manner, mixed-methods studies using the L1 WTC scale have presented similar results (Cao & Philp, 2006; Al-Murthada, 2021). In demonstrating the discrepancy between self-reported and actual behaviour, Cao and Philp (2006) suggested that while the L1 WTC scale can measure trait-like WTC, it fails to predict actual behaviour in the language classroom.

3.1.2 Educational Stage, Teaching Approach, and Geographical Context

Although the WTC research area is dominated by studies carried out on university learners, there are exceptions where the participants have been younger. Two examples include a study on Korean secondary students (Joe et al., 2017), and a Japanese study on 15-16-year-old high school students (Yashima et al., 2004). In contrast to the well-established relationship emphasised previously (cf. 1), no positive correlation between WTC and L2 proficiency was found among the Korean students. This was attributed to the fact that high WTC, as self-reported, will not come to fruition if there is a lack of communication opportunities (Joe et al., 2017). As for the Japanese study, the results were contrary to those in the aforementioned studies that found a discrepancy between self-reported data and amount of communication; instead, a positive correlation was found between self-reported WTC and amount of

communication (Yashima et al., 2004). However, this study suffers from the drawback of only having used self-reported data to establish this correlation. As it is impossible to know whether this self-reported willingness translates into actual communication, the results need to be interpreted with caution.

In addition to the age demographic in the two studies above, they also have in common the geographical context, which could also be tied to teaching approach. The vast majority of the studies take place in Asia (mainly China, Japan, and Iran) or Canada, and while the Swedish school stresses the importance of meaningful oral communication and interaction, this is not necessarily the case in these countries. In Iran, for example, language teaching is characterised by the grammar-translation method, which means that the practice of oral communicative skills might not be as promoted as it is in Sweden (Ghonsooly et al., 2012). To help illustrate this, students in one Iranian study complained that a lack of opportunities to practice oral communication skills was a reason for their disinclination towards engaging in communication, even when the opportunity was given to them (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). In China, a teacher-centred norm mandating students to listen rather than speak is different from that of the Western world where communication is considered a crucial component of language teaching (Hsu, 2006; MacIntyre, 2007). Regarding the Canadian studies, these tend to focus on the context of immersion students, which is similar to that of L1 situations (Yashima, 2012, as cited in Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). That is, while a lack of classroom communication is a world-wide issue, how it manifests and what causes it could depend on the learning context (Yongqi Gu, 2016).

In comparison to the present learning context, Sweden, there are some studies conducted with European learners, including one on Hungarian EFL majors (Nagy & Nikolov, 2007), a Serbian study (Halupka-Rešetar, Knežević & Topalov, 2018), and several mixed-methods studies on Polish EFL learners (e.g. Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Bielak, 2016). However, the fact remains that the participants in all of these European studies are university students. To the best of my abilities, I was unable to find any European studies conducted on upper secondary learners of EFL.

In sum, a major limitation of the two frequently used scales in WTC research is the omission of situations that occur in a FL learning context and, consequently, failure to predict actual behaviour. This first part of the review has also discussed areas where more research is needed, particularly in relation to educational stage, teaching approach, and geographical

context. The Swedish educational system is hardly unique in adopting a communicative approach, yet based on what has been discussed so far, we can at least somewhat confidently surmise that it is different from that of, for example, China and Iran.

3.2 Classroom WTC

Numerous variables have been found to impact WTC in the classroom: group size, confidence, interlocutors (Cao & Philp, 2006), seating in the classroom (Riasati, 2018), the teacher's wait time, concern about correctness (Zarrinabadi, 2014), and many more. Moreover, countless studies have observed the significance of topic on WTC (e.g. Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). These are all situational variables; that is, they can fluctuate more or less from lesson to lesson. Further, one can also make a distinction between environmental and individual variables (Cao, 2011; Pawlak et al., 2016). Examples of environmental variables are topic, task, group size, and interlocutor; confidence, perceived opportunity to communicate, and anxiety are examples of individual variables.

Having previously discussed WTC from a more general perspective, the aim of this section is to provide an overview of some frequently researched environmental and individual variables that have been found to cause WTC to rise and fall in a classroom context.

3.2.1 Environmental Variables

Mystkowska-Wiertelak and colleagues carried out a number of similarly constructed small-scale studies on classroom WTC in Poland. They reached the conclusion that one of the factors that most positively correlated to WTC was the topic of discussion, with high levels of WTC being attributed to having much to say and being able to relate it to personal experiences (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). In these studies, moment-to-moment fluctuations of WTC formed the central focus, and it was concluded that WTC can fluctuate over time, even for the same topic and with the same interlocutor (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016).

Some writers (e.g Pawlak et al., 2016; Riasati, 2018) have concluded that there is a positive correlation between interest in topic and WTC; indeed, Iranian EFL learners who filled out a 27-item questionnaire of classroom situations expressed the highest degree of WTC when they were interested in the topic (Riasati, 2018). On the question of what topics students find interesting, a qualitative and longitudinal study on EFL students at a Polish

university listed topics that were familiar and that the students were knowledgeable about, examples of which included pop culture and mass media (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016).

On the theme of controversial and sensitive topics, the research literature offers alternative findings as to whether this causes high or low levels of WTC. Kang (2005) found that students were willing to speak when the topic was considered sensitive or controversial. The participants in this case study cited feelings of responsibility to defend their opinions as a reason for their high WTC. This finding is contrary to other studies where students were not particularly willing to speak, the reason being that they did not want to risk causing conflict (Cao, 2011), or because they found the topic culturally inappropriate (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). These findings should not be interpreted as indications that the students need to agree for them to be willing to communicate. In fact, having different opinions about a topic has been linked to high levels of WTC (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Riasati, 2018).

Another common research objective relates to how WTC fluctuates depending on whether a discussion is held in pairs, small groups, or large groups. These studies come with a caveat, as it is not always specified how many members constitute a small or large group, respectively. All the same, it has been noted that learners experience most WTC in pairs, followed by small groups (Cao & Philp, 2006; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). A reason for this could be that pair work is considered more comfortable and less stressful than situations in which more students – and the teacher – are listening (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). Kang's (2005) study centred on the relationship between interlocutors and feelings of excitement, responsibility, and security, and the results showed that a decrease in the number of interlocutors was accompanied by increased feelings of responsibility and security to speak. Conversely, as the number of interlocutors increased, the students became more nervous about making mistakes. Some students, however, prefer small groups over pairs (Pawlak et al., 2016); more specifically, groups of three or four learners seem to be optimal (Cao & Philp, 2006).

As for discussions in larger groups, or whole-class discussions, these tend to result in decreased WTC. Cao and Philp (2006) reasoned that the individual student has fewer opportunities to speak in larger groups, whereas the interviewed students cited a lack of self-confidence as a cause of their decreased WTC. These student accounts confirm what was reported in Woodrow (2006) and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2016) who concluded that whole-class discussions and speaking in front of everyone else tend to be particularly conducive to anxiety and, in turn, decreased WTC. Nevertheless, the research also suggests that the

preferences can vary; for instance, Cao and Philp (2006) found that there were inconsistencies in preferences for how large the groups should be. Referring to Cao and Philp (2006), de Saint Léger and Storch (2009) concluded that although smaller groups generally make for a more relaxing experience, some learners find them awkward and instead favour whole-class discussions.

The lack of WTC in whole-class discussions can further be discussed in relation to wait time and perceived opportunity to speak. In a 2014 qualitative study, students complained that they would like more time to think through what they want to say before they attempt to answer a question asked by the teacher. Typically, teachers tend not to give their students enough time before moving on to other lesson objectives, which has a negative effect on WTC (Zarrinabadi, 2014). Returning briefly to the matter of opportunities to speak (Joe et al., 2017), these students might very well have reported high WTC on any sort of questionnaire, yet the practical reality of the classroom prevents them from following through with their intentions.

Continuing on the topic of the teacher, he or she has an important role to play in impacting his or her students' WTC; after all, the teacher plans the procedure of the communicative tasks and so has the potential to guide the students in the desired direction. Moreover, similarly to a peer, the teacher can be considered an interlocutor, albeit at a different standing. The connection between WTC and interlocutor was addressed in MacIntyre et al. (1998), where they defined L2 WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with *a specific person or persons* [emphasis added], using a L2." (p. 547) They used the term affiliation to discuss how WTC increases when a conversation is held with a similar person, and empirical studies on this theme have since established a positive correlation between WTC and familiarity. For example, learners are more willing to speak with a friend and somebody they like than with an interlocutor who is an acquaintance or a stranger (Cao & Philp, 2006; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016): "the more distant the relationship of the individual to the receiver(s), the less willing the individual is to communicate" (Cao & Philp, 2006, p. 488).

Now, even though students might not consider their teachers as strangers, what the findings on the topic of familiarity suggest is that there is a sense of familiarity between students that the teacher cannot be a part of; further, the presence of the teacher has been attributed to a decrease in WTC (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). So, as far as this study is concerned – and as suggested by the aforementioned studies – whenever the teacher

is directly involved in an activity, be it as a listener during a whole-class discussion or when a question is asked, such a situation will invariably look different to those where only students are involved.

3.2.2 Individual Variables

One of the most well-established predictors of WTC is a lack of anxiety (e.g. Hashimoto, 2002; Ghonsooly et al., 2012). Crucially, a lack of anxiety coupled with perceived competence form the confidence needed for speech to occur (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Two situations commonly associated with anxiety in the FL classroom have already been mentioned, namely individual speech and whole-class discussions. In addition, it has been shown that there is a negative correlation between evaluative situations and WTC (e.g. MacIntyre et al., 2001).

Students' concerns about correctness and their fear of evaluation have been discussed by several researchers (Hsu, 2006; Zarrinabadi, 2014; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). Analysing essays on situations where students experienced least WTC, Zarrinabadi (2014) found that immediate error correction had the most negative effect on WTC. Dishearteningly, the students also described how the anxiety that ensued from being corrected deterred them from participating again. Relating back to the topic of wait time and preparation, the students in Riasati and Rahimi (2018) expressed preference for carefully thinking through what they wanted to say before speaking. When the students were certain about the correctness of what they wished to say, their confidence increased and so did their willingness to speak. In a similar vein, these students were less willing to speak when they knew that their speaking was graded. In the context of Taiwanese EFL learners, Hsu (2006) observed how the students attached great importance to feeling certain about one's correctness prior to speech.

Now, both Zarrinabadi's (2014) and Riasati and Rahimi's (2018) studies were carried out in the Iranian context; as mentioned in a previous part of the literature review (see 3.1.2), the behaviouristic theory that underpins the teaching approaches in Iran prioritises linguistic correctness, possibly at the expense of communicative competence. To illustrate this, one study noted that Iranian students might not get enough opportunities to practice and that this in turn has a detrimental effect on their oral proficiency (Ghonsooly et al., 2012). In relation to the present study, one might presume that the notion that "errors should be avoided at any cost" (Ghonsooly et al., 2012, p. 208) does not apply in a school system that stresses the importance of speaking and writing freely (Skolverket, 2011a). That is, the adoption of

different teaching approaches raises the question of whether Swedish students would be equally preoccupied with correctness. This will be an object of discussion at a later stage of this paper.

To summarise, the literature review first addressed the risk of using scales that are more suited to the L1 context. It also highlighted how there is a dearth of research of Western origin, particularly in relation to younger learners (3.1). The review then went on to analyse a sample of the wealth of L2 WTC studies on situational variables (3.2). While the methodology and context have varied, there are some discernible patterns in regard to when students are most and least willing to communicate. It appears that students experience most WTC when the topic is one that they find interesting, are familiar with, and that they are knowledgeable about. Furthermore, the interlocutors should be as few as possible. By contrast, students experience least WTC when they are concerned about correctness, evaluation, and when discussions are held in large groups. With previous findings discussed, the next section describes how the present study seeks to extend on and add to the current field of knowledge.

4 Method

There are two research questions that the present study aimed to answer: 1) how often Swedish EFL learners are willing to communicate, and 2) in what situations these learners are most and least willing to communicate. The data for this study was collected as the author was doing her teacher trainee period. As such, the author was teaching the students that took part in the study. In order to find out and describe the respondents' WTC, the study adopted a quantitative approach in the form of an adapted version of a previously used questionnaire (Riasati, 2018; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). The questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms (see appendix) and took 10–15 minutes to fill out. Participants had the option of filling out the questionnaire during regular class hours but could also fill it out whenever they wanted as the link was still available after class.

Having given a brief account of the general procedure of the data collection, what follows is an account of the methodological rationale of the study (4.1), a description of the questionnaire (4.2) and the participants (4.3), ethical considerations (4.4), and a discussion on the matter of validity and reliability (4.5, 4.6). The method section ends by providing an explanation of how the collected data was analysed (4.7).

4.1 Methodological Rationale

While a quantitative approach in the form of a battery of questionnaires used to be the norm when researching WTC, more recent studies have included classroom observations, diary entries, stimulated-recall interviews, and the like to their advantage; more precisely, by complementing the quantitative methods with qualitative ones, these studies have made important contributions to our understanding of *why* students act the way they do. Admittedly, an explanatory approach using qualitative methods would enable us to understand more about these respondents' fluctuating speech behaviour. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the practical constraints surrounding this study (including, for instance, a limited time frame and no access to physical classrooms because of the COVID-19 restrictions), these methods did not seem feasible, and the benefit of being able to swiftly get plenty of information spoke to the use of a questionnaire in this case. In addition, the lack of research carried out in this particular context means that, regardless of chosen method, the findings to be reported will add new knowledge of particular relevance for Swedish teachers of EFL.

In regard to the rationale behind the particular questionnaire, choosing a research instrument that has been used in previous studies allows for an easier comparison of findings. Additionally, when using a questionnaire it is important that the combination of questions in it adequately covers the construct in question (Barmark & Djurfeldt, 2020). As for the situations included in the questionnaire, the empirical findings discussed in the literature review lend support to their impact on WTC in the FL classroom (see 3.2.1 and 3.2.2). It could thus be argued that the questionnaire covers the construct of WTC, albeit not perfectly.

4.2 Questionnaire

Following an introductory statement, the questionnaire consisted of 22 classroom situations. Drawing inspiration from the original study (Riasati, 2018), and so as to not have all the situations blend into one, a decision was made to divide them into six categories: task type, number of people, seating location, topic of discussion and interlocutor, effect of topic of discussion, and effect of evaluation. In retrospect, these categories appear somewhat arbitrary. Some of the questions from the original questionnaire were excluded as they did not seem applicable in the context of the Swedish upper secondary school. One such question was "[s]peaking to a classmate who is older than me" (Riasati, 2018, p. 5). In addition, the

situation "[p]resenting a lecture in front of class" (p. 5) was rewritten as "Giving a speech in front of class".

Using a 5-point frequency Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate how often they would choose to speak in the situations listed, where 1=*never*, 2=*rarely*, 3=oc*casionally*, 4=*often*, and 5=*very often*. These response anchors differ from those of the original scale that used alternatives such as *moderately willing* and *definitely willing* (Riasati, 2018). The change of anchors was due to beliefs that words like *rarely* and *often* would make the questionnaire more in line with the notion of WTC as fluctuating and situationally dependent; an alternative like *definitely not willing* seemed, to the author at least, too trait-like a response. The anchors ranging from *never* to *very often* were also used in Hsu (2006). Regrettably, a mistake in that study (and so also in this one) is that the scale is unbalanced: Given that anchor 1 was labelled as *never*, it would have been better had anchor 5 corresponded to *always*. Having an uneven number of alternatives posed another risk, namely that of respondents perfunctorily choosing the middle alternative (Barmark & Djurfeldt, 2020). On the other hand, for the sake of being able to compare findings, a decision was made to keep the original range of 1 to 5.

4.3 Participants

Due to the limited access to students, participants for the study had to be found by means of convenience sampling. A total number of 37 EFL students took part in the study, all of whom at the time were taught by the author. The respondents were in their third and final school year (which means that they were 18 – 19 years old) and studied at a large upper secondary school in the southwestern part of Sweden. All of them took English 7, which is the most advanced course in the Swedish school system, ranked at B2.2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Skolverket, 2011b). Hence, they could be presumed to be advanced students. However, since their proficiency level was not controlled for, no such definitive conclusions could be drawn.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Several measures were taken in order to ensure that the present study be ethically sound. Prior to administering the questionnaire, detailed information about the nature of the study and request for permission was sent out to the headmaster and the intended participants' English teacher. Once they had given their consent, the questionnaire was piloted on peers and

modified according to their feedback. The final version of the questionnaire that was administered to the participants opened with a statement containing information as prescribed by established research norms (McKay, 2006). The information outlined the author's background as a teacher student, the purpose of the study, and an assurance that any participation would be voluntary and confidential. It was also stated that their participation would have no effect on their grades. When orally informing the participants about the questionnaire, the author also stressed that should they change their minds after having started filling out the questionnaire, they could withdraw their consent at any point without there being any repercussions. Owing to the extraordinary teaching situation of the time with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also stressed that the participants should consider their "normal" lessons when filling out the questionnaire: lessons taking place in a physical classroom.

4.5 Validity

In order for a research study to be valid, its results need to "reflect what we believe they reflect" (Mackey & Gass, 2011, p. 106). As previously discussed in section 3.1.1, some of the early research suffers from questionable content validity: the representativeness of the investigated construct. Naturally, the questionnaire used in this study is far from exhaustive; after all, the unpredictability of the classroom means that there are myriad situations that can occur, far more than any questionnaire can cover. Moreover, too many items might have caused respondents to abandon the questionnaire out of boredom. In collecting research data, one must also consider the risk of participant inattentiveness (Mackey & Gass, 2011).

Internal validity is "the extent to which the results of a study are a function of the factor that the researcher intends." (Mackey & Gass, 2011, p. 109) In other words, the internal validity can be estimated as high if the researcher has controlled for other variables that might have had an impact on the results (Mackey & Gass, 2011). Since the current study did not control for any independent variables, this is a limitation; for example, although the author has an idea of the students' overall proficiency level, an outsider does not know how proficient, motivated, or confident the respondents are, nor what language background they have.

External validity has to do with the generalisability of findings. This study used a convenience sample of students who took the same course and were taught by the same teacher. With the added issue of there being such a limited number of participants, the results cannot be generalised to a larger population of EFL learners, or even to students within the

region where the study took place. Ultimately, whenever the sample size is limited, it is prudent to be careful in one's conclusions (McKay, 2006). Nonetheless, the present study could still make a valuable contribution, depending on the way in which it confirms or contradicts previous research. Further, the purpose of a small-scale study such as this one is not necessarily to be able to generalise (Turner, 2014). Finally, as is the case with any good research, the reader will be able to gauge the standard of the study for him or herself with the help of the information presented thus far (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

4.6 Reliability

In order for a study to be reliable, it needs to be consistent. One way of achieving internal reliability is to administer the same questionnaire to the same participants twice (McKay, 2006). When carrying out this study, the author took over classes from the students' regular teacher. Time was limited and learning objectives had to be prioritised; devoting time to fill out a questionnaire a second time did not seem like a reasonable option.

It was, however, possible to calculate the internal consistency. The present study used a modified version of the WTC in class scale (Riasati, 2018), and so a test of the internal consistency of all the items was performed. Statistical analysis showed that the reliability was high ($\alpha = 0.9$), which is in line with previous reliability estimates at 0.93 (Riasati, 2018) and 0.92 (Hsu, 2006), respectively.

4.7 Data Analysis

The statistics programme SPSS version 27 was used to analyse the collected data. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for each questionnaire item in terms of frequencies (numbers/N and percentages), means (M), and standard deviations (SD). Second, as mentioned on the previous page, the programme provided a reliability estimate.

Now, there is an ongoing debate about whether these mathematical operations can be performed on ordinal scales such as the one used in this study. Some argue that these calculations should only be performed on interval scales, where there is an equal distance between two responses (Wu & Leung, 2017). This distance does not exist within ordinal data (Turner, 2014). As an example, a student responding 4 (*often*) on a statement on this questionnaire should not be considered twice as willing as someone who responded 2 (*rarely*). Others, however, treat Likert scales similarly to interval scales (McKay, 2006). The present

data will therefore be presented in such a way and include a measure of central tendency (the mean) and standard deviation.

5 Results

In this section, the results of the study will be presented. This will be done in two parts. The first section (5.1) presents the results of the first research question. The second section (5.2), which is far more extensive, presents the results of each category of the questionnaire, as explained in the methods section (see 4.2).

5.1 The First Research Question

The aim of the first research question was to find out how often Swedish upper secondary students of EFL are willing to communicate. Table 1 presents the overall findings of the WTC questionnaire on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from *never* to *very often*. The table below shows that the mean for the respondents is 3.28.

Table 1

Students' Willingness to Communicate

	Never 1	Rarely 2	Occasionally 3	Often 4	Very often 5	Mean
Frequencies (%)	4.9	19.8	33.7	25.8	15.8	3.28

5.2 The Second Research Question

The second research question sought to find the extent of WTC as expressed in different classroom situations. Table 2 displays the frequencies (the upper row in *N* and the lower, within brackets, %), mean (*M),* and standard deviation (SD) for each question in ascending order: The first item (item 14) is the situation for which respondents indicated least WTC, and the last item on the list (item 11) is the situation for which they reported to be most willing.

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Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Students' Willingness to Communicate

Item	Willingness to communicate	1	2	3	4	5	*M*	SD
14	Discussing a topic with my teacher when s/he has a different view	5 (13.5)	18 (48.6)	9 (24.3)	5 (13.5)		2.38	0.893
7	Volunteering to speak individually in class	4 (10.8)	16 (43.2)	15 (40.5)	1 (2.7)	1 (2.7)	2.43	0.835
2	Volunteering to answer when the teacher asks a question	5 (13.5)	14 (37.8)	13 (35.1)	3 (8.1)	2 (5.4)	2.54	1.016
3	Speaking when no one else is speaking	3 (8.1)	19 (51.4)	7 (18.9)	6 (16.2)	2 (5.4)	2.59	1.040
5	Presenting my opinions in class	4 (10.8)	13 (35.1)	16 (43.2)	2 (5.4)	2 (5.4)	2.59	0.956
4	Asking a question in class	1 (2.7)	12 (32.4)	19 (51.4)	4 (10.8)	1 (2.7)	2.78	0.787
6	Helping other classmates answer a question	3 (8.1)	13 (35.1)	13 (35.1)	5 (13.5)	3 (8.1)	2.78	1.058
13	Speaking when I'm sitting in the front of the classroom	4 (10.8)	7 (18.9)	19 (51.4)	6 (16.2)	1 (2.7)	2.81	0.938
12	Speaking when I'm sitting in the back of the classroom	4 (10.8)	6 (16.2)	17 (45.9)	7 (18.9)	3 (8.1)	2.97	1.067
19	Speaking about a controversial topic		10 (27)	17 (45.9)	9 (24.3)	1 (2.7)	3.03	0.799
1	Giving a speech in front of class	2 (5.4)	7 (18.9)	18 (48.6)	6 (16.2)	4 (10.8)	3.08	1.010
8	Volunteering to participate in class discussions	1 (2.7)	6 (16.2)	20 (54.1)	8 (21.6)	2 (5.4)	3.11	0.843
9	Talking in large groups	2 (5.4)	7 (18.9)	15 (40.5)	9 (24.3)	4 (10.8)	3.16	1.041

Item	Willingness to communicate	1	2	3	4	5	*M*	SD
21	Speaking when I know my speaking will be graded	1 (2.7)	5 (13.5)	10 (27)	14 (37.8)	7 (18.9)	3.57	1.042
16	Speaking about a topic I'm familiar with		2 (5.4)	13 (35.1)	12 (32.4)	10 (27)	3.81	0.908
18	Speaking about a topic that I'm comfortable with		1 (2.7)	10 (27)	18 (48.6)	8 (21.6)	3.89	0.774
22	Speaking when I'm sure that my answer is correct	1 (2.7)	2 (5.4)	7 (18.9)	16 (43.2)	11 (29.7)	3.92	0.983
20	Speaking about a topic when I'm prepared		2 (5.4)	8 (21.6)	17 (45.9)	10 (27)	3.95	0.848
17	Speaking about a topic I'm interested in		1 (2.7)	8 (21.6)	18 (48.6)	10 (27)	4.00	0.782
15	Discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different		1 (2.7)	10 (27)	12 (32.4)	14 (37.8)	4.05	0.880
10	Talking in small groups			5 (13.5)	19 (51.4)	13 (35.1)	4.22	0.672
11	Talking in pairs			4 (10.8)	13 (35.1)	20 (54.1)	4.43	0.689

Note. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest tenth percent, which is why the sum is not always 100.

From this table we can see that the item for which students indicated least degree of WTC ("Discussing a topic with my teacher when s/he has a different view") has a mean of 2.38. Additionally, the majority of the participants chose the option *never* or *rarely* (62.1 %, *N*=23). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the learners expressed most WTC on item 11 ("Talking in pairs"), whose mean is 4.43. Closer inspection of table 2 shows that the majority (54 %, *N*=20) chose the alternative indicating the highest degree of willingness. By their own accounts then, this means that the students choose to speak very often when doing so in pairs, but rarely when it comes to discussing a topic with their teacher when having differing opinions. The possible explanations and implications of these results will be discussed later on.

Having presented the two items for which the students indicated most and least WTC, what follows is a description of the students' responses to each item. The presentation structure will follow that of the questionnaire layout.

5.2.1   Task Type

Items 1–6 in the questionnaire addressed the subject of task type. The students were more willing to ask a question themselves (item 4) and help their peers answer a question (item 6) than to answer a question from the teacher (item 2), as can be seen in table 2. Speaking when no one else is (item 3) and presenting one's opinions in class (item 5) had a mean of 2.59, whereas the situation "Giving a speech in front of class" (item 1) had more than 75 % ($N=28$) answering at least 3 (*occasionally*) and a mean of 3.08.

5.2.2   Number of People

Following the questions on task, five items (7–11) dealt with the correlation between WTC and the number of interlocutors. Table 2 shows that these learners were least willing to communicate individually in class (item 7) and in a discussion involving the entire class (item 8). Their willingness increased as the number of interlocutors decreased. In this study, speaking in pairs resulted in the highest degree of willingness (item 11). The learners were only slightly less willing to speak in small groups (item 10). Insofar as large groups are concerned (item 9), the mean was similar to that of item 8. From these findings the conclusion can be drawn that the respondents were more willing to speak the fewer the number of interlocutors.

5.2.3   Seating Location

Items 12 and 13 asked students to estimate their WTC when sitting either in the back or the front of the classroom. The mean of item 12 ("Speaking when I'm sitting in the back of the classroom") was only slightly higher than that of item 13 ("Speaking when I'm sitting in the front of the classroom") at 2.97 and 2.81, respectively. Considering the similar data for these items, seating location does not seem to be of much importance for these learners' WTC.

5.2.4 Topic of Discussion and Interlocutor

Two items (14 and 15) requested respondents to express their WTC when they had different opinions from their teacher and their peers. On the one hand, students indicated a relatively low degree of willingness when the teacher was involved ($M=2.38$). On the other hand, when the interlocutor was a friend with differing opinions, the willingness was much higher ($M=4.05$). Moreover, item 14 ("Discussing a topic with my teacher when s/he has a different view") was the item for which students expressed least WTC out of the 22 situations. The WTC for item 15 is on the opposite end of table 2 ("Discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different"), with only two situations ranked higher. These findings suggest that the teacher can inhibit the students' WTC.

5.2.5 Effect of Topic of Discussion

Items 16–20 concerned the influence of the topic of discussion on the students' WTC. The mean for each of the situations listed was at the higher end of the spectrum. Of these five situations, item 17 ("Speaking about a topic I'm interested in") had the highest mean at 4.00, followed by item 20 ("Speaking about a topic when I'm prepared") at 3.95. The students also reported high willingness for item 16 ("Speaking about a topic I'm familiar with"). On the question of comfortability and controversiality (items 18 and 19), these learners were more willing to discuss a topic they found comfortable ($M=3.89$) than a controversial one ($M=3.03$). At least for these respondents then, the topic of discussion should be one that they are interested in and familiar with, and that they are comfortable and prepared to talk about.

5.2.6 Effect of Evaluation

The last two questionnaire items requested the respondents to estimate their WTC when they know that their speaking will be graded (item 21) and when they are certain that their answer is correct (item 22). The data for both of these items are fairly similar, with the former having a mean of 3.57 and the latter 3.92. Few students chose the alternatives *never* and *rarely*: six students on item 21 and three students on item 22, as shown by table 2.

To conclude, the students participating in this study seemed most willing to communicate in these five situations: talking in pairs, talking in small groups, discussing a topic with a friend with different opinions, discussing an interesting topic, and discussing a topic they are prepared to discuss. Conversely, the five situations for which they expressed least willingness are the following: discussing a topic with the teacher when their opinions

differ, volunteering to speak individually in class, volunteering to answer a question from the teacher, speaking when the rest of the class is silent, and finally, presenting an opinion in class. Keeping these findings in mind, the next section moves on to discuss possible explanations of the results.

6 Discussion

The discussion part of the paper is threefold. The first part evaluates and comments on the results of the study (6.1). The findings will be presented and discussed in the same order as the results section, with the caveat that there are instances of overlap. For example, "Giving a speech in front of class" (item 1) and "Volunteering to speak individually in class" (item 7) could be presumed to be in the same category. The discussion of findings will be followed by an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study, particularly on the matter of research design and generalisability. In light of the limitations, some areas that require further research attention will also be discussed (6.2). The last part will discuss how the findings can translate into the EFL classroom (6.3).

6.1 WTC in English Among Swedish EFL Learners in the Upper Secondary School

The aim of this study was to examine the WTC of EFL learners at the Swedish upper secondary school. To that end, two research questions were posed: 1) How often are Swedish upper secondary students of EFL willing to communicate? and 2) In what situations are Swedish upper secondary students of EFL most and least willing to communicate? Following a quantitative approach, learners responded on a frequency Likert scale how often they would choose to speak in various classroom situations. While much of the previous research used the well-known L1 WTC scale, this study opted for a slightly modified version of the scale used in Riasati (2018), as it was deemed more applicable to the context of Swedish upper secondary learners of EFL. To reiterate, the L1 WTC scale does not include situations that occur in a language learning context and is as such questionable in terms of validity (see 2.2 and 3.1).

To answer the first question, the overall results indicated that these particular learners are occasionally willing to communicate during their English classes (M=3.08). This is

somewhat lower than Riasati's (2018) 3.78. In regard to the second, and more extensive, research question, the results for which situations the students were most willing to communicate can be summarised thusly: The students reported that they would speak more in activities with few participants involved – the fewer, the better – and when they were prepared to discuss a certain topic and found it interesting. Additionally, the topic of discussion should preferably be one for which the students involved have different opinions. These findings lend support to those reported in previous research. In contrast, the students were least willing to engage in communication with their teacher, whether that be answering a question of his or hers, or discussing a topic for which they have different opinions. Moreover, they were rarely willing to speak individually in class. These findings, too, corroborate those found in the literature.

6.1.1 Task Type

Of the six situations listed under task type, students were most willing to give a speech in front of class (M=3.08), and least willing to answer a teacher's question (M=2.54). They were, on the other hand, more willing to ask a question themselves (M=2,78). These three situations all place the individual student in focus, which, according to previous research, has a debilitating effect on WTC (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016). As such, one might have expected the results for these situations to be somewhat more uniform.

A possible explanation for this variance relates to preparedness. Giving a speech is rarely a spontaneous activity, but rather one for which students are given ample time to prepare. Considering the findings that students are not always given enough time to think through what they would like to say before speaking (Zarrinabadi, 2014), this lack of wait time might explain the respondents' relatively low degree of WTC when it comes to answering a teacher's question. A note of caution is due here since the study did not investigate the correlation between teacher-interaction strategies and student responses. Preparedness could also help explain why students were more willing to ask a question than respond to one; with reservations that it hinges on the situation, it is more likely that students will have had time to think through what they want to ask prior to acting on their thoughts than when the teacher asks a question they might not be prepared for.

Another possible explanation is connected to whether the students have a choice or not. In many classroom situations it might not matter how willing the students are. For example, speeches are typically evaluated and graded, and so if the students want to pass, they are

obligated to give one. When the teacher asks a question, on the other hand, the students can choose whether to answer or not. Granted, if the teacher singles out a student, one might argue that the student does not have a choice either. However, it is likely that the respondents interpreted the situations in the questionnaire verbatim. In other words, unlike the speech situation, if the teacher asks a question and the students are anxious about correctness, they can choose not to raise their hand without there being any immediate effects on their grades.

6.1.2   Number of People

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018), the students in this study answered that they would speak more often in activities where fewer interlocutors are involved. More specifically, the results corroborate the previous findings where participants expressed higher degrees of WTC in groups and in pairs in comparison to whole-class discussions (Cao & Philp, 2006). This might be because activities involving fewer participants tend to cause less stress and anxiety (Cao & Philp, 2006; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018), and as explained previously, anxiety is negatively correlated with WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

While acknowledging that anxiety becomes less of an issue as students find themselves in situations with few participants, the decision to speak more or less depending on group size might also be connected to the combined effect of two other factors: responsibility and perceived opportunity to speak. More specifically, another possible explanation for the respondents' preferences might be found in Kang's (2005) study where it was suggested that activities involving few participants could engender a sense of responsibility to speak. Further, referring back to section 5.1.1 and the question of opportunity to speak, when there are fewer participants involved each student has a greater chance to speak (Cao & Philp, 2006). Admittedly, students could still risk being tasked with communicating with someone who is overly talkative and dominates the conversation; if so, that perceived opportunity decreases. Again, neither the questionnaire nor the literature specifies how many interlocutors separate a small group from a large group, and so the results should be interpreted with caution.

Closer inspection of table 2 shows that no respondents answered *never* or *rarely* on the situations "Talking in pairs" and "Talking in small groups". This is hardly surprising: Not only does the risk of working with someone overly talkative decrease the fewer students there are, but social norms imply that even the most reticent student will not really be able to

remain quiet in a situation where they are asked to talk to only one other person (unless he or she outright refuses). Conversely, the larger the groups get, the greater the opportunity to listen in and choose for yourself whether to participate. This might explain the greater distribution of responses for the situation "Talking in large groups".

Finally, it is interesting to note how rarely these students would choose to speak individually in class (item 7). Returning briefly to the wording of the questionnaire, this situation could have been interpreted to cover all manner of activities: It does not specify any one task, nor the number of students involved. Item 1, on the other hand, is specifically geared towards giving a speech. Therefore, one might conclude that the usage of the word "volunteering" in some of the questions might be better suited to the students' actual feelings and behaviour, and thereby more in line with reality.

6.1.3   Seating Location

The similar results for sitting in the back versus in the front of the classroom could suggest that seating location is not particularly tied to whether the students choose to speak or not. For the sake of comparison, the students in Hsu (2006) and Riasati and Rahimi (2018) expressed more WTC when sitting in the front of the classroom, which is the opposite to what was found in this study. One might assume that sitting in the front would make the students feel more observed and that this would in turn result in lower WTC. On the other hand, as exemplified by Riasati and Rahimi (2018), sitting in the front might also make the students more inclined to speak due to perceived expectations to speak on behalf of the peers.

6.1.4   Topic of Discussion and Interlocutor

The two situations in this category dealt with the discussion of a topic when there are divergent views. Whereas the situation "Discussing a topic with my teacher when s/he has a different view" (item 14) is situated at the very top of table 2, "Discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different" is at the opposite end of the table. What is more, closer inspection of table 2 reveals that 23 students (62.1 %) answered *never* or *rarely* on item 14, and not a single answered *very often*. On item 15 on the other hand, the frequencies are virtually the complete opposite: One student chose the option *rarely*, and 26 students *often* or *very often*.

This somewhat conspicuous difference in frequencies could be explained by the degree of familiarity between interlocutors (see 3.2.1); it is likely that the students have closer

rapport with each other than with the teacher. This is not necessarily because they dislike the teacher, but because the students have in common the fact that they are (presumably) somewhat equally proficient and knowledgeable about the topic at hand and, in general, are more alike one another. In addition, if the teacher is seen as the expert (Gałajda, 2017), this is something that could discourage students from discussing a topic for which there is disagreement. Likewise, if we assume that students worry about being evaluated whenever the teacher is involved, they might acquiesce due to fear of potentially receiving a poor grade.

Perhaps more difficult to explain are the inconsistencies with earlier findings. The means in the present study were 2.38 for item 14 and 4.05 for item 15. While these results are similar to Riasati's (2018) in that the respondents there, too, were more willing to discuss this sort of topic with their friends than with their teacher, the means in the Iranian study were rather similar at 3.45 (teacher) and 3.72 (friends). Regarding the Taiwanese university context, 62.9 % answered either *never* or *rarely* on item 14 (Hsu, 2006), which is similar to the 62.1 % in the current study. However, 52.6 % of the Taiwanese learners reported that they would never or rarely discuss a topic with a friend when their opinions are different; in the current study, only one student responded *rarely* for this situation. In other words, while differing opinions was equally damaging to WTC in Hsu (2006), in the present study it appears that the teacher was the factor that caused a decrease in WTC.

6.1.5 Effect of Topic of Discussion

The topic of discussion is a much-researched area, and several studies have demonstrated that students are more willing to speak when they find the topic interesting and when they are familiar with it (e.g., Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Riasati, 2018). The findings in the present study confirm previous findings; table 2 shows that these respondents most often choose to speak about topics that they are interested in (item 17) shortly followed by a topic that they are prepared to discuss (item 20). This is in line with, for instance, Mystkowska-Wiertelak's (2016) study where low WTC was attributed to an uninteresting topic or a requirement for specific background knowledge.

With the exception of item 19 ("Speaking about a controversial topic"), we can see that the mean values of the items in this category are very similar: 3.81, 3.89, 3.95, and 4.00. Naturally, if you are familiar with and interested in a topic, that would also make you prepared to discuss it. In addition, if students can draw on their own experiences and existing knowledge, potential feelings of anxiety may not inhibit them from speaking; instead, the

students are able to feel confident in their abilities. If so, this would thus seem to confirm previous findings where perceived competence, confidence, and lack of anxiety resulted in high WTC (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998; Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002).

Comparing item 18 and 19, the respondents were more willing to speak about a topic that they are comfortable with than a controversial one. Similar findings were reported in Riasati (2018). As to what can be considered a controversial topic, this might be an interesting research objective for future work.

6.1.6   Effect of Evaluation

The situations "Speaking when I know my speaking will be graded" (item 21) and "Speaking when I'm sure that my answer is correct" (item 22) concluded the questionnaire. The results suggested that the respondents were less willing to speak when they are in a grading situation than when they are certain about the accuracy of their answer, yet at mean values of 3.57 and 3.92, respectively, the difference is small.

Previous studies have also noted differences between these two situations (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2001; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). In regard to item 22, the equivalent mean value in Riasati and Rahimi's (2018) study was 4.23, and so it can be assumed that the Iranian EFL learners considered correctness to be more important than the learners in this study. Students' concern about language correctness is a recurring theme in the literature, which is tied to the negative correlation between error correction and WTC (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Of course, it would not be erroneous to assume that certainty about correctness is accompanied by a certain degree of confidence, and after all, self-confidence is crucial for speech to occur (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

However, we do not know whether the respondents in the current study interpreted the word "correct" as only referring to form, meaning, or both. It is interesting to note that the studies mentioned above were all set in the Iranian context; as discussed in the literature review, this is a context where linguistic accuracy is prioritised over fluency or spontaneous speech. Indeed, because errors are to be avoided, students tend to be too anxious to speak (Ghonsooly et al., 2012). Based on what was discussed earlier about teaching approaches, one might have hypothesised that the students in the present study would not be as concerned about correctness. Still, just because the FL teaching of today is not solely preoccupied with linguistic competence and correctness, that is not to say that these components are

insignificant. Furthermore, while teaching approaches might be different, the desire to be certain about correctness does not appear to be restricted to a particular teaching context.

The willingness to speak in a grading situation can be compared to that of previously discussed item 1 ("Giving a speech in front of class"). Both situations can be considered anxiety provoking, yet the levels of WTC are higher than that of other anxiety-provoking situations, such as item 7 ("Volunteering to speak individually in class"). It was previously discussed how students have no choice but to communicate in a graded situation. Perhaps more importantly, a pattern can be discerned that emphasises the complexity of L2 WTC, and that supports the claim that "the culmination of converging, conflicting processes […] lead to both approach and avoidance tendencies, operating simultaneously […] from moment to moment" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 572). That is, a possible explanation why there are different degrees of WTC in situations that at a glance appear to evoke similar emotions could be due to conflicting thought processes.

Given the small sample size and our lack of understanding of the thought processes of these particular respondents, the discussion above mainly consists of speculations. Given this, generalisations and far-reaching conclusions are beyond the scope of this study. The findings do, however, offer interesting questions for future research to explore.

6.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

A limitation of this study is that the scope of the research topic might have been too broad. Looking at the questionnaire, we can see that it covers many different situations related to group size, task, evaluation, etc. The majority of the referenced literature has focused on one or two of the categories in the questionnaire, which means that the researchers had a good chance of getting a thorough understanding of their chosen topic. Regarding the current study, a better insight into why and how WTC of this particular research population fluctuates might have been gained had the questionnaire been limited to cover only one type of situation. Doing so might have allowed more time for follow-up interviews.

Nevertheless, this study did not seek to explain students' lines of reasoning as much as gain an insight into the behaviours of this particular research population. Moreover, the chosen method was successful in that it managed to answer the research questions. Future research on the Swedish context might benefit from complementing a questionnaire with other methods. An additional advantage of that would be that one would be able to assess the predictability of the questionnaire – a common issue in many previous studies (see 3.1.1).

This was a small-scale study comprising a mere 37 students: Generalisability is therefore another limitation. Overall, the students could be assumed to be quite homogenous in the sense that they were the same age, took the same course, and were taught by the same teacher. In order to improve the possibility of generalisability, a replication study involving a larger and randomised sample could be a fruitful avenue for future work.

Finally, more work needs to be done to understand the teachers' perspective. Most of the studies focus on the learners' point of view, and while teachers surely are aware of the behaviours of their students and have their own ways of promoting WTC, it would be interesting to gain an insight into how they reason when planning their oral communication activities, and when these are implemented in the classroom.

To sum up, this study adds to the existing knowledge of L2 WTC by providing a sorely needed insight into the behaviours of Swedish EFL learners. The next section will discuss how the insights gained could have bearing on the teaching of EFL in Sweden.

6.3 Pedagogical Implications

First, the results indicate that learners would most often choose to speak when they are engaged in activities with few participants. Conversely, they would rarely choose to speak in situations where they are the centre of attention, such as when no one else is speaking and when the teacher asks a question. Teachers are therefore advised to consider the potentially debilitating effect of discussions held in large groups and instead opt for small groups, or even better, pairs.

Next, the results suggest that the interlocutor can have a significant effect on WTC, and particularly the teacher's role in promoting or demoting WTC cannot be underestimated. The teacher is tasked with evaluating and grading their students, and fear of evaluation alone is enough to put anyone at unease, and even more so those students who are particularly prone to anxiety. Among several findings, this study has shown that correctness is important for students if they are to speak, and so teachers are advised to think about what that really means: How can we create a classroom environment where students truly have the "desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes" (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 1)? Instead of attributing a lack of participation to factors such as shyness or attitude, teachers are advised to remind themselves that students are not necessarily always unwilling, but rather unable due to the inherent complexity of using a FL, and the various

interacting factors that relate to WTC. This is especially true when output is expected at a moment's notice, which tends to be the case when questions are directed to the entire group.

Moving now to the question of the topic. This study has lent support to the widely reported finding that the topic of discussion should be one that the students are prepared to discuss and that they are interested in. This is good news for Swedish EFL teachers since the curriculum offers plenty of freedom for teachers to decide for themselves what topics to include. Looking at the core content of English 5, 6, and 7, teachers can choose between a wide range of topics related to, for example, societal issues, working life, cultural expressions, film and literature, and historical conditions (Skolverket, 2011a). As with any lesson and course objectives that are to be met, teachers will need to bear in mind the needs and interests of their individual students and classes when planning topics of discussion.

7 Conclusion

This study has addressed the issue of classroom silence; as discussed previously in this paper, no matter the educational stage, proficiency, or teaching approach, many students refrain from expressing themselves in speech. Referred to as willingness to communicate (WTC), it is the concept researchers use to investigate in what situations students choose to speak, how often they do so, and why.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the WTC among Swedish EFL learners at the upper secondary school. While an extensive body of research exists on the WTC of university students, students in the Asian and Canadian contexts, or both, there is a lack of research that has addressed the context of Swedish upper secondary students. The findings reported here could therefore be particularly valuable to teachers in the Swedish school.

To answer the two research questions, a questionnaire was distributed to students at the school where the author did her teacher trainee period. Once the data had been analysed, the following conclusions could be drawn: 1) the fewer participants, the better; 2) the topic of discussion should be engaging and one that the students are prepared to discuss, as this will bolster their confidence; and 3) teachers have an important role to play in pushing their students towards engaging in communication. More specifically, teachers should make sure to offer topics that are interesting and familiar to the students, and that discussions are held in pairs or small groups. Furthermore, given the significant difference in the students' WTC in

terms of interlocutor, teachers are advised to consider the ways in which they can help alleviate some of the anxiety typically associated with talking with the teacher.

This study has offered insights into how often students choose to speak in various classroom situations. It is hoped that the findings will be useful for teachers in their understanding of when their students may be reluctant to speak in their language classes and effectively guide teachers in their endeavour to help their students towards greater oral proficiency. Further research employing a variety of research methods is recommended in order to acquire a more exhaustive image of WTC and an understanding of why learners in a particular context act a certain way. Doing so would enable teachers to address the issue of their own silent classrooms.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Speaking habits of Swedish EFL learners

Dear student,

My name is Ellinor and I'm a teacher student at the University of Gothenburg. As part of my final year I'm conducting my own research project which will be presented in the form of a written research paper. The purpose of my research is to study the speaking habits of upper-secondary students of English in Sweden. That is, in what situations they choose to speak or choose not to speak English.

I would therefore be very grateful if you would help me with this by filling out the following questionnaire. Your participation is voluntary and will not affect your grades in any way. Responses are confidential and will only be used for the purpose of research: no one will know how you answered.

Because of the extraordinary circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, your classes have been held online. When filling out the questionnaire, I want you to consider your "normal" classes; in other words, what it used to be like in the classroom before the start of online classes.

I kindly request that you be honest when filling out the questionnaire: there are no right or wrong answers.

Thank you for your help!

Listed below are several situations that occur in English class and that might affect whether or not you choose to talk. Please indicate how often you would choose to speak in these situations on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = often, 5 = very often).

Task type

1. Giving a speech in front of class

2. Volunteering to answer when the teacher asks a question

3. Speaking when no one else is speaking

4. Asking a question in class

5. Presenting my opinions in class

6. Helping other classmates answer a question

Number of people

7. Volunteering to speak individually in class

8. Volunteering to participate in class discussions

9. Talking in large groups

10. Talking in small groups

11. Talking in pairs

Seating location

12. Speaking when I'm sitting in the back of the classroom

13. Speaking when I'm sitting in the front of the classroom

Topic of discussion and interlocutor

14. Discussing a topic with my teacher when s/he has a different view

15. Discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different

Effect of topic of discussion

16. Speaking about a topic I'm familiar with

17. Speaking about a topic I'm interested in

18. Speaking about a topic that I'm comfortable with

19. Speaking about a controversial topic

20. Speaking about a topic when I'm prepared

Effect of evaluation

21. Speaking when I know my speaking will be graded

22. Speaking when I'm sure that my answer is correct