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Willingness to Communicate in EFL Classrooms

A Qualitative Study on the Perspectives of Upper
Secondary Students in
Sweden

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper aims to investigate the EFL learner perspective on WTC and which factors influence their WTC. Additionally, another aim is to investigate if there is a difference in WTC between English and Swedish for the learners and what causes it. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing interviews to gather rich and nuanced data from a diverse sample of EFL learners. The participants consisted of 5 intermediate EFL students from an upper-secondary school in Gothenburg, Sweden. A thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the data. The findings revealed that a complex combination of situational and individual variables influences EFL WTC. Furthermore, individual variables, including linguistic competence, anxiety, and motivation, played a crucial role in shaping learners' WTC. Moreover, the study uncovered the dynamic nature of WTC, highlighting the importance of examining how situational and individual variables interact and constantly evolve. The implications of this study underscore the need for educators and language practitioners to consider a multifaceted approach to foster WTC among EFL learners. By understanding the intricate interplay of situational, individual, and dynamic variables, instructional interventions and classroom practices can be tailored to create supportive and motivating language learning environments, ultimately enhancing students' communicative abilities and confidence in using English as a foreign language.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
1.1	Historical Overview	3
1.2	Aim	4
2	Theoretical Background	4
2.1	Willingness to Communicate	4
2.2	Communicative Language Teaching	6
3	Previous Research	7
3.1	Individual Variables	7
3.2	Situational Variables	9
3.3	Dynamic Variables	10
3.4	Teacher Influence	11
3.5	The Swedish Context	12
4	Method	13
4.1	Choice of Method	13
4.2	Choice of Language	14
4.3	Participants and Ethical Considerations	14
4.4	Thematic Analysis	15
5	Results	16
5.1	Background	16
5.1.1	Motivation	16
5.1.2	English In School	18
5.1.3	English Outside of School	19
5.1.4	Classroom Environment	20
5.1.5	Teacher Influence	20
5.2	Willingness to Communicate	21

5.2.1	Classroom Scenario.....	21
5.2.2	Increase WTC.....	22
5.2.3	Swedish and English WTC	23
6	Discussion.....	24
6.1	Variables That Influence WTC.....	24
6.2	Ways of Increasing EFL WTC	25
7	Conclusion & Pedagogical Implications.....	26
7.1	Research Limitations	26
7.2	Suggestions for Future Research	27
8	References	28
	Appendix A– Consent Form.....	1
	Appendix B – Interview Guide.....	2

1 Introduction

Using language to communicate is an integral part of our day-to-day life. Furthermore, the view that communicative competence is necessary to develop linguistic proficiency is a common occurrence. However, that was not always the case. In order to understand the creation, growth, and relevance of *Willingness to Communicate* (WTC) as an area of research, the development of language acquisition as a research field needs to be established.

1.1 Historical Overview

In the early years of second language acquisition, language acquisition was gained through the *Classical Method* (Brown & Lee, 2015). The classical method consisted of teacher-led classes focusing primarily on grammar rules, translation, vocabulary and writing acquisition. The goal of language proficiency during this period was to appear “scholarly” (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 17) and less about the function or usage of a language. At the end of the nineteenth century, the classical method gained a new alias under the *Grammar Translation Method* and still has its foothold in the present day (Brown & Lee, 2015). The focus for most methods during this era was put on developing language accuracy with little to no focus on communication.

Eventually, *the Direct Method* broke this curse at the beginning of the twentieth century and revolved around the active implementation of the English language in classrooms. Under the direct method, language was produced in a spontaneous manner with no translation between L1 and L2 (Brown & Lee, 2015). The direct method became popular in private schools; however, the same did not apply to public schools where it became more difficult to implement due to logistical reasons. Following the direct method was the *Audiolingual Method* which originated in the middle of the twentieth century. The audiolingual method focused on oral proficiency and had the intent of teaching “long neglected aural/oral skills” (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 21) through pronunciation drills, pattern practice, and conversation exercises.

Despite these developments in language teaching, a few issues remained. One of which was increasing the focus on learner awareness of their language development. Thus, *Communicative Language Learning* (CLL) was introduced in the 1970s when teachers took a backseat in the classroom and functioned more as language counselors to learners. The focus on interpersonal relationships between teacher and student was high, and language learning was viewed as a collaborative effort (Brown & Lee, 2015). CLL eventually became viewed as

too restricting, resulting in the preference for other methods instead. However, aspects of it are still used in language classrooms today depending on the context.

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, a globally renowned approach to language teaching was created called *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT). CLT aimed to establish an integrative approach to language acquisition (Brown & Lee, 2015) with a focus on life-long language learning. To facilitate lifelong learning, authentic classroom content was implemented. Additionally, the focus on linguistic accuracy lessened to make leeway for linguistic fluency and sociolinguistic competence. Brown and Lee (2015) state that a characteristic of successful language acquisition is interactive communication. Thus, the development and establishment of CLT aided in the creation of WTC research.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects factors influencing WTC from a learners' perspective and ways of increasing WTC through the following research questions:

1. Which variables (individual, situational, or dynamic) influences the language production of EFL learners with low WTC?
2. How can EFL learners with low WTC be encouraged to speak more?

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Willingness to Communicate

The concept of *willingness to communicate* was introduced by McCroskey and Baer in 1985. Its development originated through an analysis of interpersonal relationships based on prior research. The basis of an interpersonal relationship lies in the ability and desire to communicate with each other. According to McCroskey and Baer (1985) when two strangers cross paths for different purposes, an uncertainty lies between them that causes a reluctance to engage if there is no prior communication or interaction. When communication and “non-verbal affiliative expressiveness” (McCroskey & Baer 1985) increase, the underlying uncertainty that existed prior, decreases. As a result, intimacy and a sense of liking lay the basis for creating an interpersonal relationship.

However, despite interpersonal relationships, there are still individual differences that remain that cause some to be more inclined to talk while others are not. These differences are

categorized as personality and situational variables (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) and are encompassed in the definition of *willingness to communicate*. Personality variables refer to individual differences in a desire to communicate in any given situation and its WTC measurement is defined as a *personality construct*. Situational variables refer to contextual and individual factors such as current mood, prior engagement, time, and more (McCroskey & Baer, 1985).

Furthermore, McCroskey and Baer's (1985) definition of WTC was built upon the prior establishment of the terminology *unwillingness to communicate*. The concept of unwillingness to communicate was defined as a "chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication" (McCroskey & Baer, 1985, p.4) and correlates with low self-esteem, introversion, and communication apprehension as influencing factors. The terminology of *social anxiety* (SA) is also introduced as a correlating factor of unwillingness to communicate. Social anxiety, per this definition, was a reconstruction of the word shy which was believed to have an inadequate characterization by prior researchers. SA refers to "internally experienced discomfort and externally observable behavior" (McCroskey & Baer, 1985, p. 4) and affects an individual's inclination to communicate negatively.

Additionally, MacIntyre et al. (1998) contributed to developing McCroskey and Baer's (1985) definition of WTC by adding the L2 perspective. They critiqued the prior definition as too narrow-minded with a focus on personality traits while excluding situational variables, which MacIntyre et al. (1998, p.4) believe are closely integrated. One notable difference between the two definitions is that MacIntyre et al. (1998) introduced a pyramid model listing WTC influences for L2 learners. At the top of the pyramid is communication behavior and is defined as L2 speakers having the intent to speak. At the bottom is the social (intergroup climate) and individual context (personality type) which lays the basis for the remaining influences in the pyramid. According to the formatting of the pyramid, individual variables such as learner personality, self-confidence, and motivation are static and carried by L2 learners to any environment. Meanwhile, situational variables such as topic knowledge and desire to speak to individuals are viewed as dynamic depending on the context.

In light of recent research, the MacIntyre et. al. (1998) pyramid is outdated and needs to be reformatted to incorporate a definition of WTC that views individual variables (IV) as non-static and instead as the co-contributor of dynamic variables (DV) together with situational variables (SV), resulting in the creation of WTC (see figure 1).

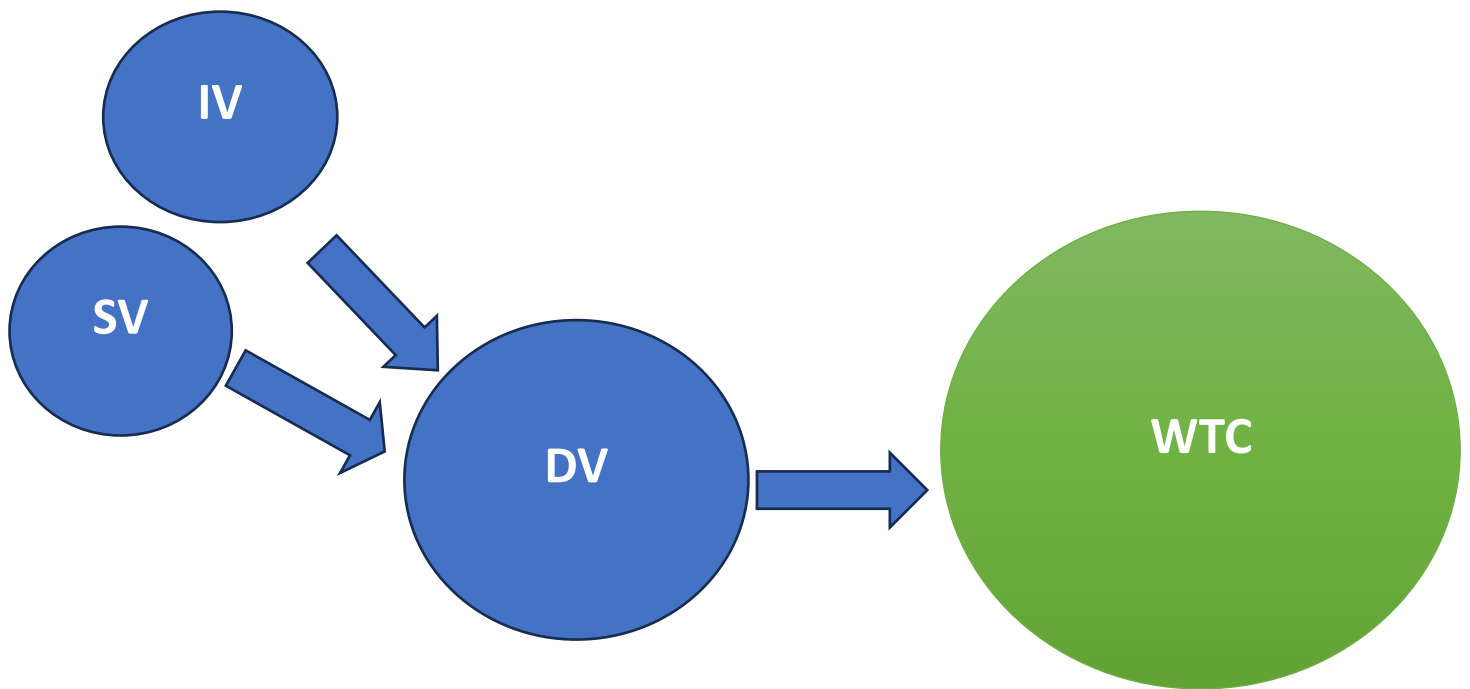


Figure 1. Influencing variables of WTC.

IV includes factors such as learner personality, motivation, linguistic competence, and anxiety while the situational factors (SV) encompass the environment and include variables such as interlocutor, social groups, task type, and assessment. These are simply examples of variables that influence WTC and could be listed to a much further extent beyond this due to both IV and SV having different contents depending on the learner. An EFL learner for instance, could have a high language anxiety tied to a specific environment but when they are outside of that context, the anxiety variable is gone. Furthermore, per this definition, IV such as motivation or linguistic competence are not static but are rather as dynamic as SV. Together they create the basis for language production.

2.2 Communicative Language Teaching

Loumbourdi (2018) reports that communicative language teaching (CLT) was developed with second language acquisition in mind and made room for a more functional approach to language teaching and learning. *Communicative competence* lays the foundation for CLT and encompasses the integration of four factors. The four factors according to Loumbourdi (2018) are *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse*, and *strategic* language competence. They are defined as follows:

Grammatical refers to the linguistic aspect of language, sociolinguistic applies to the understanding of the social context, discourse examines the elements of cohesion and coherence, and finally, strategic analyses refer to the strategies that people use when

communicating in order to keep communication going, with whatever language they have at their disposal. (Loumbourdi, 2018, p.2)

According to Brown & Lee (2015, p. 31-32), there are seven characteristics of CLT:

- Goals
- Relationship between form and function
- Fluency and accuracy
- Focus on real-world contexts
- Autonomy and strategic involvement
- Teacher roles
- Student roles

The core aim of CLT is to promote life-long learning in authentic contexts that incorporate all the required skills for language fluency. Teachers that implement CLT in their language classrooms are instructed to take the role of a supportive coach that encourages students to actively pursue their implementation of communicative competence (Brown & Lee, 2015). The groundwork of CLT is closely related to the concept of WTC and its primary focus on engaging learners to actively produce language in the school context.

3 Previous Research

3.1 Individual Variables

Peng (2015) investigated the relationship between L2 anxiety and WTC. The study consisted of 1,073 Chinese university students and data was collected through questionnaires. Results indicated that “the strongest direct predictor of L2 WTC was anxiety” (Peng, 2015, p. 438). The occurrence of anxiety among the participants was during classroom moments, specifically during their English public-speaking class. Speech delivery (30.3%) and poor preparation (25.8%) were the top causes of anxiety for the participants.

Similarly, Baran-Łucarz (2014) aimed to explore the relationship between WTC and pronunciation anxiety in the foreign language classroom context. The study was carried out in a Polish university and had 151 participants. Their levels varied from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. During the collection of data, Baran-Łucarz (2014) developed two surveys called a Measure of Willingness to Communicate in the FL Classroom (MWTC-FLC) and a Measurement of Pronunciation Anxiety in the FL Classroom (MPA-FLC).

Unsurprisingly, the findings indicated that pronunciation anxiety was the highest among intermediate-level learners, resulting in a reluctance to speak due to the fear of being judged by their peers. Furthermore, Baran-Łucarz (2014) reported a correlation between unwillingness to communicate and the participants' "self-perceived linguistic competence" (p. 462). The lower the learners perceived their linguistic competence, the higher their unwillingness to communicate became, thus, resulting in a low WTC.

Bernales (2016, p. 4) conducted a study aimed to explore the distinction between learners' self-perception regarding their planned participation in class and their "actual self-reported participation" (Bernales, 2016, p. 3). The study used a mixed-method implementation of surveys and interviews with 16 participants selected from a university in the United States. The findings stated that the participant's perspective on their linguistic competence influenced their engagement in the language classroom. In particular, the participants expressed a sense of linguistic obstruction that prevented them from conveying their thoughts at their desired level and thus, resulting in a reluctance to engage in the language classroom and a low WTC.

Learner motivation is another individual variable that influences EFL WTC, according to Liu and Park's (2012, p. 35) findings. Their study aimed to investigate the relationship between WTC, motivation, and English proficiency in Korea. In total, 201 college students were recruited as participants and distributed questionnaires. According to the findings, many of the learners had an instrumental motivation, meaning they were driven to learn to gain a means to an end. Furthermore, Lui and Park (2012, p. 50) concluded that "there were positive correlations between different types of motivation, motivation intensity, and WTC. From this, it can be suggested that teachers should improve students' motivations in order to improve their WTC."

Similarly, Joe et al. (2017) carried out a quantitative study aimed to "review three interrelated theoretical frameworks (i.e., classroom social climate, self-determination theory, and L2 WTC) in an attempt to formalize connections between key individual and situational factors" (p. 135). The participants consisted of 381 EFL Korean students in secondary school and were instructed to fill out a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. According to the findings, autonomous forms of motivation increased WTC. Additionally, learners' motivation is influenced by social contexts within an environment which can either foster or hinder "students' growth-oriented propensities" according to Joe et al. (2017, p. 140).

3.2 Situational Variables

Peng's (2015) study established eight situational variables that positively influenced L2 WTC. They were categorized as students' interest in topics, sufficient preparation, teacher skills, group discussion, enjoyable classroom climate, impromptu speech, having ideas to share, and 'other'. Additionally, Kang (2005, p. 280) conducted a study aimed to explore the influence of situational variables on L2 learners' WTC. This is encompassed as *situational WTC* and is created "through the joint function of multi-layered variables" (Kang, 2005, p. 288). The participants were four male Korean students selected from a university in the United States with a conversation partner program. The program aimed to establish a dialogue between native and non-native speaker students. In the study, the native-speaking students had the role of tutors for the L2 students and were listed as being five to eight participants that the non-native speakers could select from. The conversations lasted for one hour and revolved around anything the participants wanted to speak about. There were no topic limitations or guidance. The results of the study indicated that situational variables such as interlocutor, topic, and conversational context were all influences on L2 learners' WTC.

Furthermore, Kang (2005, p. 282) discovered that security was a common determinator of situational WTC in L2 communication. The primary influence on L2 speakers' security during the conversations were the interlocutors. If the interlocutors had no prior knowledge of the learners' proficiency level, the non-native speakers became insecure. Additionally, the variable of excitement was influenced by the conversation topic. Thus, if an L2 participant became excited over a topic, it increased their sense of security due to having prior background knowledge that they could utilize during the conversation. Lastly, Kang's (2005, p. 288) study establishes a clear function in individual variables such as excitement, responsibility, and security as antecedents to situational WTC. Moreover, assessment is a situational factor that influences WTC among EFL learners, as evident in Zare et al.'s (2020) research findings. The aim was to investigate EFL learners' views on *oral corrective feedback* (OCF) and its correlation to L2 WTC. The study's participants consisted of 60 female students, aged 11 to 22, selected from an English-speaking institute in Iran. They were assorted into levels concerning their linguistic competence in English, from starter to intermediate before being instructed to fill out a survey questionnaire. Additionally, interviews were carried out with the intent to distinguish a correlation between OCF and L2 WTC. Zare et al. (2020, p.1172) discovered that proficiency level and OCF

influenced L2 WTC. Furthermore, elicitation and metalinguistic feedback were shown to be the two forms of OCF that influenced L2 WTC the highest.

On a final note, the function of assessment as an influence on WTC can be due to learners carrying the perception that *performance-based assessment* is a constant element in the language classroom. According to Brown and Lee (2015), performance-based assessment pertains to learners producing observable skills, commonly in oral form, that can occur outside of regulated assessment practices such as tests. It is the teacher's choice of what forms of assessment they take into consideration when grading, and which weighs larger.

3.3 Dynamic Variables

Zhang et al. (2018) describe second language acquisition as a dynamic process that occurs through the interaction of both individual and situational variables. It is an aspect of language development that incorporates several influencing factors tied to specific contexts instead of analyzing them as isolated variables. According to MacIntyre and Wang (2021) the same can be applied to L2 learners WTC. They carried out a study with the aim of creating “an intensive examination of the dynamics taking place within one specific L2 activity, describing a meaningful photo” (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021, p. 879). The participants consisted of ten students from a Canadian university that were taking an English course as their L2. During the study, they were instructed to participate in a photo narrative task where they had to discuss “the meaningfulness of the photo for three to five minutes in English” (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021, p. 884). Additionally, the participants had the freedom of choosing a picture on their own that was personal to them or that brought them meaning.

Furthermore, Cao (2014, p. 793) carried out a study at a New Zealand University with twelve international students in a 20-week pre-graduate English for academic purposes (EAP) program. The purpose of the study was to “investigate how various individual and environmental factors co-influence learners' WTC in class from a sociocognitive perspective” (Cao, 2014, p. 793). The data was collected through classroom observations, interviews, and journal entries. The participants were instructed to record themselves during oral tasks in the classroom and to write journal entries to keep track of their WTC progress. Afterward, the researcher sat down with each participant and their recordings to reflect on the collected data. The results of the study confirmed Cao’s (2014, p. 799) initial perspective of WTC as a dynamic concept. The participants' WTC was influenced by individual, environmental, and linguistic factors. In particular, the results indicated that the degree of influence of these

factors would vary. One participant's WTC was more influenced by environmental factors such as group work and task types, for example. However, the degree of its influence would vary from class to class.

Similarly, Macintyre et al. (2011) conducted a study consisting of 100 junior high school students from a French immersion program located in Canada. They were instructed to fill out a questionnaire regarding their previous linguistic background and their purpose for learning French. Furthermore, the participants wrote journal entries detailing six scenarios where they felt comfortable speaking French and ones where they were uncomfortable. The findings suggest a high amount of ambivalence in the participants' answers where they could be both willing and unwilling to communicate in French regardless of the interlocutor. This supports the notion that WTC occurs in a dynamic process that cannot be predicted.

Moreover, one interesting aspect of MacIntyre et. al's (2011) findings shows that interpersonal relationships influence L2 WTC. Several of the participants were unwilling to use French outside of the immersion classroom due to feeling judged by their peers. Additionally, a factor that increased WTC was the sense of security some of the participants felt when speaking French with a teacher that they knew would not judge or think less of them if they made errors in their speech. In contrast, one participant expressed an unwillingness to speak French with a teacher because of fear that it would influence their grade. Thus, the relationship certain teachers have with their students cannot be replicated for everyone, nor does it always positively influence L2 WTC due to its dynamic nature.

3.4 Teacher Influence

As a continuation of the teacher influence, Zarrinabadi (2014, p. 288) investigated the correlation between teachers and WTC in a study consisting of 50 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 to 24. The study was carried out in Iran using essays produced by the participants as the data collection. In their essays, the participants were instructed to write about situations that influenced their WTC, specifically regarding dialogues with their teachers. Teacher support was shown to be the largest influence in EFL WTC. The notion of support can be interpreted into teacher attitudes as the participants expressed that their degree of WTC is influenced by the teacher's behavior towards their attempts at communication, according to Zarrinabadi's (2014) findings. Other influences were teachers' wait time for feedback, error correction, and topic choice.

Subsequently, Grant (2022) carried out a case study in Ethiopia consisting of four English teachers as participants. A common determinant for the participants was that they were selected on the grounds of their long teaching experience. The study focused on discovering contextual factors that influence teachers' communicative classes, through the CLT perspective. The findings indicated that teachers struggle with creating interactive and communicative classrooms when EFL learners are passive and reluctant to speak. As a strategy to combat their lack of participation, the teachers would call on the learners by name and encourage them to speak. Grant (2022) establishes that implementing the strategy of random name-calling can cause a source of anxiety for learners.

Similar findings were reported in Cao's (2014) study and emphasize that without free will and the intent to communicate with another individual, WTC cannot be established. Therefore, teachers need to avoid forcing learners to engage in communication in the classroom context without giving them the opportunity to opt-out. Furthermore, the teachers in Grant's (2022) study concluded that the lack of learner participation in speech was influenced by their low linguistic competence. They simply did not know how and when to use the language. Additionally, Chen et al. (2021) researched the influence that teachers and teaching styles (TTS) have on L2 WTC. The participants consisted of 221 EFL learners divided into domestic and abroad students at an intermediate level, located in China. Data collection was conducted through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. According to the findings "the participants' L2 WTC level still reflected their previous learning experiences" (Chen et al., 2021, p. 13), and a significant influence was the perception of their teacher. As a conclusion to the Chen et al. (2021) findings, EFL teachers are encouraged to be aware of their teaching strategies as they can negatively affect L2 WTC if they are not implemented to benefit contextual learning, which requires adaptability from teachers.

3.5 The Swedish Context

Källmark (2023) researched the influence of group dynamics on EFL learners' WTC in Sweden. The participants of the study consisted of 6 upper-secondary students in a technology program. 4 out of the 6 participants believed they had a high WTC. Källmark (2023) applied a qualitative interview method with the aim to find out what factors influence the learners' WTC in their environment, specifically group settings within the classroom, proficiency levels, and personality traits. According to the findings, the majority of the students perceived their classroom setting as secure and were comfortable in the group dynamics within. One

student stated that he has a higher WTC during group assignments with his friends in comparison to being placed in a group with people he is not as familiar with. The sense of unfamiliarity caused him to observe others instead of speaking as frequently.

In terms of proficiency levels in English among the participants, 3 out of the 6 were confident in their English skills and spoke it fluently. The same 3 students also categorized themselves as having extroverted personality traits. The rest of the students were more hesitant in their proficiency, with one student expressing that it is due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, one participant expressed that he was introverted and had low motivation in school which influenced his WTC.

4 Method

The method of choice for this research project is a qualitative interview study. The participants consisted of 5 upper-secondary students selected from a Swedish school. The data was collected near the end of a teaching trainee course. Additionally, the collected data was transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed through thematic analysis.

4.1 Choice of Method

Qualitative research aims to gain more nuanced and in-depth data, in comparison to quantitative research. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) describe qualitative interview research as knowledge gained from social interaction between an interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer holds a large influence over the interview quality when it comes to asking questions that demand prior subject knowledge and good social skills. It is important for the interviewer to gain consistent control over the flow of the interview by continuously guiding the interviewee back to the main topic if it derails (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

Similarly, Widerberg (2002) states that qualitative research can be used to investigate individual qualities or aspects of a concept. Qualitative interviews are defined as a form of dialogue where a researcher attempts to gain insight into an area of interest by asking a series of leading questions. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), an interviewer's role is to ask questions, listen and interpret the participants' answers which is precisely what was implemented in this study. Widerberg (2002) further states that the quality of a qualitative interview can be influenced by the time, location, and relationship between the interviewer and interviewee at the given time. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is of utmost importance and is reflected in the data. In this study, the researcher took a

mixture of the role of an *explorer* and *participant* which are two of three different interview roles according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014). The *explorer* attempts to delve deeper into questions to understand why participants hold a particular viewpoint and it relies on having a friendship-like relationship with the participants to be able to ask sensitive questions that a stranger would have less opportunity to do. Meanwhile, the *participant* inserts themselves into the conversation by sharing and questioning utterances from both involved parties to come to a deeper understanding. A combination of these roles produced the present data at a satisfactory level. As mentioned earlier, WTC is often correlated with anxiety. Therefore, it is important to create a relationship with the participants where they feel safe and comfortable divulging their thoughts about a sensitive topic.

4.2 Choice of Language

MacIntyre et al. (1998) reports that a language change during communication can affect numerous variables that impact WTC and declares that it holds the biggest impact on EFL learners' language production. Therefore, the requirement of speaking English during the interview process was removed to avoid influencing the data too vastly. Additionally, the aim of the interview was to make the participants feel safe and comfortable in expressing their thoughts without feeling as if they were put under the spotlight of scrutiny of their English language.

4.3 Participants and Ethical Considerations

The setting was a male-dominated upper-secondary school with approximately 150 students. There was only a handful number of female students in the school. The participants in the study were either in a vocational program focused on electricity and energy or a technology program focused on design and product development. Additionally, they were taking the same English course which was English 5. In Sweden, students at the upper-secondary level have three English courses during their three-year education. English 5 is at the beginner level, followed by English 6 at intermediate level. Both are mandatory subjects. Lastly, there is English 7 which is an optional advanced level and gives extra credit. In English 5, students are expected to have a basic understanding of communication, reception, production, and interaction (Skolverket, 2022).

The process of identifying potential participants involved classroom observations over the course of 7 weeks. During this time, the researcher was able to form an adequate

understanding of which students found English difficult. Their English teacher was also available to guide the researcher in finding suitable participants to recruit. Furthermore, three steps were the primary focus during the recruiting process. The first step was to explicitly inform them about the *confidentiality* of the study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) define confidentiality as the researcher ensuring the participants that their identity will not be divulged. Secondly, the participants were informed about *informed consent* and what it entails. Informed consent, per Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), refers to the researcher explicitly explaining to the participants both the purpose of their study and how their data will be used.

Furthermore, it is a requirement that the research subjects are made aware that their participation is voluntary and that they are free to quit if they choose to. Thus, the participants in this study were instructed to read out and fill out a consent form (see Appendix A). Thirdly and most importantly, the participants were made aware that the interview would be conducted in Swedish and not English which made recruiting much easier. All the interviews were recorded in a private study room at the school and took approximately 10-15 minutes per respondent.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

After the interviews were carried out, the data was then transcribed and explored through *thematic analysis* (TA). Thompson (2022) describes TA as a method to interpret qualitative data by generating meaning in the transcriptions. Before interpreting the meaning of the data, Kieger and Varpio (2020) instruct researchers to familiarize themselves with the data through active reading. It is common to create codes when implementing TA according to Kieger and Varpio (2020) and that was applied through color-coding the discovered themes. The selection of themes for this study originated through the interview questions and the data was sectioned into color-coded themes to find patterns. The themes were as follows:

- Experience level at the school
- Program motivation
- Opinions on using English (both in school and outside)
- Classroom environment
- Teacher relationship
- Ways to increase WTC

Lastly, there was one section added to the thematic analysis which was titled “Emotions during a potentially anxiety-inducing scenario” and refers specifically to the question 9 in the interview guide.

5 Results

The results based on the thematic analysis of the collected data produced a selection of themes that are presented above. Out of the 153 students at the school, 5 participants were selected consisting of two females and three males. The respondents were in their second semester at the school and had the same English teacher. Respondents 1 and 3 were in the same vocational class. Respondents 2, 4, and 5 were in the same technology class.

Respondent	Age	Gender	Program
R1	17	F	Electricity and Energy
R2	16	F	Technology
R3	17	M	Electricity and Energy
R4	17	M	Technology
R5	16	M	Technology

5.1 Background

5.1.1 Motivation

Previous research has established a correlation between motivation and WTC (see subsection 3.1). Thus, to assess if there was a potential correlation between low motivation and a low WTC, I asked the participants to express their motivations for choosing their respective program. One of the students in the vocational program stated the following:

R1: I lived like fifteen minutes away and knew a few people that went to the school. Also, because it’s a smaller school, you get more help. And if you’re a girl, you get a *lot* of help and I know that I need help in school.

When encouraged to develop her reasoning about the gender aspect, she continued:

R1: There aren't many girls here and the teachers get like...they don't want the girls to quit.

R1 admitted that she had been made aware very early on in her admittance to the school that it lacked gender diversity and that female students were viewed as a rarity that needed to be preserved. Thus, she was motivated to choose the specific school and its vocational program due to factors of convenience and a prominent gender bias that she perceived would benefit her learning. Additionally, another student in the vocational program expressed that he chose it due to his grades:

R3: Well, the main plan was for me to apply to the technology program, but I didn't leave 9th grade with good credits, so I had to pick electricity and energy instead.

R3 expressed that he felt limited in his options due to his previous grades and chose what was available to him at the time. His first-choice option was to apply to the technology program but he did not meet the requirements needed for math. In contrast to the two vocational students, the technology students had other motivations:

R2: I like drawing and designing a lot. I was going to pick art and design, but I know it's not so good for the future, so I thought of technology as the closest.

I: So, you feel like the technology program is going to give you more...?

R2: Yes, more options in the future, jobs, and that stuff.

R2 was influenced by her environment which made it evident to her that her desire of choosing art and design would not result in realistic job opportunities post-graduation.

Similarly, R5 motivated his program choice on the premises of a social group influence:

R5: I chose it because I think it's pretty fun exploring new things. And programming and things like that. I also thought that the actual technology in itself is very fun, and my friends also chose it, so I thought yeah, I'll start too.

Therefore, to summarize, the common determinant of motivation for the vocational students was factors of convenience while the technology students were influenced by their environment when making their program choice.

5.1.2 English In School

Learners' self-perceived proficiency level in English is a factor that influences WTC. Therefore, the participants were asked to share their thoughts about using English in school and displayed a unanimous agreement on understanding the need and use of English in school as a core subject. Some respondents, such as R2 chose to reflect on their prior English experience in the school context:

R2: It's very difficult for me because I'm not used to it. I started studying English in 9th grade. I lived in Venezuela and they're not that strong at the English language. You only learned like, hello, how are you, those kinds of things. And then in 5th and 6th grade, I didn't go to school. I started studying Swedish and some math in 7th grade.

During this reflection, she also shed light on her English teacher at the time. R2 explained that a combination of her linguistic competence, the teacher's attitude, and the classroom environment negatively impacted her WTC:

R2: In English during half the semester in 8th grade, I had a teacher that didn't offer much help. I know a lot of words, but I don't know how to use them. Then I started studying with a regular class in 9th grade, but my teacher didn't do anything. It was like a playhouse. We went to class and played games and did whatever.

She further explained that their English teacher at the time showed no interest in the students and would only speak about his own life with no regard for theirs. The disappointment she expressed in her teacher and the schools' organization that failed her by keeping the teacher employed influenced her ability to develop English proficiency at the required level for her age. Similarly, R4 came to Sweden in 2018 and shared his experience with learning English:

R4: I haven't learned much English because I had to study more in Swedish, that was most important for me. Then I learned English at home, I haven't learned it in school. It's hard to learn it in school so I started studying it at home instead.

Thus, he was forced to prioritize learning Swedish over English which influenced his low proficiency level in English.

5.1.3 English Outside of School

The participants were asked about using English outside of school and whether it was something they do in their free time. The intent was to understand if the participants WTC was higher (or lower) outside the school context and why. In R1's experience, her usage is more frequent outside of school and occurs on the internet:

R1: Sometimes, like on social media. There's a lot of people who write in English on let's say, TikTok, and it leads to me reading in English. And then like if there's a word in Swedish, it can easily happen that you add an English word to the Swedish language.

She explained that this results in her combining English and Swedish when speaking. After reflecting on differences in the usage of English depending on the environment, R1 continued:

R1: I think my English is better outside of school and then when I'm in school it's like I don't know English.

I: Hmm. Why do you think that is?

R1: I don't know, it's like there's more pressure. It becomes like...it's being graded.

Similarly, R5 reflected on using English outside of Sweden:

R5: I also think that when you're in school then maybe it's more....during class you'll maybe think that you have a teacher that's grading you and it becomes more stressful. But if you're using it [English] when you're out and traveling, nobody cares.

Meanwhile, R3 uses English for entertainment purposes outside of the school context, but only within a specific social group:

R3: I use it for entertainment with my friends or brothers. They know that I don't know English so we're just messing around and stuff. I kind of just babble and even if I know I'm saying it wrong and stuff, I don't care.

Lastly, R4 expressed an instrumental motivation for using English outside of school:

R4: I played games and needed to learn English to be able to speak to the people I was playing with. They only spoke English. I had Discord [video and text communication app] too and learned how to write from there and how to translate. Then I understood what they were saying and how they write texts.

Additionally, R4 describes using English as a last-minute resort when there is no other common language available to use or as an intentional tool for communication in specific contexts, as exemplified above.

5.1.4 Classroom Environment

When asked about their perception of the classroom environment during their English classes, the majority stated that they like it and have positive opinions of the group as a whole.

However, one respondent, R2, explained the following:

R2: If I'm being honest, I feel like an outsider. You know, they're so good at English and they talk and stuff. There's only a few that don't know English, for example my friend Bella, that's like me. She hasn't studied English before, so she doesn't know it either.

Similarly, R3 admitted that his environment influences his willingness to communicate:

R3: Well...my English isn't that good, so I refuse to like, talk. I'd rather be quiet than say something wrong.

I: But what would happen if you said something wrong?

R3: It would be fun for everyone else.

I: Oh okay. So, you feel like you'd rather be quiet to avoid an embarrassing situation?

R3: Yeah exactly.

5.1.5 Teacher Influence

To gauge the teacher's influence on the participants' WTC, they were instructed to divulge their interpersonal relationship with their English teacher. 4 out of 5 respondents felt satisfied with their relationship with their teacher. They were pleased with how pedagogical, helpful, and engaging he is. R1 reflected on her experience with different types of teachers in comparison to her current one:

R1: He'll come and help you if you need any help with English. He's there to teach people and not just there for the money. [...] He will do different tasks and go through all of them. He explains in Swedish if we don't understand it in English. He tries to make sure that we've all understood the instructions.

Meanwhile, R3 expressed a desire to have a closer bond with his teachers:

R3: Well...for me, I like having my teachers as friends because it becomes much easier.

When asked to elaborate on what exactly is easier for him, and if it pertains to his learning, R3 continued:

R3: Like when you have a teacher that you can like, joke around with. Not always but when the opportunity presents itself...to like, get more into the relationship so that you don't hold anything against the teacher.

Lastly, he clarified that holding something against the teacher is related to a specific perception of teachers depending on the existing teacher-student relationship:

R3: I mean like, have them as friends instead of teachers that you're scared of or don't want to fail in front of.

R3 finished his reflection by stating that students mirror the teacher's behavior. Thus, if there is a friendly approach coming from the teacher, it will be reflected back by the students.

5.2 Willingness to Communicate

The following sections are related to the interview questions that investigate willingness to communicate in the school context.

5.2.1 Classroom Scenario

The participants were introduced to a specific scenario where their English teacher randomly called upon them in front of the entire class and encouraged them to speak English without any forewarning. Their responses included a collective feeling of unease and passiveness:

R1: Ehh. No, I don't like that. If you ask a question, then it's like this: if I didn't raise my hand then I don't want the teacher requesting me to answer because obviously I don't want to answer or I don't know the answer.

R2: I wouldn't say anything and I'd just stand there because I have a bit of a stage fright. I panic when I have to speak in front of others and it's even more difficult when it's in a language that you don't know that well.

Additionally, the respondents expressed specific emotions that could occur during that scenario:

R2: It would be embarrassing, and you would feel a bit stupid in this way. You don't know what to say and feel like you're not that good.

R3: It would've been embarrassing in some way. That you don't know the language and then you have to speak in front of everyone.

Furthermore, R5 explains that it would be easier if he could prepare what to say prior to the teacher calling on him, to ensure language accuracy:

R5: It's mostly when you're speaking English that you're scared to say certain words wrong or that there's words that you won't be able to know. And that can be a little....

I: Difficult and stressful?

R5: Yeah exactly.

He added that this particular scenario has happened to him several times and made things difficult for him because he didn't know what to say or how to pronounce words correctly. When asked if that caused him to become irritated with the teacher R5 stated that it indeed caused frustration within him due to the feeling of being singled out in the classroom. As if the teacher carried a nefarious intent with that choice.

5.2.2 Increase WTC

When asked what would encourage them to speak in their English classes, as opposed to prompting them to, they replied with a few requirements:

R1: When we're having presentations, I'd want it in smaller groups or just doing it in front of the teacher. That there are options. Because it's specifically presentations that are difficult regardless of the subject.

R5 continued with the importance of preparation and would prefer having topic ideas or themes when being encouraged to speak, to avoid being put in a situation where he is forced to produce information from nothing. In terms of linguistic competence R3 stated its importance:

R3: Learning more English maybe. Then I'd know more about the language and can speak more.

He agreed that smaller groups would influence his speech positively, specifically if the group consisted of his friends. In contrast, R2 stated that a lack of a social group in the class influenced her WTC:

R2: I don't know but I think if I had more friends, it would be a little more easier to speak to them. Like in 9th grade I had some issues with speaking in front of others, but I had my friends and we talked. And we three were bad but we just talked.

She continued, reflecting on differences in speech fluency:

R2: It's difficult if you're on one level and someone else is on a higher level. It's difficult to talk.

5.2.3 Swedish and English WTC

In order to investigate if a low or high WTC is tied to a specific subject, the participants were asked if they noticed a difference in using another school-related language other than English. Due to contextual reasons, the language that came to mind for the respondents was Swedish:

R1: Yes, because I know Swedish fluently it is much easier to know what I want to say. Sentences are grammatically correct. But I have to think twice in English and be like okay, what does this word mean? And if I can't say that word in English, I'll say it in Swedish instead. So, I have to think more in English.

R4: I'm more comfortable with Swedish because I know more Swedish than English. I can speak without having to memorize it.

R5 was asked if he feels that the stress that he experiences about language accuracy in English, also applies in Swedish and stated that it is more prevalent in English. Meanwhile, R2 expressed that she struggles with both languages:

R2: You mean in Swedish? It's also difficult because I'm not used to it. I can't express myself the way I want to.

In conclusion, most of the respondents felt more comfortable speaking Swedish in school in comparison to English.

6 Discussion

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of factors influencing WTC from a learners' perspective and ways of increasing their WTC. The findings will be discussed in the two subheadings below, referencing each research question.

6.1 Variables That Influence WTC

In terms of answering research question 1: which variables (individual, situational, or dynamic) influence the language production of EFL learners with low WTC, the findings show that all the respondents had a low self-perceived linguistic competence in the school context which hindered their WTC in the EFL classroom. Many of the respondents believed that their prior background in English proficiency, or rather their lack of it, influenced their desire to use the language in the classroom. Baran-Łucarz (2014) reported similar findings where the learners' perception of their linguistic competence influenced the degree of their WTC. This suggests that learners' perception of their language skills can result in an unwillingness to communicate in the school context.

Moreover, the findings show that low linguistic competence did not prevent them from communicating in English outside of school. As one respondent stated, there is an ever-present feeling of being graded in school which can cause learners to feel the need to have a correct language and a suitable vocabulary. This is supported in Macintyre et al., (2011) where learners were reluctant to speak if they believed that the teacher would judge their performance at any given time. The findings of this study suggest that EFL learners are more encouraged to engage in oral discourse outside of the school environment because of a more relaxed perception that is free of assessment. Furthermore, the EFL learners who are quiet during their English lessons but are willing to speak English outside of school are influenced by their social groups. Several of the respondents felt more comfortable using English with friends that they knew would not care if they said something wrong or judge them, which encouraged their speech production outside of school. Thus, the school environment itself and the classmates inside it can cause a hesitance to speak due to the feeling of inferiority. Källmark (2023) had similar findings where learners felt less secure in social groups that were unfamiliar to them which lowered their WTC.

The findings included a classroom scenario used to observe the respondents' perspective on a potentially fearful experience and indicated that the choices teachers make in the classroom highly influence the students' WTC. Similarly, Grant (2022) reported that

teachers implementing random name-calling as a strategy to encourage speech, can cause anxiety for learners and hinder their WTC. This suggests that individual variables of anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration with the teacher are responses that can cause low WTC. Moreover, exposing learners to anxiety-inducing scenarios causes them to internalize negative emotions regarding their language proficiency and hinders their development. As one respondent stated, the panic she experiences when she speaks in front of others is most likely caused by prior experiences in the school context.

Lastly, the most interesting aspect of the results regarding teacher influence is the learners' perspective of a good teacher. A bad teacher is someone who shows no regard for enhancing their language development or teaching them beyond giving instructions to follow. A good teacher, however, is someone who shows that they care by engaging with the students and adapting their lessons to facilitate learning. Additionally, one respondent valued having a close bond with their teacher that is on a friendship level and less on a teacher-student level. Zarrinabadi (2014) also reported that students feel more encouraged to speak when the teacher displays a supportive attitude. This suggests that learners' WTC is higher when the student perception of the teacher is positive. Thus, the teacher's influence is a situational variable that varies depending on the context and dynamics within the classroom environment.

Another interesting finding is the differentiation between respondents in the vocational program compared to those in the technology program which is evident in their motivations. The vocational program students motivated their program choice with convenience or as a simple last option. Specifically, the female respondent in the vocational program mentioned that she chose the school and its program due to the benefits she perceived female students gain at the school. Thus, a conclusion can be made that the motivation for learning may not be that high for certain female students if they believe they can get away with doing the bare minimum or getting more chances to succeed than their male counterparts. In contrast, the technology program respondents were motivated by individual and situational factors, indicating that their motivation for learning could be higher than the vocational students. These findings are not represented in previous research.

6.2 Ways of Increasing EFL WTC

In terms of answering research question 2: how can EFL learners with low WTC be encouraged to speak more, the findings show that the answer will continuously vary depending on the learner. Some respondents prefer having oral assignments in smaller groups

or alone, with the teacher as the audience to help them feel more comfortable and thus, increase their WTC. Others value preparation time and topic ideas to support their WTC. Zarrianbadi (2014) reported that topic choice was an influence on learners' WTC. Meanwhile, some learners believe that simply learning more English would help increase their WTC. As evident in the findings, the answers vary. This is reflected in MacIntyre et al. (2011) where the ambivalence in the respondents' answers could not be predicted or replicated and suggest that individual matters of WTC occur in a dynamic process.

7 Conclusion & Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study indicate that EFL learners in the Swedish context perceive linguistic competence, classroom environment, assessment, and teachers as an influence on their WTC. In particular, the distinction between EFL learners' perception and usage of English in and outside of school offers valuable insight into the influence of assessment. Learners are reluctant to make errors that may influence the teachers' perception of them, and their grades or result in them being ridiculed by their peers. Additionally, the role of teachers in the EFL classroom remains highly influential and pertains specifically to teacher attitudes and interpersonal relationships with the students. EFL learners' WTC is positively influenced by strong interpersonal relationships. However, if a teacher completely disregards their students and their development, it unsurprisingly results in a negative impact on their WTC.

As evident with a selection of respondents, a low linguistic competence in English that prevented WTC was felt to be the consequence of prior inadequate EFL teachers. Thus, teachers need to make an active effort into creating strong interpersonal relationships and creating a healthy dialogue with their students on the assessment that makes them acutely aware of when and where they will be assessed. Furthermore, teachers hold the required tools to create a classroom environment where making errors in oral production can be viewed to further develop language proficiency and thus, increase WTC.

7.1 Research Limitations

Based on the researcher's prior observations during the respondents' English classes, it became evident that a few of the students' answers did not align with their behavior in class. The common determinant among these respondents was a desire to uphold a language identity that was not supported by their language proficiency. Specifically, a gender dynamic may have been an influence as this group of respondents were male and the interviewer was

female. Thus, the research limitation, in this case, pertains to the gender influence between the interviewer and respondent which appears to be a prevalent influence on data results in the qualitative field of research, according to Herod (1993). Additionally, the location of the study was at a male-dominated upper secondary school which made the selection of participants limited in terms of gender variety. Therefore, there was an intentional choice to recruit available participants that were of the female gender and investigate if a male-dominated environment potentially influenced their WTC. Moreover, the size of the school made it difficult to conduct a mixed method and collect quantitative results, which was the original intent.

Lastly, the interviews were recorded in the last two days of the researcher's teacher trainee period which resulted in a relatively hasty selection of participants respondents. Moreover, a selection of the interviews occurred during time restraints and felt rushed, which may influence the results. Lastly, another limitation was conducting the interviews in Swedish and translating them into English. As with many languages, certain phrases are tied to a specific context that cannot be translated accurately into another language. That was the case here which may have resulted in a loss of data.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

In regard to future research, the distinction between different types of anxiety and the influence they have on EFL WTC needs to be established as the lines between anxiety types are blurred. Furthermore, the process of incorporating a dynamic viewpoint into the creation of EFL WTC is needed. This is primarily due to prior research continuously viewing factors that influence WTC as isolated occurrences instead of existing in a dynamic process that continuously varies and is not predetermined.

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Appendix A– Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study about EFL students' perspectives on the English language and its usage. The study aims to investigate different factors that can influence EFL learners' desire to speak English. The data will be collected through recorded interviews, and you will be instructed to answer a selection of questions. The interview should take approximately 15-20 minutes.

All the collected data will be kept confidential and anonymous. Your personal information will not be shared with any other individual or organization without your explicit consent. Furthermore, your participation in the study is fully voluntary and you can choose to remove yourself at any time without giving an explanation.

I have read and understood the above information and given my voluntary consent to participate in this study:

Name _____

Date & district _____

Appendix B – Interview Guide

1. How old are you?
2. What program are you currently studying?
3. How long have you been at the school?
4. How did you go about choosing your major?
5. How do you feel about using English in school?
6. How do you feel about using English outside of school?
7. Can you describe the classroom dynamic/environment in your English classes?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your English teacher?
9. If your English teacher randomly calls on you in front of everyone and encourages you to speak English, how would that make you feel? Please develop your answer.
10. What would encourage you to be more comfortable speaking in your English classes?
11. How do you feel when you have to speak in other subjects other than English?