

## **The Impact of Content and Context on International Teaching Assistants' Willingness to Communicate in the Language Classroom**

**Lily K.L. Compton**  
Iowa State University  
<lilycompton@yahoo.com>

### **Abstract**

Past studies have identified the impact of situational and enduring variables on second language (L2) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the L2. This qualitative study triangulates data from two classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with four students and class instructor, and personal experiences including communication with peers to examine the impact of content and context on four international teaching assistants' (ITAs') WTC in their language class. Results suggest that ITAs are more willing to communicate when there is shared knowledge of field-specific content or if they feel confident with their L2 ability. Cultural factors and international posture were also important factors that contributed to the level of ITAs' WTC.

### **Introduction**

International graduate students who attend universities in the United States often seek teaching positions to fund their studies as well as to expand their learning experience. Because these international students have to teach undergraduates who are mostly native speakers of English, their employers need assurance that they have the linguistic competence to communicate the subject matter effectively during classes, recitations, labs, and other interactions with the undergraduates. These international students are often tested for their oral proficiency and general teaching skills to ensure that they are able handle their duties as teaching assistants. Most universities offer resources such as language courses to help those who fail to fulfill the language requirements. In these language courses, the international students attempt to improve their oral proficiency and general teaching skills so they can be certified as international teaching assistants (ITAs).

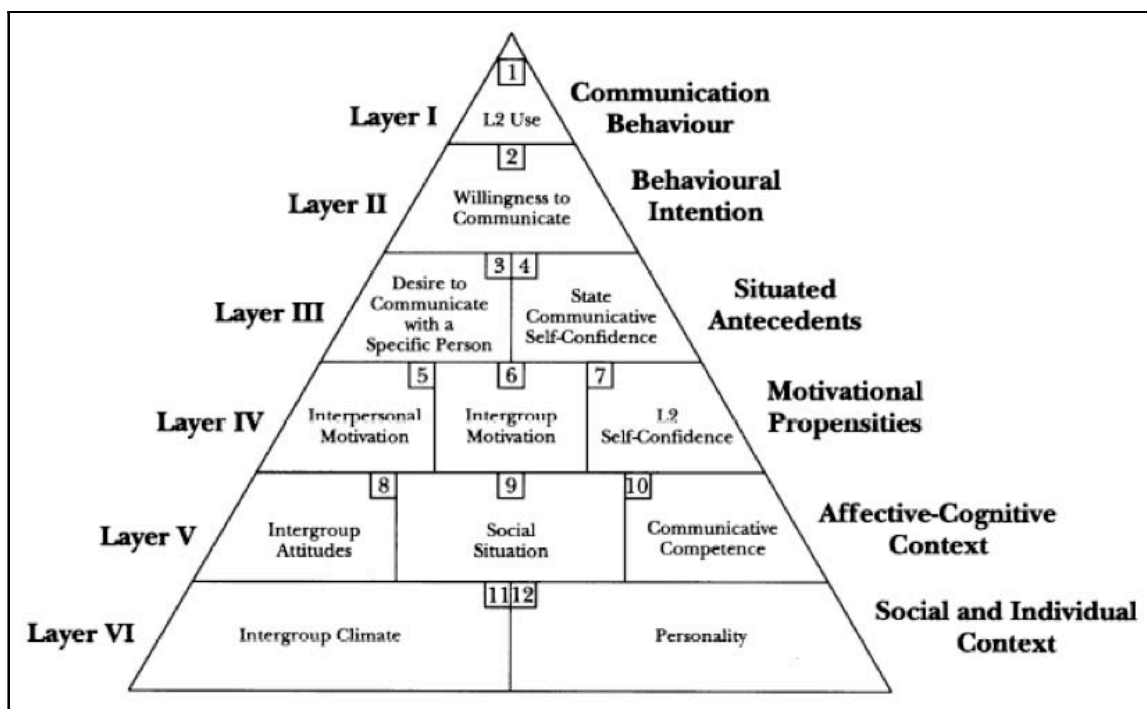
My personal experiences as an instructor for a language course geared towards ITAs at a US university have revealed that some of the ITAs are more willing than others to participate and utilize opportunities to communicate in the classroom. Since this language course's focus is to help ITAs improve their oral skills, willingness to

communicate (WTC) is imperative because the students need to practice in order to improve. As MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) assert, "The ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them" (p. 547). This is especially true for language courses designed to improve ITAs' oral skills. Despite the obvious objective for these language courses, ITAs' WTC in the classroom vary considerably.

This qualitative study employs a case study approach to investigate the variables that affect four ITAs' WTC in a English as a Second Language (ESL) class emphasizing oral skills at a large Midwest university. The theory of situated learning (Hansman & Wilson, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Stein, 1998) and the model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998) were selected as theoretical "lens to guide the researcher as to what issues are important to examine" (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, the selected theory and model provided an overview of possible variables that affected WTC and these possible variables became a starting point to guide the analysis of why the ITAs in this case study ITAs chose to communicate or avoid communication in the language classroom which was meant to help them improve their oral skills. Themes that did not match the listed variables could then be used to provide a better understanding of ITAs in the USA.

### **Willingness To Communicate**

McCroskey and Baer (1985) first introduced the construct of WTC as the intention to initiate communication when given the opportunity. This reference however was made for native language use. MacIntyre et al. (1998) later adapted this construct to the second language (L2) situation and developed a heuristic model in an attempt to account for the variables that influence L2 learners' WTC. Their model in Figure 1 identified three layers of situational influences (Layers I-III) and three layers of enduring influences (Layers IV-VI) that are organized in a pyramid to reflect the "immediacy of some factors and the relatively distal influence of others" (p. 546).



**Figure 1. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC**  
(Source: MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998, p. 547)

The authors describe the situational variables in Layers I-III as transient and dependent on the given moment and context. They argue that WTC (Layer II) is a precursor to the actual act of communicating in the L2 (Layer I) but the act itself is not necessary to reflect WTC. For instance, students who raise their hands to volunteer their responses have displayed their WTC even if they were not called upon. They identify two immediate precursors of WTC in Layer III, which are (a) the desire to communicate with a specific person and (b) state self-confidence. Here, they say that people are more willing to communicate with others who are "physically nearby, encountered frequently, physically attractive . . . and similar in a variety of ways" and if they feel confident enough at that particular moment to communicate effectively (MacIntyre et al., 1998, pp. 548-549).

While situational variables are seen as more temporary and context dependent, the enduring variables in Layers IV-VI are considered more stable and predictable in almost any situation. Motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context, social and individual context are used to explain why one person would choose to speak while another would avoid communication in similar situations. MacIntyre and colleagues (1998) list three types of motivational propensities that influence the WTC, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Description of motivational propensities**

<b>Motivational Propensities</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interpersonal motivation	Control	Motivation for communication is to exercise social role and maintain control over a certain task
	Affiliation	Motivation for communication is to establish a relationship with others
Inter-group motivation	Control	Motivation for communication is to maintain and reinforce social positions in a group setting
	Affiliation	Motivation for communication is to establish or maintain rapport with members in a group
L2 confidence	Competence	L2 confidence increases if mastery of L2 skills is high and vice versa
	Anxiety	L2 confidence decreases if one experiences high levels of discomfort when using L2 and vice versa

In addition to motivation and L2 confidence, MacIntyre et al. also describe the affective-cognitive variables that can affect the WTC. The affective variables are seen as remote to the specific learning and communication context and relate more to the accumulated history of the individual, specifically the general attitude and motives. High levels of integrativeness and motivation to learn the L2 for enjoyment and satisfaction can promote the positive attitude towards the L2 community while a fear of assimilation can threaten the quality of the relationship between the learner and the L2 community. Additionally, the WTC is also affected by the familiarity of the social context, for example, topic and register, and the different levels of communicative competence including linguistic, discourse, and sociocultural competence.

Finally, MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model describes the influences of the society and the individual. They explain that L2 societies with the relative socioeconomic power have a high ethnolinguistic vitality that would encourage the use of the L2. Adaptation to the host culture would likely correspond with the benefits including social acceptance and economic advancement. In terms of the individual differences, they believe that the "Big Five" traits, that is, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (Goldberg, 1993; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) contribute to the motivation for language learning and/or WTC. Additionally, they note that individual differences can also be explained in broader societal terms in that certain groups may have similar traits. For example, they cite Aida (1994) who says that "the average American learner is likely to be more extraverted than the average Japanese learner" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 558.)

While some would argue that personality traits play a major role in affecting the differences in level of WTC, Wen and Clément (2003) argue that cultural factors are more likely the reason, particularly when it comes to Asian language learners. In their study, they claim that Chinese ESL learners are likely to be regarded as reticent

or lacking in WTC because their cultural values have shaped their approach to learning. They explain that the Chinese philosophy and culture that is deeply rooted in Confucianism place high emphasis on collectivism over individualism. As such, Chinese learners often "evaluate their own self in relation to others" to maintain group cohesiveness (p. 20). Tziner (1982) argues that the Chinese perception of group cohesiveness differs from the Western perception because the former is based on the successful completion of tasks and satisfaction of achieving group goals while the latter is based on emotional satisfaction of group participation and interpersonal relationships and attractions.

Yashima (2002) and Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) add another dimension to the individual differences with their concept of "international posture." Examples of this inclination include "willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and . . . openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures" (Yashima, 2002, p. 57). They claim that in contexts where there is minimal contact with native speakers of the L2, attitudes toward the L2 culture are often promoted through education and exposure to media. Yashima et al. (2004) finds that for Japanese ESL learners, WTC is higher for those who are interested in "international affairs, occupations, and activities" (p. 141). In other words, L2 learners who do not have much contact with native speakers may still display high WTC if they have interest or plans to enter the L2 community for reasons such as work, study, or travel.

These studies have identified many variables that can influence L2 learners' WTC in the language classroom. While MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model provides an in-depth look at the situational and enduring influences on WTC, the other studies show that other factors need to be considered when dealing with different ESL contexts, suggesting the need to further explore the other possible factors that influence L2 learners' WTC, particularly in the context of ITAs in US universities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws from the theory of situated learning (Hansman & Wilson, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Stein, 1998) or situated cognition (Altalib, 2002) as a starting point to explain the different factors affecting ITAs' WTC in their ESL classroom. These authors argue that learning is shaped not only by the content but also the context, community, and participation. Because language learning, particularly the learning of oral skills involves communication with other speakers, this theory is useful to shed light on how learners are affected by these factors. Specifically, this theory is used as a framework to focus on understanding the impact of the content and context on the ITAs' WTC in their ESL classroom. In order to provide thick descriptions and insightful interpretations in qualitative research (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002), only the first two factors--content and context--will be explored in detail. The decision to leave out the other two factors (community and participation) is based on the scope of the study and does not reflect the researcher's view of which factors are regarded as most important.

The important principle behind this theory is to situate the learner in the center of the instructional process. Therefore, the content should relate to the needs of learners in their daily experiences (Choi & Hannafin, 1995; Stein, 1998). If the knowledge presented is authentic and meaningful to the learners, the level of WTC is likely to be

high, and learners will be engaged in the learning process. This study investigates the learners' view of the content and the impact it has on learners' WTC.

Hansman & Wilson (2002) point out that learning cannot occur in isolation. This is especially true for language classrooms that emphasize oral communication. As such, we need to understand the learning context, which includes not only the learners but also their socio-cultural backgrounds. Some examples of the socio-cultural issues that need to be addressed include "notions of power relationships, politics, competing priorities, the learner's interaction with the values, norms, culture of a community, organization, or family" (Courtney, Speck, & Holtorf, 1996, cited in Stein, 1998, p. 3). These socio-cultural issues are particularly relevant in this study because it is situated in a context filled with students from diverse backgrounds.

Through an examination of the students' views and experiences in this language classroom, this study shows how situated learning is related to learners' WTC. The central purpose of this study is to understand how the content and context affect the ITAs' WTC and participation in the classroom. Using the situated learning theory, the following questions were developed to guide the data analysis and interpretation:

- What impact does the content have on the ITAs' WTC in the language classroom?
- What impact does the context have on the ITAs' WTC in the language classroom?

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative case-study approach to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the factors that influence learners' willingness to communicate in a language classroom (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Different data collection strategies were used including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and a semi-structured interview with the class instructor. Personal communication with peers from backgrounds similar to the participants' (for example, Ukraine, Latvia, and China) and personal experiences as both an ITA and a past instructor of a similar language course were used to triangulate the data and to present interpretations with thick descriptions and clear illustrations of the emerging themes.

## **Context and Participants**

This study was conducted in an English course for International Teaching Assistants at a large US Midwestern university. More than half of the class of 16 students were from India and China, while the rest were from other countries, including Indonesia, Ukraine, and Colombia. Four ITAs, two female Chinese students and two male students from Ukraine and Colombia respectively, volunteered for the study. Table 2 provides an overview of the four students.[1] The four students were ITAs enrolled in an ESL course emphasizing teaching skills and cross-cultural issues, as well as specific aspects of oral skills, such as pronunciation. The course was the most advanced level ESL course offered to ITAs and was geared towards ITAs who had not achieved the level of certification required to teach a course, but who were proficient enough to lead recitations and labs. These ITAs do not have to retake the tests of

spoken proficiency and teaching ability administered by the university's Graduate College if they are seen to be making satisfactory progress throughout the semester. In other words, these ITAs were proficient ESL speakers, but still had a few areas that needed improvement such as pronunciation, cultural references and idioms, and teaching skills including handling questions, explaining concepts, and organizing presentations.

Of the four participants, Hans appeared to be most proficient as an ESL speaker, while Natalie seemed to be the least proficient. Victor and Erin, on the other hand, appeared to be equally proficient based on the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and fluency of their speech during the interviews and class observations. My perception of the participants' overall proficiency was confirmed by the instructor. In particular, Natalie, who was regarded as least proficient among the four, was the only one who had taken a lower-level ESL course as an ITA before her enrollment in the intermediate ESL course.

**Table 2. Overview of case study participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Victor</b>	<b>Hans</b>	<b>Erin</b>	<b>Natalie</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	Ukrainian	Colombian	Chinese	Chinese
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Russian	Hispanic	Chinese	Chinese
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Male	Female	Female
<b>Age</b>	22	26	25	26
<b>First language</b>	Russian	Spanish	Mandarin	Mandarin
<b>Years as an ESL learner</b>	13-14 years	16 years	13 years	14 years
<b>Semesters enrolled in the university</b>	1	1	1	5
<b>Program/Major</b>	Applied Math	Geology	Economics	Physics
<b>Semesters as a teaching assistant</b>	1	1	1	3
<b>Number of "ESL for ITAs" courses taken</b>	1	1	1	2

Activities for the course included mini-presentations in groups and presentations to the whole class. Students who had given their presentations were also required to address any questions posed by their peers. While the presentations were required for all students, posing questions was voluntary. Thus, any student questions were viewed as evidence of WTC. The students and their instructor used the recordings of these presentations for evaluations during individual conferences. Other tasks included discussions of cultural issues, strategies for teaching, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises in which the students were encouraged to participate and express their views or questions.

The class instructor also agreed to participate in this study. She was a Caucasian woman from the USA who had lived in and traveled frequently to South America. Her teaching experience included 13 years of ESL and 14 semesters (16 sections) of ESL courses for ITAs at this university. Her experiences in South America also proved to



be particularly useful in understanding the Colombian socio-cultural implications on Hans' WTC.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected through two classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the four participants and their class instructor. The two classroom observations were conducted on consecutive class sessions within the same week--the twelfth of a sixteen-week semester. Each observation was conducted on the first 60 minutes of the 90-minute class period.[2] I sat in a corner at the back of the classroom to make my presence less noticeable. During the first observation, I took the opportunity to leave when the instructor proceeded to show the students some video clips, while in the second observation, I left when the students were paired up to practice questioning strategies.

For the first observation, the instructor introduced me to the class and I explained my research interest before proceeding to hand out the informed consent forms.[3] Since I did not know the names of the students or which students would volunteer to be my participants, I used this observation to familiarize myself to the situation and noted general impressions of the students, for example, which students appeared to participate actively and the interactions among the students and between the students and the instructor. I made careful notations of their physical appearances (for example, "curly hair male" or "short hair European-looking male with glasses") to help me identify which student I was referring to. No electronic devices were used to record the observations. Careful and descriptive written notes and sketches of the group layout were taken. While students worked in groups, I requested information from the instructor to match the notes and sketches, such as the ITAs' names, background, and general impressions, which helped to complement my observation notes.

After the second observation, I debated whether to schedule individual interviews or focus-group interviews. I decided against a focus-group interview because I felt it would be difficult to keep track of the participants' comments. I had initially planned to schedule pair interviews because of my participants' background and my impressions of their personality. There were two female Chinese participants, so I thought that the participants would have similar cultural influences. Additionally, I was concerned that the female participants might be shyer than the male participants who appeared to be quite confident and extroverted in class. By interviewing in pairs, I hoped that the female students would be more comfortable because of support from each other. Also, this arrangement would have allowed me to make observations based on gender differences.

In the end, due to scheduling conflicts, there were four individual interviews over a period of four days. The interviews were semi-structured with similar starting topics focusing on the student participants' ESL experiences in their native country and their decision to study in the USA. Open-ended questions were used to probe for further details based on responses, while a list of questions was used as a guide to cover some of the major topics such as perceived language competence, perceived performance in class, etc. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted either in a conference room or a quiet corner in the library. The interviews were conducted in English since it was the only common language. I also interviewed



the instructor in her office during the same week and the interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed during the following week. Follow-up questions for all the participants were sent through e-mail. Other questions posed during the interviews were aimed at getting a deeper understanding of the students' experiences, so they varied depending on the students' responses.

## **Data Analysis**

Preliminary analysis of the data was performed immediately after the interview sessions (by writing down thoughts or impressions of the participants). I tried to summarize the experience by identifying some main ideas. I shared my initial findings and questions with some of my peers who provided some insights to my findings and posed some questions which I then used as follow-up questions. For instance, my personal communication with a well-traveled Fulbright master student from Latvia and a doctoral candidate from Ukraine provided insights on the competitiveness and difficulty in applying to study in the USA, as well as the level of determination and ambition needed for any applicant. Additionally, they provided helpful details such as the typical background of a Ukrainian student and the socio-cultural impact on language learning styles. This process was particularly relevant for the Ukrainian participant. Helpful insights were also gathered through personal communication with a doctoral student from China who either confirmed or provided additional explanations to my observations and analysis of data relating to the two Chinese participants while questions relating to socio-cultural issues of South America were posed to the class instructor since she had an extensive personal experience with that culture.

I conducted open coding on the interview transcripts and observation notes. Using significant ideas from phrases, sentences, or paragraphs, I coded the data with code words that represented those ideas. Examples of the code words were ambition, culture, and topics. I then attempted to group these code words around the two key elements in the theoretical framework, namely content and context. I then attempted to link those key elements with variables from MacIntyre, et al.'s (1998) heuristic model of WTC. (See Figure 1.) In cases where the code words could not be related to a specific variable from the heuristic model, a new variable was then identified using other related studies as a guide.

The data were triangulated using the three main data sources: observation notes, interview data from the students, and interview data from the instructor. To ensure trustworthiness, coding notes were shared with peers with backgrounds similar to the participants', resulting in insightful feedback that guided my interpretations. Finally, I shared the emerging themes with the participants, and encouraged them to provide me feedback.

## **The Researcher and the Research Context**

This research context is not new to me for several reasons. First of all, I am an international student at the same university and was an ITA for two years. However, one main difference between my situation and my participants is that I never took the ESL course for ITAs, as I was certified after my first attempt at the tests of oral

proficiency and teaching ability. I also had the opportunity to be an instructor of one of the lower level ESL courses for ITAs for two semesters. My experiences as an ITA and a course instructor for a similar ESL course provided me with certain insights into the research context. In fact, it was through those experiences that I was able to notice the varying degrees of WTC among ITAs in these language courses. Reflexivity was crucial because my experiences had created many preconceived notions about the participants' situation and the research context (Esterberg, 2002).

Additionally, as an ethnically female Chinese student, I might appear to share cultural values or norms with the two Chinese female participants. But because I come from a different Asian country, I felt it would be presumptuous to assume that I understood them and their experiences. Furthermore, my educational background was different because my experience at this university was not my first study abroad experience. Since I had completed my undergraduate degree in a college in England, I was familiar with the academic culture of western institutions of higher learning that emphasized active class participation. Moreover, I grew up learning English as my first language even though I was considered a non-native speaker of English, based on my nationality. Therefore, I had to examine my thoughts and interpretations to make sure that I did not assume to understand the experiences of the two Chinese participants. It was also possible that my Chinese participants assumed that I understood their socio-cultural background because they identified with me as a Chinese ITA. As a result, I felt that my interviews with these Chinese students were less fluid than with the other two participants and found myself asking a lot of clarification questions that almost seemed leading at times.

## **Results**

To address the research questions, I organized the findings into two major themes as outlined in my theoretical framework: content and context. I use these themes to understand the factors that influence my participants' WTC in the language classroom. The data analysis shows that content and context are important factors in encouraging or preventing the participants from communicating in class. Shared topical knowledge, international posture, and cultural factors, in particular, were identified as three variables not included in the MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model that affected the participants' WTC.

### **The Impact of Content on Willingness to Communicate**

The content of the course was clearly linked to the participants' daily experiences as ITAs and as graduate students. Mini-presentations and large-class presentations were based on topics in the participants' respective fields so they not only practiced pronunciation of vocabulary from their fields but also their presentation skills. Moreover, the instructor assigned each student a turn to present so all students had a chance to speak. In terms of WTC, I focused on when the learners actually communicate when they had the choice to participate or not to participate. During my observations, I noticed that the most obvious examples were seen during the question-answer sessions following the mini- presentations or when the instructor asked open-ended questions to the whole class.

Because the students came from different fields of study, the instructor divided them

into groups with similar backgrounds. However, she was only able to accomplish this goal with two groups: (a) biochemistry - chemistry and (b) mathematics - physics. These two groups each had four members. The third group, however, consisted of four members from three different fields: economics, geology, and computer sciences. Because the content of the presentations in the third group varied considerably, the learners' WTC was affected. Group members did not have enough knowledge about a topic; therefore, they were less likely to ask questions because they did not know what to ask. (Except Hans, a geology major--his situation will be explained later in this section). Meanwhile, the biochemistry-chemistry group appeared to be "the most active during the mini-presentations" not only with "questions and comments" but also "jokes as laughter could be heard periodically" (Class Observation 1, November 7, 2005). This again suggested the importance of having shared knowledge to promote learners' WTC.

The situation was the same during large-class presentations. This is true for Erin, who said that her participation during presentations sometimes depended on her knowledge of the content:

*I volunteer to participate but there is only one student from Economics background and most of them are from Sciences background. So when the topic is about Sciences, I couldn't participate. (Erin, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

Erin added that she also responded to open-ended questions when it related to her background knowledge:

*[If she [the instructor] asks, "Do you have . . . in Chinese?" then I'll answer, "Yes, we have . . . in Chinese." (Erin, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

Hans shared the same sentiments when he expressed his inability to participate in discussion on statistics. However, he appeared to be very active, if not the most active participant during my classroom observation. Even though he was the only student from geology, he still attempted to ask questions and share his thoughts relating to other fields. Again, the content was a big factor in his WTC. He explained:

*We don't have a 4-year university study [in Geology]. We just have to study the career. And then you have to take a lot of classes with engineers and things like that so we have to take 3 Calculus, 3 Chemistry, 3 Physics, and that is the reason, in the end, we use tools from every sciences, so I kind of know a little bit of topics from what they are talking in class. So it is easy to give my opinion. (Hans, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

Stacy believed that in general, the content had a large impact on the learners' WTC, because a shared knowledge of the content allowed learners to participate better:

*Generally, I see more animated involvement and more details when they share that background . . . . And it does not work as well when they don't have the same background. Sometimes the miscellaneous group is related enough that they do just fine but sometimes they end up with someone*

*from architecture, somebody from math, so that can be problematic.*  
(Stacy, Interview, November 20, 2005.)

In this classroom, the language content was not as large a factor as field-specific knowledge because the learners were more or less at the same level of ESL proficiency, and the knowledge was considered shared since they are learning the same L2. Natalie, for example, shared that she was less hesitant to ask questions related to the language compared to field-specific knowledge:

*When I have questions, I ask Stacy in class. I'm comfortable with that because it's just language, not quantum mechanics . . .* (Natalie, Interview, November 21, 2005.)

In sum, learners were more likely to volunteer communication when they felt they had something meaningful to ask; this WTC is dependent on both the language and field-specific knowledge.

### **The Impact of Context on Willingness to Communicate**

To understand the impact of context on learners' WTC, I examined the socio-cultural background of the learners. All four participants shared unique circumstances that affected the values and beliefs brought to the context. However, further analysis showed three common findings: (a) international posture, (b) L2 confidence and (c) culture.

#### **A. International posture**

Although it can be argued that all the students in this class displayed international posture based on the fact that they had chosen to attend a foreign university, some learners appeared to be more "internationally oriented" (Yashima, et al., 2004) than others. For instance, the two male students expressed higher international posture compared to the female participants. Both male participants displayed high levels of international posture in terms of career and study choices. Hans, for example, acknowledged that there were many brilliant geologists in his country but because they did not speak a L2, they are limited in terms of professional advancement since Colombia only has "two masters program in two universities and one PhD in Geo-Physics," which is not a preferred field. Hans recognized that his ability to speak a L2 had opened up educational opportunities that would help him to achieve his goal of being "THE geo-chemist" rather than "just another geo-chemist." This ambition drove him to excel not only in his program of study but also in his L2 proficiency which motivated him to be an active learner with a high level of WTC in the ESL class.

Victor's ambition was reflected differently. He described how he successfully participated during the previous summer in the Summer of Code program sponsored by Google (<http://code.google.com/summerofcode.html>). His accomplishment in the field of computer science and his current studies in applied mathematics motivate him to consider a future career in research after he completes his PhD:

*I have my degree and my major is in Applied Math, but I spent some time as a geek, you know, and Google even paid me money for this, and they think that I'm pretty high level as a computer science, so maybe I would like to switch somewhere to research in the future. (Victor, Interview, November 16, 2005.)*

He also added that studying abroad had been a major goal for sometime and that he chose the USA because of his sister's positive experience as an international student in the USA. The desire to study abroad, particularly in the USA, requires considerable effort and motivation. A conversation with two of my Eastern European peers confirmed this:

*[O]nly the very best students [from Eastern Europe] make it to universities in the US. They have to demonstrate excellence in some form of capacity in order to compete for grant funding or find means of coming here. They also need to show good language proficiency which is not an easy feat. (Personal communication with two graduate students from Ukraine and Latvia, November 17, 2005.)*

Victor was not able to secure any grant funding, so he worked as a software developer and saved for three years in order to pursue his dream of studying abroad. His determination clearly reflected his international posture.

On the other hand, Natalie's international posture was lower than Hans' or Victor's because her decision to attend this university was not entirely a personal choice. Her husband had already been admitted into this university, she also decided to pursue her studies here as well.

## B. Second Language Confidence

The participants' WTC was also closely related to their confidence in their L2. Both Hans and Victor perceived their L2 ability to be good. They were humble when asked to share their perception of their L2 ability. However, upon further probing, they shared that their L2 ability was much better than the average person in their country:

*When I arrived here, I had a cultural shock because I had never been in this kind of background where everyone talks not my language, so first time I had some problems, but generally, my understanding was much better than the average Russian guy who comes here . . . because I studied English extensively, I was much more prepared than the average Ukrainian. (Victor, Interview, November 16, 2005.)*

*There are not very many people who speak English very well. It's mandatory for every high school in Colombia to teach English but it's not that good. Because you can see that they are learning but that's not completely true. They teach English . . . but they teach the same [content] every year. Only the teachers are different . . . by the time I was in the university, I already had a big background in*

*English." (Hans, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

In Hans's case, he attributed his success with his L2 to his circumstances as a young learner. His mother knew English well enough to help him. But his main explanation was that a unique situation helped him with his L2:

*When I was a child, something happened. Our TV was broken, so the Spanish channels, for no logical reason, was broken. So we were only able to see the channels in English. And I supposed because I was a little boy, it was easier [to learn English]. And some words I don't understand, I just asked my mom . . . This is my own explanation because what else? I never took a course." (Hans, Interview, November 21, 2005)*

The participants' perception of their L2 skills gave them the confidence to pursue their graduate studies in an L2 context. And with this L2 confidence, they were more willing to communicate because they believed in their L2 ability to communicate and conduct discussions effectively. While they acknowledged that they had some minor pronunciation problems, they both shared that they had no difficulty handling their current teaching responsibilities in leading recitations and labs. In fact, Hans found himself to be more confident with his L2 abilities after attending this course because he is less concerned about making mistakes when communicating in the L2. Victor added, "When I am confident, I am sure I can express myself and I can understand everyone."

Natalie, on the other hand, appeared to be the least active of the four participants. During the interview, she seemed nervous and slightly uncomfortable, avoiding eye contact. Her confidence in her L2 ability was much lower compared to the male participants:

*I'm not very confident with my English especially when I want to explain something in detail. When I want to use some words, I just only use the simple words to explain something . . . it seems like my listening is not so good . . . sometimes I cannot catch their [her classmates] point or why they want to say such things. (Natalie, Interview, November 21, 2005)*

The fact that she was the only participant who had taken two semesters of ESL courses for ITAs also suggested that her L2 proficiency was lower than that of the other participants. Most of her classmates were ITAs who had been assigned to this advanced level course immediately after their first attempt at the tests of oral and teaching skills. Therefore, she might have felt less confident in her L2 ability, since she had to advance to this level after a semester in a lower level ESL course.

### C. Culture

Cultural differences seemed to influence the participants' WTC in class. For Natalie, cultural background played a strong role in her decision to remain quiet, even when she did not understand or had questions. In the previous section, I described how knowledge of shared content could encourage



participants to ask questions about the topic. However, for Natalie, she chose to refrain from asking questions even when she understood the content of the presentation. Her motivation was to promote group cohesiveness:

*Yeah, I just keep quiet. If I don't understand, but the others understand, I don't want to ask. I don't want to delay the class. . . . Sometimes when I ask, they just repeat it. I also think it's not very important . . . I can understand the main idea, so I think it's enough. (Natalie, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

Here, Natalie's unwillingness to communicate appears to be strongly related to the Chinese culture that emphasizes the accomplishment of a group goal. Instead of seeing the process of individual learning as the goal, she viewed the product as the end goal, that is, finishing one presentation and moving on to the next. Therefore, she chose not to express her WTC.

Natalie's hesitance to ask questions could also be due to the concept of losing face (Wen & Clément, 2003). She pointed out that in general, she did not feel comfortable seeking help from her professors. She was concerned that her question was "too stupid" and would often try to solve her problems on her own. This fear of looking stupid is also closely related to Confucianism and Chinese culture as explained by Wen & Clément (2003).

In contrast, Erin's WTC in class appeared to be higher than Natalie's, even though they come from the same cultural background. One possible reason for this difference is Erin's ability to adjust to the different academic culture and its expectations, due to her prior experiences with a native English instructor and the teaching style that is similar to her current instructor's. She explained:

*In traditional [language] class [in China], the teacher always sits in front of the classroom, and we wear earphones and we can't speak freely. Sometimes the teacher will instruct someone to answer the question and that person will answer the question. But I had a semester of spoken English that is led by a native English speaker. And this is somewhat similar to [this] class . . . You can interrupt what the teacher is saying and ask questions and say something you are thinking, but in China, you better not do that. (Erin, Interview, November 21, 2005.)*

The level of formality in different academic cultures also affects WTC. As suggested, the academic culture in China tends to be formal. Classroom etiquette requires Chinese learners to raise their hands and wait for permission to speak. Stacy shared her observation:

*My observation has been that as a general rule, a lot of times, the Chinese students are less willing to throw out ideas, they will raise their hands instead of shouting, they may be less willing to say anything. Quite likely it is also because of the education system that the people come from as well. (Stacy, Interview, November 20, 2005.)*

Although she acknowledged that her observations were gross generalizations and influenced by general stereotypes, she believed that in her many years of teaching ESL, she had seen most Asian students placing their "focus on the group rather than the individual," while some cultures "tend to be more participatory and/or more informal."

Because she had lived in South America, she was more familiar with that culture and perceived the informality of Latin American culture to be a reason Hans displayed more WTC than some of his classmates. She said that it was particularly relevant for "the education system in Latin America, especially at the college level" because it is "relatively informal."

## **Discussion**

In this study, two key elements of the situated learning theory (content and context) were used to guide the analysis of the factors affecting ITAs' WTC during class. The heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998) provided a starting point to explore the different factors that came into play in this research context. At the same time, the in-depth exploration and analysis of the data from this study revealed other significant variables not listed in this heuristic model that affected the ITAs' WTC--namely shared topical knowledge, international posture, and cultural factors.

The use of the situated learning theory revealed the importance of content in this learning situation. Because this course integrated two layers of content--language and field-specific knowledge--both types of content affected the learners' WTC in different ways. In terms of language content, the learners felt willing to engage in the L2 because they were linguistically competent, which MacIntyre et al. (1998) believe to be preconditions of WTC. Moreover, they had a sense of shared knowledge because they were learning the same L2. However, when it came to field-specific knowledge, the level of shared knowledge differed for individuals and groups. This lack of topical expertise made it difficult for some learners to participate, as they were unfamiliar with the topic. This resulted in a decrease in state perceived competence, which MacIntyre et al. describe as "the feeling that one has the capacity to communicate effectively at a particular moment" (1998, p. 549). Additionally, this sense of unfamiliarity can also limit the learners' desire to communicate because they feel they have nothing to contribute. These affective conditions can reduce the learners' WTC.

Determining the impact of the context on learners' WTC is more challenging because of the intersections of different factors. The learners are situated in a context filled with diverse backgrounds; therefore, it is difficult to discuss the effect of one factor without relating it to another. I will frame my discussion starting with those that relate to MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model and move to those that were not included in the model.

From this study, the finding most consistent with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model was the influence of the L2 confidence on learners' WTC. MacIntyre et al. believe that learners who perceive their L2 ability to be high are likely to have high levels of WTC. This was clearly reflected in the male participants' experiences, in which they perceived their L2 ability to be much better than their average compatriots, and displayed self-confidence in their ability to adapt to the L2 community and participate

effectively in discussions and conversations. Because they were confident in their L2 ability, they were two of the most active participants in class.

The finding related to international posture was particularly relevant to this context. As Yashima et al. (2004) point out, students who are "internationally oriented" or have "greater interest in international affairs, occupations, and activities" are more willing to communicate in the L2 (pp. 141-142). This was true in this study for the participants pursuing graduate studies in a foreign country and dependent on their teaching positions as the primary funding source. Because they realized they needed L2 proficiency to achieve certification as ITAs, they saw a necessity to communicate in the L2, and were therefore very willing to communicate in class. However, the level of WTC varied depending on the learners' career ambitions. Those who displayed high career goals showed higher WTC than those who were in this foreign community for other reasons such as following the spouse.

While the ambitions perspective of international posture was not included in the MacIntyre et al. (1998)'s heuristic model, the concept of "ethnolinguistic vitality" did relate to the idea of international posture. MacIntyre and colleagues explain that students who perceive the use of L2 as beneficial for social acceptance and economic advancement are likely to communicate in the L2. In this study, the participants saw the benefits of economic advancement in terms of career advancement and funding opportunities and the necessity of gaining social acceptance on the basis of their L2 linguistic and general teaching skills to secure and maintain their position as ITAs. Thus, they were willing to contribute and communicate in class using their L2.

However, the third finding, related to culture, could conflict with the international posture. This cultural variable, which is also absent in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model, suggests that if learners are engrained in the expectations of their own cultures--differing from the norms of the L2 culture--then WTC may be reflected according to expectations of their own culture. This is especially true for the Chinese culture and Confucianism that prioritize collectivism over individualism, which could hinder learners from asking questions. Additionally, the Chinese culture also has less tolerance of ambiguity as reflected in the "Confucius saying, 'Say yes when you know; say no when you don't'" (Yashima et al., 2004, p. 30). Consequently, learners may be less willing to ask questions or contribute their comments unless they are confident in their knowledge. Yet, if learners who come from cultures with conflicting norms realize the expectations of the L2 culture and are able to adapt, then they are more likely to increase their WTC. As MacIntyre et al. (1998) point out, "When faced with an unfamiliar cultural environment, [individuals] can readily adapt to the new context . . . and concede certain practices and characteristics of their original in exchange for participation in the host culture" (p. 556). This readiness to adapt is again linked to the idea of ethnolinguistic vitality discussed earlier.

## **Conclusion**

The findings in this study show how specific circumstances related to the content and context can influence learners' WTC. Specifically, the findings on cultural influences and international posture illustrate that MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model of variables influencing WTC may not be comprehensive enough to explain WTC in all L2 environments. Additionally, the unique circumstances behind the setup of this language course mean the course content is key in the conceptualization of the

learners' WTC.

Findings from this study are beneficial to language instructors. By understanding the various factors that affect learners' WTC, instructors can attempt to identify which factors are affecting individual learners' WTC, and design classroom activities and use teaching strategies that will best encourage and promote learners' WTC, particularly for those who are reticent learners.

The limitations of this study restrict any generalizations on the WTC of other learners in the class. For example, using the volunteer process instead of a purposeful sampling might have led to participants who displayed higher levels of WTC initially. Therefore, the themes identified in this study might be more relevant to those who are willing to communicate rather than reticent learners. Nonetheless, this study shows how individual circumstances can differ and the accumulated history from childhood experiences to future goals can impact every learner's WTC. More importantly, the primary benefits of this study include the identification of important themes that could impact WTC with respect to increasing or decreasing levels.

Future studies should explore the factors that reduce learners' WTC, and if cultural factors and international posture are as influential on learners from other cultures in the class (such as the Indian students). Additionally, I have not made any comments regarding gender differences, even though there were observable differences between male and female participants.[4] Without more data and input, it cannot be determined whether gender or culture was the main factor relating to ambition and high WTC. Future studies should therefore explore the impact of gender on learners' WTC in language classrooms. Such inquiries can further contribute to the conceptualization of a more comprehensive model of variables affecting WTC.

## About the Author

**Lily Compton** is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instructional Technology with a minor in Applied Linguistics and Technology. Her research interests besides willingness to communicate include teacher preparation for online language learning and teaching, and using computer-mediated communication for language learning.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carol Chapelle and the two reviewers for their constructive feedback on the drafts of the manuscript. I would also like to thank the instructor and ITAs who volunteered to participate in my study as well as my peers who provided me with useful insights.

## Notes

[1] The participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

[2] I was unable to stay for the entire 90 minutes due to schedule conflicts so I

informed the instructor ahead of time that I would leave early.

[3] The instructor collected the informed consent forms at the end of the class period so students did not feel obligated to sign them in my presence. This decision however, made me feel a little uneasy because I was concerned that I would not get any volunteers. Fortunately, the four students volunteered and I got the consent forms before my second observation. During this observation, I paid more attention to the four students who were my participants even though I still made notes about the rest of the class.

[4] For instance, personal perception would indicate that the male participants displayed strong ambitions, which increased their levels of WTC while female participants did not mention anything relating to ambition. However, both female participants shared the same Chinese culture while the male participants came from different cultures.

Permission to use Figure 1 pending from Blackwell Publishing.

## References

- Altalib, H. (2002). Situated cognition: Describing the theory. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED475183.
- Choi, J. & Hannafin, M. (1995). Situated cognition and learning environments: Roles, structures, and implications for design. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 43(2), 53-69.
- Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Esterberg, K.G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Goldberg, L.R. (1993). The structure of phenotypic personality traits. *American Psychologist*, 48, 26-34.
- Hansman, C. & Wilson, A. L. (2002, May). Situated cognition: Knowledge and power in context. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference, Raleigh, NC). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED478969).
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1990). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- MacIntyre, P.D. & Charos, C. (1996). Personality, attitudes, and affect as predictors of second language communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 15, 3-26.
- MacIntyre, P.D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z. & Noels, K.A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal*, 82, IV, 545-562.

McCroskey, J.C. & Baer, J.E. (1985, November). Willingness to communicate: The construct and its measurement. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association, Denver, CO.

Merriam, S.B. & Associates (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stein, D. (1998). *Situated learning in adult education*. ERIC Digest No. 195. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED418250).

Tziner, A. (1982). Differential effects of group cohesiveness types: A clarifying overview. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 10, 227-239.

Wen, W.P. & Clément, R. (2003). A Chinese conceptualization of willingness to communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(1), 18-38.

Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal*, 86 (i), 54-66.

Yashima, T., Zenuk-Nishide, L. & Shimizu, K. (2004). The influence of attitudes and affect on willingness to communicate and second language communication. *Language Learning*, 54(1), 119-152.

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.