Increasing University Students' Willingness to Communicate

—Task Training For Specific Communicative Situations—

Jeff BRODERICK*

Abstract

This study examines the effect of targeted task training on the willingness to communicate (WTC) of 187 first- and second-year university students. Results indicate that learning skills and practicing communicative tasks increases students' WTC by raising confidence and desire to attempt that task, while decreasing feelings of anxiety during the activity. Pedagogical considerations for teachers are discussed.

Keywords : willingness to communicate (WTC), language anxiety, task training

---

1. Introduction

Alongside the closely-related topic of language learning motivation, willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign language is a topic that has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years (for an overview, see Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016). Originally conceived with regard to first language communication, WTC is defined as the tendency to seek out and engage in spoken communication. It was viewed as an individual personality trait and was thus not prone to change.

L2 WTC however was soon found to be quite different from its L1 analog in that it is very changeable, depending strongly on the situation, including such factors as self-confidence, the interlocutors, familiarity with the topic under discussion, and difficulty of the communicative task (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). Subsequent research has demonstrated that WTC can fluctuate within a communicative encounter from minute to minute (Kang, 2005 ; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011). Recently, WTC has increasingly come to be seen as part of a complex-dynamic system, with a great number of contributing variables, and complex dependencies between these variables including feedback mechanisms (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015 ; Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016).

While the conception of WTC has changed from a stable trait to a rapidly varying quantity influenced by a large number of variables, the problem for classroom instructors remains one of how to influence a student's WTC. As MacIntyre *et al* put it, 'a proper objective for L2 education is to create WTC. A program that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed program' (1998, p.547). One of the teacher's jobs, then, is to instill WTC in students. Sadly, there has been little research conducted to determine how instructors can actively improve WTC via their choice of classroom activities. This paper is a continuation of the author's previous works (Broderick, 2015 ; 2016) to address this deficiency. In particular, it seeks to answer the following research questions :

1. Can training in a specific type of communicative task increase students' WTC

＊理工学部共通教育群講師　Lecturer, Division of Liberal Arts, Natural, Social and Health Sciences, School of Science and Engineering

with regard to that task ?

2. Does task training provide any increase to general willingness to use English in other situations ?

WTC has been shown to depend on a large number of factors related to motivation in very complex ways. For purposes of this study however, WTC will be described in terms of a simplified function f which is positively affected by confidence C, negatively influenced by anxiety A, and reflected in the desire D to attempt a communicative task.

$$WTC \simeq f(C,A) \quad f \propto C, f \propto \frac{1}{A}$$

$$WTC \approx D$$

(Eq. 1)

2．Method

This study utilized nine intact classes comprised of 187 students in the author's 5 first-year and 4 second-year communicative English classes. (See Table 1.) Students in both grades engaged in general communicative activities (for example, self-introductions, giving directions, talking about likes and dislikes, etc.), but first-year students (Group 1, n = 110) also learned and practiced discussion skills in each class. They learned strategies for initiating speech, offering opinions, supporting ideas, asking follow-up questions, and turn-taking, among others. Second-year students (Group 2, n = 77) received skill training and practice in giving presentations to their peers. They learned gestures, how to communicate using body language, voice control, and how to structure an effective speech.

Table 1 : Participants

	Males	Females	Total
Group 1 1st Year, Discussion	93	17	110
Group 2 2nd Year, Presentation	72	5	77
	165	22	**187**

Student attitudes were assessed through questionnaires asking them to rate their feelings of confidence, anxiety, and desire when attempting various hypothetical communicative tasks in English. These tasks were divided into three basic categories: discussions, presentations, and miscellaneous or general English communication tasks. Raters responded on a Likert scale from 0 − 4 to assess each task. Questionnaires were issued at three time points: (1) in lesson 1 of semester 1, (2) near the end of semester 1 in lesson 13, and (3) near the middle of semester 2, in lesson 23.

Data screening revealed that several students completed the survey in an unacceptable manner, such as selecting 4 for each question or skipping answers, and these respondents were disqualified. In addition, due to absences or other irregularities, a number of students failed to submit one or more questionnaires and were removed from the study.

Results were compiled and means calculated for each category of task. Next, the 95% confidence interval on the mean was calculated for each data point to determine whether changes were statistically significant. While this methodology simplifies the data analysis considerably, it provides no information about the strength of the effects or the power of the tests.

3．Results and Discussion

The results for confidence in performing

discussion tasks are presented in Figure 1.

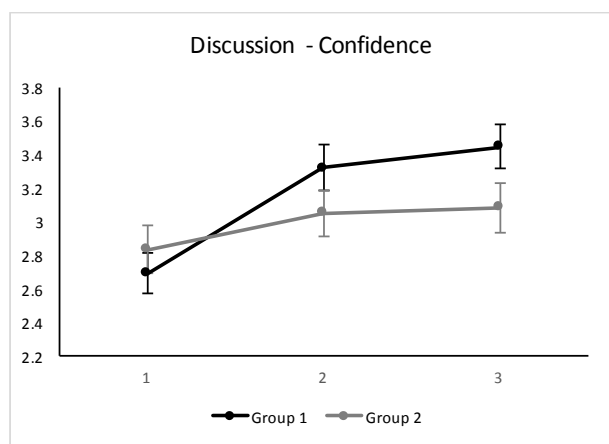explain this result.

Discussion - Confidence

Figure 1.

Group 1, which received discussion training, underwent a significant increase in confidence at time point 2 and then a small increase to time point 3. This may reflect the steep initial learning curve of the discussion lessons, where students who may have had little or no experience engaging in English discussions learned the basic skills and discovered (perhaps to their surprise) that they were able to discuss topics in English. Their subsequent increase in confidence was much smaller, perhaps because of the increasing difficulty of the function phrases used in the latter part of the course. While Group 2 also experienced an increase in confidence, as indicated by the overlap of the error bars this is not a statistical change and so as we would expect, having received no discussion training, their confidence did not increase by a significant amount.

Figure 2 shows the corresponding graph for desire to engage in discussion tasks. Although the confidence intervals are quite wide, the increase over the initial period for Group 1 is significant, while Group 2 shows no statistical change. For both groups, the desire to attempt discussion tasks leveled out between times 2 and 3. Obviously the subjective experiences of these groups were very different, so it is difficult to
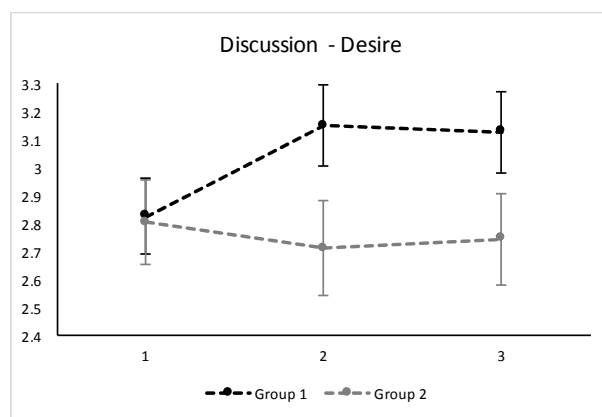
Discussion - Desire

Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows anxiety towards discussion tasks. Both group show notable drops in anxiety, with Group 1 showing a significant drop over the first interval and a smaller drop over the second interval. This decreasing anxiety may reflect their increasing comfort and familiarity with both the discussion tasks and with their interlocutors, the other members of their classes. While Group 2 also showed an initial drop in anxiety, probably related to their growing comfort with their classmates, this drop is probably not statistically significant.
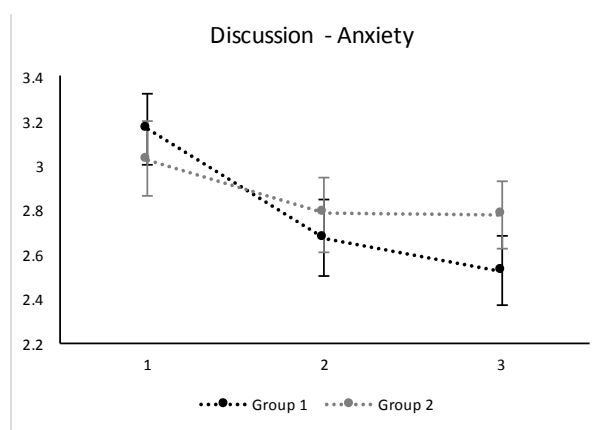
Discussion - Anxiety

Figure 3.

Next, we examine the data for presentation tasks. It is very likely that students in both Groups 1 and 2 had little or no previous experience in giving formal presentations (let

alone speeches given in English), either in high school or (in the case of Group 2) in their previous year of university. Perhaps for this reason, both groups initially rated themselves as having very little confidence in their ability to speak publicly in English, as shown in Figure 4.
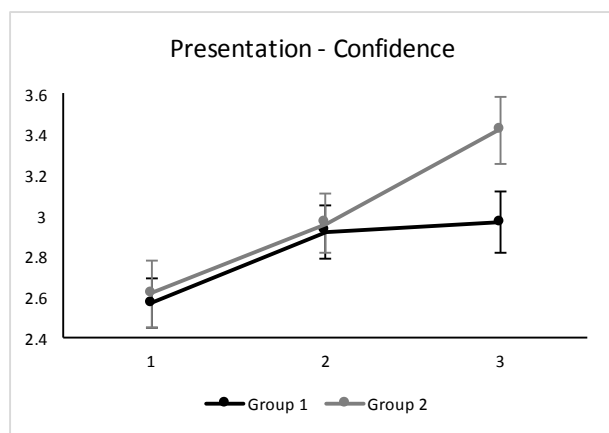

Presentation - Confidence

Figure 4.

The results for Group 2, which received presentation training, indicate a sustained and significant increase in confidence over the duration of the course, which supports the hypothesis that training increases confidence. What is harder to interpret is the finding that Group 1 reported increased public speaking confidence despite having received no training. One possible explanation is that their experience in speaking in front of 3 or 4 of their peers during small-group discussions bolstered their feelings of confidence that they could speak to a larger group of their peers. Having reached an increased level over the first interval, their confidence appeared to plateau and did not increase further.

The desire to give a presentation, shown in Figure 5, also presents some unexpected findings. Group 1 starts with a slightly higher initial value and both groups maintain relatively steady desire over the first interval. Group 2 then shows a significant increase in desire to present. In other areas, initial changes tend to be

large and followed by a 'plateau' but this case is anomalous.
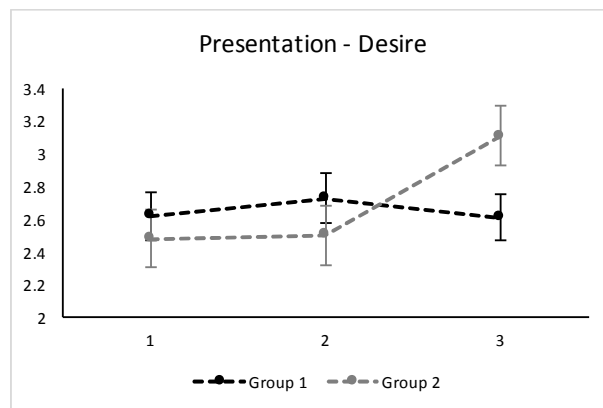

Presentation - Desire

Figure 5.

One possible explanation is that participants may have found the speech topics in the first part of the course (such as 'My Hobby', 'My Hometown', etc.) less interesting than the topics in the latter part of the course (e.g., 'Tell about a time you were successful', 'Use graphs to compare 2 places', etc.) The topics toward the end of the course were objectively more difficult but may also have challenged students more and engaged their imaginations to a greater degree. They may also have felt somewhat less contrived and more realistic and therefore more worthwhile to the participants. In short, Group 1 showed no significant changes, while Group 2 demonstrated a significant increase, albeit over the latter part of the course.

Next, Figure 6 shows anxiety related to presentation tasks. Both groups show a high initial anxiety level, followed by significant drops over the first interval. Unlike Group 1, however, Group 2 shows a continued decrease which, although substantial, is not statistical because of the wide confidence interval. It does imply, however, that continued task training resulted in continued benefits with regard to lowered anxiety.
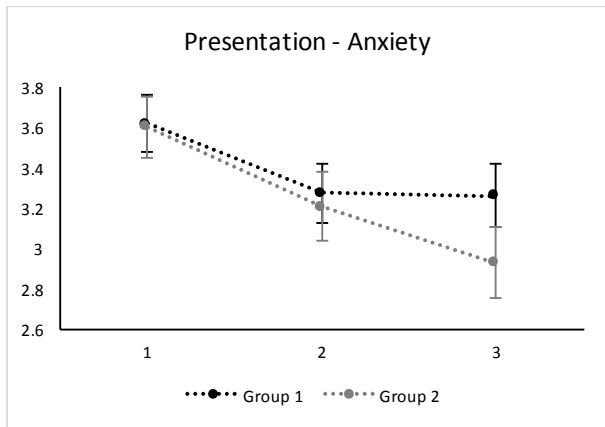
Figure 6.

Why does Group 1 experience a drop in presentation anxiety over the first time interval? This is probably related to the similar increase in confidence observed in both groups as seen in Figure 4. The hypothesis that a familiarity with class members increases confidence could also be applied to explain a concurrent drop in anxiety.

Finally, Figure 7 shows the changes in attitude toward general English communication tasks not directly related to discussion or presentation.
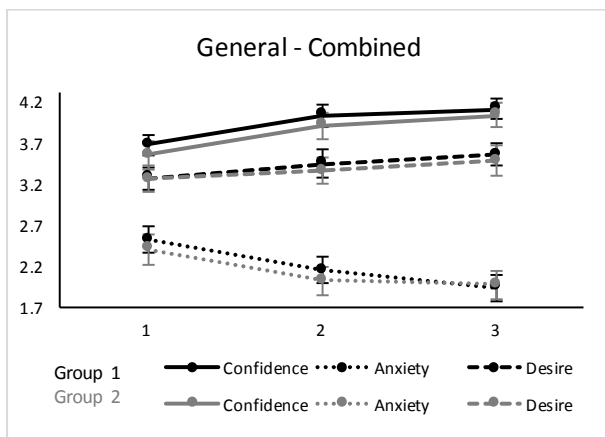

Figure 7.

The data for both groups are remarkably similar and show an almost identical evolution over the course. There are two main points I wish to draw from this figure. The first is the fact that, while the groups differ slightly in average age and Group 2 has one additional year of English instruction compared to Group 1, the results indicate that the two groups are very similar, both in terms of their initial conditions and in their evolution. Both groups received similar kinds of training in general English communication, and their progression is essentially identical. The main differences in their development are attributable to the different task training they received. In other words, in areas where both groups received the same kinds of training, their attitudes changed in an almost identical fashion. Where they received different training, however, their levels of confidence, anxiety, and desire differed substantially, as seen in Figures 1 − 6.

The second point to be drawn from Figure 7 is that changes in confidence and desire towards general English communication changed only slightly (even on the enlarged scale of this graph). 'General English' is a very broad description, and in fact included such disparate classroom tasks as discussing jobs, giving directions, making social plans, and talking about one's childhood. The questions on the survey were not closely related to these tasks, so it is perhaps not surprising that this generalized training had little applicability to the students' sense of general English ability.

The exception to this is the significant drop in anxiety towards general English tasks. In light of the results for confidence and desire, we should probably attribute this decrease to familiarity with the classroom environment, particularly the other students.

4．Conclusions, Implications for Teaching, and Future Directions

The results of Figure 7 would appear to indicate that Groups 1 and 2 were initially very similar. This is further demonstrated by the results of Figures 1 − 6: there was no area in which the groups differed significantly at the

starting point of the investigation. This should probably not be surprising, as both discussions and presentations are not activities that are commonly taught in Japanese, test-oriented language classes. So while Group 2 had an extra year of English instruction, it is very unlikely that they received any substantial training or practice in either discussion or presentation, and thus were at the same starting point as Group 1.

Differences between the groups emerge when examining the different kinds of task training each received. Training in discussion tasks resulted in increased confidence and desire to attempt discussion tasks. Presentation training had a similar effect on presentation tasks. Both groups experienced lowered anxiety over the course of the study, and this is probably at least in part attributable to growing familiarity with class members.

Task training does not seem to have a strong effect on either confidence or desire to perform unrelated activities in English. This could be interpreted as a kind of warning to designers of English curricula : there may be no reason to suspect that learning one set of English skills will result in a 'spin-off' effect of increased confidence in other areas. As a more concrete example, the Japanese public school English curriculum, which places a heavy emphasis on grammar translation and memorization of vocabulary, should not be expected to produce confident, willing speakers. Indeed, experience seems to bear this prediction out.

Many of these results would seem like common sense. Giving students the skills for a task, and then an opportunity to practice in a controlled environment, gives students more confidence and makes them want to attempt the task. It is important to note that previous research has often minimized the teacher's role in creating WTC in learners, or at least left this role unspoken. Other approaches, particularly those regarding motivation and WTC as parts of a complex dynamic system, seem to suggest that the relationships between environmental factors and WTC are so complex as to be more or less 'chaotic' and esssentially unknowable. Should educators then throw up their hands? I would assert that teachers can exert a profound, positive influence on their students' willingness to communicate by developing activities that allow genuine and meaningful communication which is as realistic and as similar as possible to the 'target activity' or real-world task. Specifying the necessary skills required, and then practicing those skills, appears to go a long way toward boosting student confidence and desire to speak and to communicate.

Further research should be conducted to specify in more detail how task training changes the individual psychology of language learners. One area for further study would be to approach the topic from a qualitative perspective, with student interviews and self-reflective activities such as journaling, alongside stimulated recall methodologies such as retrodictive qualitative modeling.

At the same time, another important area for improvement would be to subject the results of this or a similar study to more rigorous statistical analysis ; as it stands, this study should be regarded as only an informal investigation, and one small step in the direction toward quantitatively studying task training and its connection to WTC and motivation.

References

Broderick, J. (2015). Dynamics of English motivation and willingness to communicate. *Bulletin of Tokyo Denki University, Arts and Sciences 13*, 195-202.

Broderick, J. (2016). Increasing university students' willingness to communicate via skills training. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the*

learner. Tokyo：JALT.

Dörnyei, Z., MacIntyre, P., & Henry, A. （2015）. *Motivational Dynamics in Language Learning.* Bristol：Multilingual Matters.

Dörnyei, Z., Henry, A., & Muir, C. （2016）. *Motivational Currents in Language Learning.* Oxford：Routledge.

Kang, S. J. （2005）. Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *System 33,* 277-292.

MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. （1998）. Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2：A situation model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal 82*, 545-562.

MacIntyre, P., & Legatto, J. J. （2011）. A dynamic system approach to willingness to communicate：developing an idiodynamic method to capture rapidly changing affect. *Applied Linguistics 32*（2）, 149-171