

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among Beginning-level German Learners: Teaching German as a Foreign Language in a U.S. University Classroom

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Abstract

This action research examines the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a second language acquisition context. The researcher investigated the contributors of WTC in a foreign language classroom setting. Therefore, a multiple assignments method and sequence was applied. Participants of this study were students who matriculated in a United States (U.S.) undergraduate program, studying German at a public Midwest University. Findings of this study suggest applying various speaking activities and providing the opportunity to practice assessment-like activities prior to the evaluation, which enhanced second language WTC. In addition, the present study found three major factors that contributed to second language WTC: student preparedness, student feelings, and speaking capacity influences. Findings of this study can be implemented into any language classroom. The teaching methods and sequence of activities can be integrated into language curriculum. This study provides insight on a successful language teaching model that prepares students to engage in any oral communication with more confidence and less hesitation.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate (WTC), multiple assignments method, preparedness, feelings, influences.

Introduction

Speaking a second language (L2) is not uncommon in today's society. Many individuals are even proficient in three or more tongues. The concept that relates to the ability of being capable to speak fluently two languages is called bilingualism and more than two languages multilingualism (Turner & Cross, 2016). Increasingly more individuals can speak more than one language and are bilingual or multilingual (Tetel Andreson & Carter, 2016). Furthermore, the capacity to speak even more than two languages fluently is shared among many individuals that live in the United States of America (USA).

The number of students who are bilingual or multilingual significantly increased in the past years and is expected to grow in the future (Gottlieb, 2016). This outlook poses challenges and provides benefits for students and teachers in a classroom environment. Advantages of multilingual classrooms are the ability to learn about various cultures and languages. However, challenges of such classroom environments may arise due to the various English proficiency levels of students in one course. Additionally, the lack of previous formal education experiences might also be a hindrance for some learners. With the growing number of bilingual and multilingual students, educators must be prepared to instruct those learners. This teaching-learning process is an effort that both parties need to develop and contribute towards, together not separate.

Besides multilingualism being a challenge in today's educational world, public discourse is another area that many people struggle with. According to Palmer (2011) and his book *Well Spoken: Teaching Speaking to all Students*, public speaking is the number one fear of adults. Furthermore, Palmer states that "fear of speaking ranks higher in people's minds than fear of death" (2011, p. 59). Moreover, according to a national survey, as cited in Palmer (2011), fear of

public speaking ranks among the top fears of Americans; even higher than fear of heights, fear of lying, or fear of terrorism. When individuals perform a public speech act, which is an oral performance that a student delivers in front of an audience in their first language (L1), fear of publicly speaking exists for most of them. This leads to the following inquiry question: How would fear of public speaking rank for people in their additional language(s)?

Furthermore, performing public discourse in one's additional language happens frequently and as Palmer (2011) mentions "every student (and every adult) I have worked with has been successful at performing the speech when the time came" (p. 59). Thus, when most individuals have to perform a public speech act, no matter in which language, they seem to manage it, regardless of their level of fear. Applying this thought to teaching public speaking, provokes the succeeding queries. How do educators promote public discourse among language learners? How do educators reduce speech anxiety among language learners? What steps can educators take to help language learners commit to public speech acts?

To find answers to the posed inquisitions, it was necessary to create a study that could measure Willingness to Communicate (WTC) before and after speech acts, which occurred at different instances throughout a longer timeframe. Therefore, the present action research was designed to inform language instruction by investigating learners' WTC. Findings of this study may be applied to other teaching and learning contexts, such as public education institutions and language camps. Additionally, this investigation promotes the development of further research questions in the field of WTC and language learning. Furthermore, other languages and disciplines might be able to enhance their instruction by implementing teaching approaches that are used within this study to enhance students' discourse motivation.

Overall, the current document provides an investigation of WTC within a foreign language classroom setting while learning an additional language. This article will, first, provide a brief overview of related research, before giving detailed explanation about the study's participants, methodology and findings. Last, a discussion of results and of pedagogical implications of this study will be shared.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the concept of Willingness to Communicate and its features it is necessary to know its origin. MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) proposed WTC "as the primary goal of language instruction" (p. 545). In addition, MacIntyre et al. (1998) states: Willingness to communicate (WTC), originally conceptualized with reference to first or native language (L1) communication, was introduced to the communication literature by McCroskey and Baer (1985), building on the earlier work of Burgoon (1976) and others. McCroskey and Baer conceptualized WTC as the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so. (p. 546)

This foundational conceptualization of WTC justifies the investigation of foreign language communication. Most individuals engage in speech acts voluntarily, however, many of them do not offer foreign language communication for various reasons. Basing the research on first language acquisition was an essential step to combat the blockage that some individuals have when a possibility arises to commit to a foreign language speaking opportunity. In result of such research, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed factors that might be influencing a person's WTC and positioned themselves as follows:

MacIntyre (1994) proposed a model describing the interrelations among several individual difference variables as predictors of WTC in the L1. Results were consistent with a model in which WTC was seen to be most directly influenced by a combination of

communication apprehension and perceived communication competence. [...] There are many variables that have the potential to change an individual's WTC. The degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, the degree of evaluation of the speaker, the topic of discussion, and other factors can influence a person's WTC. (p. 546)

These findings were thought to be related solely to first language acquisition WTC, however, later research documents similar factors influenced second language acquisition WTC and therefore the ability to commit to speech acts in an additional language. Importantly, under a multilingual perspective, WTC might have additional contributors that either promote or hinder public communication. Factors such as first language transfer, cultural norms, or the idea of a public sphere might influence an individual's additional language WTC. Consequently, it is necessary to separate WTC between first and second language perspectives. The present study will only focus on the second language viewpoint of WTC and defines it as “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). This definition of WTC is the foundation of the present action research, which helped to guide the design of this study. Thus, activities were created to be task-based and as authentic as possible.

Prior research by Baran-Łucarz (2014) suggests that the following features contribute to WTC and performing speech acts: self-perception in the new environment, accepting ‘new’ identity, and learning of new pronunciation patterns in the target language (TL). Further, Barjesteh, Vaseghi, and Neissi, (2012) contribute to the discussion by citing group size and power distance as contributors to WTC and public speaking. In addition, Cao (2011) views WTC as an ecological process and Öztürk, and Gürbüz (2014) cite English as Foreign Language (EFL) speaking anxiety as a contributing factor when committing to a speech act. These features foster the understanding of the study in foreign language public speaking and enable the investigation of variables that motivate and hinder language learners' WTC.

To further the notion of WTC, MacIntyre (1998) states that “WTC strongly implies a behavioural intention such as: I plan to speak up, given the opportunity” (p. 548). Taking these statements under consideration, a closer look at other studies, which further discuss WTC and second language public speech acts, is necessary.

To initiate the discussion, it is essential to investigate student motivation and what it takes to engage students in a speech act. Taking WTC into consideration when teaching language learners, motivating learners requires instructors to be sensitive when educating students. Not only need learners to be willing to communicate as Baran-Łucarz (2014), Barjesteh et al. (2012), and Cao (2010) mentioned, they also need to be provided with the appropriate environment to perform speech acts without having any type of anxiety (Hendrix, 2000). Previous research suggested providing students with an acculturation period, especially if they are new to the learning environment, and giving students the opportunity to share their culture and background with others to provide speaking opportunities (Hendrix, 2000). This is best accomplished through activities that involve small group work. Prior studies have shown that students, who practice speech acts in smaller groups, yield higher WTC, which results in more speech act performances in front of a large audience in the future (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). In addition, it is helpful to provide group members with various roles, just as it is practiced in Toastmasters (Sun, 2008). Toastmasters is a professional organization that provides working individuals with an opportunity to develop public speaking skills in a competitive setting (Toastmasters International, 2016).

The small group approach with an individual task for each group member is one strategy that assists students to perform well in public speaking situations (Smart & Featheringham, 2006;

Toastmasters International, 2016). Other categories that influence student's motivation, WTC, and anxiety level can be individual, environmental, or educational (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Environmental preparedness to perform speech acts can be achieved through the grouping and task-sharing approach previously mentioned, and individual preparedness can be achieved through reduction of anxiety (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014).

An additional study by Myers (1995) suggested for language learners to record their narrative prior the performance. This enables learners to replay the audio text and practice its script before it is evaluated. By using this approach, students become familiar with their text, get their timing intact, and practice pronunciation. Good pronunciation results in higher self-perception, which leads to an increase in WTC (Baran-Łucarz, 2014).

In terms of providing educational preparedness to perform speech acts, Shih's (2010) research suggested incorporating multiple avenues such as online based learning into the curriculum. This way, students can have in-class lectures and opportunities to share their speeches online, where learners can give feedback to classmates (Shih, 2010). Another way to promote educational preparedness towards language learners is the acknowledgement of their bilingualism or multilingualism by integrating it into the evaluation criteria (Gottlieb, 2016). Further preceding research lends evidence that language learners perform speech acts slower in their additional language than in their L1 (Hincks, 2010). This considered, their speech rate and amount of content delivered can also influence students' public speaking proficiency and WTC, even in future situations (Hincks, 2010).

Additionally, categories (individual, environmental, and educational) outlined by Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014), influence students' anxiety, WTC, and, ultimately, public speaking ability. After investigating previous research, a comprehensive answer of proficiently teaching language students listening and speaking skills in a classroom environment cannot be fully concluded and needs further investigation. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the present action research to find appropriate WTC contributors, teaching activities and instructional techniques that promote multilingual public speaking curriculum.

The study

The present study will help language educators implement new pedagogical techniques to their teaching praxis in terms of promoting public discourse in a classroom setting as well as helping language students increase their WTC. Public discourse is highly important in today's society, especially in a foreign language context. With the purpose of communicate successfully in a foreign language, individuals have to overcome their fears and commit to public speech acts. Examples of such could be presentations, formal and informal speeches, toasts, interviews, and general conversations in the public sphere. Therefore, the present action research is vital in order to offer alternative teaching strategies and to utilize public speech acts from an educator's and a learner's perspective.

The goal of this research is to be able to help students perform public discourse in a foreign language environment successfully. In order to produce implementable results, this study was conducted as an action research with the intention of having the best second language teaching practice outcomes that are able to improve teaching pedagogy (McKay, 2006). In addition, the rather small informant group, the length of the research period, and the fact that the research was conducted in a specific context, suggested the utilization of qualitative research methodologies (observation notes, video and audio recording, open-ended questionnaires) with the purpose of gathering authentic data that would be able to inform on future research and practice (McKay, 2006). This research also enlightens teaching tools that educators can

implement into their classroom routines to promote greater WTC and brand public speaking as a domain that language students can utilize proficiently. Therefore, the study is trying to answer the following research questions:

Q1. What variables contribute to Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a foreign language classroom setting?

Q2. How can educators promote Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a foreign language classroom setting?

In order to answer these research questions, prior research suggested the consideration of numerous variables including dependent and independent ones. One independent variable that Öztürk, and Gürbüz (2014) cited was foreign language speaking anxiety, which they categorized into the following groups: individual, environmental, and educational. In addition to anxiety, motivation is another independent variable that was considered when talking about WTC. Since motivation and WTC are interrelated, the following definition was considered for both concepts: “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). This means that WTC and motivation were considered the same variable. Regarding dependent variables, previous research considered language fluency and proficiency level. The term language fluency was adapted by Hincks (2010) as the mean length of runs (MLR) or in other words as utterance length, or the amount of speech, in syllables, between pauses. The term proficiency was adapted by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and described in terms of communicative competence; that is, interactional and social aspects of language ability (Schmidt, 1983).

Methodology

Participants

All participants were enrolled in a German 102 spring semester course at a public Midwestern University and participated in the research on a voluntary basis. Of the 15 undergraduate participants, 12 were native English speakers and 3 were native Portuguese speakers. Further, the group of participants included 9 Freshman, 2 Sophomore, 3 Junior, and 2 Senior students. The self-reported range of German classroom experience ranged from 1 semester to 14 years, with 1 semester being the most frequent; and the self-reported outside classroom experience ranged from “none” to “most of my life,” with “none” being the most frequent. Finally, participants ranked their motivation to speak German between 3 and 10 (10 being the highest), with 8 being the most frequent self-reported answer.

Data Collection

All data was collected during the course of the semester by the researcher. The collected participant data included one speech assignment, six classroom assignments, one midterm assignment, one final interview assignment, and one initial student questionnaire. In addition, the researcher collected observation notes throughout the semester. Furthermore, participants filled out nine post-activity questionnaires that were collected by the researcher after each of the previously mentioned assignments. This questionnaire and its items were tested in a pilot-study that was conducted one semester prior to the present study. It had a comparable participant group and was within a similar setting at the same institution.

To understand the complexity of this action research, a detailed explanation of procedures is necessary. First, students completed the initial questionnaire (see Appendix 1) on Monday of the second week of classes. This questionnaire provided background information regarding the students' preconceived notions about language learning and their motivation. Second, throughout

the second week of class, students presented a two- to four-minute speech about themselves in German. This speech was videotaped to measure students' German discourse base-line skills. This occurred during the second week of the semester. Third, students completed the post-activity questionnaires (see Appendix 2) for all major speaking activities throughout the semester. The course had six units and each one included one major speaking assignments. Additional activities that included completing post-activity questionnaires were the introductory speech assignment, the midterm audio-recording assignment, and the final interview assignment. The same post-activity questionnaire was used for all activities. Fourth, each student video recorded themselves during speech activity number four to measure German discourse progress. Fifth, throughout final week, students completed a final oral speaking examination in groups of two to three in German, which was audio recorded. This demonstrated the development of the students' German discourse skills over the course of the semester.

Content Analysis

All data was analyzed and documented exclusively by the researcher. The post-activity questionnaires were transcribed into a spreadsheet format, which was sorted first by student and second by activity. Following, tables that displayed the general tendencies of the questionnaire answers was created. One table displayed student preparedness after the implemented speech activity. A second table exhibits students' change in feeling from before to after the speech activity. In addition, the data in the table was color-coded in terms of student preparedness (Table 1) and perceived student feeling changes in correspondence to each speech activity (Table 2). This was supportive of determining if students were equipped for the activity as well as if the activity effected participants' WTC positively or negatively. Additionally, from the same spreadsheet, the dominant factors that positively or negatively influenced participants' WTC was tabulated (Table 3). This was helpful in determining the factors that influenced a student's WTC in each implemented activity and throughout the entire research period.

Limitations

The present study was qualitative action research, which was designed for a specific classroom setting. The researcher was a graduate student majoring in English as a Second language (TESL) and held a teaching assistantship in the German department. Furthermore, the L1 of the investigator was German. These aspects make it challenging to transfer findings from the present research, however, results from this action research can be modified and implemented in many language classrooms. Additionally, the teaching curriculum was predetermined by the German department of the institution. Moreover, all participants were considered beginning language learners of the target language who had different first languages. Each language culture might have different perceptions towards public communication, which may have altered WTC factors that contributed to performing a speech act. In a cohort that shared the same L1, overlapping factors from participant to participant might have been more likely.

Future research could widen the participant pool in terms of number or cultural variations as well as language proficiency spectrum of the informants. In addition, the time frame of a future study could be extended to a whole academic program cycle to gain more evidence. Furthermore, it would be contributing to the field of second language education to explore if similar results can be reported from other language classrooms, that are different than German as foreign language. This would provide researchers with another foundation on which future studies can be based on and where they can investigate in more detail the factors that contribute to second language WTC.

Results

This action research resulted in a vast number of findings. After examination and based on the research questions the following three categories were determined by the researcher: student preparedness, student feelings, and speaking capacity influences. Student preparedness refers to the readiness level of each participant to partake in a TL speech act after each speech activity. Student feelings refers to the change in feeling from before to after each speech activity regarding feeling able to engage in a TL speech act. Speaking capacity influences refers to factors that contribute towards the increase or decrease of the ability to publicly speak the TL. To further dissect these notions additional discussion is necessary. The subsequent section highlight each of the three categories (student preparedness, student feelings, and speaking capacity influences) in detail.

Student preparedness

One of the questions on the post-activity questionnaire was: *Do you feel prepared to engage in a German conversation because of this activity?* Answer choices for the learners were ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ This question was designed to investigate the usefulness of the assignment in terms of increasing WTC within the learner and to examine the preparation (if any) students take to engage in a natural speech act.

In terms of the activity breakdown, the data in Table 1 shows that Assignment #4 has the most ‘no data’ incidents (4) and Assignment #2 the most ‘maybe’ responses (2). Further, Assignment #3 has the most ‘No’ selections (9), and Assignment #6, Assignment #8 and Assignment #9 are tied for the most ‘Yes’ answers (11). In addition, with the progression of the course, the ‘Yes’ responses are increasing and the ‘No’ responses are decreasing, whereas the ‘Maybe’ responses stay constant. The incidents where there is no data available fluctuates throughout the length of the course. Overall, the ‘Yes’ responses outweigh the ‘No’ responses in all activities, except in Assignment #3, where the ‘No’ responses outweigh the ‘Yes’ responses (9:6). This might be because Assignment #3 was the first small group sharing task and students were not familiar with that format yet. Nevertheless, despite the activities getting more complex in content and difficult in task, participants seem to feel more and more prepared as the semester went on. This suggest that the sequence and repetition of speech activities in a classroom learning environment fosters preparedness to engage in a TL conversation.

The same question analyzed from the participants’ prospective shows that P7 responded with ‘Maybe’ for each activity. It also can be seen that P16 has the highest amount of no data incidents (3). Further, P4, P8 and P15 responded with ‘Yes’ for each activity (9), whereas P1 and P14 had the highest number of ‘No’ responses (8) as well as the lowest number of ‘Yes’ responses (0). Additionally, P3 was the only informant who had equal selections in ‘No’ (3), ‘Yes’ (3) and no data (3) responses. Overall, ‘Yes’ responses outweighed ‘No’ responses for most participants; only P1, P13 and P14 had more ‘No’ responses than ‘Yes’ ones. The reason for P13 and P14 having more ‘No’ responses might be their L1, which was different from the rest of the class. This finding might suggest that the L1 has influence on the preparedness to partake in a TL speech act.

Reasons for preparedness/non-preparedness

In order to find the reasons behind the participants’ feeling of preparedness or non-preparedness for an assignment, the following item was included on the post-activity questionnaire: *Why do you feel prepared? OR Why don't you feel prepared?.* The dominant responses across all assignments for being prepared, that were self-reported by the participants,

were practiced the material/content ahead of time, felt confident in the topic, and felt confident in speaking ability. For feeling unprepared, the most dominant responses, that were self-reported by participants, were did not prepare for assignment, lack of vocabulary, and not confident in speaking skills.

Table 1. Student preparedness to engage in speech act after the assignment

	Assignment #1	Assignment #2	Assignment #3	Assignment #4	Assignment #5	Assignment #6	Assignment #7	Assignment #8	Assignment #9
P1	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X
P2	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
P3	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+
P4	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
P5	+	?	X	+	+	+	+	+	+
P6	X	?	X	+	-	+	X	+	+
P7	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
P8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
P9	X	X	X	-	+	+	-	+	+
P10	X	X	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
P11	+	+	X	+	+	X	+	+	+
P12	+	+	X	+	+	+	+	+	+
P13	+	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
P14	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
P15	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
P16	-	+	X	X	+	+	X	-	-

- +
 - ?
 - X
 -
- Participant feels prepared to engage in a speech act
Participant is unsure about the preparedness to engage in a speech act
Participant does not feel prepared to engage in a speech act
No data

Student feelings

Another two questions that were asked on each post-activity questionnaire were: *How did you feel before the activity? Circle the items that apply.* and *How did you feel after the activity? Circle the items that apply.* To respond to those questions, participants could circle words from a list of positive and negative perceived words. The words that were considered positive were: *inspired, confident, fascinated, unique, nonchalant, clever, interested, reassured, and satisfied.*

Additionally, participants filled in the words *ok*, *better* and *relieved* to extend the given list. The words that were considered negative were *anxious*, *disappointed*, *lost*, *tense*, *fearful*, *bored*, *overwhelmed*, *dissatisfied*, *confused*, *shaky*, *irritated*, and *concerned*. Again, participants had the opportunity to add their own words to this list, but they did not take advantage of this possibility. The questions were designed to measure participants' self-perceived change per activity, to determine if the activity influenced their WTC.

The data in Table 2 indicates the participants' self-reported feelings before and after each speech activity. In terms of analyzing the participants' before and after feelings, the data shows that Assignment #9 had the most positive change answers (10), whereas Assignment #3 and Assignment #4 had the most negative change ones (3). Further, Assignment #8 had the most no change indications (14) and Assignment #4 had the most occurrences with no data reported (5).

Moreover, Table 2 shows that in most activities positive change outweighs negative or no change incidences, except in Assignment #3, Assignment #6 and Assignment #8 where no change outweighs any other category, as well as Assignment #2 where positive change and no change are at par. Overall, negative change declines throughout the length of the course and that positive change and no change with positive feeling increase over the course of the research period.

Analyzing the data in Table 2 by participant, P16 had the most no data occurrences (3). Additionally, the data shows that P11 had the most number of negative feeling change incidences (4) and P7 the most number of positive feeling change indications (9). Further, P4 had the most no feeling change indications (8) and P6 had as many positive change indications as no feeling change ones (4). Overall the data in Table 2 shows that participants with majorly positive change responses (8) outweigh participants with negative change responses (1) and participants with no change responses (6).

To further analyze the data, it is necessary to look deeper into the no feeling change responses that occurred after the speech activity. There was a total of 62 no feeling change responses reported by participants, 14 of which were negative, 6 were neutral, and 42 were positive. This shows, although there was no change in feeling, the overall feeling before and after the activity was dominantly positive. Assignment #6 was the one with most positive no change responses (13), whereas Assignment #1 and Assignment #3 were the ones with the most negative no change responses (3). Truly neutral responses which were neither positive nor negative in change were scattered throughout all activities.

These findings suggest, despite the activities getting more complex in content and more challenging in task, most participants have a positive feeling about their ability to publicly communicate in the TL after the activity. In addition, more participants feel positive about participating in a public communication towards the end of the course than at the beginning. This suggests that the repetition and the sequence of activities is fostering TL WTC as well as positive feelings towards TL public speaking.

Table 2. *Student feeling change–before and after assignment*

	<i>Assign ment #1</i>	<i>Assign ment #2</i>	<i>Assign ment #3</i>	<i>Assign ment #4</i>	<i>Assign ment #5</i>	<i>Assign ment #6</i>	<i>Assign ment #7</i>	<i>Assign ment #8</i>	<i>Assign ment #9</i>
<i>P1</i>	+	?	+	?	+	+	---	?	+
<i>P2</i>	?	?	?	-	+	?	?	?	?
<i>P3</i>	+	+	?	-	-	+	?	?	+
<i>P4</i>	X	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
<i>P5</i>	?	+	?	+	+	?	+	?	?
<i>P6</i>	?	+	?	+	-	?	+	?	+
<i>P7</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>P8</i>	+	?	X	X	?	?	+	?	+
<i>P9</i>	?	?	+	-	?	?	?	?	+
<i>P10</i>	?	?	?	X	?	?	+	?	+
<i>P11</i>	+	X	?	X	X	?	X	?	+
<i>P12</i>	+	X	X	+	+	?	+	?	?
<i>P13</i>	+	+	+	-	+	?	+	?	?
<i>P14</i>	+	+	?	-	?	+	+	?	+
<i>P15</i>	+	?	+	+	+	?	?	?	+
<i>P16</i>	-	+	X	+	+	+	+	-	-

- +
- ?
- X
-
- Positive change – from negative feeling to positive feeling, neutral feeling to positive feeling, or negative feeling to neutral feeling
- No change – feelings stayed negative, positive, or neutral
- Negative change – from positive feeling to negative feeling, neutral feeling to negative feeling, or positive feeling to neutral feeling
- No data

Speaking capacity influences

To further investigate WTC of the participants, two items on the post-activity questionnaire dealt with the language development and its factors. The two questions that enlightened this area were: *In what ways did the activity increase your German speaking capacity?* and *In what ways did the activity decrease your German speaking capacity?* The dominant answers from all assignments that increased participants' German speaking capacity were: learned new vocabulary, improved speaking/conversational skills, improved comprehension skills, improved grammar usage, and learned about the topic. For dominant factors of all assignments that decrease German speaking capacity, participants reported: not being able to remember vocabulary and not being able to use all grammar patterns confidently. The dominant factors that increased or decreased the German speaking capacity for each individual assignment, which were reported by participants are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Dominant factors that influence speaking capacity by assignment

	Increase German Speaking Capacity	Decrease German Speaking Capacity
Assignment #1	Correct grammar usage Speaking skills practice	Limited vocabulary
Assignment #2	Learned new vocabulary Conversational speaking skills	Grammar
Assignment #3	Learned new vocabulary Hearing peers speak increased listening comprehension Learned grammar	Limited vocabulary Grammar
Assignment #4	Learned new vocabulary Speaking German Grammar and sentence structure	Limited vocabulary
Assignment #5	Hearing peers speak increased listening comprehension Learned new vocabulary Usage of complex grammar Pronunciation	Missing grammar knowledge Limited vocabulary
Assignment #6	Grammar Speaking German casually Learned new vocabulary Listening comprehension	Grammar
Assignment #7	Grammar Speaking German Learned new vocabulary	N/A
Assignment #8	Learned new vocabulary Pronunciation Speaking German	Limited vocabulary
Assignment #9	Speaking German Ability to use vocabulary	Skipping rules to appear more fluent Limited vocabulary Grammar

Discussion

Research question 1

What variables contribute to Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a foreign language classroom setting?

This action research suggests that there is more than one factor that influences a language learner's WTC. One factor is student preparedness, referring to the preparation (study time, homework, notes, etc.) that the student invests prior to the assessment contributes to the numerical outcome (grade) as well as the increase or decrease of WTC.

Another factor, according to the study, is the feeling that the student has prior to the assessment. Most likely, if a student felt positive towards the assignment it reflects an increase in WTC as well as a feeling of achievement. When a student had a negative feeling towards the assignment it, most likely, led to a decline or stalemate of WTC as well as a feeling of uncertainty or dissatisfaction.

An additional factor for most students was the language skills prior to the assessment. Depending on where each student fell on the language ability spectrum, it either positively or negatively influenced WTC, making the activity a pleasant and satisfying one or a stressful and displeasing one. Ideally, all students should have similar language knowledge prior to the assessment, which is rarely the case. Most often, students in a class enter the activity with various language capacities.

Furthermore, topic interest seemed to be an indicator of positive WTC development. In other words, if the student was convinced about the usefulness of the activity and personally interested in the assessment, it most likely led to a positive feeling towards it, which in the end fostered positive WTC development.

One last factor that contributes indirectly to the increase of students' WTC, was the sequence of the assessments and the routine application of them as well as the classwork that led up to the activities. This can be concluded by investigating the number of students who felt positively and prepared in regards to an assessment at the beginning of the semester compared towards the end of it. Almost all students had a higher WTC starting point at the end of the semester than they had at the beginning. This was indicated by the data and by the comfort and ease with which students entered the assessments as well as engaged in class discussions, in their target language, towards the end of the semester. In addition, the activities themselves might have factored towards increasing or decreasing WTC, depending on how much students liked and engaged with the activity. Further student background knowledge and motivation towards the subject of the activity could have been a contributor that influenced willingness to speak publicly. Generally, students perform better and are more engaged in subject matter they can relate to or enjoy.

Research question 2

How can educators promote Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a foreign language classroom setting?

Taking in consideration the present action research, it can be proposed that the teaching model (cooperative learning mixed with individual performance, task-based teaching and learning, and the utilization of multiple intelligences) used in the study and the sequence of assessments (manageable to challengeable in content and activity), positively influenced students' WTC as well as positively predisposed them with the ability to enter into a target language conversation confidently and with less hesitation. In addition, it is vital for educators to prepare students for the successful completion of the assessment, which means practice assessment-like tasks prior to the actual evaluation activity. This can be positively strengthened by utilizing authentic-like exercises and activities where the real-world is brought into the classroom environment.

This research has also shown that it is vital to create a safe classroom environment where everyone, including the instructor, is a language learner. Practice is a vital contributor to later success and towards increased WTC. In this study, practice was considered providing routine speaking opportunities to students and availing them to the resources they need to succeed.

Furthermore, the integration of various assessment types (oral presentation, role-play, monologue, dialoged, audio and video recordings, etc.) contributed not only to an increase in WTC, but also to an authentic evaluation of the student's language ability. In daily life, many of people encounter various speech and language events and seldom participate in the same one repeatedly. Therefore, it is integral that educators provide this authentic model of differentiating assessments to prepare students to enter a communicative world.

Conclusion

This action research examined WTC within a foreign language context at a Midwest University, seeking factors that contribute to WTC. Major findings from the present study suggest that student preparedness, student motivation, and the utilization of various assessment types contribute to an increase in second language WTC. These findings contribute to implications for the field of language teaching and learning by implementing this sequence of assessments in curriculum as well as providing students with the opportunity to practice assessment-like task, before they will be evaluated. In addition, educators should highly consider their students' interests when developing lesson plans and assessments. This will not only foster students WTC, but also the student-teacher relationship, which in return contributes to a positive learning environment.

Furthermore, there needs to be more field research conducted to gather more information about WTC factors in second language acquisition with the purpose of expanding our knowledge about teaching and learning public communication in a multilingual world. In addition, this study is the beginning of evaluating an authentic-like assessments sequence that is comprised of different task-based activities. It needs to be further tested and expanded to other programs that have a more diverse student population. In order to foster positive WTC in students and assistance them engage in speaking events without fear similar to acrophobia (fear of heights), educators need to conduct future research on teaching methodologies that create a positive view of public speaking in any language.

To further utilize the research results, it is necessary to discuss the magnitude these findings have on educational praxis. The following discussion will explore in what matter answers to the research questions can be transferred to other language and content classrooms. Public speaking is a well know fear of most Americans (Palmer, 2011). Communicating in the public sphere is expected or required in many educational areas, therefore it is beneficial to take the positive aspects from this study and apply them to other areas of teaching and learning. The following section will highlight some transferable features of this action research.

Findings from this study suggest that a curriculum approach that implements multiple speaking activities throughout an instructional period enhances WTC. In addition, the research shows that students most likely advance their speaking ability when they have an opportunity to practice and prepare prior the evaluation of the task (before the assessment). Furthermore, speech activities need to vary in group size as well as in variation of tasks according to the suggestions of this study. Data from the present study proposes that language learners feel more prepared and are more willing to communicate in the target language when the aforementioned features are met. Further, this approach of language teaching takes the focus away from the instructor as the sole information giver and puts the discovery and learning of a language into the hands of the language learners. Students interact with each other instead of the instructor or text books, which lowers the stakes of language proficiency and provides an environment that fosters mutual learning in a safe and low-risk situation. Moreover, power-distance related issues will be eliminated with this approach since the interaction will be strictly with peers.

This research study also provides evidence that language learning can happen in a foreign language environment when native-speakers are scarce. Instead of relying on print material that often provides unrealistic situations and unnatural speech, language learners can utilize their knowledge to make meaning and create authentic speech acts. "Given that language development can occur through interaction, it can be assumed that more interaction leads to more language development and learning" (Kang, 2005, p. 278). The more time students spend being engaged in

speech activities, the longer the opportunity to practice authentic communication resulting in an increase in WTC. Further, it creates a higher baseline WTC for future interaction and speech activities. Additionally, learners' confidence in their speech ability most likely increases each time they partake in similar situations.

Moreover, this approach of language teaching provides opportunities to expand other language areas such as listening, writing, reading, and grammar. Students utilize and build their speech activity performance onto the content and language knowledge recently gained. This method provides intrinsic motivation for learners to succeed in a speech activity. At the same time, it holds them accountable to learn the material in meaningful and authentic ways. According to Kang (2005), repeated utilization of this approach enhances WTC as well as the confidence level in learners' speaking ability. This increases the chances that they might engage in similar speech events in the future, because language learners with high WTC are more likely to engage in future authentic communication (Kang, 2005).

Furthermore, oracy is only one of multiple domains when it comes to language learning. Oracy interrelates with other language domains in such a way that it increases oral proficiency and strengthens literacy. "Teachers can create opportunities for students to use and practice oral language throughout a unit of study as this will support them when they encounter the same language in print" (WIDA Consortium, 2013, p. 14). This leads to the suggestion of implementing language curriculum that includes multiple language domains within one lesson. Thus, the ability to foster receptive as well as productive language skills in the similarly without neglecting one, leads to a more balanced and complete language learner who has command of a tongue in its entirety.

Acknowledgement

This research would not have been possible without the support of the World Language Department and the German Program of the Minnesota State University, Mankato. Additional thanks go to the Teaching as Second Language (TESL) faculty, especially to Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee, who supported and guided me throughout this project. Further appreciation to my wife, Gabrielle, who strengthened my ability to focus on this project and whose eyes guided me to excellence. Last, but not least, I would like to extend my gratitude to those who could not be mentioned here, but were a vital part of this research.

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Appendix 1

Initial Student Questionnaire

Directions: Please take a few minutes and fill out this questionnaire to the best of your knowledge. Do not ponder too long over one item. This questionnaire will not affect your grade. If you have any questions, please raise your hand and I will attend to you. Thank you.

1.Name: _____

2.Year in school (please circle one): Freshmen Sophomore Junior Senior

Other – (please specify): _____

3.How many years of experience do you have learning German **in** a classroom setting?

4.How many years of experience do you have learning German **outside** a classroom setting?

5.How motivated are you speaking German (1=least and 10=most motivated)? Indicate below.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6.What motivates you to speak German?

7.What hinders you from speaking German?

8.Circle all descriptions that apply to you when speaking German.

inspired	anxious	disappointed	confident	fascinated	unique	lost
nonchalant	clever	interested	tense	reassured	fearful	bored
	overwhelmed	dissatisfied	shaky	irritated	concerned	satisfied

other: _____

9.How can I help you develop your German?

Appendix 3**Assignments in Order of Occurrence**

Assignment #1: Introductory Speech (Brown Bag Speech)

Assignment #2: Speech Activity #1: Interview – *Wo wohnst du?*

Assignment # 3: Speech Activity #2: Group sharing – *Reiseerlebnisse* (3-4 students per group)

Assignment # 4: Speech Activity #3: Video recording – *Lieblingsgericht (Essen & Trinken)*

Assignment # 5: Speech Activity #4: Monologue – *Kindheit/Jugend* (3-4 students per group)

Assignment # 6: Speech Activity #5: Group sharing – *Wegbeschreibung* (3-4 students per group)

Assignment # 7: Midterm: Individual – *Erzähle eine Geschichte*

Assignment # 8: Speech Activity #6: Pair work roleplay – *Beim Arzt*

Assignment # 9: Final: Interview in pairs with instructor

