# The Personality-based Variables and Their Correlations Underlying Willingness to Communicate

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**Abstract**

Many researchers have studied the various affective variables which influence the use of the target language. Willingness to communicate is often regarded to be main causes of the frequency of L2 use. At first, the concept and importance of willingness to communicate is illustrated. Next, the essay argues about the personality-based variables underlying willingness. Finally, the correlation of the personality-based variables will be illustrated. The purpose of this essay is to make a literature of willingness to communicate and provide a theoretical support on the further research on willingness to communicate.

**Keywords:** Willingness to communicate, Personality-based variables, Correlation

## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the factors influencing the success of second language acquisition (SLA). Moving away from the previous focus on the social cultural context of second language (L2) learning, many L2 researchers have explored the individual difference in SLA. The study of willingness to communicate (WTC) can provide better understanding of individual differences in second language acquisition. It can also promote the success in second language acquisition. It is also a contribution to the theory on the willingness to communicate in second language acquisition. Willingness to communicate has been paid more and more attention in second language acquisition. In this essay, I will make a literature review of willingness to communicate. First, I will demonstrate the importance of willingness to communicate in second language acquisition. Then, I will describe the concept of willingness to communicate. Next, the personality-based variables underlying willingness to communicate will be analyzed. At last, the correlation of the variables will be illustrated.

## 2. The importance of willingness to communicate

For many second language learners, the main purpose in learning second languages is the use of the target languages. Hashimoto (2002) claims that the use of the target language is also an indicator of and a necessary condition for successful second language acquisition. Therefore, the use of the target language plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. Therefore one must communicate in the target language in order to learn the second language. Communication in the second language depends greatly on a psychological readiness to use the language. Therefore, willingness to communicate is the main cause of second language use.

MacIntre (1994) points out that willingness to communicate has been proposed as an important variable underlying the interpersonal communication process. If the person has the willingness to communicate, he will mostly begin the actual behavior of communication. Therefore the willingness to communicate can cause the use of the target language by the second language learners. Then the learners can improve the learning of second language and realize the goal of second language acquisition.

MacIntyre (2003) also claims that WTC can be conceptualized as a goal of second language instruction, a variable that facilitates language learning itself, and an internal psychological event with socially meaningful consequences (MacIntre, 2003). This shows more important roles of willingness to communicate in second language acquisition.

## 3. The concept of willingness to communicate

Burgoon (1976) conducted one of the seminal studies using a construct identified as unwillingness to communicate. In his study, he just mentioned the negative orientation of the construct, that is unwillingness to communicate. McCroskey and Baer (1985) adapted the construct and renamed it as "willingness to communicate". McCroskey and Baer show the positive orientation of the construct. MacIntre (1994) made a conclusion of the concept of willingness to communicate described by Burgoon and McCroskey. He claimed that the two concepts could be considered to be opposite sides of the same coin. However, the WTC scale proposed by McCroskey and his associates (1985, 1987, and 1992) appears to have better reliability and validity.

Willingness to Communicate can be defined as the probability that an individual will choose to initiate communication, more specifically talk, when free to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985, McCroskey 1992). In simple words, it just means an individual's intention to the behavior of communication.

Roach (1999) quote the description of willingness to communicate from Richmond and Roach (1992). Richmond and Roach (1992) note that "willingness to communicate is the one, overwhelming communication personality construct which permeates every facet of an individual's life and contributes significantly to the social, educational, and organizational achievements of the individual" (p. 104).

McCroskey and Richmond (1990) maintain that people demonstrate regularity in their level of WTC across situations; therefore it should be defined as a personality trait. This trait is manifested by the stability in an individual's cognitive processes when confronted with the choice to engage in communication or not (MacIntyre & Clement, 1996). It has been suggested that willingness to communicate functions as a personality trait, showing stable individual differences over time and across situations (MacIntre, 1994).

Even though WTC is considered trait-like, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) acknowledge that it is also related to situational variables such that, given a specific trait-determined level of WTC, persons will still vary in their willingness to speak across situations. Then, "WTC is a trait-like predisposition that can be influenced by situational factors" (Roach, 1999).

## 4. The personality-based variables underlying willingness to communicate

WTC can be viewed from two complementary perspectives- the trait and state level. States potentially will be affected by several variables including mood, physiological factors (e.g., arousal levels), environmental conditions (eg., the presence of recording equipment), and a lot of other factors (MacIntyre, et al,1999). The states are not stable and so complex. Therefore, WTC will just be discussed from the perspective of trait in this essay. Trait means the stable and enduring dispositions. Personality traits are the most important factors influencing willingness to communicate.

McCroskey & Richmond (1987) maintain that there are a number of antecedents to WTC specifically introversion and extroversion, perceived communication competence, communication apprehension, self-esteem and the dimension of emotional stability and neuroticism. According to MacIntyre (1994), perceived communication competence and communication apprehension are the two key antecedents of WTC. The other personalities can influence one another and then influence perceived communication competence and communication apprehension, and at last show impacts on the willingness to communicate.

### 4.1 Introversion/extraversion

An introverted person tends to be less socially active than an extraverted people, so an introvert is not required to communicate as often. Most of the introverts are trying to avoid communicating with others. On the other hand, an extravert requires communication to facilitate social interaction; therefore, he places a higher value on communication (MacIntyre, et al, 1999). That is why the extraverted people like communicating with people under any circumstances. In brief, the extraverts are more likely to communicate than introverts. That is, the extraverts have stronger willingness to communicate than the introverts.

Introverts tend to avoid social interaction and thus have fewer opportunities to improve their communication skills in second language. Then they will perceive themselves as less competent because they lack experience or practice in the second language communication settings. Furthermore, they are afraid of lose face during the communication then their self –esteem will be hurt. According to MacIntyre (1994), introverts have a tendency to have lower self-esteem. Therefore, they are not willing to communicate with others. The extraverts often communicate with other peoples in many kinds of social situations, so they have greatly practiced the using of second language. Then they perceive that they have the competence to communicate with other people. They are self-confident enough to communicate with others in the second language.

### 4.2 Emotional stability/neuroticism

MacIntyre, et al, (1999) made an explanation of Emotional stability and neuroticism according to Goldberg (1993). "Emotional stability versus neuroticism refers to an individual's typical level of anxiety, worry, and ease of emotional upset". On one hand, persons with high emotional stability tend to be calm, secure, and self-assured. They are not easily influenced by their own mood and the reaction of the listeners. Usually, the persons with high emotional stability are extraverts. They have a high level of self-esteem for communication. Then they are willing to communicate.

On the other hand, persons with low emotional stability show neurotic tendencies such as nervousness, emotional distress, insecurity, and feelings of inadequacy. These people easily get nervous during the communication. They care too much about what happens around them. Their mood easily changes. Their self-esteem is very low so that they have great communication apprehension. And then they lack the willingness to communicate.

According to MacIntyre, et al, (1999), emotional stability, in combination with extraversion and introversion, has the potential to contribute to the model of factors underlying WTC, particularly self-esteem (MacIntyre, et al, 1999).

### 4.3 Self-esteem

Self-esteem is the positive or negative evaluation of self-knowledge that is included in our self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979, in MacIntyre, et al, 1999). Campbell & Lavalle (1993) claim that people with low self-esteem are more sensitive to environmental cues (Campbell & Lavalle, 1993, cited by MacIntyre, et al, 1999). As a result, they will be greatly affected by the possible things which will happen to them, especially the negative feedback, such as ridicule. In order to protect themselves, the persons with low self-esteem intend to avoid the situations in which their self-esteem might be threatened. So they are unwilling to communicate using the second language under many circumstances. Furthermore, most of the persons with low self-esteem believe that they have nothing meaningful to contribute; they think that there is no need for them to express their own idea. Thus they will be less willing to communicate. An individual with low self-esteem is likely to be less willing to communicate (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

On the contrary, people with high self-esteem are not easily affected by the environmental cues. They are so self-confident in that they can make great contribution to the others and they believe that they will be respected by the others so they are eager to express their opinions. They are willing to communicate.

Usually the extraverted people with high emotional stability have a high level of self-esteem. And the introverted people with low emotional stability have a low level of self-esteem. However, sometimes self-esteem does not influence willingness to communicate directly. Self-esteem usually exerts its influence through other communication variables such as communication apprehension and perceived communication competence.

### 4.4 Communication apprehension

McCroskey (1977) defined communication apprehension as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" McCroskey, 1977, p78). Beatty (1998) claims that communication apprehension refers to the predisposition to avoid communication if possible, or suffer from a variety of anxiety-type feelings when forced to communicate.

From the definition, we can know that communication apprehension can be treated as a trait-like predisposition. In Roach's (1999) literature review, it is claimed that Weaver, Sargent, and Kiewitz (1997) discovered a link between personality and communication apprehension. Beatty, McCroskey, and Heisel (1998) have taken this idea regarding communication apprehension and personality even further, suggesting that "communication apprehension represents individuals' expression of inborn biological functioning [that is] independent of social learning processes" (p. 197).

According to McCroskey and Richmond (1987), communication apprehension is probably the best predictor of willingness to communicate. The willingness to communicate, to some degree, relies on an individual's level of

communication apprehension. Roach (1999) points out that communication apprehension is one of the major reasons an individual might be unwilling to communicate. The person with high-level communication apprehension worries much about the communication situation, the feedback from the audience, and so on. Then it is certainly not possible for him to communicate with others.

Under the influence of the people's personalities and the situational issues, the communication apprehension varies in intensity and fluctuates over time. However, no matter to what degree the intense of communication apprehension is, it will reduce the willingness to communicate.

### 4.5 Perceived communication competence (self confidence)

According to McCroskey (1982), perceived competence refers to person's self-evaluation of their communication ability (McCroskey, 1982). MacIntyre (2003) points out that the communication abilities compose of five competencies: linguistic competence, discourse competence, actional competence, sociocultural competence and strategic competence.

MacIntyre, et al, (1999) state that perceived communication competence is strongly predictive of willingness to communicate. No matter whether the person actually has the abilities to communicate in the second language, he may be greatly influenced by his perception of his communication abilities. Sometimes, even a very capable communicator might perceive himself lack communication abilities due to many reasons, such as low self-esteem or other factors. Then the person's self-evaluation may influence his willingness to communicate. He lacks the self-confidence to communicate. Just as McCroskey and Richmond (1990) maintain that people who perceive themselves to be poor communicators are apt to be less willing to communicate.

If an individual has developed knowledge and skills of the second language and the communication situation has been encountered previously, then he may highly self-evaluate himself and he will perceive himself have the competence to communicate. Therefore, his willingness to communicate will be increased.

## 5. The correlations between the variables underlying willingness to communicate

The variables underlying willingness to communicate do not influence willingness to communicate separately. Sometimes, they can show influence to willingness to communicate directly; sometimes, they put impact on other variables and then influence willingness to communicate indirectly. Above all, the variables have strong interrelationship.

According to McCroskey (1985), willingness to communicate is seen as an intention to initiate communication, so willingness to communicate is considered to be the step before the actual behavior in the model. MacIntyre (1994) shows that communication apprehension and perceived communication competence are the two nearest antecedents of willingness to communicate. The other factors can influence willingness to communicate directly or indirectly.

### 5.1 The correlation among self-esteem, emotional stability/neuroticism and introversion/extraversion

MacIntyre, et al, (1999) claim that the combination of emotional stability with extraversion and introversion has the potential to contribute to self-esteem. MacIntyre (1994) claims that the correlation between introversion and self-esteem is negative and significant. He points out that introverts usually have lower self-esteem. In conclusion, the introverts with neurotic personality usually have lower level of self-esteem. On the contrary, the extraverts with stable emotion usually have high self-esteem. In other words, the people with low self-esteem and low emotional stability are usually introverts. The people with high self-esteem and high emotional stability are usually extraverts.

### 5.2 The correlation of communication apprehension and other factors

Beatty et al. (1998) point out that the primary components of communication apprehension are introversion and neuroticism. The introverted people and neurotic people are likely to have high levels of communication apprehension. Beatty et al. (1998) make a conclusion of the studies about the correlations between communication apprehension and indices of extraversion and neuroticism. In the previous studies, the negative correlations were found between communication apprehension and the components of extraversion, such as, surgency, adventurousness, sociability, and assertiveness. Also many studies have examined the correlation between communication apprehension and the traits which are the indicative of neuroticism, such as anxiousness, depress, tense and shyness. For instance, McCroskey, Daly, and Sorensen (1976) found a positive correlation between communication apprehension and general anxiousness (.50) (Beatty et al., 1998). In brief, the neurotic people have high level of communication apprehension.

MacIntyre (1994) states that communication apprehension is caused by a combination of introversion and low self-esteem. McCroskey, Daly, Richond, and Falcione discovered significant correlations between communication apprehension and self-esteem in a series studies. (Beatty, et al., 1998).

In all, communication apprehension is influenced by extraversion/ introversion, emotional stability and self-esteem. The extravert who feels high self-esteem has the highest levels of communication apprehension. The introvert who feels low self-esteem has the lowest levels of communication apprehension.

Furthermore, communication apprehension can also be greatly affected by perceived communication competence. The people who perceive himself as less competent can be more apprehensive to communication.

*5.3 The correlation of perceived communication competence and other factors*

MacIntyre (1994) maintains that perceived competence is caused by a combination of communication apprehension and introversion/extraversion. The introverts tend to avoid social interactions so they have few opportunities to practice their second language. Because of the lack of communication experience, the introverts usually perceive themselves less competent. The apprehensive individuals must have encountered many difficulties in the past communication process, then they become afraid of interaction. Due to the failure of communication, the apprehensive people usually perceive themselves less competent.

## 6. Conclusion

Willingness to communicate plays an important role in second language acquisition. Both the individual's personality and the situation can influence the willingness to communicate. Personality shows the major impact on willingness to communicate. There are many personality-based variables underlying willingness to communicate. Communication apprehension and perceived communication competence are the two key antecedents of willingness to communicate. An individual with less communication apprehension and high level of perceived communication competence has more willingness to communicate. Some other factors can also influence willingness to communicate directly of indirectly, such as self-esteem, extraversion/introversion and emotional stability. The extraverts with high self-esteem and stable emotion are likely to have the willingness to communicate. Based on the literature review of willingness to communicate, a further research can be made on the strategies to increase students' willingness to communicate.

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