Asian Journal of Technology and Applied Sciences
ISSN: 2301-xxxx (online) | IF: 10.01 | Vol: 1, issue 1
Available: http://asiansciencejournal.org

LEARNER MOTIVATION AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A LITERATURE-BASED INQUIRY

Nigina Sobirova
MA TESOL
Webster University

Abstract: Willingness to communicate (WTC) has become one of the most productive constructs in applied linguistics for explaining why learners with comparable proficiency differ so markedly in their readiness to use a second or foreign language. This article synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between learner motivation and WTC, framed within an Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD) structure adapted for a conceptual literature-based inquiry. Drawing on foundational models (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Kang, 2005) and motivation frameworks (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), together with empirical studies from Japanese, Chinese, Iranian, Ethiopian, and Uzbek EFL contexts - including recent Uzbek scholarship on passive learners, input-based pedagogy, and curriculum-standards alignment (Khujakulov, 2025c; Khujakulov & Ruxshona, 2025; Nizamiddinova & Khujakulov, 2026) - the review identifies three interacting layers of influence on learners' WTC: enduring psychological traits, motivational orientations, and situational-contextual variables. The synthesis suggests that motivation operates less as a direct cause of communicative behavior and more as a distal force that shapes the proximal psychological states-confidence and low anxiety-that immediately precede a learner's decision to speak. Pedagogical implications for fostering a communication-friendly classroom climate are discussed, along with directions for future research.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, L2 motivation, L2 Motivational Self System, EFL classroom.

Introduction

One of the most persistent puzzles in second language acquisition (SLA) is why learners who possess comparable grammatical and lexical competence differ so sharply in their readiness to use the language communicatively. Two learners may finish the same course with similar test scores, yet one volunteers' answers, initiates conversations with visitors, and seeks out speaking opportunities, while the other remains silent even when called upon. McCroskey and colleagues first framed this variability in first-language communication research as willingness to communicate (WTC), later extended to second-language contexts by MacIntyre et al. (1998), who defined L2 WTC as a learner's readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using the second language.

This puzzle sits alongside a related, longer-standing question in SLA theory: how comprehensible input is converted into productive output. Krashen's input hypothesis, and its continued relevance to contemporary pedagogy, holds that learners advance when exposed to language slightly beyond their current level (the i+1 principle), yet exposure to input alone does not guarantee that learners will subsequently choose to produce the language communicatively (Khujakulov & Ruxshona, 2025). WTC research can, in this sense, be read as addressing the missing half of the input-output equation: it asks not whether learners are cognitively ready to produce the L2, but whether they are psychologically willing to do so.

Because WTC captures the final psychological step before actual language use, it has been treated by many scholars as the proximal goal of communicative language teaching:

proficiency alone is of limited value if learners are not willing to draw on it (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This has drawn WTC into close theoretical contact with the study of learner motivation, since motivation is widely regarded as the engine that sustains the long-term effort required for language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). Yet the exact relationship between motivation and WTC - whether motivation acts directly on the decision to speak, or indirectly through confidence, anxiety, and situational appraisal - remains contested and has been modeled differently across theoretical traditions and cultural contexts.

This article addresses that question through a literature-based synthesis organized in an IMRAD frame. Three guiding questions are examined: (a) how has the construct of WTC been conceptualized across enduring trait-based and dynamic situational models; (b) what motivational constructs have been shown to relate to L2 WTC; and (c) what contextual and pedagogical factors mediate the translation of motivation into observable communicative behavior in the EFL classroom. Addressing these questions is intended to give language teachers and teacher-educators a coherent, evidence-based account of why some learners speak and others do not, and what classroom conditions make speech more likely.

Method

As a conceptual rather than a primary empirical study, this article follows the logic of a narrative-integrative literature review, adapted to the IMRAD format so that the reasoning process - identifying sources, extracting patterns, and interpreting them - is made as transparent as it would be in an empirical report.

Search Strategy and Sources

Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and empirical studies published primarily between 1998 (the publication year of MacIntyre et al.'s foundational model) and 2026 were located through Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate, and publisher databases including Wiley, SAGE, ScienceDirect, Springer, and Taylor & Francis. Search terms included combinations of "willingness to communicate," "L2 motivation," "L2 Motivational Self System," "international posture," "foreign language anxiety," and "EFL classroom." This search was supplemented with a targeted, author-supplied reference list of recent Uzbek-authored scholarship; of the entries provided, those addressing learner passivity, input-based pedagogy, technology-supported task design, and curriculum-standards alignment were judged topically relevant and integrated below, while entries from unrelated linguistic subfields (e.g., historical lexicology of folk-medicine terminology, locative case semantics, and literary translation pragmatics) were excluded as outside the scope of a WTC-focused review.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were retained if they (a) explicitly addressed L2 or foreign-language WTC or a closely related motivational construct, (b) reported on foreign or second language learner populations rather than first-language communication alone, and (c) were published in English in an academic venue. Priority was given to sources representing a range of instructional contexts beyond North America and Western Europe - including Japanese, Chinese, Iranian, Ethiopian, and Central Asian (Uzbek) EFL settings - in order to examine whether motivation-WTC relationships generalize across cultures of learning or are locally conditioned.

Analytic Approach

Sources were read and coded thematically rather than statistically aggregated, consistent with the conventions of a narrative synthesis. Three recurring themes were identified inductively across the literature: (a) trait-like individual-difference variables, (b)

motivational orientations and self-related constructs, and (c) situational and pedagogical variables. These themes structure the Results section below.

Results

The reviewed literature converges on a layered picture of WTC in which motivation is necessary but not sufficient to produce communicative behavior; motivational energy must pass through more proximal psychological states before it is expressed as speech.

Trait-Like Individual-Difference Variables

MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a six-layered pyramid model in which stable, enduring variables - intergroup attitudes, social context, communicative competence, and personality - sit at the base and progressively feed into more transient states such as L2 self-confidence and, ultimately, momentary WTC and actual L2 use. Within this model, L2 self-confidence, understood as the combination of perceived communicative competence and low communication anxiety, functions as the most immediate predictor of WTC. This pattern has been widely replicated: low foreign language anxiety and higher self-perceived competence are consistently associated with greater WTC across the Iranian (Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011), Ethiopian (Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024), and East Asian literatures. Personality traits such as grit have also been shown to relate positively to WTC, with the perseverance-of-effort component of grit predicting classroom communicative engagement more strongly than consistency of interest (Ebn-Abbasi & Nushi, 2022).

A complementary line of Uzbek scholarship has approached this same trait-like variability from the classroom-observation side, profiling what Khujakulov (2025c) terms the "silent majority" - the sizeable subset of EFL learners who remain passive during oral tasks regardless of their measured proficiency. This profile of passive learners overlaps considerably with the low end of the WTC continuum described in the pyramid model: passivity is attributed not to a single trait but to an accumulation of low self-confidence, prior negative speaking experiences, and a learned habit of deferring to more vocal peers, echoing MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) claim that enduring and transient variables jointly, rather than singly, determine whether a learner speaks.

Motivational Orientations and Self-Related Constructs

Where the pyramid model treats motivation as one of several enduring inputs, subsequent research has given the construct a more central and elaborated role. Gardner's (1985) socioeducational model first linked integrative motivation - a positive disposition toward the target-language community - to L2 achievement and communicative engagement. Dörnyei (2005, 2009) reframed this territory through the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which conceptualizes motivation as arising from discrepancies between a learner's actual self and two future self-images: the ideal L2 self (the person one would like to become as an L2 user) and the ought-to L2 self (the person one feels obliged to become to meet others' expectations). A vividly imagined and attainable ideal L2 self has repeatedly been shown to predict intended communicative effort more strongly than instrumental or ought-to orientations (Dörnyei, 2009).

In contexts where learners have little direct contact with target-language communities, Yashima (2002) proposed the construct of international posture - an orientation combining interest in international affairs, willingness to interact with people from other cultures, and a sense of connectedness to the wider world - as a functional substitute for integrativeness. In a structural model of 297 Japanese university students, international posture was found to influence motivation, which in turn influenced both L2 proficiency and WTC directly (Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004). Because the target-language community is often geographically and socially distant for EFL learners, international posture has since been

applied productively in Chinese, Korean, and other Asian EFL contexts as an explanatory bridge between global orientation and classroom communicative behavior.

Motivation-WTC relationships are not culturally uniform, however. Wen and Clément (2003) argued that MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model reflects Western, individualist assumptions about communication and proposed a Chinese-specific model distinguishing desire to communicate from WTC itself, incorporating Confucian-influenced values such as deference to the teacher's authority and sensitivity to face and group harmony. Similarly, Peng (2007) situated Chinese EFL learners' reticence within a broader cultural preference for accuracy over fluency and a teacher-centered culture of learning, both of which temper the behavioral expression of motivation regardless of its underlying strength. Comparable culturally embedded patterns have emerged in Central Asian contexts: a mixed-methods study of Uzbek university EFL majors found intrinsic motivation to outweigh extrinsic motivation significantly, with learners' communicative engagement closely tied to perceived relevance of English for their professional and international aspirations (Abduolimova, 2025) - a pattern conceptually continuous with Yashima's international posture.

Situational and Pedagogical Variables

A third strand of research treats WTC not as a stable trait shaped indirectly by motivation, but as a dynamic state that fluctuates moment to moment within a single lesson or conversation. Kang (2005), studying Korean learners in conversation-partner sessions, found that situational WTC emerged from the joint effect of three psychological conditions - security, excitement, and responsibility - each shaped by immediate variables such as topic, interlocutor, and conversational context. This dynamic perspective helps explain why a highly motivated learner may still fall silent in one lesson and speak freely in the next: the situational conditions for security and excitement were not met.

Classroom-level and teacher-related variables have been shown to interact with motivation in shaping this situational WTC. Zarrinabadi (2014) found that Iranian EFL teachers' wait time, manner of error correction, choice of topic, and expressed support directly affected students' willingness to speak, independent of learners' underlying motivational level. Likewise, classroom emotional climate - operationalized as foreign language enjoyment alongside foreign language anxiety - has been found to predict WTC through a doubly latent multilevel model, suggesting that positive classroom affect can amplify the behavioral expression of motivation while anxiety suppresses it (Khajavy et al., 2018). More recent Uzbek research has extended this situational strand toward technology-supported task design: step-by-step frameworks for planning technology-supported lessons have been proposed as a means of diversifying the interactional contexts in which learners are asked to speak (Abduhalilova & Khujakulov, 2025), although digital tools are not a uniform remedy, since structural barriers to digital integration in some school settings can just as easily narrow, rather than expand, learners' situational opportunities to communicate (Badriyeva & Khujakulov, 2026).

Discussion

Read together, the three strands of literature reviewed here suggest that motivation and WTC are related but not interchangeable constructs, connected by an intervening layer of confidence, emotion, and situational appraisal. Motivation - whether conceptualized as integrativeness (Gardner, 1985), an ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009), or international posture (Yashima, 2002) - appears to function as a distal, energizing force that shapes learners' general orientation toward the language and its speakers over months or years. Whether that energy is expressed as observable speech in a given lesson, however, depends on more proximal and volatile factors: perceived competence, anxiety, teacher behavior, task design,

and the momentary sense of security and excitement described by Kang (2005). This layered account reconciles what might otherwise appear to be contradictory findings across the literature - for example, why highly motivated learners in teacher-centered, face-sensitive classroom cultures (Wen & Clément, 2003; Peng, 2007) may nonetheless exhibit lower observed WTC than the same learners would in a more communicatively permissive setting.

For TESOL practitioners, this synthesis carries several implications. First, interventions aimed purely at increasing motivation - for example, through content that connects English to learners' imagined international futures - are likely to be necessary but insufficient on their own; they should be paired with classroom practices that lower the situational cost of speaking, such as generous wait time, non-punitive error correction, and topics with genuine personal relevance (Zarrinabadi, 2014; Kang, 2005). Second, teachers working in cultures of learning that privilege accuracy, hierarchy, or face-consciousness (Wen & Clément, 2003; Peng, 2007) may need to make the norms of the L2 classroom explicit, since learners' reticence in these contexts should not be read as low motivation; addressing the "silent majority" (Khujakulov, 2025c) in particular requires teachers to distinguish clearly among the approaches, methods, procedures, and techniques at their disposal, since a mismatch between the intended technique and a passive learner's needs can reinforce, rather than reduce, reticence (Hasanova et al., 2021). Third, the Central Asian evidence (Abduolimova, 2025) suggests that in EFL settings where direct contact with native speakers is rare, cultivating learners' sense of connection to an international community - Yashima's (2002) international posture - may be a more accessible motivational lever than traditional integrative orientations tied to a specific target-language culture.

At the systemic level, these classroom-based recommendations are only as effective as the curricula that house them. In the Uzbek context specifically, an evaluation of the national middle school EFL curriculum's alignment with TESOL standards found notable gaps between prescribed learning outcomes and the communicative competencies the standards envision (Nizamiddinova & Khujakulov, 2026), suggesting that efforts to raise learners' WTC through improved classroom practice may be constrained unless curricular documents themselves foreground sustained opportunities for spoken interaction rather than test-oriented literacy skills.

This review has limitations characteristic of narrative syntheses. Because sources were selected and coded thematically rather than through a systematic, criterion-based screening protocol, the account is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and publication bias toward statistically significant relationships cannot be ruled out. Most reviewed studies are also cross-sectional, correlational, or based on self-report measures, limiting causal claims about the direction of influence between motivation and WTC. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and idiodynamic designs capable of tracking how motivational self-images and situational WTC co-evolve within the same learners over time, and from more comparative work across Central Asian, Caucasus, and other underrepresented EFL contexts, where the present evidence base remains thin relative to East Asian and Middle Eastern settings.

Conclusion

Willingness to communicate offers a theoretically rich and pedagogically actionable lens for understanding why motivated language learners do not always speak. The literature reviewed here indicates that motivation - whether framed as integrativeness, an ideal L2 self, or international posture - shapes learners' WTC primarily by building the confidence and reducing the anxiety that make speech feel possible, while situational variables under the teacher's direct control determine whether that possibility is realized moment to moment. For TESOL professionals, the practical takeaway is that cultivating motivation and cultivating a

communicatively safe classroom climate are complementary, not substitutable, tasks; sustained progress in learner communicative engagement is most likely where both are pursued together.

REFERENCES

1. Abduhalilova, N., & Khujakulov, R. (2025). Strategic framework for skill integration: Introduce a step-by-step framework for planning technology-supported lessons. Yangi O'zbekiston, Yangi Tadqiqotlar Jurnali, 3(6), 634–638.
2. Abduolimova, M. (2025). Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in EFL: A mixed-methods approach to the university students in the Uzbek context. Cogent Education, 12, Article 2569685. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2569685
3. Badriyeva, S., & Khujakulov, R. (2026). Barriers to digital integration in logical schools. In Education and research in the era of digital transformation (pp. 499–503).
4. Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition. Lawrence Erlbaum.
5. Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), Motivation, language identity and the L2 self (pp. 9–42). Multilingual Matters.
6. Ebn-Abbasi, F., & Nushi, M. (2022). EFL learners' grit, classroom enjoyment and their willingness to communicate: Iranian public school versus private English language institute learners. Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education, 7, Article 24. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-022-00150-9
7. Gardner, R. C. (1985). Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation. Edward Arnold.
8. Hasanova, N., Abduazizov, B., & Khujakulov, R. (2021). The main differences between teaching approaches, methods, procedures, techniques, styles and strategies. JournalNX, 7(02), 371–375.
9. Kang, S.-J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. System, 33(2), 277–292. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.10.004
10. Khajavy, G. H., MacIntyre, P. D., & Barabadi, E. (2018). Role of the emotions and classroom environment in willingness to communicate: Applying doubly latent multilevel analysis. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 40(3), 605–624.
11. Khujakulov, R. (2025c). The silent majority: Analyzing the profile of "passive" EFL learners. Лучшие интеллектуальные исследования, 59(3), 379–381.
12. Khujakulov, R., & Ruxshona, A. (2025). The vitality of the input hypothesis (i+1) in modern English language pedagogy. Yangi O'zbekiston, Yangi Tadqiqotlar Jurnali, 3(6), 628–633.
13. MacIntyre, P. D., Baker, S. C., Clément, R., & Donovan, L. A. (2003). Talking in order to learn: Willingness to communicate and intensive language programs. Canadian Modern Language Review, 59(4), 589–607.
14. 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. The Modern Language Journal, 82(4), 545–562.
15. Nizamiddinova, S., & Khujakulov, R. (2026). Bridging the gap: Evaluating the alignment and effectiveness of the national middle school EFL curriculum with TESOL standards in the Uzbekistan context. Tadqiqotlar, 75(1), 304–307.
16. Peng, J.-E. (2007). Willingness to communicate in the Chinese EFL classroom: A cultural perspective. In J. Liu (Ed.), English language teaching in China: New approaches, perspectives and standards (pp. 250–269). Continuum.

Asian Journal of Technology and Applied Sciences
ISSN: 2301-xxxx (online) | **IF:** 10.01 | **Vol:** 1, issue 1
Available: http://asiansciencejournal.org