

# Communication Apprehension, Willingness to Communicate, and Communication Competence: A General Review

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## Abstract

This paper explores the interrelated concepts of communication apprehension (CA), willingness to communicate (WTC), and communication competence, providing a general review of their dynamics and implications. The relationship among these concepts is cyclical and interdependent. People with high levels of CA tend to reduce WTC. Conversely, lower levels of CA often stimulate higher WTC, promote individuals to engage more freely in interactions, thus leading to better competence. Communication competence, in turn, builds confidence and reduces anxiety, strengthening the individual's readiness to communicate.

## 1. Introduction

"A person's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" is the general definition of communication apprehension (CA) (McCroskey, 1982). Generally, there are two types of CA: situational and trait. Situational CA is unique to certain situations, such as public speaking or engaging in formal settings, while trait CA refers to persistent communication anxiety in a variety of contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986). Some other variables related to communication apprehension are willingness to communicate, culture, communication competence and social factors.

According to McCroskey and Baer (1985), "a stable predisposition toward the initiation of communication when free to choose to do so" is the definition of willingness to communicate (WTC). Situational factors, cultural background, and individual psychological characteristics all have an impact on WTC. Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is defined as an individual's opportunity to involve in a communication when the individual is given the chance. It is considered a significant interpreter of communication behaviour, especially when dealing with second language (L2) contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

On the other hand, Communication Competence (CC) is the ability to convey information in a range of situations in an acceptable and successful manner (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The capacity to effectively and appropriately deliver messages in a variety of circumstances is known as communication competence (CC) (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). It includes contextual, nonverbal, and verbal communication abilities.

### 1.1 Studies on Communication Apprehension

High levels of CA have been linked to reduce participation in group discussions, public speaking challenges, and overall lower academic and professional performance. For instance, Bourhis and Allen (1992) found that individuals with high CA tend to avoid communication situations, leading to missed opportunities for personal and professional growth. According to Boszkut & Ayden (2023), speaking anxiety is considered a problematic

feature encountered in English as a foreign language. A comparison study was conducted and they found that there is no significant difference between face to face and online communication among foreign languages students in English classroom.

A study focusing on pre-service teachers in Türkiye found that perceived self-efficacy in communication significantly influences CA levels. Individuals with high self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) exhibited reduced levels of CA, emphasizing the relationship between self-perception and anxiety (Goncu & Mede, 2022). Similarly, a longitudinal study on college students revealed that CA diminishes with exposure to structured communication training programs (Lucas & Park, 2023). Kulusakli & Genc (2024) investigate the relationship between L2 communication apprehension and communicative competence of pre-service English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers studying at a state university in Türkiye, and found that pre-service EFL teachers have varying levels of communication apprehension and are remarkably more apprehensive in certain situations.

## 1.2 Studies on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

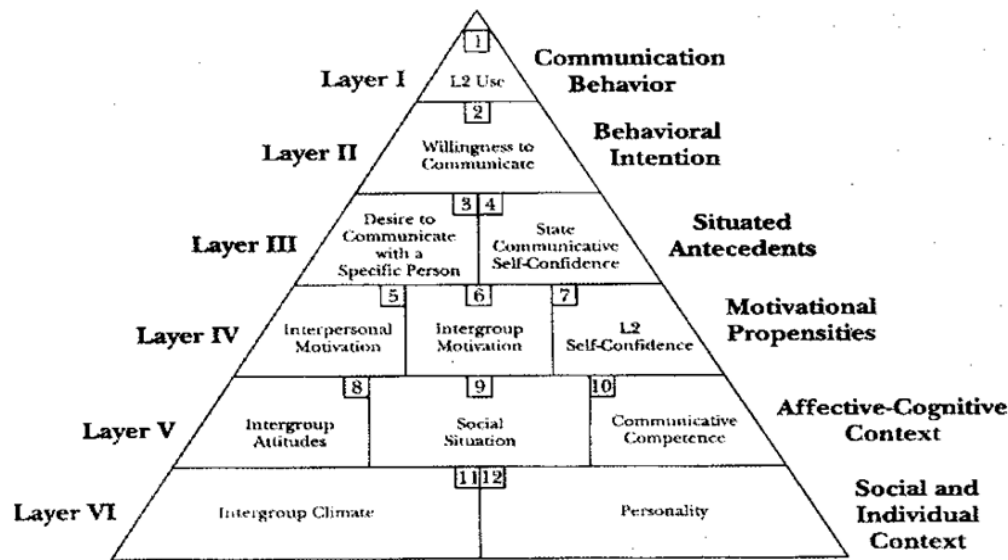
Willingness to communicate is one of the important variables associated with communication apprehension. There are a few factors influencing the willingness to communicate. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) is one of the most significant predictors of WTC. Studies have consistently shown that individuals who perceive themselves as capable communicators are more likely to initiate communication. Ozalp & Merc (2022) found students had a moderate level of speaking anxiety but possess a high level of WTC, female learners had a higher level of communication apprehension than their male peers, but in terms of WTC levels, there was no difference observed between genders. They conclude that communication apprehension had a significant impact on willingness to communicate and vice versa.

Cultural influences also play an important role where research in high-context cultures (e.g., East Asia) indicates that hierarchical social norms often reduce individuals' WTC (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Muhammad Yousaf et al. (2022) conducted a study regarding the aspect of culture and willingness to communicate. The study provides a cross-cultural comparison of ethnocentrism and the intercultural willingness to communicate among higher institution students from two collectivist cultures, namely, Pakistan and China. The findings show that Pakistani students are more ethnocentric but possessing a lower intercultural willingness to communicate than Chinese students. Additionally, males were more ethnocentric and less willingness to communicate in intercultural settings than females in both countries.

## 1.3 WTC in Virtual Environments

The rise of virtual communication platforms has shifted the dynamics of WTC. Ju and Ming (2023) found that students with lower anxiety showed greater L2 WTC. In digital settings, students with a higher ideal L2 self showed less overall anxiety (comprising face-to-face and digital anxieties), which yielded greater L2 WTC. For engineering undergraduates, technical presentations are crucial and high WTC is important for success of the study performance. However, communication apprehension (CA) can significantly impact a student's WTC, often leading to unwillingness to participate, which can negatively affect their academic and professional development (Peng & Woodrow, 2021).

Research suggests a strong negative correlation between WTC and CA (MacIntyre, 2007). Students with high levels of CA typically show low WTC. This is shown in their fear, language barriers, and lack of confidence where it becomes a big hindrance for them from engaging in communication activities (Peng & Woodrow, 2021).



**Fig. 1** Pyramid Model of Willingness to Communicate (WTC). (From MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998)

There are relationships between L1 WTC and other psychological constructs such as self-perceived communication competence (McCroskey and Richmond, 1990), communication apprehension as what has been studied by MacIntyre (1994), the aspect of shyness (Teven, Richmond, McCroskey, and McCroskey, 2010), as well as introversion (MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey, 1997).

Willingness to communicate happens in two situations; willingness to communicate as a personality trait, and willingness to communicate as a situational construct. This is well explained by the pyramid model of willingness to communicate as in figure 1. The "pyramid model" combines generally consistent variables with steady influence (distal factors) and situation-specific variables (proximal factors) to impact a learner's propensity to talk in a second language and, eventually, to utilize it. All pyramid tiers are interconnected.

## 1.4 Models of WTC

There are two models of WTC. The models are as below:

- 1.4.1 The WTC Model by McCroskey and Richmond (1987): This model identifies several important components influencing WTC, including individual differences, situational factors, and the context of communication.
- 1.4.2 MacIntyre's (1994) Model: This model emphasizes the role of motivation and anxiety in second language communication. It incorporates psychological and social variables, such as self-confidence, which affect one's willingness to involve in communication.

Studies on WTC have been conducted and related to many aspects. Botes, Dewaele, & Greiff (2024) found moderate positive correlations were found between Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and WTC. Elahi Shirvan et al. (2019) identified motivation, communication anxiety, and L2 competence as significant predictors of WTC. Lower WTC has been linked to communicative anxiety, low self-confidence, and feelings of cultural alienation (MacIntyre and Ayres-Glassey, 2020).

## 1.5 Communication Competence (CC)

Communication competence is assessed by an instrument namely Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) or an individual's subjective assessment of their communication skills which plays a pivotal role in influencing their communication behaviours. SPCC not only affects WTC but also mediates the relationship between CA and WTC.

## 1.6 Studies Related to Communication Competence

Research by Richmond and McCroskey (1998) demonstrated that SPCC accounts for up to 27% of the variance in CA levels. This suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as competent communicators experience less

communication-related anxiety. While Peng and Woodrow (2010) found a strong positive correlation between WTC and SPCC, with high self-perception leading to greater willingness to engage in communication.

Fung (2010) conducted a study on communication competence and communication apprehension of English and Communication Skills students at a private university in Malaysia. Significant differences were found in terms of gender, age, and the course enrolled by the students.

Sabri and Sunil (2018) worked on communicative competence in English language as a foreign language in Yemen. The study recommends some activities, based on researchers' personal experience in teaching English as a foreign language and as well as based on some previous studies in this field. These suggested activities are usually communication-based activities that help in making classroom situation more interactive and provide as much opportunities for exposure to English as possible.

A qualitative study has been conducted by Prima and Wisnu (2018) in Indonesia among twelve students who participated in the national teams of English Debating Championship of Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta from 2013-2017. The researchers would like to investigate if there is a significant connection between communicative competence and cognitive ability. Results revealed positive relationship and cognitive ability gives a direct influence on communicative competence in speaking English.

### 1.7 Interrelationships between Communication Apprehension, Willingness to Communicate and Communication Competence

There are two models that explain well the relationship between these variables.

- Heuristic Model of Communication Competence: This model is proposed by Spitzberg (1983), where this model outlines the cyclical relationship between competence, apprehension, and willingness. It suggests that competence not only reduces apprehension but also increases the likelihood of initiating communication. The Heuristic Model of Communication Competence is a framework used to understand how individuals develop and demonstrate effective communication skills in various contexts. It is called "heuristic" because it serves as a practical, problem-solving guide to learning and improving communication.
- MacIntyre's Pyramid Model: This model integrates SPCC, WTC, and CA within a hierarchical framework, demonstrating how psychological and contextual factors shape communication behaviour (MacIntyre et al., 1998). MacIntyre's Pyramid Model of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is a conceptual framework designed to explain why people choose to communicate in a second language (L2) or in general. It focuses on the psychological, situational, and individual factors influencing one's willingness to initiate communication. This model has broad applications in language learning, interpersonal communication, and intercultural communication. Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

### 1.8 Conclusion

The relationship between communication apprehension (CA), willingness to communicate (WTC), and communication competence highlights the complex dynamics of effective communication. These concepts are deeply interrelated, each influencing the other in significant ways.

Communication apprehension, or the fear or anxiety associated with communicating, can act as a significant barrier to communication competence. On the other hand, willingness to communicate serves as a critical bridge between communication apprehension and communication competence. WTC reflects an individual's readiness to engage in communication, which is shaped by factors like self-confidence, motivation, and perceived competence. In addition, communication competence, which is, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately, is both a cause and a result of reduced apprehension and increased willingness.

In short, these three concepts form a cyclical and interdependent relationship where reduced communication apprehension fosters greater willingness to communicate. Greater willingness to communicate enhances opportunities for developing communication competence. Improved communication competence builds confidence, further reducing apprehension and increasing WTC.

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## Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **Introduction:** Zulida binti Abdul Kadir; **Draft Manuscript Preparation:** Zulida binti Abdul Kadir and Nurul 'Ain binti Othman; **Conclusion:** Zulida binti Abdul Kadir.

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