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Investigating Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English between lower and upper primary English learners in Hong Kong ESL classrooms

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Abstract

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) has been introduced in recent years and is assumed to be one of the key influence leading to successful second language acquisition as well as modern language learning. This present study focuses on comparing the differences between upper and lower primary learners' WTC and exploring the factors for affecting primary learners' WTC in Hong Kong ESL classrooms. The study adopts a mixed-method approach in which data were collected through in-class observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The findings suggest that there is a prominent difference between upper and lower primary learners' WTC, with lower primary students showing higher tendency to speak English in ESL classrooms while upper primary students tended to be less willing to speak English. Besides, the findings also show that age, gender, L2 self-confidence, effects of teachers and personality traits have a significant influence on learners' WTC in English. Both upper and lower female primary learners showed a higher WTC in English while the male learners showed the opposite result. Primary learners with intermediate and low WTC level also attributed their WTC levels to their L2 self-confidence that their high level of L2 anxiety and poor perceived language competence restrained their WTC in English. Besides, the support and encouragement from teachers as well as the topics chosen by teachers had a significant impact on both upper and lower primary learners' WTC in English. Moreover, it is found that personality traits have a more significant influence on upper primary learners than lower primary learners. Finally, the findings of this study provide new pedagogical insights for ESL or English teachers in primary schools.

Keywords: willingness to communicate (WTC), English language teaching (ELT), ESL, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

In English language teaching, there was a time that most teachers put their focus on teaching the grammar rules and instilled learners with a long list of vocabulary items. However, there has been a changing focus in English language teaching from the mastering of structures to the capability of achieving meaningful communicative purposes (Alemi, Mesbah & Tajeddin, 2013). Also, Swain & Lapkin (2002) had mentioned that language learning happens in a practical setting through interactive and meaningful communication. Therefore, learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in a language facilitates their language learning. This

research aims to investigate primary pupils' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. The study plans to compare lower and upper primary English learners regarding their WTC in the Hong Kong ESL classrooms, and to explore the reasons for their WTC in English through the methods of in-class observation, individual interviews, and a questionnaire.

2. Literature Review

Learners' motivation and attitudes towards a second language are one of the key factors which influence learners' performance in language classrooms. The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model is also important in modern language learning classrooms where English is used as the medium of instruction, and it has been argued that if a learner has a higher WTC, he is more likely to succeed in second language acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 2003).

First introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985), the term WTC refers to the predisposition of a person to initiate conversation when provided the choice to do so. According to McCroskey (1992), WTC is also defined as a trait-like predisposition which is a stable characteristic of an individual. The research conducted by McCroskey (1992) explored how the personality and psychology affect a person's WTC in terms of impeding or facilitating communication. In addition, a model of WTC was proposed by MacIntyre (1994), which contemplated that L2 WTC was influenced by communication anxiety as well as perceived communication competence. Previous studies of WTC in the second language investigated the influence of individual variables on learners' tendency of engaging in communication through a cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) constructed a situational model of WTC in L2 to display the interrelationship of communication behaviour, behavioural intention, situated antecedents, motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context and social and individual context in affecting learners' WTC in L2 acquisition. The model (see Figure 1) was constituted in a form of pyramid with six layers, showing how different situations affect learners' feelings towards communication, and it begins with personality and intergroup climate at the bottom (Layer VI) to L2 use at the top (Layer I). Hence, willingness to communicate (WTC) in the L2 is also construed as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (MacIntyre et al. 1998, p. 547).
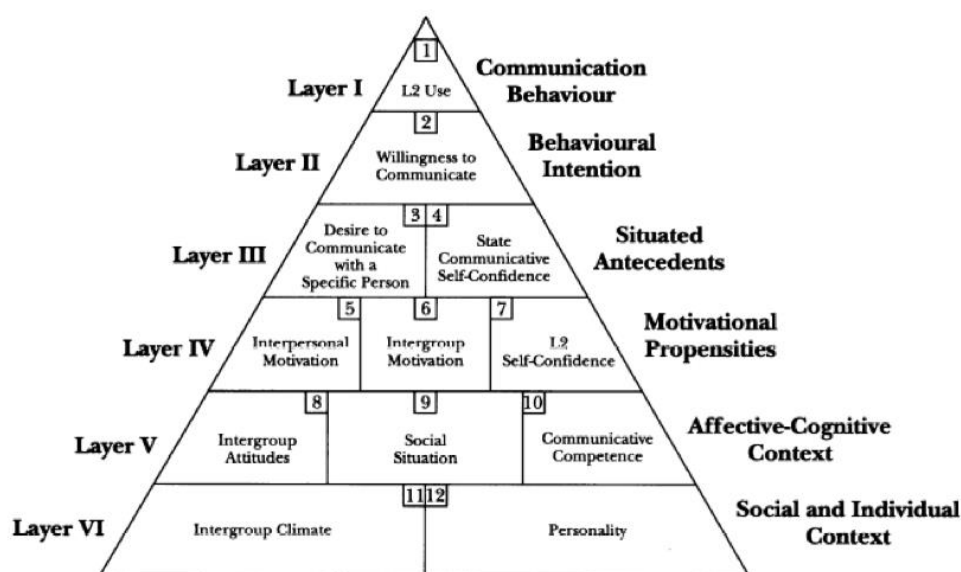
Figure 1. Pyramid of WTC model by MacIntyre et al. (1998).

While studying learners' WTC in ESL classrooms, there are empirical investigations focusing on the effects of various factors on learners' WTC. Based on the research studies of Baker and MacIntyre (2000), MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Donovan (2002), Hashimoto (2002) and Yashima (2002), it has been discovered that learners' motivation in language learning is directly or indirectly related to their WTC. According to Yashima (2002), it is presumed that learners' motivation is directly leading to L2 WTC. Therefore, it can be seen that learners' motivation has a significant influence on learners' WTC. Another crucial factor contributing to the enhancement of WTC is learners' attitude. MacIntyre & Charos (1996) suggested that if a person has a positive attitude when learning a second language, he or she will be more willing to use the language in future. There are studies indicating that learners' attitude is related to L2 WTC directly, for instance, the research conducted by Yashima (2002) suggested a direct relation between learners' attitude towards international community in the contexts of English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL).

Other than the above mentioned, some other studies have focused on the effects of personality traits on the degree of WTC. Based on the findings by MacIntyre and Charos (1996), the personality traits of conscientiousness, emotional stability (also known as neuroticism), extraversion, and intellect are related to learners' WTC through communication apprehension, perceived communication competence, and motivation. Similarly, MacIntyre

et al. (1999) have indicated the personality traits of emotional stability as well as extraversion and introversion are related to learners' WTC by perceived language competence and communication apprehension.

Apart from examining the influences of these factors on WTC, Cao & Philip (2006), MacIntyre et al (2003) and Yashima (2002) have also investigated the influence of students' self-confidence in L2 communication on their WTC. It is claimed that learners' perceived communication competence and their levels of anxiety amalgamate to form a state of L2 self-confidence, which results in WTC when combining with one's desire to speak to a particular person in a given situation. As a result, L2 confidence is also considered as one of the primary factors in affecting learners' second language acquisition.

In addition, Cao (2011), Kang (2005), Wen & Clement (2003) and Zarrinabadi (2014) explored the effects of teachers through studying the teachers' attitudes, teaching styles, involvement and immediacy while teaching in classrooms. Based on the research study done by Zarrinabadi (2014), teachers' wait time, teachers' decision on the topic, error correction and teachers' support are all crucial in influencing learners' WTC in a classroom. The result reveals that teachers who are offering a longer wait time for students to answer, choosing a topic that students are familiar with, providing delayed error corrections, and displaying friendly smiles as well as supportive behaviours, help facilitate and boost learners' WTC in L2.

Other than the effects of teachers, gender and age are also two important factors in influencing learners' WTC in learning a second language. MacIntyre et al. (2002) studied the influences of gender and age on learners' WTC in a Canadian junior high school with L2 French immersion students. They discovered that junior students showed a higher WTC in French while senior students showed a relative lower WTC in French and there was evidence showing that female students were more willing to communicate than male students. Similarly, Alemi, Mesbah & Tajeddin (2013) also conducted a research on gender and age in affecting learners' WTC in L2 in an Iranian private language institute. However, the results indicated that there were no significant effects of gender and age on learners' WTC in English. Besides, the research studies on the effects of age on learners' WTC conducted by Donovan and MacIntyre (2004), and Lu (2007) have found that learners' WTC increases as their ages increase and they become more willing to communicate.

While studying the effects of different factors on learners' WTC in L2, scholars and researchers have also examined the importance of WTC in second language acquisition. It is found that producing WTC is the ultimate aim of language learning so that learners can accomplish the aim of creating authentic and meaningful communication with people coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (MacIntyre et al. 1998). Kang (2005) also mentioned that generating WTC can help increase the chances of learners to be willing to use and speak their second language, and hence learners will be self-determining and autonomous in language learning and look for chances to use or communicate in L2 inside or outside the classrooms.

3. Objectives and research questions

Although there have been plenty of research studies regarding ESL learners' willingness to communicate in English, most of them were conducted in tertiary education. There seems to be a relatively small number of research studies investigating primary or elementary students' willingness to communicate in ESL classrooms. Therefore, this research investigates the WTC among primary learners. The study also compares lower and upper primary learners' WTC in English to identify if there are any differences due to age. Guided by the objectives, the present study asks the following research questions:

1. Are there any differences between lower and upper primary learners' WTC in English in Hong Kong ESL classrooms?

2. In addition, would learners' WTC be different when attending English lessons taught by NETs?

3. What are the factors affecting learners' WTC in English in ESL classrooms?

According to Zeng & Tan (2014), Chinese English learners are believed to perform well in grammar-based examination, whereas their spoken English seems to be the opposite. In addition, Liu (2002) also claimed that Chinese learners are often considered to be passive learners when learning English. For instance, some learners are too shy to speak English in class and may not take initiative to participate in English-related learning activities.

Therefore, the research questions are used to explore the differences between Hong Kong upper and lower primary learners' WTC in English based on the factors of age and gender, and investigate other possible factors for affecting learners' WTC in Hong Kong ESL classrooms. Through this research, the findings may be able to help pre-service or current English teachers identify the reasons for some learners with relatively lower WTC in the ESL classrooms and provide them insights for future teaching.

4.Methodology

1) Participants

   The participants of the study were a class of upper and lower primary students. While the lower primary class were Primary 2 (P.2) students, the upper primary class were Primary 6 (P.6) students. There were 30 participants from the P.2 class and P.6 class respectively. Therefore, the total number of participants was 60. The age of participants ranged from 7 – 13. All the participants had basic and simple knowledge of English in terms of the four aspects: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

2) Instrumentation

   The data collection was conducted in three stages. First of all, there were four times of in-class observations for both P.2 and P.6 classes during the regular English lessons taught by local Hong Kong-trained English teachers and Native-speaking English teachers' (NETs) English lessons. To conduct a deeper and more thorough observation, the students' WTC in NET's English lessons were used to compare with that of regular English lessons. Both regular and NETs English lessons were observed once in P.2 and P.6 classes respectively. In order to observe students' WTC in English, their in-class WTC observations were measured based on the In- Class WTC measurement proposed by Peng and Woodrow (2010). This measurement was chosen because it was designed to measure learners' WTC in speaking a second language in an instructional context. However, this measurement was slightly modified from the original measurement to cater to Hong Kong ESL classroom practices.

In-Class WTC measurement:

The observations were taken place based on the following nine items to see if the students have performed these items in ESL classrooms.

1. Take initiative to use English in small group discussion
2. Ask the teacher questions about course content in English
3. Ask classmates or group mates about words or grammar forms in English
4. Ask classmates or group mates about ideas related to the discussion topic in English
5. Give presentation or ideas in front of the whole class in English
6. Do demonstration in front of the whole class voluntarily
7. Respond to teachers' questions in English voluntarily
8. Give impromptu speech or presentation in front of the whole class
9. Correct mistakes when teachers point out

In September, the English teachers of the two P.2 and P.6 classes were informed about the lesson observations and the objectives of this current study. After a brief discussion with the teachers, they had agreed to set the observation dates within October, so all the lesson observations were done in October. Due to the school's request, videotaping was not allowed. Therefore, all the data collected from the observations were marked down on a note.

The regular English lessons of P.2 and P.6 classes were conducted on 16th October (Tuesday) and 19th October (Friday) respectively. As for the NETs lessons, the observations of P.2 and P.6 classes were taken place on 10th October (Wednesday) and 18th October (Thursday). Each lesson observation lasted for 35 minutes, as in one class period. During the observations, the frequency of students doing the nine items from the above In-class WTC measurement was counted. When conducting the observations, the observer sat at the back of the classroom to obtain a clearer view of all the students in class from the back so all the details would not be missed out.

To observe students' actual WTC in English during the lesson, students were not notified about the observation which might affect their in-class performance and WTC in ESL classrooms. Hence, only the teachers who were delivering the lessons were informed about the observations.

After the in-class observations, there were individual interview sessions with a total of nine students. Four students were recruited from the observed P.2 class while the other five students were from the observed P.6 class. A stratified sampling method was used to recruit participants for individual interviews. Based on the students' performances during the in-class observations, they were recruited from various levels of WTC: high, intermediate and low. Hence, three students from each WTC level were invited to do the interviews. In the group of high WTC level, there were one student from the P.2 class and two students from the P.6 class. As for the group of intermediate WTC level, there were one P.2 student and two P.6 students, whereas, there were two P.2 students and one P.6 student in the low WTC group.

Since all the participants were Cantonese speakers, the interviews were conducted in Cantonese to help students understand the questions better as well as making the conversation easier. The interviews were conducted in a conversation style in which each individual was asked about their WTC in English and the factors for influencing their WTC in English during classes. The whole process of interview sessions began on 11th November and finished on 28th November. As there were nine interviewees, there were a total of nine individual interviews. Each individual interview lasted for 8 – 10 minutes and was recorded for transcriptions.

Finally, questionnaires were given out to all 60 participating students so a more comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting learners' WTC in English and the effect of their WTC on their in-class performances could be explored. All the questionnaires were given out on 6th December and collected on 10th December. Only 44 students agreed to do the questionnaires, with 22 students from P.2 and P.6 classes respectively. All the participating students were Cantonese speakers, so the questionnaires were presented in Chinese to facilitate students' understanding of the questions.

5. Results and Discussion

1. *Differences between lower and upper primary learners' WTC in regular English and NETs lessons*

Of 60 participants who participated in the in-class observations, 30 of them were from a P.2 class while the rest were from a P.6 class. In the P.2 class, there were 17 (57%) female and 13 (43%) male learners. In the P.6 class, there were 16 (53%) female and 14 (47%) male learners. All the participants were Cantonese speakers and had basic knowledge of English.

Based on the data retrieved from the in-class observations, there are several noticeable features between the learners' WTC in English in lower and upper primary ESL classroom, and it is believed to be related to the influence of age in learners' WTC in English during the English lessons. While using the in-class observation measurement as mentioned above, there are distinct variations between the WTC of lower and upper primary English learners corresponding to the nine items as stated in the measurement.

Table 1. Results of in-class observation of the Regular English lesson

Regular English lesson (35 minutes)	P.2 students Frequency	P.6 students Frequency
1. Take initiative to use English in small group discussion	14	8
2. Ask the teacher questions about course content in English	9	7
3. Ask classmates or group mates about words or grammar forms in English	5	4
4. Ask classmates or group mates about ideas related to the discussion topic in English	8	6
5. Give presentation or ideas in front of the whole class in English	13	5
6. Do demonstration in front of the whole class Voluntarily	16	7
7. Respond to teachers' questions in English voluntarily	19	9
8. Give impromptu speech or presentation in front of the whole class	6	3
9. Correct mistakes when teachers point out	9	7

In the regular English lessons (taught by locally- trained English teachers)(see Table 1), both lower and upper primary learners developed a low tendency of taking initiative to speak English in small group discussions. However, it is observed that the reasons for this phenomenon are out of various intentions. For lower primary learners, they have a relatively weaker English proficiency (due to a shorter period of time in studying English) and lack the key vocabulary terms or items required for the discussion. And consequently, they preferred to use Cantonese to exchange ideas and discuss the issue so as to facilitate communication among group mates. Similarly, the upper primary learners who have a longer period of studying English, preferred to use Cantonese for group discussion while some of the students later revealed in an individual interview that they were shy and afraid of making mistakes for speaking English during the group discussions.

Another interesting phenomenon is that lower primary learners tended to respond to teachers' questions in English voluntarily while the upper primary learners did not. The lower primary learners were very engaged in the lessons and were active in raising hands for answering teacher's questions, whereas, the upper primary learners tended to be passive in the lesson and remain silent when the teacher was raising a question. When observing the learners' WTC in giving presentations and doing demonstrations in front of the whole class, there is a pronounced difference between the two groups. The engagement of lower primary learners in presenting ideas or doing demonstrations in front of the whole class seems to be higher than that of the upper primary learners. With more than half of the students were willing to volunteer to present their ideas or demonstrate in class that some of the more proficient learners were willing to come out and volunteer to deliver an impromptu speech in front of the whole class. By contrast, the upper primary learners were less active and engaged in these activities that they tended to sit still and remained quiet to wait for the teacher to pick a student to do instead of volunteering, and they were particularly afraid of being selected for the giving an impromptu speech. Nevertheless, both upper and lower primary learners shared similar WTC when asking the teacher questions about the course content in English, asking classmates or groupmates words grammar forms or discussion ideas in English, and correcting mistakes when the teacher pointed out.

Table 2. Results of in-class observation of the NETs lesson

NET lesson (35 minutes)	P.2 students Frequency	P.6 students Frequency
1. Take initiative to use English in small group discussion	20	14
2. Ask the teacher questions about course content in English	12	10
3. Ask classmates or group mates about words or grammar forms in English	6	5
4. Ask classmates or group mates about ideas related to the discussion topic in English	7	5
5. Give presentation or ideas in front of the whole class in English	9	5
6. Do demonstration in front of the whole class voluntarily	8	5
7. Respond to teachers' questions in English voluntarily	20	8
8. Give impromptu speech or presentation in front of the whole class	4	2
9. Correct mistakes when teachers point out	9	6

In the NETs lesson (see Table 2), both lower and upper primary learners were willing to take initiative to use English as the main communicative language in small group discussions. The lower primary group showed a higher frequency of speaking English while the upper primary group showed a relatively lower frequency of speaking English. And accordingly, they were more willing to use English to exchange ideas with groupmates or discuss ideas related to the discussion topics. Since the students were arranged to sit in four big groups of eight people, the numbers of speech given per each student in lower and upper primary group are 4-5 times and 2-3 times within a 10-minute discussion respectively. Comparing with lower primary learners, there were several unintended moments of silence within the discussion by the upper primary learners. Furthermore, learners from both groups were more willing to use English to ask teacher questions about the course content or classwork. Interestingly, the lower primary learners became even more engaged in responding to teacher's questions

voluntarily in the NET lessons. Yet, the situation was vice versa for upper primary learners that they were less active in answering teacher's questions compared to their performance in the regular English lessons, only a few students with stronger verbal English were willing to respond to teacher's questions. Regarding the presentation of ideas, delivering speech (both prepared and impromptu speech) or doing demonstration in front of the whole class in the NET lessons, the WTC of lower primary learners reduced a bit with only half of the students were willing to volunteer to present individual findings or do demonstration, and only four high-achievers in class were willing to deliver a speech voluntarily in English. The situation became even worse among upper primary learners, in which majority of the class were not actively involved in class activities with most of the students remained silent when asked to present ideas or give out a speech. Therefore, the teacher often needed to spend plenty of wait time for students to take initiatives or select volunteers.

Through the comparison between observations in regular English and NET lessons, it is particular true of lower and upper primary learners displaying differences in their WTC in English. Based on the findings, learners from both groups showed a higher WTC in group discussion during the NET lessons though the WTC of lower primary learners is shown higher than that of upper primary learners. Moreover, both groups did not display similar level of WTC when being asked to present ideas or deliver speeches in the NET lessons as compared to that of regular English lessons, which indicates that they were more willing to participate such individual activities in regular English lessons. In short, it is likely that the WTC of upper primary learners is considered relatively lower than that of the lower primary learners.

Among these 60 participants, 44 of them had completed the questionnaires after the in- class observations, with 22 students from each class (a P.2 and P.6 class). The learners are categorized into two age groups: P.2 students (about 7 – 8 years old) and P.6 students (about 12 – 13 years old). The data collected from the questionnaires (on the scale of 1 to 4, where 1 = absolutely not willing; 4 =absolutely willing) were later analyzed by mean of SPSS. The results of the questionnaires show a variation on the WTC of Hong Kong primary learners in particular aspects in the ESL classrooms.

An independent *t*-test was therefore used to compare the WTC of learners between these two age groups. As Table 3 illustrates the mean values of WTC for P.2 and P.6 learners are 2.91

and 2.55 respectively in terms of age in affecting learners' WTC in using English for a group discussion. However, the result of an independent *t*-test shows that the difference is not statistically significant (p=0.17), implying that there is no significant difference between the WTC of lower and upper primary learners in taking initiatives to speak English in group discussions. This result seems to be contradicting with the results retrieved from the class observations.

Table 3. T-test result of age on primary learners' WTC in speaking English during group discussion

	P.2 students	**P.6 students**	
	Mean	**Mean**	**p-value**
Speaking English during group discussion	2.91	2.55	0.17

According to Table 4, the result of an independent sample t-test shows the lower primary learners (mean= 2.91) are more willing to communicate in order to deliver an impromptu speech than the upper primary students are (mean= 1.5) in a statistically significant way (p=0.01). It implies that age is related to learners' WTC when it comes to presenting a speech without any preparation beforehand. Younger learners appear to be more willing to give out unprepared speech or presentation in the English lessons rather than those older learners at school.

Table 4. T-test result of age on primary learners' WTC in delivering an impromptu speech

	P.2 students	**P.6 students**	
	Mean	**Mean**	**p-value**
Delivering an impromptu speech	2.91	1.50	0.01

Table 5. T-test result of age on primary learners' WTC in communicating with NETs

	P.2 students	P.6 students	
	Mean	Mean	p-value
Delivering an impromptu speech	2.91	1.50	0.01

In addition, the result of another independent sample t-test (see Table 5) shows that the lower primary learners (mean=3.45) are more willing to communicate with NETs in ESL classrooms than the upper primary learners (mean=1.82), is in a statistically significant way (p=0.01). The result suggests that age serves as a crucial factor in reducing the WTC of upper primary students towards the choice of communicating with a NET in the lessons. Younger learners are more willing to make their attempts to speak to or communicate with Native-English speakers in a classroom setting.

Based on the findings, younger English learners show a higher WTC than that of older English learners in a primary educational setting. This result aligns with the study carried out by Gardner and Smythe in 1975, in which grade 7 students were found to have highly positive attitudes towards the acquisition of French and correspondently ascribed to a higher WTC while comparing with the learners of grade 8, 9 and 10. It is likely that young learners are more willing to speak in English during the English lessons (including both regular and NET lessons) as they are just beginning to learn English as a second language and so their interest towards English is gradually increasing as if they are approaching a new object, and thus their WTC is higher comparatively. Similarly, Gardner and Smythe (1975) made an explanation for the higher WTC in younger learners based on their research study that they suggested that grade 7 learners held a "heightened keenness" when they first began learning French yet their enthusiasm towards learning French became dormant as their study to acquire the proficiency of the language.

In addition, the English curriculum for lower primary students in Hong Kong covers less challenging and interesting topics for younger children. Although the result proves that age poses certain effect on learners' WTC when acquiring a second language, the findings of the result are in contrast with the previous studies carried out by MacIntyre et al. (2002), Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) and Lu (2007), in which all three studies claimed that

learners' WTC in L2 increases with their ages. In the research conducted by MacIntyre et al. (2002), the influence of age on learners' WTC and other WTC- related variables are examined, which included perceived competence, L2 motivation, and apprehension, in a high school with a number of 268 junior students as the target research participants whom were undergoing a L2 French immersion program in the Canadian context. The participants were ranged from grades 7 to 9, with age ranging from 11 to 16. The results showed that students' L2 WTC, frequency of communication and perceived competence increased as they proceeded from grades 7 to 8 while that of grades 8 and 9 remained constant. This is further supported by the study of Lu (2007) when investigating the effect of age on learners' willingness to communicate, and he discovered that people's degree of WTC rises as they age. Conversely, the findings of this research suggest a negative correlation of age on learners' L2 WTC, and this can be related to the educational setting of this study that both groups of the participants were primary students who are younger learners comparing with the participants in the previous studies, and so the impact of age on their L2 WTC pattern may vary.

Furthermore, it is found that lower primary learners were more willing to communicate and interact with NETs during the lessons rather than upper primary learners. This can be very likely in relation to the Chinese concept of face which is also known as *mianzi*, that they fear making mistakes when speaking English and lead to the fear of face loss correspondently. As people's age increases, their awareness and consciousness towards the concept of face grow gradually. In this case, the lower primary students had not yet reached the realization of the Chinese concept of face, and therefore they had less fear and awareness about making grammatical mistakes or accuracy issues when speaking English to NET. Whereas, the upper primary students were slowly developing consciousness about their faces that they did not want to risk losing their faces or be embarrassed if they could not be able to communicate with the NETs through an accurate, fluent and correct spoken English. Thus, they chose not to talk to or reduce the chances of communicating with native- English speakers. As Zhong (2013) mentioned in her study, Chinese learners regard the act of speaking English in front of others with errors as taking the risks of losing face and be judged negatively by their classmates or peers. This also explains why the upper primary learners presented a lower WTC during the NET lessons. And consequently, they tended to avoid speaking with the NETs (who are native English speakers) even if they had questions about the lesson content or clarification of the instructions, and it was also impossible to see a student having just a

simple daily chat with the NETs. As a result, the interaction between the NETs and the upper primary students in the English lessons is considered lower comparing with the lower primary students.

2. Factors affecting the WTC of learners

After the in-class observations in both regular English and NET lessons, a total of nine students were selected for individual interviews based on their WTC levels in English to enable a deeper exploration of the factors affecting their WTC.

All the participants were given pseudonyms due to confidentiality. Jane is P.6 student and she has studied English for nine years. She has a strong English background and she can speak English fluently. Jenny is also a P.6 student and she has learned English since kindergarten so she is proficient in both written and spoken English. Lily is a P.2 student and her English is one of the best in class. Mary is a P.6 student and her English proficiency level belongs to the middle level among her classmates. Peter is a P.2 student and he came to Hong Kong five years so he has learned English for five years now. Tom is a P.6 student and his written English is very proficient. Both Anna and Sally are P.2 students and they came from mainland China. They started learning English a year ago. As for Jeff, he is a P.6 student and he has been studying English since kindergarten. The background of these nine participants can be found in table 6.

Table 6. Background information of participants

Name of participants (Age)	WTC level in English
Jane (12)	High WTC
Jenny (11)	High WTC
Lily (8)	High WTC
Mary (13)	Intermediate WTC
Peter (7)	Intermediate WTC
Tom (12)	Intermediate WTC

Table 6. (Continued)

Anna (8)	Low WTC
Sally (8)	Low WTC
Jeff (12)	Low WTC

2.1 Gender and WTC

The relationship between age and learners' willingness to communicate in English was investigated using an independent sample t-test. For primary two students, the mean values are 3.02 for female learners and 3.14 for male learners (see Table 7). The test comparing learners' WTC across genders finds no significant difference (p=0.715). The result suggests that the impact of gender on the WTC of lower primary learners is not significant.

Table 7. T-test result of gender on P.2 learners' WTC

	P.2 students
	Mean
Female	3.02
Male	3.14
p-value	0.715

For primary six students, the mean values are 2.5 for female learners and 1.64 for male learners (see Table 8). An independent sample t-test comparing learners' WTC across genders shows a significant difference (p=0.026). The result indicates that gender has an impact on the WTC of P.6 students. Among the P.6 students, the female learners are more willing to speak during the lessons than the male learners.

Table 8. T-test result of gender on P.6 learners' WTC

	P.6 students
	Mean
Female	2.5
Male	1.64
p-value	0.026

As the findings of the questionnaires show, the effect of gender on learners' WTC in English in the ESL classrooms becomes more marked as their ages increase, with female learners showing a higher WTC than the male learners. In addition to the result of the questionnaires, the data obtained from individual interviews also reveal a higher WTC of female learners in the upper primary English classrooms. Some of the female participants attributed this to their love of learning English and so most of the English ambassadors at school were female. Through the interviews, a few male participants suggested that they were not interested in the subject of English, and they were more fond of science and mathematics so they did not engage much in the English lessons. This leads to a lower L2 WTC.

This current result shows similar findings with the studies carried out by MacIntyre et al. (2002), and Donovan and MacIntyre (2004), which proved the effect of gender on learners' L2 WTC. For instance, the result of the study by MacIntyre et al. (2002) indicated that female learners were more willing to communicate in L2 than the male learners in the Canadian context. As for the research by Donovan and MacIntyre (2004), they examined the effect of gender on learners' WTC among junior high school, senior high school and university students, and the result supported the previous findings from MacIntyre et al. (2002) that the female learners had a higher WTC than male within the junior high school group while there were no significant differences in the other two groups. Livingston (2007) also claimed that female language learners are expected to be more talkative and expressive with topics about or surrounding themselves. In this present study, the most likely reason to explain why female learners having a higher WTC than the male learners is the positive attitude held by the female learners when learning a language, which can be seen from the following excerpts from upper primary learners who participated in the interviews:

> *I like English. I like speaking English, reading English books or novels. I just enjoy the English lessons so I am willing to communicate with my teacher or classmates. (Jane, aged 12, high WTC)*

> *English lessons are one of my favourite sessions at school. I think learning English is fun and I like it more than any other subjects So, I make use the time in the English lessons to practice my English and I am willing to communicate in English with my classmates and teachers as well. (Jenny, aged 11, high WTC)*

Apart from the above two responses, most of the other female participants also claimed an interest in learning English during individual interviews. With most of the participants claiming their interest or love in English, this illustrates that they held a positive attitude towards learning English, whereas, the male learners did not. Since they loved or had a huge interest in English, they cherished every moment in the English lessons to speak English that some of them even viewed this as an opportunity to practice English. However, this is not what the male participants thought about when they had English lessons. Most of them usually stayed quiet throughout the lessons, yet they would speak English occasionally only when the teacher force or request them to. As a result, they were not speaking English out of their will, resulting in a low WTC. As Gardner (1985) suggests that female often demonstrate a more positive attitude towards language learning that an attitudinal difference may be a reason for the sex differences in the achievement of language learning. Moreover, Clark & Trafford (1995) mentioned that modern languages are regarded as a 'traditionally female subject' that they show more interest in language subjects rather than men, which can also explain why the female learners are more willing to communicate in English during the lessons.

2.2 L2 self- confidence

As Yashima (2002) and Clement et al. (2003) claimed that L2 self- confidence is formed by the coalescence of self-perceived communication competence and levels of L2 anxiety (also known as communication apprehension). Moreover, MacIntyre (1994) proposes that self-perceived competence and communication apprehensions as two main antecedents of WTC. Hence, these two elements are crucial in determining one's L2 self- confidence on WTC.

Self-perceived competence or self- perceived communication competence (SPCC) refer to the "sufficient ability of passing along or giving information and being able to make known by writing or talking" (McCroskey, 1984, P. 261). In general, SPCC is defined as how a person perceives his or her own communicative competence in a certain situation or context.

Based on the findings from the interviews, SPCC was rated as one of the major concerns related to participants' WTC when asked about the reason why they did not speak English during the lessons. In the interviews, a total of four participants from both age groups claimed that their L2 WTC depended on how they considered their English proficiency level, that is, if one thinks his or her English proficiency level is low or has a weak spoken English, then he

or she will not speak English very often to avoid the fear of making mistakes and thus having a lower WTC. Interestingly, even for participants whose English proficiency levels belonged to the intermediate level or above, they still presented a low L2 WTC in the English lessons that they would not volunteer to deliver speech or present ideas in the class or give out simple and short answers in response to teacher's elicitation, and seldom take initiatives to speak English in group discussions, preferably using Cantonese instead. This phenomenon is particularly common among the upper primary learners that they considered their English proficiency level in two separate parts: written and spoken, which means one's excellency in written English proficiency level does not represent one's ability to produce or communicate in fluent and accurate spoken English. Consequently, many of upper primary learners with good written English proficiency level did not possess a relatively higher WTC compared to the others in their class. Mercer (2011) thinks that SPCC plays an important in foreign language learning since any inaccurate or accurate self-beliefs can easily cause a hindrance or strong help in the process of learning. In addition, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) point out that perceived communicative competence can influence the frequency of L2 use. As a result, it is discovered that only the learners who saw themselves being competent in spoken English or English communication, were willing to communicate in English with teachers or classmates in the upper primary ESL classrooms while the others were hindered by their self-beliefs, leading to a lower tendency of speaking English.

Other than SPCC, L2 anxiety or communication apprehension also plays a role in L2 self-confidence on learners' L2 WTC. The term 'communication apprehension' is defined as a fear caused in oral or verbal communication (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners with communication apprehension are very likely to receive adverse effect on their L2 learning as well as their L2 performance.

L2 anxiety or communication apprehension is precisely what some of the participants considered to be another main reason for their low WTC in English lessons. A total of four upper and lower primary participants revealed that the major reason for not willing to speak English in the lessons was the fear or anxiety generated when speaking English. And correspondently, they would not take initiatives to deliver a speech or do presentation in front of the whole class unless the teacher requested or invited them. They would be very nervous and frightened even if they were well-prepared for the presentation or speech. Eventually, some of the students would refuse to do so or reject the teacher's invitation or request.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) believe that learners with L2 anxiety have a higher tendency of underestimating their abilities, which also aligns with the view of MacIntyre et al. (1998) that anxiety is posing as an influence on learners' perception of their own L2 competence. The majority of participants stated in the interview that their anxiety and fear led them to consider themselves as incompetent or having poor English proficiency level, which caused them not wanting to take the risk of speaking English in front of the whole class in the avoidance of making mistakes, and subsequently they became less willing to speak English during the lessons.

Overall, the L2 anxiety or communication apprehension is linked with the perceived communication competence. The two items present a positive correlation: the lower the levels of L2 anxiety lead to a better perceived communication competence; the higher the levels of L2 anxiety lead to a worse perceived communication competence, which will eventually attribute to a low L2 self-confidence that brings a negative effect on learners' L2 WTC.

2.3 Effects of teachers

There has been several studies exploring the effects of teachers on learners' WTC and suggesting that teachers' teaching style, involvement, and attitude pose a determining and crucial impact on learners' WTC as well as their engagement and participation in the lessons (Wen & Clement, 2003; Kang 2005; Cao, 2011; MacIntyre et al., 2011). The effects of teachers are thus categorized into two aspects for the present study: 1) teachers' support and encouragement, and 2) choice of topics, which were the two most voted aspects by the participants in regard to the effects of teachers.

2.3.1 Teacher's support and encouragement

Wen and Clement (2003) discovered that a teacher's support is a key influence on learners' WTC. Therefore, the following excerpts present how teacher's support affects learners' tendency to communicate and unwillingness to communicate in ESL classrooms.

In the excerpts below, an upper primary student considered the lack of teacher's support and encouragement as an important factor leading to the low WTC or unwillingness to communicate:

I am willing to communicate in English when my teacher is not shouting at us (me and my classmates). When she scolds us, I got scared and so I am unwilling to communicate until the lesson ends because I am afraid if I give wrong answers, she will shout at me too. (Tom, aged 12, intermediate WTC)

Learners' tendency to communicate in English during ESL lessons will greatly increase and enhance when their teachers provide them support and encourage them to speak more English, as shown in the following excerpt:

If my teacher is willing to give some encouragement and support to me, I maybe less nervous and so will be very much willing to communicate in English with her or my classmates during the lesson. I will be willing to volunteer in answering her questions, asking her questions related to the lesson, and actively engaging in class activities. (Mary, aged 13, intermediate WTC)

The results show that learners prefer having teacher's support and encouragement, which fosters them to have a higher tendency to communicate in or speak English. Similarly, the lower primary learners also considered this as one of the most influential reasons of their willingness to communicate in the English lessons that the excerpts below indicate the importance of teacher's support and encouragement in fostering a higher L2 WTC of the learners:

I am nervous to speak English in front of the class but I feel better when my teacher gives me support and help when I don't know how to answer her questions or I don't know how to pronounce the English words. Sometimes, my English teacher gives us some incentives such as small gifts or points for our group to encourage us to speak up more. Eventually, many of my classmates volunteer to answer her questions and do demonstration or presentation because we all want her gifts. (Peter, aged 7, intermediate WTC)

My teacher is very nice and friendly. I like her so much because she never shouts at me even when my English is not good. She always encourages me to engage more in the class activities and she will invite me to answer her questions. I will try even if I don't know and she will not blame me when I can't get the right response. (Lily, aged 8, high WTC)

It is obvious that a teacher's support and encouragement can be very meaningful to learners and help enhance their WTC during the lessons. This kind of support and encouragement can eventually transform into a state of learners being fond of their teachers, which has a direct influence on learners' WTC. As the study by Cao (2011) found that students are more willing to participate or engage in the lessons actively and ask questions if they like their teacher. Thus, the learners' L2 WTC is pushed by their teachers' support and encouragement in the beginning and gradually convert to the force of their favorite teacher in leading them to a higher WTC in the ESL classroom. Besides, teachers' support and encouragement also serve as a good inhibitor on L2 anxiety or communication apprehension that the learners will become calmer and more confident when they receive support from their teachers. The social support from a tutor or teacher aids in lowering learners' anxiety levels, and act as a significant role in situational WTC as well as constructing a sense of security (Kang, 2005). Hence, there is a marked effect of teachers on the learners' WTC in the ESL classrooms regardless of the age of learners.

2.3.2 Teacher's choice of topic

Teacher's decision on the topics of the lessons was found to have an impact on learners' WTC. There were several research studies confirming the effect of discussion topic chosen by teachers on the WTC of learners (Kang, 2005; Cao & Philip, 2006; MacIntyre et al., 2011). Additionally, MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggested that one's familiarity with a certain topic has a critical effect on one's WTC in terms of using the language, that is, a person's L2 self-confidence may greatly increase if he or she holds a certain degree of knowledge about the topic being chosen by teachers for discussion; Conversely, one's WTC is hindered by his or her unfamiliarity of the topics. Both P.2 and P.6 participants who were observed to be one of the less willing to communicate in English in the lessons, claimed the unfamiliarity of topics as a hindrance for them attempting to speak English during the lessons or in the group discussion. Two of the participants stated as followed:

I want to speak English more too but sometimes I don't know very much about the topic that Miss So is talking about. I don't know the vocabulary items needed to discuss the topic so I just stay quiet. (Anna, aged 8, low WTC)

> *I like dogs. I remembered Miss So had once showed a video about dogs and asked us to discuss which type of dog we want. I was so happy because I could finally discuss and share what I know about dogs. (Sally, aged 8, low WTC)*

> *If my teacher can show us a Marvel movie and ask us to discuss about it, I think the whole class will be very willing to use English to discuss about every superhero in the movie. (Jeff, aged 12, low WTC)*

Five participants indicated the selection of topics by their teachers for the lesson was highly related to their tendency of speaking English and would possibly display a higher WTC if they were familiar with the topics and were very willing to share what they know about the topic to their classmates or teacher by using English. A student also claimed that an interesting topic would definitely change her WTC positively in the following excerpt:

> *Many of the topics chosen by my teacher were boring and I don't think there is much to talk about so we seldom speak English in the lessons. (Mary, aged 13, intermediate WTC)*

In a broad sense, teacher's choice of a topic shows a positive correlation with learners' L2 WTC as shown in this study. If the topic selected is one of the learners' preference, then they will be more willing to communicate in ESL classrooms. Based on Kang's study (2005), learners' knowledge of the topic and their securities are closely linked that their sense of insecurity and uncertainty originate from the unfamiliarity of topic as a result of the fear from ceasing conversation due to the lack of ideas or the fright of their comprehension ability. The data obtained from this present study seems to be consistent with the findings of Kang's research and proves that topic chosen by the teachers may lead to a lower WTC or tendency to speak English due to unfamiliarity of topics. Another situation of having a low tendency to speak English is probably learners' uninterest in the topics. Zarrinabadi (2014) who examined the effects of teachers on learners' WTC reported that an intriguing and interesting topic could ultimately lead to higher classroom engagement and participation, which will result in higher WTC. This is again proven in this present study with learners claiming an interest in the topics can help alter their WTC in English because they will be more active and willing to talk about the topics that they are interested in or infatuated with. Finally, this study of the effect of topic on learners' WTC in ESL classrooms may help shed light on the further pedagogical implications to enhance the language learning for L2 learners.

2.4 Personality traits

From the responses of the participants in the interview session, only two participants thought their personality traits were to be responsible for their unwillingness to communicate in English when asking about the reasons why they did not tend to speak English during the English lessons. As McCroskey & Richmond (1990) pointed that people with extroverted personality are more outgoing and good at communicating with others, whereas, introverted individuals are less sociable, introspective and do not value the need for communication. To put it simply, the extroverts are more willing to communicate while the introverts prefer to be tranquil.

In the following excerpts, the participants with a lower WTC claimed that their introverted personality was the reason why they did not speak much English throughout the English lessons.

> *I don't speak much English because I just don't feel like talking a lot. I like to listen to others' opinions rather than expressing my own because my English is not good. (Jeff, aged 12, low WTC)*

> *I like to be quiet and I am not very good with communicating with people so I only speak when I have to, especially responding to teacher's questions. (Tom, aged 12, intermediate WTC)*

> *I like to talk to people so I will try to use all the English I know to communicate with them, especially with the NETs. (Jane, aged 12, high WTC)*

It is apparent the responses from the upper primary learners revealed that personality traits play quite a crucial role in learners' WTC in English. Even for learners who displayed intermediate WTC in the previous lesson observation, who claimed introverted personality as a barrier for him to speak English, so he only speaks English when it is necessary. However, the effect of personality traits on the WTC of lower primary learners seems to be less significant as they claimed that their lower WTC is mostly due to their perceived language competence, as the followed shows:

I would like to speak more English if I know more English words and make less mistakes. I don't think it is about my personality at all. (Anna, aged 8, low WTC)

I like to be quiet sometimes but it does not affect my willingness to speak English. I speak English everytime when we have group discussion. Sometimes, I volunteer to do demonstration too. (Peter, aged 7, intermediate WTC)

Based on the excerpts retrieved from the interviews, the responses from both age groups show quite a difference on the influence of personality traits in learners' WTC in English lessons. It is noticeable that one's personality traits have a more significant impact on his or her WTC in ESL classrooms among the upper primary students rather than the lower primary students. The research by MacIntyre (1994) reported that an introverted personality could reflect impacts on learners' WTC in terms of perceived competence and communication apprehension. Hence, certain personality traits of the introverted learners affect their perceptions towards their communication and language competence that they are less sociable and not good at communicating with others in English because of their perceived competence. As a result, their frequency or tendency to speak English in the lessons is greatly reduced.

A previous study done by Mahdi (2014) investigated the importance of personality traits on the WTC of EFL students in Saudi Arabia at a tertiary institution. He concluded that introverted students were inhibited by their personality which led to the unwillingness to communicate not only in English but also in their mother tongue, suggesting that introversion has led to a lower WTC in both L1 and L2. He added that extroverted students were very chatty, sociable and confident, presented a higher WTC even in an unfamiliar environment or context. In this present study, learners who displayed an introverted personality were also observed to be quiet and less sociable individuals in daily school life, and their friends regarded them as "super quiet persons in the world" and disclosed that they did not talk much even in other lessons such as Chinese and Maths. Some classmates revealed that even some of the students with good English proficiency level did not speak English much in English lessons because they "just don't like to talk." When asked about the learners who spoke most frequent in English lessons, they highlighted the learners who spoke English frequently in the lessons were not one of the best students in English that they "like to talk and express their views." Through this, it can be concluded that personality traits have a certain degree of

influence on learners' WTC in English, and it can be irrelevant to their English proficiency levels in some occasions.

6. Pedagogical Implications
Based on the findings of this present research, there are several possible ways to improve the WTC of primary learners.

Firstly, it is the support of teacher in the English Language Teaching, given the fact that both lower and upper primary learners consider the role of their teachers as one of the factors in relation to their WTC. In a Chinese context, teachers are regarded as an authority in class, and so students often attempt to seek appraisals from teachers. The involvement and immediacy of teachers are of paramount importance for affecting the learners' efficiency as well as their learning attitudes, especially in a Chinese setting (Wen & Clement, 2003). On this account, English teachers are recommended to give more verbal support such as encouragement to motivate learners to speak and use more English in class. If learners present a wrong answer, teachers should say "good try" or "almost, close" instead of pointing out the mistake directly and bluntly, which may hurt learners' feeling and make them afraid of making mistakes so they may not speak up again. This can help strengthen the confidence of learners who are struggling with L2 anxiety or considering themselves less competent or holding fear of making mistakes and helps foster a higher WTC in class.

Secondly, it is the choice of topics. As shown in the above, quite some learners decided their tendencies to speak English based on the topics presented or taught in class. If the topics are related to learners' everyday life which they are familiar with or something they are interested in, they are very much willing to speak English. And hence, English teachers may take this into account when deciding what to teach or designing lesson plans.

7. Limitations
Due to the school's request, the times of in-class observations were restrained. To avoid any inconvenience to the teachers and students, the school only allowed two observations for each class (including both NET and regular English lessons). Therefore, only one observation was permitted for each English lesson. As a result, the data collected from in-class observations might not be sufficient.

Besides, the sample size of the data was small. The present study only took place in one primary school and so the number of participants was relatively smaller compared with previous studies related to learners' WTC. Hence, the findings related to the WTC of Hong Kong primary learners cannot be overgeneralized.

8. Conclusion

The reason why I chose to initiate this research is from my observation during my teaching practicum. I noticed that a lot of Hong Kong primary students tended to be proactive when attending English lessons. Some of them were too shy or afraid to speak English while some of them were not confident about themselves in speaking English. Therefore, I would like to study the reasons for this phenomenon and find out the possible factors about their tendencies to communicate in or speak English. Hence, the objective of this paper is to study the WTC of primary learners in Hong Kong ESL classrooms and the possible factors for affecting their WTC. Generally, lower primary learners were more willing to communicate in English in ESL classrooms than the upper primary learners. Besides, female primary learners also showed a higher WTC than that of male learners that they were more willing to speak English and participate in in-class English activities. Other than age and gender, other possible factors such as L2 self-confidence, effects of teachers and personality traits also display influences in primary learners' WTC.

Through this research, it is hoped that this paper can provide pre-service and current English teachers with pedagogical insights about English Language Teaching to further enhance English learners' WTC in primary educational settings. Based on the factors from the findings, teachers can perhaps refer to this research to refine and develop their teaching strategies to encourage a higher WTC in English classrooms.

Moreover, the findings of this present study have produced some insights for future studies about L2 WTC of young learners in primary or elementary schools. As most studies related to learners' WTC focused on secondary students or tertiary students, this paper enables scholars or teachers to have a more comprehensive understanding about young learners' WTC in ESL classrooms and serves a springboard for future investigations related to the WTC of primary learners.

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