

An Exploration of Students' Willingness to Communicate in Thai EFL Online Classroom

Patthaya Punyaporn

Language Institute, Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand
Corresponding Author: patthaya@g.swu.ac.th

Kittitouch Soontornwipast

Language Institute, Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand

Received:03/03/2022

Accepted: 06/03/2022

Published: 07/25/2022

Abstract

This study aims at exploring the level of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms. The crucial evidence from students' voices was investigated through the mixed-methods paradigm, called exploratory sequential research design which employed a qualitative, followed by a quantitative approach to answer the main research question that investigated the levels of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms. In the first phase, qualitative data was collected and analyzed from focus group interviews to elicit the rich data in deep detail and explain some outstanding points of view from the participants at the university level. Then, the results from the qualitative phase were used as a guideline to develop the questionnaires which were relevant to the willingness to communicate in online classrooms. One thousand one hundred and nineteen participants ($N=1,119$) responded to the questionnaires. Results showed that the salient factors that influenced the level of students' willingness to communicate in online classrooms were communication channels, students' beliefs, peer influence, teachers' characteristics, teaching methods, and online classroom atmosphere. The findings of this study can create teachers' awareness when teaching online and can be used to seek out how to improve themselves and adjust their own teaching approach to enhance their students' online language learning outcomes in the future. Recommendations for further research are addressed in the end.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, online classes, Thai EFL undergraduate students, Thai EFL online classroom, willingness to communicate

Cite as: Punyaporn, P., & Soontornwipast, K. (2022). An Exploration of Students' Willingness to Communicate in Thai EFL Online Classroom. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on CALL (8)*. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call8.5>

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis has suddenly affected the educational system all around the world. The Thai educational system has also been disrupted by this crisis. To control the spread of Coronavirus, schools and academic institutions are all shut down suddenly and the way of teaching has changed dramatically and shifted away from the normal classroom to online teaching and learning by using various digital platforms. Simply put, the face of Thai education has been transformed according to the spread of Coronavirus. Both teachers and students have to work and study from home which has never happened before and we inevitably have to face a new challenge and try hard to adapt ourselves to the new social setting. Therefore, learning online has been providing opportunities for more learners to continue their education according to the current situation. The emergence of online education has created a channel where students no longer need to be able to meet face-to-face in the normal classroom to complete a course. The convenience and flexibility can be offered by the familiar words “anytime”, and “anywhere” which meant that accessibility can be seen as an advantage in the area of online learning. This makes the students far more convenient than traditional classroom learning experiences (Berge, 1997; Harasim, 1990; Simonson, 2000).

In English classes, it is known that speaking is an important productive skill that will enhance students' oral communication. A high degree of willingness to communicate in a language classroom is required as Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) pointed out that ineffective interaction and language production led to a lack of willingness. Encouraging students' willingness to speak in the online classroom has become a new challenge for English teachers nowadays after the Coronavirus pandemic. From the researcher's direct experience, the problem occurred when it was found to be a lot harder to create students' willingness to communicate while teaching online. For example, we don't know exactly whether they are still studying with us or not because they always turn off their cameras so it is quite challenging for the teacher to cope with that kind of situation. Therefore, the issue of students' willingness to communicate in an online classroom is worth conducting to build upon and expand existing knowledge in light of students' advantages.

Moreover, it is crucial to find out what makes some students willing to communicate while others are unwilling to communicate in an online classroom. This issue should be taken into consideration in the new changing face of English language teaching. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that most previous research studies were conducted in a normal classroom or face-to-face classroom, not in an online classroom as found in this study. For this reason, conducting research in an online classroom is considered equally important as it occurred in a normal classroom because the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 might change the face of foreign language education. In the Thai EFL classroom context, there has not yet been explored more of the level of students' willingness to communicate in online classrooms. To bridge this gap, this present study, therefore, aims to investigate the level of students' WTC in online classrooms because of the scarcity of research in this aspect.

Based on the research objective of this study, the current study addresses the following question.

RQ: What are the levels of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms?

Review of Literature

Willingness to Communicate

McCroskey and Baer(1985), McCroskey and Richmond(1990, 1991) developed the concept of the “Willingness to communicate” construct based on the original concept of the word “Unwillingness to communicate” (UWTC) proposed by Burgoon (1976). She originally proposed and validated the measurement of unwillingness to communicate within the native language context only. The concept of unwillingness to communicate was interrelated among anomia and alienation, introversion, self-esteem, communication apprehension, and reticence. Consequently, people tend to avoid and/or devalue oral communication.

Later, the WTC construct was first used and developed by McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond(1985), and the study was conducted regarding communication in the native language. The term “willingness to communicate” has been defined as the underlying tendency to talk to others which are rooted in a personality variable. They also highlighted that communication competence, communication apprehension, self-esteem, and cultural diversity can be counted as predecessors of WTC. Regarding culture, they also suggested that any kind of generalization should be done with that issue. MacIntyre and Charos(1996) developed path analysis to explore the relationships among the variables to predict willingness to communicate in the first language. They also examine the impact on the frequency of second language communication, and the role of global personality traits. The effect of significant paths on the frequency of communication from the willingness to communicate in the second language, language learning motivation, perceived L2 communicative competence, and also the opportunity for contact with second language speakers were found in this study. Moreover, they indicated that global personality traits and language-related affective variables initiated the psychological context for second language communication. According to the definition of WTC, MacIntyre, Clément, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) defined it as the readiness of learners to enter into conversation at a particular time with a specific person or person using the second language.

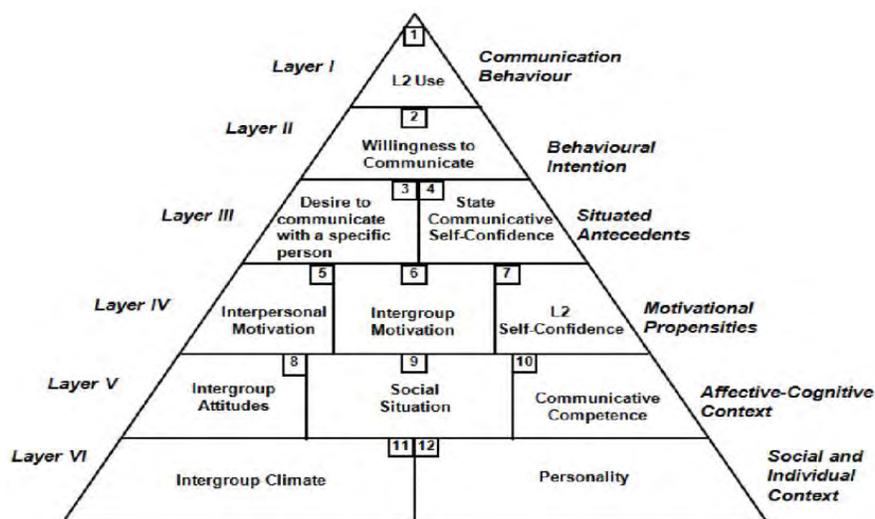


Figure 1. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547)

Figure one demonstrated the Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC. It revealed that L2 learners' communication behaviors were influenced by the interrelation among social and

individual contexts, affective cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioral intention. However, this model was argued by Wen and Clement (2003) that can only be implemented in the Western context. However, this model can be used as a reference in both Western the Eastern context nowadays.

From previous studies, the notions of willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Hashimoto, 2002; Vongsila & Reinders, 2016), willingness to talk (Menzel & Carrell, 1999), and willingness to speak (Riasati, 2012; Hsu & Huang, 2017) can be referred to as the similar concept as it appears in this study. Encouraging language learners to communicate effectively is a major goal of language teaching. It is undeniable that teachers can play a significant role to help learners to develop WTC in the language classroom (Dornyei, 2007). In some previous studies, it has been recognized that teachers play a significant role as they create effective learning and communication in English classrooms. Importantly, students' learning would depend so much on teachers' teaching (Wen & Clement, 2003, cited in Gol et al., 2014). One of the most challenging language teachers' roles is how to make learners communicate. Concerning the characteristics of Asian students, it has frequently been reported that they are passive and shy, and they are not willing to answer questions in the EFL classroom (Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2005; Tsui, 1996;). From previous studies, many researchers mentioned that learners' WTC is influenced by teachers by addressing factors such as learners' self-confidence and anxiety or by choosing topics of learners' interests (Cheng, 2000; Tsui, 1996; Xie, 2011).

The earlier studies suggested that the essential components of the language learning process such as interlocutor interaction and pattern of interaction: teacher-fronted situation, dyad, small group, topic, and type of task can affect learners' WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006). According to Cao's (2011) study, the students expressed that they are likely to be willing to interact more when they like their teachers. This is consistent with Zarrinabadi's (2014) study which found that when the teachers encourage and support them to talk, for instance, by giving students sufficient time to think before answering questions; or allowing students to choose topics of discussion that are interesting for them, students tend to be more active when they use a foreign language in their classroom.

Some researchers have done empirical studies in this field by employing various methods to investigate what factors influence students' second language learning. They found some factors affecting students' WTC in different contexts. For example, in the Korean EFL context, qualitative research was conducted by Kang (2005), who collected the data by utilizing interviews, stimulated recall, and videotaped conversations with four Korean students who attended a conversation partner program in the USA. In conclusion, she postulated that the situational emergence of L2 WTC can be counted as an interactive effect of three psychological situations, which were responsibility and security, excitement, and also three situational variables, which were topics, interlocutors, and conversational contexts. Additionally, she found an association between speaking in an L2 and feeling safe from anxiety.

In connection with the interlocutor issues, it also appears in the results of Cao & Philp's study (2006) which found that learner's WTC was influenced by the familiarity with interlocutors, interlocutors' participation, and group size. Later, Cao (2009) also asserted the factors which can

influence students' WTC in classrooms, including topic, task type, interlocutor, and teacher. More specifically, task types, Peng(2014) asserted that L2 students' degree of WTC could be noticeably affected by task types. This is consistent with Pattapong(2010) who maintained that the nature of the task, level of difficulty, and the time allowed for completing the task can influence L2 students' WTC.

In recent studies, some studies were conducted in the Eastern context in relation to students' WTC and online learning. For instance, Weda, Atmowardoyo, Rahman, Said, and Sakti (2021) attempted to investigate what factors influenced students' willingness to communicate in online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic in higher education in Indonesia. 71 students participated and responded to the questionnaire. They found that most students liked to participate in group discussions, and they prefer online class discussions rather than offline class discussions. This finding was still in line with the aforementioned definition of WTC that MacIntyre, Clément, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) stated, which meant that they were ready to communicate in online classrooms. In terms of nervousness, they mentioned that students could express their feelings and other opinions in online classes without feeling nervous.

Due to the paucity of research in the Eastern context, this study, therefore, aims to explore the level of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms.

Methods

Participants

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design which comprised two phases. In the qualitative phase, the participants in this step were six Thai first-year EFL undergraduate students of a state university in Thailand who enrolled in a foundation English online course and have been taught by Thai teachers in the academic year of 1/2020. Purposive sampling was employed for sample selection.

In the quantitative phase, the participants were 1,119 Thai EFL first-year undergraduate students. The participants came from different faculties and they had mixed abilities according to their admission scores. All foundation English classes were assigned to teach 100% online via online platforms according to the pandemic crisis.

Research Instruments

Focus Group Interview

A Focus group interview was employed in this study to elicit the rich data and was the primary data source that reflects the participants' perceptions of their willingness to communicate in online classrooms and create a better understanding of what exactly happened in online classrooms.

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

After having all qualitative data analyzed, the questionnaire was gathered, created, and adapted from the Willingness to Talk in Class Scale (Menzel & Carrell, 1999). This scale was previously utilized within traditional classrooms and used to be conducted on non-Thai participants. In this study, this scale was adapted and added more items related to the results from

focus group interviews in the Thai EFL context. However, some mismatched items from the scale were considered to be omitted from the current questionnaires according to the current online learning situation.

Then, the experts were asked to validate all items in the questionnaire by rating means of IOC (Index of item objective congruence). Items on research instruments scored greater than .50 and were consistent with expert judge validity. To avoid any misinterpretation due to the lack of English proficiency of the participants, all research instruments were translated into Thai. The pilot study was conducted by distributing it to 53 students via Google Form to ensure that the questionnaire is reliable.

Research Procedures

An exploratory sequential mixed methods research design was employed in this study. The researcher utilized a focus group interview via an online platform to collect rich data from the students in the first step and then used the findings from the qualitative phase to develop a questionnaire to measure the level of students' willingness to communicate in online classrooms.

First of all, six students from two sections were purposely selected to participate in the focus-group interview session. They were all freshmen and studied Foundation English courses online. The interviews were taken approximately between 20-30 minutes and all were recorded and transcribed. Accordingly, the participants can be ensured that their identity would be kept anonymous and confidential by using a pseudonym in the process of the research. Sample interview questions mapped to the research question based on the Willingness to Talk in Class Scale (Menzel & Carrell, 1999).

After the results from the focus group interviews were collected, transcribed, and analyzed by using thematic analysis. Then, the data was developed and made compatible with teaching and learning situations in online classrooms. The next phase started with forming the questionnaire which was developed based on the rich data elicited from the interviews and adapted from the Willingness to Talk in Class Scale (Menzel & Carrell, 1999). When the first semester ended, 49-items of the questionnaire were distributed to the participants via the online Google Form with their teacher's permission. When receiving all 1,119 responses from the participants, the obtained data were collected, calculated, and analyzed by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Means and standard deviations were calculated.

Results

Results from Focus Group Interview with Students

The qualitative findings were transcribed and analyzed by employing thematic analysis to develop the questionnaire for answering the research question. The themes emerged and are described below.

Communication Channels (Camera turning on/off)

Concerning communication channels, the issues of turning on and turning off their camera while learning online emerged and influenced their willingness to communicate. The results from students' interviews below showed the reasons why they preferred to turn off their cameras during studying online.

Nid: I feel nervous when I turn on the camera. I feel safer when I turn off the camera. That's why the students choose to turn off the camera. This is my privacy. Moreover, one of the students who usually turned on her camera also gave her opinion about how her willingness to communicate related to turning on/off her camera while studying.

Pim: It doesn't relate to each other because even when I turn off my camera, I still pay a lot of attention to what the teacher said and always jot down the note myself.

Communication Channels (The stability of the internet network)

From the student's interview, the stability of the internet network also affects the student's WTC. The researcher also found out that some students could not continue their studies because of the instability of the electricity system at home. An example is Som who stated:

Som: I prefer studying in the face-to-face classroom because we are sometimes in trouble with unstable internet networks so it is quite difficult for us to share screens and work as a group with friends. For this reason, it made us finish our work quite late. However, it is good for us to stay home and study online. I am willing to speak when the teacher gives us a chance to speak but my problem is the bad internet network which makes it hard to communicate while studying online. When the teacher asks a question, I will be ready to answer.

Peer Influence

The influence of peers also became one of the important factors that affected participants' WTC. The participants preferred to communicate with their teachers and friends openly without any pressure as can be seen from the following opinions:

Vera: Peer pressure is another factor that makes me feel embarrassed because I feel that I am an outstanding person when the teacher calls out my name and my teacher and friends will focus on what I said in the class.

The power of peer pressure still appeared in many dimensions especially, when one of their friends became the center of attention while he/she was talking. Pim also emphasized that she was willing to talk more if her peers would not make her feel embarrassed.

Pim: Sometimes I cannot remember the English vocabulary as I don't know what it is called. I am also afraid of peer pressure because when I speak English in the classroom, my friends sometimes make fun of me and that makes me embarrassed.

Teachers' Characteristics (Generation gap between teachers and students)

These responses emerged from students' interviews. Vera and Nid who took part in the study, expressed their different attitudes toward the relationships between students' WTC and their teachers regarding the generation gap between them as follows:

Vera: The way the teacher speaks a word will encourage the students to talk in English and make the students willing to talk. If the teacher looks younger, it will create a better understanding between us. In my point of view, it helps reduce the pressure and distance

between teachers and students so I think teachers' personality also plays an important role in encouraging students to learn.

In Vera's opinion mentioned above, she had a positive attitude toward the teacher who looks young, whereas Nid argued that she had a positive attitude towards the teacher who looks older as stated below.

Nid: Learning with the older teacher makes me feel comfortable to learn with because I feel like she is a mother. Sometimes she tells her own story from her own experiences and makes me feel familiar with her and easy to approach. The teacher is very helpful and gives us support when we cannot get the correct answer and she will make a correction for us when we use grammar incorrectly.

Teachers' Characteristics (Personality)

According to participants' responses, teachers' personality also plays an important role to increase students' WTC. This is supported by these participants' interviews.

Som: The teacher often tells some funny story as he is a funny guy and speaks English with simple words which are easy to understand and often share his experience in his life.

Tan: The teacher is very helpful, easy-going and takes good care of his students. He likes to make conversation with his students quite often.

Teachers' Characteristics (Relating to teacher's nationality)

According to the teacher's nationality, one of the participant's responses demonstrated that studying English with a native English-speaking teacher was her preference as suggested below.

Pim: From my experience, I often speak English with native English speakers because they always persuade us to talk so we can have a chance to practice speaking English all the time. Whereas Thai teacher hardly persuades us to speak English that much, But he usually focuses on teaching English grammar and following the coursebook. If the teacher gives us a chance to speak, then I will speak English.

Results from Questionnaire

After distributing the questionnaire, the total number of 1,119 responses the questionnaire was sent back to the researcher. Of the participants, 70.51% were female and 29.49% were male. After administering the questionnaires, the obtained data were collected, calculated, and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). To answer a research question, means and standard deviations were calculated for six categories which were communication channels, students' beliefs, peer influence, teachers' characteristics, teaching methods, and general online classroom atmosphere.

Research question: What are the levels of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms?

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding communication channel*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	Communication Channels		

1	I am willing to communicate when I turn on my camera while learning online.	3.02	1.12
2	I am willing to communicate when I turn off my camera while learning online.	4.13	0.95
3	I am willing to communicate when I can see the whole face of my teacher as it makes me understand better.	4.11	0.89
4	I am willing to communicate when the internet network is stable.	4.25	0.83
5	I am willing to communicate when I can type a message via chat box for communicating with my classmates and my teachers.	4.29	0.83

As illustrated in Table one, it showed a descriptive analysis of the levels of Thai EFL undergraduate students' WTC in English language online classrooms related to communication channels. It can be seen that the participants were willing to communicate when they had a chance to communicate with the class by typing a message into the chat box at a very high level as shown in item 5 (mean = 4.29, SD = 0.83). Followed by item 4 (mean= 4.25, SD =0.83), the participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate when they found the stability of the internet network, so which made them feel comfortable communicating easily with the classroom. Whereas, turning on my camera while learning online in item 1 (mean = 3.02, SD = 1.12) had the least effect on students' willingness to communicate as the rate appeared at a moderate level.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding students' beliefs*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	Students' Beliefs		
6	I am willing to communicate when I know that I am not going to lose face when I give the wrong answer.	3.24	1.05
7	I am willing to communicate when I feel comfortable talking.	4.15	0.93
8	I am willing to communicate when I feel that I will not be judged by the teacher.	4.12	0.92
9	I am willing to communicate because I respect the teacher.	4.39	0.79
10	I am willing to communicate because my parents taught me to make eye contact with the teacher.	3.33	1.08
11	I am willing to communicate when I have confidence in my English skills.	2.94	1.06
12	I am willing to communicate when I don't feel that I am the center of attention.	3.74	1.08
13	I am willing to communicate because I have always got a very good grade.	2.89	1.04
14	I am willing to communicate when my views differ from other students' views.	3.18	0.99
15	I am willing to communicate when I am prepared for class.	3.87	0.93

16	I am willing to communicate when I am comfortable with the subject matter.	4.03	0.88
17	I am willing to communicate when my views differ from the teacher's views.	3.27	1.01
18	I am willing to communicate when I know the correct answer.	4.30	0.83
19	I am willing to communicate when I can really help clarify the discussion.	3.65	0.96
20	I am willing to communicate when I am angry about a topic.	3.01	1.02

Regarding students' beliefs, the majority of the participants were willing to communicate when they respect the teacher at a very high level as shown in item nine (mean = 4.39, SD= 0.79). Results indicated that an increase in the level of students' willingness to communicate was shown when they respect the teacher in connection with the Thai cultural context. Moreover, a very high level of willingness to communicate was also shown in item 18 (mean = 4.30, SD = 0.83). It showed that an increase in the level of students' willingness to communicate happened when students knew the correct answer.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding peer influence*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	Peer Influence		
21	I am willing to communicate when my friends will not put pressure on me.	4.13	0.97
22	I am willing to communicate when my friends won't feel that I am showing off my English skill.	3.94	1.02
23	I am willing to communicate when my friends won't make fun of me.	4.15	0.97
24	I am willing to communicate when my friends persuade me to talk.	4.25	0.88
25	I am willing to communicate when everyone is talking.	3.93	1.07
26	I am willing to communicate when the class is engaged in a heated debate.	3.15	1.11
27	I am willing to communicate when my views differ from my classmates' views.	3.22	0.98
28	I am willing to communicate when I dislike my classmates who are speaking.	2.18	1.24

Concerning peer influence, the participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate when their friends persuade them to talk (mean= 4.25, S = 0.88) as they rated in item 24. On the other hand, item 28 was rated as low (mean = 2.18, SD = 1.24), which showed that even though they like or dislike their classmates who are speaking, it might not affect their WTC that much.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding teachers' characteristics*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	Teachers' Characteristics		
29	I am willing to communicate when there is no generation gap between teachers and students.	3.82	1.11

30	I am willing to communicate when I like the teacher's personality/the characteristics of my teacher.	4.15	0.93
31	I am willing to communicate when the teacher simplifies the English language use when he/she talks to us.	4.21	0.91
32	I am willing to communicate when the teacher is of the same gender.	2.98	1.35
33	I am willing to communicate with a non-Thai teacher who communicates in English.	3.07	1.15
34	I am willing to communicate when the teacher is open-minded.	4.51	0.75
35	I am willing to talk when I can talk to the teacher like a friend.	4.13	0.91
36	I am willing to communicate when the teacher will not be a commander.	4.32	0.88
37	I am willing to communicate when my teacher asks for a response from the class.	3.96	0.98

Regarding the teachers' characteristics, a large number of the participants were willing to communicate when they found that their teachers were open-minded as they rated at a very high level in item 34 (mean = 4.51, SD = 0.75). Additionally, the participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate as shown in rated item 36 (mean = 4.32, SD = 0.88), which means that a great number of the students were willing to communicate when the teacher would not be a commander as it would make them feel uncomfortable while studying online. Furthermore, the participants also rated item 31 as very high (mean = 4.21, SD = 0.91). This can be clearly explained when the teacher simplifies the English language used when he/she talks to them, so it would affect the level of their willingness to communicate.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding teaching methods*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	Teaching Methods		
38	I am willing to communicate when the teacher gives an extra score for answering a question.	3.51	1.18
39	I am willing to communicate when the teacher gives extra scores for volunteering to join the activities.	3.57	1.13
40	I am willing to communicate when my teacher won't focus too much on grammar rules including the contents in a course book.	4.24	0.87
41	I am willing to communicate when I can answer the questions in Thai(L1).	4.31	0.85
42	I am willing to communicate when the class is engaged in an open discussion.	3.94	0.95
43	I am willing to communicate when I am in a small group in class.	3.71	1.06
44	I am willing to communicate when the topic is interesting.	4.02	0.88
45	I am willing to communicate when my assignment is being discussed.	3.50	1.06

46	I am willing to communicate when the whole class is discussing a particular assignment.	3.05	1.09
----	---	------	------

In relation to the teaching methods, the majority of the participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate as shown in item 41 (mean = 4.31, SD = 0.85). It appeared when their teachers allowed them to answer the questions in Thai (L1) or clarify their answers in Thai, they would feel more comfortable and they would be more willing to communicate in the classroom. Furthermore, the participants also rated item 40 (mean = 4.24, SD = 0.87) as very high which revealed that the majority of participants were willing to communicate at a very high level when teachers shared their own experiences or discussed something else rather than focus too much on what's going on in the coursebook. However, it can be noticeable that students had a moderate level of willingness to communicate when the whole class was discussing a particular assignment.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics of students' willingness to communicate regarding the general online classroom atmosphere*

Items	Students' Willingness to Communicate	\bar{X}	SD.
	General Online Classroom Atmosphere		
47	I am willing to communicate when I've found that the classroom atmosphere is relaxing.	4.39	0.83
48	I am willing to communicate so that the class won't be silent.	3.51	1.11
49	I am willing to communicate when no one else is talking.	2.94	1.22

Regarding the general online classroom atmosphere, the participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate as shown in item 47 (mean = 4.39, SD = 0.83). In item 48 (mean = 3.51, SD = 1.11), the participants also had a high level of willingness to communicate because the class will not be silent. It can be implied that the level of students' willingness to communicate was likely to increase when the students happened to be active, lively and supported each other. If their teachers encourage them to communicate, the class will not be silent. Then, their willingness to communicate can be increased.

Discussion

The present study aims at exploring the level of Thai EFL undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English language online classrooms. The results showed that the level of students' willingness to communicate was highly influenced by the factors which included communication channels, students' beliefs, peer influence, teachers' characteristics, teaching methods, and online classroom atmosphere. Concerning the communication channel, the students had the highest level of WTC when they had a chance to communicate with the class by typing a message into the chat box. It can be assumed that it would be convenient and relate to face-saving concerns in the classroom (Hofstede, 2001). They might not feel comfortable enough to communicate with the class by talking individually in front of a large group of students. This is in tune with Toth(2010), who posited that one of the most studied topics, relating to communication is the tendency of some people to avoid communicating orally. In parallel, Kupczynski et al. (2008) postulated that an asynchronous environment affected students' participation as they would

participate more in that kind of environment because it is high time to post, read, and respond to messages, or even reflect on responses. In relation to Thai culture, shyness is part of Thai cultural identity as mentioned in the study of Chaidaroon(2004) so students might try to avoid communicating with their cameras turned on because they are likely to conceal their feelings and prefer keeping silent. Due to Thai cultural background, students are quite familiar with the teacher-centered approach which relates to authoritarian structure as Hofstede et al. (2005) proposed. They described that all work is led by a senior who is respected by younger members. As a result, they might feel considerate and prefer to receive knowledge passively and let teachers lead the class. Therefore, communicating via chat box would be another good option.

Concerning the internet network, the students also had a very high level of WTC when the internet network was stable. The result of this study indicated that the stability of the internet network affects their levels of willingness to communicate in an online classroom. In the age of online teaching and learning, the internet network has been regarded as a helpful and essential tool to engage students' WTC and interests. To support this, in Ogedebe's(2012) study, he mentioned that 79% of the respondents in his study accepted that their academic performance has been improved by using the internet. Accordingly, Fabito et al.(2021) who conducted their study in the Philippines also found that a good internet connection was considered to be one of the barriers and challenges that students had to inevitably encounter while learning online. This can be counted as an area of concern when students have to struggle to keep up with the new normal educational system. However, it is worth noticing that turning on their cameras while learning online probably did not affect the students' willingness to communicate that much as they rated it as moderate level. It can be assumed that the level of students' WTC did not depend on whether they turned on the camera or not.

In respect of students' beliefs, it can be seen from the findings that the highest level of WTC was related to the Thai cultural context which indicated that when they respected their teachers, their level of WTC would be increased. According to Hofstede et al.(2005) in the previous study, they suggested that culture determines human decisions, actions, and behaviors. Therefore, Thai culture may influence Thai students' belief on how Thai students respect their teachers and it would affect their level of WTC. This is similar to the concept of Confucianism and collectivism that influences strongly the Taiwanese context as mentioned in the study of Hofstede (2001) and Skow and Stephan (2000). The hierarchical relationship between teacher and students that lie within Confucianism embraces the higher status of teachers so students should respect their teachers due to Chinese traditional cultural values that widely impact Chinese society. In another aspect, a very high level of students' WTC can be increased when they know the correct answer. This finding concurred with the notion supported by Tsui (1996) who stated that the common causes of reticence in the class occurred when students lacked confidence, had a fear of making mistakes, and was laughed at. Students are likely to keep silent as he/ she thinks they are going to give the wrong answer to the class which might make them feel embarrassed especially when they find that their peers make fun of what answer they gave to the class.

Regarding peer influence, as demonstrated in this study, the majority of students had a very high level of WTC when their peers persuade them to talk. It would be better if their peers would cheer them up and encourage them to talk without fear of losing face. Therefore, fear of losing face

can play a significant role, especially, in relation to Thai cultural background and this may lead to students' reticence and unwillingness to communicate in the online classroom. This is also consistent with what Hamouda (2012) highlighted that Asian learners are often characterized as passive and silent in the English language classroom. However, it can be argued that the students' negative attitude toward their peers would probably not influence students' willingness to communicate that much as illustrated when they rated this item as low.

In accordance with the teachers' characteristics, the majority of the participants were willing to communicate when they found that their teachers were open-minded and this might reduce the gap between them. This finding is in line with the study of Cao (2011) and Zarrinabadi (2014). In Cao's (2011) study, the students indicated that they are likely to be willing to interact more when they like their teachers. This is consistent with Zarrinabadi's (2014) study which found that when the teachers encourage and support them to talk, for instance, by giving students sufficient time to think before answering questions; or allowing students to choose topics of discussion that are interesting to them, students tend to be more active using their foreign language in their classroom. In connection with teaching in an online classroom, it can be concluded that teachers' characters play a significant role and can be shone through the computer screen when he/she talks or communicates with their students throughout the semester.

Based on the findings, a very high level of students' willingness to communicate can be found when the teacher would not be a commander. It can be noticed that students were willing to communicate when the teacher would not act like a commander. The role of teachers in the digital era in their mind might be a facilitator or mentor rather than a commander who is likely to order and expect students to show obedience to the teacher. Although Thai culture can be described as having an authoritarian structure (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) as all work is led by a senior who is respected by younger members, teachers still need to listen and support them, help them learn better, create a good classroom environment, and enhance students' willingness to communicate. This result corresponds to the notion of Saetang(2014) in her study, she mentioned that low self-confidence and shyness could result from teachers' characteristics such as authoritarian power and emotional value which could lead to students' unwillingness to participate in class.

Results also showed that the students had a very high level of students' willingness to communicate when the teacher simplified the English language used when he/she talked to them. Due to students' language proficiency, students who have lower English proficiency than others may feel embarrassed when they make some mistakes in front of their peers. There was some crucial evidence from previous studies which showed that students with low proficiency caused students unwillingness to speak (Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b; Liu & Jackson, 2009). When the teacher simplifies the English language used when he/she talks to students, it would help them a lot, especially when they do not understand what teachers speak by using some complicated words. This can be conducive to the fact that the level of students' willingness to communicate can be increased when the teacher simplifies the English language used while teaching.

Concerning the teaching methods, the result showed the highest level of students' willingness to communicate that the majority of students had when their teachers allowed them to answer the questions in the first language (L1) or clarify their answers in Thai, this caused low

proficiency students felt more comfortable and they would be more willing to communicate by using the Thai language in the classroom because teachers were kind enough to listen to what they tried to answer using their mother tongue. Some students may feel frustrated with communicating in English and it will lead to miscommunication, boredom, and the feeling of unwillingness to participate in class. Regarding using L1 to communicate with students in the classroom, the result was similar to the previous studies conducted in a face-to-face classroom (Sung, 2010; Chun, 2014). It demonstrated that grammar explanation should be carried out by non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) who can use L1 to communicate with their students to make it easier for students to understand grammar points clearly. When they do not understand what teachers teach, it can be easier for them to ask their teachers by using L1 to communicate in the classroom. This finding concurred with what MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggested that the participants' willingness to communicate has been influenced by the level of proficiency in the target language.

Moreover, the findings also revealed that the majority of participants had a very high level of willingness to communicate when teachers would not focus too much on grammar rules including the contents in a coursebook. They were more willing to communicate when teachers shared their own experiences or discussed something else rather than focus too much on what was going on in the coursebook. This finding is similar to the result of Saetang's (2014) study which asserted that relaxing activities like talking about interesting and encouraging things apart from the course content would be students' preferences.

Regarding the general online classroom atmosphere, a relaxing online classroom atmosphere affects the level of students' willingness to communicate as it appeared that students had a very high level of students' willingness to communicate. Based on the results, it was in tune with the works of Pattapong (2010) and Peng(2014) who pointed out that students' willingness to communicate in second language classrooms can be promoted by a friendly classroom atmosphere, while a boring and silent atmosphere demotivated second language students' WTC. To sum up, one of the important factors which increased the level of students' willingness to communicate both in face-to-face and online classrooms is a relaxing classroom atmosphere.

Conclusion

Unlike the previous studies which have been conducted in a face-to-face classroom, this present study focused mainly on exploring the level of students' willingness to communicate in online classrooms which has not been previously explored. The results suggested that Thai EFL undergraduate students were willing to communicate more when they found the stability of the internet network and they could have more freedom and chances to communicate with the class via different communication channels such as chat boxes to feel less of a threat of losing face. After the pandemic crisis, teachers and students would have to confront new ways of teaching. They would have a hard time struggling with social distancing and it is considered harder to make students feel closer to the teachers. The only way they meet each other would be through electronic devices so it is quite hard to manage as well as create an appropriate classroom atmosphere for most teachers. In addition, the results also suggest that teachers should be open-minded and not act as a commander to motivate them to be more willing to communicate. Importantly, teachers should simplify their English language use when they find that some students are struggling with difficult words. In terms of peer influence, teachers should well-manage their classes when having

some students make fun of their friends while talking in English as it might reduce students' WTC. Hopefully, this current research could strengthen the significance of students' willingness to communicate in online classrooms, and it can create teachers' awareness through the lens of students' worldviews.

Recommendation for Further Studies

The recommendations for further studies should be continued to investigate students' willingness to communicate in an online classroom by employing larger sample sizes in different universities in Thailand. In terms of the qualitative approach, further study should be conducted by interviewing and observing a larger number of teachers and students to explore more what other factors can influence students' willingness to communicate in an online classroom to maximize students' learning outcomes in the future.

About the Authors

Patthaya Punyaporn is a full-time lecturer at Language Center and Academic Services, International College of Sustainability Studies, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English Language Teaching at Thammasat University, Thailand. Her areas of interest are vocabulary learning strategies, English language teaching, and related fields. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2824-1688>

Dr. Kittitouch Soontornwipast (Assistant Professor) teaches both post- and undergraduate courses at the Language Institute, Thammasat University, Thailand. He obtained his Ed.D. in Professional Development, Victoria University, Australia. His main interests include ELT teacher training, instruction media, and action research for English teachers.

References

- Berge, Z.L. (1997). Characteristics of online teaching in post-secondary, formal education. *Educational Technology*, 37(3), 35-47.
- Burgoon, J. K. (1976). The Unwillingness-To-Communicate Scale: Development and Validation. *Communication Monographs*, 43(1), 60-69.
- Carrell, L. J., & Menzel, K. E. (1999). The impact of gender and immediacy on willingness to talk and perceived learning. *Communication Education*, 48(1), 31-40.
- Cao, Y., & J. Philp (2006). Interactional context and willingness to communicate: a comparison of behavior in the whole class, group, and dyadic interaction. *System* 34. 480–93.
- Cao, Y. (2009). An ecological view of situational willingness to communicate in a second language classroom. In H. Chen & K. Cruickshank (Eds.), *Making a difference: Challenges for applied linguistics* (pp. 199–218). Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Cao, Y. (2011). Investigating situational willingness to communicate within second language classrooms from an ecological perspective. *System*, 39, 468–479. doi:10.1016/j.system.2011.10.016
- Cheng, X. (2000). Asian students' reticence revisited. *System*, 28(3), 435–446.
- Chaidaroon, S, S (2004) Effective communication management for Thai people, *Proceeding of the Global Era international conference on Revising Globalization and Communication in the 2000s*. Bangkok, Thailand
- Chun, S.Y. (2014). EFL learners' beliefs about native and non-native English – speaking teachers: perceived strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35:6, 563-579. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2014.

- Dornyei, Z. (2007). Creating a Motivating Classroom Environment. In J. Cummins, & Ch. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 719-731). New York: Springer Science-Business Media, Inc. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-46301-8_47
- Fabito, B.S., Trillanes, A.O., & Sarmiento, J.R. (2021). Barriers and challenges of computing students in an online learning environment: Insights from one private university in the Philippines. *International Journal of Computing Sciences Research*, 5(1),441-458. <https://doi.org/10.2514/ijcsr.2017.001.1.51>
- Freiermuth, M., & Jarrell, D. (2006). Willingness to communicate: Can online chat help? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(2), 189–212.10.1111/ijal.2006
- Gol, M., Zand-Moghadam, A., & Karrabi, M. (2014). The construct of willingness to communicate and its relationship with EFL learners' perceived verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy. *Lang. Teach.* 3, 142–143.
- Harasim, L. M., & Winkelmann, T. (1990). *Computer-mediated scholarly collaboration: A case study of an international online educational research workshop*. Knowledge, 11(4), 382-409.
- Hashimoto, Y. (2002). Motivation and Willingness to Communicate as Predictors of L2 Use: The Japanese ESL context. *Second Language Studies*, 20(2), 29-70.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2005). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (Rev. 2nd ed.). New York: Mcgraw-hill.
- Hsu L.I., Watson, T., Lin, C.H., & Ho, T, C.(2007). Explorations in Teachers' Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors and Students' Willingness to Talk in English. *English Teaching & Learning*, 31, 1-27
- Kang, S. J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language, *System*, 33, 277 ~ 292
- Liu, M. H. (2005). Reticence in oral English language classrooms: A case study in China. *TESL Reporter*, 38(1), 1-16
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Charos, C. (1996). Personality, attitudes, and affect as predictors of second language communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 15, 3-26.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dornyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in an L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Baer, J. E. (1985). Willingness to communicate: The construct and its measurement. *Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Denver, CO.*
- McCroskey, J. C., Fayer, J., & Richmond, V. P.(1985). Don't speak to me in English: Communication apprehension in Puerto Rico. *Communication Quarterly*, 33, 185-192.
- McCroskey, J., Richmond, V. (1990). Willingness to Communicate: Differing cultural perspectives. *Southern Communication Journal*, 56, 72-77.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (1991). Willingness to Communicate: A Cognitive View. In M. BoothButterfield (Ed.), *Communication, Cognition, and Anxiety* (pp. 19-37), Newbury Park, CA: Sa
- Ogedebe, P.M.(2012). Internet usage and students' academic performance in Nigeria tertiary institutions: a case study of the University of Maiduguri. *Acad. Res. Int*, 2(3), 334-343. [http://www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.2\(3\)/2012\(2.3-41\).pdf](http://www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.2(3)/2012(2.3-41).pdf)
- Pattapong, K. (2010). *Willingness to communicate in a second language: A qualitative study of issues affecting Thai EFL learners from students' and teachers' points of view*, (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
- Peng, J. (2014). *Willingness to communicate in Chinese EFL university classroom: An ecological perspective*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Riasati, M. J.(2012). EFL Learners' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Willingness to Speak in Language Classrooms: A Qualitative Study. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 17(10). 1287-1297.

- Saetang, S. (2014). A survey in a Thai classroom on learning activities and learning problems. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education (IJCDSE)*, 5(3), 1753-1758.
- Simonson, M. (2000). Myths and distance education: What the research says (and does not) *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(1), 277-279
- Skow, L., & Stephan, L. (2000). Intercultural communication in the university classroom. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp.355-370). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Sung, C. C. M. (2010). Native or non-native? Exploring Hong Kong students' perspectives. *Papers from the Lancaster University Postgraduate Conference in Linguistics & Language Teaching*, 4, 243-262.
- Toth, Z. (2010). *Foreign language anxiety and the advanced language learner: A study of Hungarian students of English as a foreign language*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Tsui, A. B. M. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. M. Bailey, & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the Language Classroom* (pp.145-167). Cambridge University Press.
- Vongsila, V., & Reinders, H. (2016). Making Asian Learners Talk: Encouraging Willingness to Communicate. *RELC Journal*, 47, 331 - 347.
- Weda, S., Atmowardoyo, H., Rahman, F., Said, M. M., & Sakti, A. E. F. (2021). Factors Affecting Students' Willingness to Communicate in EFL Classroom at Higher Institution in Indonesia. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(2), 719-734.
<https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2021.14240>
- Wen, W. P., & Clément, R. (2003). A Chinese conceptualisation of willingness to communicate in ESL. *Language Culture and Curriculum*, 16(1), 18-38.
- Xie, Q.M. (2011). *Willingness to communicate in English among secondary school students in the rural Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). AUT University, Auckland.
- Zarrinabadi, N.(2014). Communicating in a second language: investigating the effect of teacher on learners' willingness to communicate. *System*, 42, 288-95.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author agrees that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declares the absence of conflicting interests with any funders.