

# On Trends and Future Issues in Research on Second Language Communication Willingness from the Perspective of Japanese Language Education

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## 1. Introduction

The central issue in second language acquisition research has always been how learners can efficiently acquire a second language. The Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995) argued that producing a second language significantly aided language acquisition, while the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981) emphasized that interacting with others using the second language was essential for language learning. Thus, using the second language for communication is crucial. Furthermore, a major goal of language acquisition is to understand people from different cultural backgrounds and engage in conversations using the target language. Therefore, encouraging learners to communicate more in the second language is a significant issue in second language acquisition.

MacIntyre, Clément, & Dörnyei (1998) introduced the concept of communication willingness from first language communication research into the study of learners' second language communication, highlighting its importance. Since then, research on L2WTC (Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language) has increased and garnered the attention of many second language researchers.

Influenced by English education, communicative approaches that provide learners with ample opportunities to communicate in the second language are widely used in Japanese language education as well (Kobayashi, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Tanaka, 2014; Noda, 2009, 2012). Research on Japanese language learners' communication in Japanese has also increased. Japanese language teachers and researchers are paying attention to the importance of communication in Japanese by learners. However, these studies mainly focus on course design to increase classroom communication, communication strategies, and intercultural communication, without thoroughly examining L2WTC. As Jaehee, Y., Hiramatsu, Y., and Kabaya, H. (2018) stated, the core of learning communication was the learners who engaged in communicative acts. Without considering Japanese language learners' willingness to communicate, it might have been difficult to understand why learners chose to communicate in Japanese or why they did not. Jaehee, Y., Hiramatsu, Y., and Kabaya, H. (2018) also called for attention to the affective factors involved in communicative acts in communication education within Japanese language education. While research on communication willingness has extensively developed from the perspective of English education, examining second language communication willingness from the perspective of Japanese language education is still in its early stages (Kobayashi, 2006).

Thus, this paper reviews recent research on communication in Japanese language education, confirms the significance of considering L2WTC in Japanese language education, and discusses how future research on learners' L2WTC in Japanese language education should progress.

## 2. Communication in Japanese Language Education.

Due to economic globalization, people from different cultures and language backgrounds have begun to engage in social activities using a second language. In language education, the focus has shifted from teaching vocabulary and grammar to nurturing learners who can effectively use a second language in practical contexts. Influenced by the Communicative Approach of the 1980s, Japanese language education has also transitioned from a focus on language knowledge to an emphasis on communication skills. According to Canale (1983), communication competence consists of "linguistic competence," "discourse competence," "sociolinguistic competence," and "strategic competence." Research has been conducted to explore teaching methods and the development of materials aimed at enhancing learners' communication skills. For example, Noda (2009) argued that to transform communication education, it was necessary to reassess classes from four perspectives: "grammar," "language activities," "situation setting," and "task setting." Additionally, Noda (2012) pointed out that when creating materials to improve communication skills, it was essential to consider "setting realistic situations" and "establishing realistic goals." Writing essays like "My Hometown" or "My Day" is not commonly required in real life; instead, writing an email to inform a teacher about missing a class would be more natural. In short, engaging in meaningful communication activities is vital for learners' acquisition of the language. Furthermore, Tanaka (2014) examined whether classes incorporating conversation strategies could elicit more speech from learners.

Communicating is not merely the act of exchanging words; it involves choosing specific words with intent and understanding them within a socio-cultural context. Research has explored how learners can avoid communication friction arising from cultural differences by comparing communication styles between Japan and other countries. For example, Boku (2013) investigated the differences between Japanese and Chinese communication styles through surveys and interviews, noting that Japanese people tend to maintain a certain distance during communication. However, these studies have focused more on the classes and the language itself, rather than on learners who engage in second language

communication. Since learners are the primary agents in second language communication, it is essential to focus on intrinsic factors related to them to better understand second language communication activities (Kobayashi, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

Kobayashi (2008b) explored the relationship between Japanese language learners' L2 willingness to communicate (L2WTC) and their motivation, while Kobayashi (2008a) investigated the relationship between L2WTC and communication skills among Japanese learners. As mentioned in Chapter 3, research on L2WTC has been developing in English education for nearly 20 years, shifting the focus from static L2WTC to dynamic L2WTC. However, research on L2WTC in Japanese language education is still at the stage of static L2WTC, primarily based on questionnaire surveys. Therefore, it is essential to utilize the insights gained from English education to further investigate L2WTC among Japanese language learners.

### 3. Research on L2WTC

In Chapter 3, the development of L2WTC research will be discussed. Section 1 will introduce the origins of the concept of L2WTC. Section 2 will present the L2WTC model. Section 3 will provide an overview of research on L2WTC in second language acquisition. Section 4 will review research on L2WTC in Japanese language education.

#### 3.1 What is L2WTC?

WTC is a concept in the field of communication research. It describes the degree of willingness to communicate, which is influenced by personality factors and tends to remain relatively stable (MacIntyre, 1994). By using this concept, it becomes evident that individuals with high WTC have a stronger willingness to communicate compared to those with lower WTC, resulting in a higher frequency of communication interactions.

Since the 1990s, the communicative approach has become mainstream in English education. Simultaneously, in second language acquisition research, an increasing number of researchers adopt the stance that learners' use of a second language for communication contributes to language acquisition success. Against this backdrop, how to increase learners' opportunities for second language communication has become a central challenge for language teachers and researchers. To understand learners' second language communication behaviors, MacIntyre et al. (1998) were the first to attempt to apply the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC), commonly used in communication studies, to the field of second language acquisition. They distinguish L2 WTC from WTC, viewing it as more situationally dependent, and define it as "the readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998; translated by Yashima, 2019: 116). This definition implies that a person with high WTC may not necessarily have high L2 WTC. For example, an individual who is chatty in their first language might have low L2 WTC due to limited proficiency in the second language, which hinders their ability to express thoughts freely. Conversely, the opposite pattern can also

occur. What factors might influence L2 WTC? In this regard, researcher MacIntyre and his colleagues in the field of second language acquisition have proposed an intriguing L2 WTC model that discusses the factors influencing L2 WTC. The next section will introduce this significant L2 WTC model that impacts L2 WTC research.

#### 3.2 Research Studies on L2WTC in the Field of Second Language Acquisition

##### 3.2.1 Research on Factors Influencing L2WTC

MacIntyre and Charos (1996) conducted a survey involving 92 beginner French learners to investigate the relationship between "language anxiety," which encompasses concerns related to learning and using a second language, and "perceived L2 ability," defined as learners' self-assessment of their language skills, in relation to L2WTC. The findings indicated that both "perceived L2 ability" and "language anxiety" are significant factors influencing L2WTC. Specifically, learners who perceive their language abilities positively and experience less anxiety tend to have higher L2WTC.

On the other hand, Yashima (2002) posited that English learners in Japan have limited contact with target language speakers and may prefer to engage with individuals outside Japan rather than communicate with specific target language speakers. Consequently, Yashima conducted a survey involving 297 Japanese English learners in a foreign language environment to examine the relationship between international orientation, characterized by the desire to engage with the outside world and different cultures, and L2WTC. The findings indicated that individuals with a stronger international orientation exhibit higher motivation for learning English and, subsequently, higher L2WTC. Furthermore, Yashima explored the relationship between learners' motivation, confidence in using a second language for communication, and L2WTC, concluding that motivation indirectly influences L2WTC by affecting learners' confidence in second language communication.

Additionally, MacIntyre et al. (2001) differentiated between classroom L2WTC and out-of-classroom L2WTC due to the distinct nature of communication contexts within and outside the classroom. They examined the relationships among learners' reasons for language learning, social support, and both classroom and out-of-classroom L2WTC. Their study involved a survey of 79 English learners in a target language environment. The results indicated that five reasons for language learning—namely, "employment," "travel," "knowledge acquisition," "academic achievement," and "making friends"—showed a strong correlation with both classroom and out-of-classroom L2WTC, whereas social support was found to have a higher correlation with out-of-classroom L2WTC. Thus, it was revealed that the factors influencing learners' L2WTC vary by context, suggesting that understanding the factors affecting learners' L2WTC requires a focus on the differences between classroom and out-of-classroom situations.

Many researchers have investigated the factors influencing classroom L2WTC, including Pakpahan et al. (2017), Koga,

Chen et al. (2022), and Khazaei et al. (2012). Pakpahan et al. (2017) focused on the L2WTC of learners in the classroom, conducting interview studies with three English learners in a foreign language environment to identify the factors that lead to a decrease in L2WTC. Their findings indicated that linguistic factors, such as insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, psychological factors, including the fear of making mistakes and the desire not to be perceived as showing off one's English skills, socio-cultural factors, such as the predominance of peers speaking in their native language, and institutional factors, including teachers' attitudes toward learners' mistakes and the language used by teachers during class, all contribute to the decline of learners' classroom L2WTC.

Chen et al. (2022) focused specifically on the impact of teachers on L2WTC, conducting a survey and interviews to investigate the relationship between students' attitudes towards teachers and teaching styles and learners' L2WTC. Statistical analysis revealed that in foreign language contexts, students' attitudes towards their teachers were predictive factors for both classroom L2WTC and out-of-class L2WTC. However, in second language environments, students' attitudes towards teachers did not serve as predictive factors for L2WTC in either context. Regarding the reasons for these findings in relation to teacher involvement, Chen noted that English teachers in foreign language contexts tend to be more integrated into learners' lives and attentive to their needs. Furthermore, concerning teaching styles, it is commonly believed that making jokes during class improves the classroom atmosphere and promotes L2WTC; however, the study found no relationship between a teaching style that involves humor and L2WTC. From student interviews, Chen suggested that making jokes during class could potentially decrease students' willingness to engage actively in classroom activities.

Khazaei et al. (2012) investigated how classroom size affects learners' L2WTC. They conducted a study with 30 Iranian English learners from the same school, who were originally studying in classrooms of varying sizes: 5, 10, and 15 students. Over a period of six weeks, Khazaei and colleagues collected data on learners' speech turns and speaking time through classroom observations, followed by descriptive statistics and variance analysis. The results indicated that learners in the 5-student classrooms had significantly higher speech time and turns compared to those in the larger classes. Furthermore, Khazaei et al. suggested that learners in smaller classroom sizes exhibited a greater willingness to communicate in the second language during lessons.

Research focusing on sociocultural aspects includes studies by Matsuoka et al. (2014). Matsuoka et al. (2014) conducted an oral presentation activity with Japanese learners, allowing them to freely choose books to read and then present about those books. Based on the learners' comments after the presentations, they explored how this activity influenced learners' L2WTC. The findings indicated that "other-directedness" is a significant factor affecting Japanese learners' L2WTC; while it may lead to communication anxiety, it also has the potential to enhance motivation as learners strive to perform well in the classroom.

In addition, Ito (2021) focused on social environmental factors and examined the relationship between relational fluidity—representing the freedom of choice in relationships and groups—and L2WTC, as well as the perception of second language proficiency among Japanese English learners. The results indicated that relational fluidity mediates the perception of second language proficiency, thereby influencing learners' L2WTC. When relational fluidity is high, the fluid nature of surrounding relationships makes it easier to dissolve relationships in the event of failure. In such situations, learners are less likely to underestimate their abilities and feel the need to avoid failure, which enhances their perception of second language proficiency and subsequently leads to higher L2WTC. Conversely, when relational fluidity is low, learners' perception of their second language proficiency decreases, which may result in their reluctance to engage actively in activities such as discussions and presentations in the classroom setting.

### 3.2.2 Research on Changes in L2WTC in Second Language Acquisition

The aforementioned studies that focus on the factors influencing L2WTC in second language learners provide various insights for understanding the characteristics of L2WTC. On the other hand, some researchers have shown interest in the aspect of how learners' L2WTC actually changes, rather than the relationship between learners' L2WTC and other factors. Among them are Kang (2005), Yashima (2009), and Yashima et al. (2018).

Kang (2005) examined the L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) of four male Korean English learners studying at American universities using a stimulated recall method, where conversations were recorded, and learners were asked about their feelings and situations at the time. The results indicated three psychological factors — “comfort,” “stimulation/excitement,” and “sense of responsibility” — underpinning the formation of learners' L2 WTC. Furthermore, it was noted that these psychological factors are influenced by aspects such as conversation partners and topics. For instance, one participant felt a sense of responsibility and was more willing to speak when the conversation touched on topics related to his ethnicity. Conversely, another participant reported a decrease in their sense of responsibility and willingness to talk as the number of conversation participants increased. This study focuses on situations outside the classroom, revealing changes in learners' situational L2 WTC, but it does not clarify how L2 WTC changes within the actual classroom environment.

Yashima et al. (2018) built on the work of Kang (2005) to explore changes in learners' situational L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) within the classroom. The study involved observing the speech time, instances of silence, and turn-taking of four participants from a class of 21 learners, followed by interviews with these participants after the lessons. The results indicated that learners' situational L2 WTC varied depending on the type of activity, group members, and the teacher's instructional style. For example, participants were more active in their speech during pair activities among students than in teacher-centered activities like sentence pattern drills. While this study identified factors influencing

changes in learners' L2 WTC during lessons, it is important to note that the classroom environment for Japanese learners differs from that of English learners, suggesting that the factors leading to changes for Japanese learners may also differ. This warrants further observation and investigation.

On the other hand, Yashima (2009) focused on how overseas experiences impact learners' L2 WTC. The study examined Japanese English learners participating in international volunteer activities, comparing emotional factors before departure and after returning. The findings indicated that through their experiences abroad, learners' L2 WTC increased significantly.

### **3.3 Research on L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in the Field of Japanese Language Education**

Kobayashi (2006) reviewed research on L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) to examine motivation for second language communication. He noted that studies investigating learners' L2 WTC in Japanese language education are rare; however, by introducing this concept, educators could gain valuable insights into methods for enhancing learners' motivation for second language communication.

Subsequently, Kobayashi (2008a) conducted a study involving 30 intermediate Chinese learners of Japanese studying at universities in Japan. Through a questionnaire survey and an oral proficiency test, the study explored the relationship between learners' L2 WTC, communication frequency, and oral proficiency. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between Japanese learners' L2 WTC and communication frequency, as well as between communication frequency and oral proficiency. Furthermore, it was indicated that L2 WTC indirectly influences oral proficiency through communication frequency. This research underscores that L2 WTC is a crucial factor for Japanese language learners.

Kobayashi (2008b) examined factors influencing Japanese language learning. The study involved a questionnaire survey of 370 international students attending universities in Japan to investigate what types of motivation for learning Japanese affect L2 willingness to communicate (WTC). The results identified five types of motivation among learners: "interest in learning Japanese," "interest in modern Japanese culture," "orientation toward understanding Japan," "inducement orientation," and "instrumental orientation." Among these, "interest in learning Japanese" and "instrumental orientation" were found to have a significant relationship with learners' L2 WTC, while "orientation toward understanding Japan" did not demonstrate such a relationship. Kobayashi (2008b) noted that intrinsic motivation, such as interest in learning Japanese, and extrinsic motivation, such as career opportunities and entrepreneurship, promote learners' L2 WTC. He also pointed out that the findings differ from those of Yashima (2002) regarding English learners, suggesting that since Japanese is a language with a more limited global usage compared to English, a sole focus on understanding Japan may not sufficiently enhance learners' L2 WTC.

Research examining changes in Japanese learners' L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) includes studies by

Nohata (2020) and Nobata (2021). In Nobata (2020), the study investigated the factors influencing L2 WTC among Japanese learners in out-of-classroom situations during their study abroad. Focusing on emotional factors, the study involved interviews and surveys with two exchange students. The results indicated that the L2 WTC of Japanese learners in out-of-classroom settings is aimed at building relationships with others within intercultural communities. It was noted that communication conditions, such as the relationship with the interlocutor, and various communication experiences, including anxiety and confidence, fluctuate within individual contexts.

In Nohata (2021), a study was conducted involving five exchange students through interviews and surveys, focusing on learners' L2 ideal self and L2 ought-to self while examining changes in Japanese learners' L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) during their study abroad. The results concluded that changes in learners' L2 WTC are related to the L2 ideal self that learners developed through their experiences in the host country.

## **4. Discussion**

Research on L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) has been developed for nearly 20 years. While most of these studies have been conducted from the perspective of English education, there remains a scarcity of research examining L2 WTC from the standpoint of Japanese language education. This section discusses how to advance research on L2 WTC within the context of Japanese language education in line with current trends in L2 WTC research.

First, it is essential to consider the differences in L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) among learners of different second languages. Prior research has revealed that L2 WTC differs from general WTC in nature; while WTC tends to be more static and influenced by the personality of the individual, L2 WTC is affected by static factors such as personality and confidence, as well as situational factors including topics, the number of communicators, and task types, making it more dynamic and subject to change. In summary, L2 WTC encompasses both static and dynamic characteristics. With globalization, an increasing number of people are learning multiple second languages. For instance, in China, most students majoring in Japanese also study English, as English education is mandatory from elementary through high school. To further explore the characteristics of L2 WTC, it is not sufficient to merely compare L2 WTC with general WTC; it may also be necessary to examine and discuss the L2 WTC of learners across different second languages.

Next, it is also necessary to consider the L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) of learners who have participated in online classes. Much of the research focusing on learners' L2 WTC has centered on face-to-face classroom settings, examining how factors such as teacher attitudes, types of classroom activities, number of participants, and classroom atmosphere influence learners' L2 WTC. However, it remains unclear what factors affect changes in L2 WTC in online classes mediated by the internet and how these differ from those in face-to-face classes. With advancements in online technology, a growing number of learners are studying

Japanese online, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when many were unable to attend in-person classes. Given this context, it is crucial to explore the L2 WTC of learners in online settings.

Additionally, it is essential to consider changes in learners' L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) outside of the classroom. Previous research has primarily focused on examining changes in learners' L2 WTC within the classroom, and to the best of our knowledge, studies addressing how L2 WTC changes in out-of-class contexts remain insufficient. Once learners leave the teacher-created classroom environment, they must take responsibility for many aspects of their language learning themselves. In other words, while examining changes in L2 WTC within the classroom can aid teachers in creating effective classroom environments (Pawlak et al., 2016), exploring changes in L2 WTC outside the classroom may support learners' autonomous learning. Outside the classroom, if learners' L2 WTC decreases, it becomes crucial to understand how learners recognize and confront this decline, as their engagement in these processes must be proactive.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between learners' identities and L2 willingness to communicate (WTC). Identity refers to the self-awareness of who one is (Norton, 2000), and language allows individuals to express their identities. For instance, someone who frequently uses terms like "まじ," "くさ," or "えもい" may be signaling their identity as a young person, while someone who often jokes may be expressing their identity as a humorous individual. There are multiple expressions available to convey the same message; for example, when expressing gratitude, one might choose from "どうも," "ありがとう," "ありがとうございます," or "サンキュ." Humans use these words to articulate their uniqueness. However, for learners, it is often not easy to select words that truly express their identities during communication. Therefore, when considering the factors that influence L2 WTC, focusing on learners' identities may provide new insights.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary goal of language acquisition is to communicate using a second language. Moreover, communication in a second language is essential for language learning. While L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) has been extensively studied as a significant factor influencing learner communication in English education, it has received limited attention in Japanese language education. This paper provides an overview of recent research related to communication in Japanese language education, highlighting that while the development of communicative competence has become a primary educational objective—with considerable focus on teaching methods, materials development, and intercultural communication comparisons—learners' intrinsic emotional factors have been somewhat overlooked. By organizing research on both static and dynamic aspects of L2 WTC, this paper discusses how to advance research on L2 WTC from the perspective of Japanese language education. It proposes major research topics, including "Differences in WTC among learners of different second languages," "Characteristics of L2 WTC among learners in online classes," "Changes in learners'

L2 WTC outside the classroom," and "The relationship between learners' identities and L2 WTC." It is hoped that this paper will serve as a valuable reference for those interested in L2 WTC.

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