

# Pronunciation Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate in the Foreign Language Classroom

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## Abstract

Numerous studies have proven language anxiety to have a detrimental effect on foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) performance (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Furthermore, while anxiety has been found to be one of the most immediate determinants of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a FL (e.g. Clement et al., 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2001), other observations (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Phillips, 1992; Price, 1991) show that it is particularly concern over pronunciation mistakes and speaking in front of the whole class that cause embarrassment and anxiety in FL students. Linking these two facts might lead to an explanation why many post-puberty learners avoid speaking tasks in the FL classroom, which deprives them of practice and improvement in communicative skills—usually their main goal of FL learning.

The aim of the present paper is to report results of a study conducted to verify whether Pronunciation Anxiety (PA) is an important determinant of students' WTC in a FL classroom – the first part of a two-fold project on the relation between PA and WTC inside and outside of the classroom. I provide a brief theoretical introduction of the two variables in question and a description of the research design, followed by a discussion of results and final conclusions.

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Proficiency in speaking skills constitutes the main aim of most foreign language (FL) learners. At the same time, speaking is considered a necessary condition for acquisition to take place (e.g. Savignon, 2005; Skehan, 1989; Swain, 1985). Consequently, it is important that students be involved in speaking tasks in the FL classroom. This should be one of the basic concerns of the teachers. MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) emphasize that

*(...) the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them. A programme that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed programme.*

“The most immediate determinant of L2 use” (Clement, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003, p.191) is Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The concept has been found to be related to communication anxiety/apprehension. Frequently the cause of anxiety experienced by FL learners in the classroom is “great embarrassment” resulting from the belief that they have a “terrible accent” (e.g. Price, 1991, p. 105). Thus, it may be presupposed that pronunciation anxiety may be a particularly important factor determining FL students’ willingness to communicate and the frequency of speaking in the FL classroom.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Willingness to Communicate in L2

The construct of willingness to communicate in a second language (L2-WTC) is defined as the “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). In other words, WTC consistently predicts actual initiation of and participation in communication, given the opportunity to do so (MacIntyre & Care, 2000; McCroskey & Baer, 1985). Although L2-WTC derives from communication studies examining WTC in the first language (L1), it is “not a simple manifestation of WTC in L1” in the L2/FL context (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In fact, some studies have proven a negative correlation between WTC in L1 and WTC in L2 (e.g. Charos, 1994).

In 1998 MacIntyre and his associates forwarded a “pyramid” model of L2-WTC showing a range of potential influences on the construct.

According to the model, a FL learner's decision to communicate is the result of interplay between immediate situational factors, e.g. the desire to speak to a specific person or knowledge of the topic, and more enduring influences, such as intergroup relations and personality. The latter constitute "the basis or platform on which the rest of the influences operate; the foundation on which the pyramid is built" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). The most immediate determinants of L2-WTC are the desire to interact with a specific person and state communication self-confidence, i.e. a momentary feeling of confidence in a specific situation. In turn, what determines the speaker's level of confidence in speaking is his/her state anxiety and state perceived competence. Finally, as MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 549) explain, "anything that increases state anxiety will reduce one's self-confidence, and, therefore, one's WTC."

### **The Model of FL Pronunciation Anxiety (FL-PA)**

Despite the fact that the aspect FL learners show most concern of and that causes the highest levels of apprehension is pronunciation, i.e. FL students' accent, to the best of my knowledge, so far no attempt has been made to define and operationalize the construct. Thus, the following working definition can be suggested,

*Pronunciation anxiety is a feeling of apprehension experienced by FL learners either in the FL classroom or natural setting, deriving from negative FL pronunciation self-perceptions, fear of negative evaluation, and beliefs about the importance of pronunciation, difficulty of learning and the sound of the FL pronunciation, evidenced by typical cognitive, physiological/somatic and behavioral symptoms of being anxious.*

As the definition suggests, foreign language pronunciation anxiety (FL-PA) is a multidimensional construct<sup>1</sup>. What needs to be further clarified is that fear of embarrassing oneself and pronunciation self-perceptions are key subcomponents of the construct.

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed presentation of the construct of FL-PA can be found in Baran-Lucarz (in preparation).

More specifically, the self-perceptions refer to the following factors:

1. Pronunciation self-image, i.e. beliefs one holds about his/her appearance (the way he/she sounds and looks like) when speaking a FL, and acceptance of the perceived self-image;
2. Pronunciation self-efficacy, i.e. beliefs about one's ability to learn/acquire a TL pronunciation;
3. Pronunciation self-assessment, i.e. evaluation of one's pronunciation level, usually made in comparison to that of other FL speakers (e.g. classmates).

## METHOD

In April 2013 an empirical study was launched, aiming at shedding light on the relationship between willingness to communicate in the FL classroom (WTC-FLC) and pronunciation anxiety in the FL classroom (PA-FLC). The following research questions were forwarded:

- Q1: Is the learners' WTC-FLC related to their PA-FLC?
- Q2: Does the strength of the relationship between the two variables differ, depending on the number of interlocutors involved in the speaking activity and its type, and on the degree of acquaintance between speakers?
- Q3: Does the strength of the relationship vary depending on the proficiency level?

## Participants

The study was conducted among 151 Polish learners of English studying at the University of Wrocław, Poland, majoring in various disciplines of knowledge, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, history, information and library studies, management, economics, law and administration, biotechnology, geography, environmental protection, Polish philology, classical philology, social support, national security, European studies, political science, sociology. The subjects' age ranged from 18 to 40, with the age mean being 21.40. They represented three proficiency levels, i.e. B2 ( $n = 61$ ), B1 ( $n = 52$ ) and A2 ( $n = 38$ ), according to the Common European Framework of Reference.

It seems vital to add that students of the universities in Poland are obliged to take at least one FL course and pass an exam at B2 level. By the

moment the learners were involved in the study, they had participated in approximately fifty 90-minute lessons conducted in groups of from 12 to 20 students. Most of the participants had already studied English for several years before they became university students either in a public school or private language school. A few (about 25%) had attended a course only for a few months and thus usually represented a lower level, i.e. A2. The learners were expected to join a particular group at a specific level after having taken a placement test and to attend the course consistently with this group.

## Instruments

Two main instruments were designed to gather data needed to answer the research questions, i.e. a *Measure of Willingness to Communicate in the FL Classroom (MWTC-FLC)* and *Measure of Pronunciation Anxiety in the FL Classroom (MPA-FLC)*. Both of them were written in the participants' mother tongue. They were filled out anonymously by the participants during one of their regular classes of English at the end of the second semester of the course. The participants were assured that the information provided by them in the questionnaires would be confidential and used only for scientific purposes.

*Measure of Willingness to Communicate in the FL Classroom.* The instrument to measure the subjects' WTC-FLC had the form of a 12-item questionnaire with a 6-point Likert scale, based on a battery designed by McCroskey (1992). The testees' task was to specify the degree of willingness/eagerness with which they tend to participate in different oral communicative tasks performed during the course, by marking a digit from 1 to 6 next to the statements referring to particular activities, where 6 stood for 'very willing' and 1 for 'very unwilling/reluctant.' Consequently, the higher the score, the higher the level of WTC-FLC.

The items of the questionnaire can be classified on the basis of two criteria/categories:

- I) Degree of acquaintance with the interlocutor(s)/listeners;
- II) Number of interlocutors/listeners involved in the speaking task/type of speaking activity.

When the first category is concerned, 4 items addressed speaking tasks performed with unknown students (e.g., *Taking part in a discussion with*

approximately 10 unknown students.’), 4 with acquaintances (e.g., ‘Presenting a prepared talk to approximately 20 acquaintance students.’), and 4 with friends (e.g., ‘Explaining the rules of my favourite game to approximately 5 students who are good friends of mine.’). It is important to clarify that the participants’ attention was drawn to the difference between an acquaintance and that they were provided with a definition of the two words in the written instructions that preceded the questionnaire.

When it comes to the second category, i.e., the number of speakers and type of exercises, each subcategory was addressed 3 times. More specifically, the statements referred to the following: delivering prepared presentations to large groups (20 people), discussions/ debates with approximately 10 speakers, explaining the rules of one’s favourite game to 5 people, and a conversation (convincing the interlocutor) in a dyad. The tasks represent the most frequent types of exercises performed in the FL classroom, which by definition are bound to the size of group they are performed in.

The test showed an acceptable level of internal reliability (Cronbach alpha = .91).

***Measure of Pronunciation Anxiety in the FL Classroom.*** A 40-item self-report questionnaire was administered<sup>2</sup> to diagnose the participants’ level of pronunciation anxiety experienced when learning and using a FL in the classroom setting. Its design was inspired by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) and a battery to measure Phonetics Learning Anxiety (Baran-Lucarz, 2013). The testees’ task was to agree/disagree on a 6-point Likert scale with statements referring to their emotions experienced during a FL class related specifically to self-perceptions about their pronunciation and typical symptoms of being anxious. More specifically, the items concerned the following subcomponents of the construct of Pronunciation Anxiety:

- ❖ Fear of negative evaluation related to pronunciation, e.g.:
  - ‘I fear that other students may consider my pronunciation ridiculous.’
  - ‘I’d rather other students did not hear me making a pronunciation mistake.’
- ❖ Pronunciation self-image, e.g.:
  - ‘I think I sound funny pronouncing English sounds or words the way they should be pronounced.’

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<sup>2</sup> The instrument is thoroughly described and enclosed in Baran-Lucarz (in preparation).

- *'I like singing or speaking to myself in English.'*
- ❖ Pronunciation self-assessment, e.g.:
  - *'My pronunciation of English is at a lower level than that of my friends.'*
  - *'I am satisfied with my level of pronunciation.'*
- ❖ Pronunciation self-efficacy, e.g.:
  - *'I think I have a talent to acquire FL pronunciation.'*
  - *'I remember the pronunciation of new words easily.'*
- ❖ Beliefs related to pronunciation of English, e.g., about the importance of pronunciation in communication, the difficulty of learning English pronunciation by Poles], about the sound of the English phonetic system and words, e.g.:
  - *'Some English words sound odd or funny.'*
  - *'Intelligibility of the speaker depends on his/her pronunciation.'*

The wording of some of the statements required a reversed scoring key to be used. The higher the achieved score, the more anxious a student was considered to be.

The instrument proved to be a valid and reliable tool (Cronbach alpha = .92) for diagnosing Pronunciation Anxiety experienced by learners in a FL classroom (see Baran-Lucarz, in preparation).

## RESULTS

### Correlation Analysis

To examine the existence of a connection between FL learners' willingness to take part in communicative oral tasks during a FL lesson and their level of pronunciation anxiety, Pearson correlation was computed. Prior to these calculations, the basic statistics were analysed and the assumptions underlying correlation (the scales, independence, linearity, normal distribution assumptions) were verified. Since none of them were violated, it was justifiable to proceed to further calculations.

Table 1 displays the correlation coefficients achieved between the degree of Pronunciation Anxiety, the general level of WTC-FLC and its subcategories.

**Table 1.** Correlation between PA-FLC (Pronunciation Anxiety in the FL Classroom) and WTC-FLC (Willingness to Communicate in the FL Classroom)

Subcategories of WTC-FLC		PA-FLC Total
degree of acquaintance	Acquaint.	-.41*
	Friends	-.34*
	Unknown Sts.	-.13
number of interlocut. /type of test	10/discussion	-.56*
	20/present	-.52*
	5/exp1.	-.50*
	2/conv.	-.35*
	WTC-FLC Total	-.60*

Note.  $df = 149$ ; \* $p < .0005$

As the table shows, a negative correlation of moderate strength ( $r = -.60$ ) was found between the students' scores achieved for the MPA-FLC and their general degree of WTC-FLC. In other words, the more anxious the participants were about their pronunciation, the less eagerly they took part in speaking activities in the FL classroom. When the degree of acquaintance is concerned, a connection between the two variables appeared in the case of tasks performed in groups of students that know each other and among friends. However, the apprehension related to pronunciation did not determine the subjects' willingness to talk in a FL with people they do not know. Finally, when it comes to the relationship between PA and WTC in the FL classroom depending upon the size of the group in which the speaking task is performed and the type of activity: in all cases a significant moderate negative correlation was found (from  $r = -.35$  to  $r = -.56$ ), with the link being the weakest in the case of dyads.

### T-test

What lends further support to the importance of Pronunciation Anxiety for one's eagerness to join in communicative tasks are results of the independent *T-tests*. To be able to compute them, the participants were classified as belonging to either high or low PA students. Those who scored more than 1 SD above the median in the MPA-FLC were

considered highly anxious learners ( $n = 50$ ), while those who scored less than 1 SD below the median were categorised as having a low level of PA ( $n = 53$ ). Table 2 presents the results of MWTC-FLC achieved by both of these groups and the  $t$ -values.

**Table 2.** *T*-test of Differences in WTC-FLC between High and Low PA Learners Depending on Degree of Acquaintance among Speakers and Size of Group/Type of Task

	Total	FR. <sup>a</sup>	ACQU. <sup>b</sup>	UNKN. <sup>c</sup>	2/CON <sup>d</sup>	5/EXPL <sup>e</sup>	10/DIS <sup>f</sup>	20/PRES <sup>g</sup>
Mean high PA-FLC	<b>38.98</b>	14.58	13.24	11.16	11.72	10.34	8.88	8.04
low PA-FLC	<b>50.57</b>	18.47	17.15	14.94	13.26	13.07	12.24	11.98
SD high PA-FLC	<b>8.33</b>	2.75	3.01	3.61	2.79	2.48	2.58	3.14
low PA-FLC	<b>6.64</b>	2.21	2.56	3.55	2.16	2.02	2.16	2.63
$t_{obs}$	<b>-7.828*</b>	-7.933*	-7.121*	-5.362*	-3.150*	-6.157*	-7.191*	-6.920*

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Friends. <sup>b</sup>Acquaintances. <sup>c</sup>Unknown. <sup>d</sup>Conversation. <sup>e</sup>Explanation. <sup>f</sup>Discussion. <sup>g</sup>Presentation.  $df = 101$ ; \* $p < .0005$  (one-tailed).

The higher mean scores achieved by the low anxiety subjects for the general level of WTC-FLC and each of its subcategory indicate that they reported to be more willing to communicate during the lessons of English than their high PA classmates. Moreover, the *T*-test results proved the differences between the level of WTC-FLC of high and low PA learners to be statistically significant at  $p < .0005$ . As in the case of the results of correlation analyses, the least meaningful scores, though this time still statistically significant, were found in the case of speaking tasks performed with unknown students and dyads.

### Proficiency Level as the Moderator Variable

Since the subjects represented three different proficiency levels, it was possible to observe whether and how the strength of connection between the students' PA and their WTC varied, depending on their FL competencies.

**Table 3.** Correlation between WTC-FLC (Willingness to Communicate in the Foreign Language Classroom) and PA-FLC (Pronunciation Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom) at Three Proficiency Levels (Note.  $p < .0005$ ).

Prof. level	WTC-FLC/PA-FLC
B2 ( $n=60$ )	-.41*
B1 ( $n=52$ )	-.82*
A2 ( $n=38$ )	-.52*

The relationship between WTC and PA appeared irrespective of the participants' proficiency level. It was found to be ( $r = -.82$ ) at the intermediate level. This may be due to the fact that after a few years of studying, which learners at a B1 level have usually experienced, they expect from themselves (and probably think others expect from them) a higher level of pronunciation than they actually command. Low pronunciation self-assessment, self-image, and fear of embarrassing themselves in front of their classmates might lead to anxiety, which, in turn, can result in strong reluctance to speak in a FL. Since the students do not expect to have high attainments at a beginners' level and the pronunciation skills of the learners are at a comparably low level, the connection between the two variables is weaker ( $r = -.52$ ). Finally, it is the least meaningful at the highest proficiency level, when most likely students feel more confident about their pronunciation self-image.

## DISCUSSION

The outcomes of the study prove that students' WTC in a FL classroom, the "most immediate determinant of L2 use", is related to their anxiety, as caused by pronunciation self-perceptions. The results also indirectly imply how the communicative tasks in the FL classroom are perceived by learners. The fact that the relationship between PA and WTC proved insignificant and the t-value the lowest in the case of speaking activities performed among students who do not know one another, as opposed to communicative tasks conducted with friends or acquaintances, illustrate that for many learners FL classroom is, among others or maybe first and foremost, a platform or scene at which they feel they are constantly evaluated. What they seem particularly afraid of is losing their face in front of significant others, i.e. our friends, colleagues, who already have a

picture of them functioning in other life situations, whom they worry they might disappoint, and whose views about them might change due to their FL skills. The situation may be particularly anxiety-generating in the case of FL courses conducted in the place of work, where the TL skills of adult learners may not go hand in hand with their position in the company. The apprehension of one's ego being endangered can be even stronger in the case of adolescent students', in the life of which affiliation and acceptance of peers is most crucial.

Interestingly, the objective quantitative data do not go hand in hand with students' answers to open questions about reasons for being unwilling to communicate and suggestions on how to make them more eager to speak (see Baran-Lucarz, in preparation). Usually, students mention that they are careful about joining conversations because they don't know other students in the group. It may be because the fear of losing face in front of significant others is not open to conscious thoughts or not willingly reported.

The apprehension caused by the idea of embarrassing oneself in front of significant others does not allow the anxious individual to focus on the language task (Horwitz et al., 1986). Instead, he/she looks for ways of protecting his/her image. One of the strategies a learner may choose is avoidance behaviour, an example of which is staying silent or performing only when one feels prepared and ready to do so. On the other hand, reluctance to speak, usually resulting in actual low frequency of communication practice in the classroom, debilitates FL acquisition and progress (e.g. Savignon, 2005; Skehan, 1989; Swain, 1985).

As this and many earlier studies (e.g. Phillips, 1992; Price, 1991) show, learners seem to be particularly worried about ridiculing themselves by mispronouncing words or generally by the way they sound in the target FL. Indeed, there are data showing that pronunciation is an important aspect on the basis of which listeners view their interlocutors. Some observations have shown that the aesthetic properties of our speech seem to subconsciously attract listeners and that correct non-stigmatized pronunciation raises the general assessment of the speaker and his/her credibility (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010).

Consequently, it seems that improving FL students' perceptions of their own pronunciation and their actual pronunciation level should be a crucial concern of all FL teachers. On the other hand, what should be pointed out to learners is the fact that errors are an inevitable part of learning and that progressing without making them is not possible. Moreover, introducing the concepts of EuroEnglish, International English

and the fact that accentedness does not affect the level of comprehensibility might lower the affective filter related to the learners' pronunciation.

Outcomes on the correlation between PA and WTC in particular types of tasks and the sizes of groups they are performed in show that it is the weakest in the case of pair work, which is not surprising at all. Although the link between the two variables is stronger in activities conducted in larger groups, WTC experienced in the context of presentation delivery to a relatively big group of approximately 20 people was not the highest. This may be due to the learner being able to prepare and rehearse the monologue, thus experiencing less worry related to pronunciation mistakes and self-image.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study corroborates the hypothesis that FL students' willingness to communicate in the FL classroom is related to their level of Pronunciation Anxiety. A high statistically significant correlation was found between the level of WTC-FLC and PA-FLC ( $r = -.60$  at  $p < .0005$ ). In other words, the higher the level of PA, the less eager the students are to engage in oral communicative tasks in the FL classroom. The outcomes of correlational analysis were supported by T-test results, which proved that WTC in the FL classroom of high PA-FLC students is significantly lower than that of low PA-FLC students. The unwillingness/ reluctance to speak caused by pronunciation anxiety is most likely to occur when students work in large groups rather than small groups or dyads. However, the WTC is less likely to be affected by PA when the students can prepare and rehearse the performance earlier, as in the case of a presentation.

Furthermore, the relationship between PA and WTC was found to be statistically significant of moderate strength in speaking tasks performed with acquaintances and friends. However, it was insignificant in the case of speaking practise performed with (an) unknown student(s). This may imply that some learners feel less apprehension caused by their pronunciation when talking to a student they don't know than with a person they know well and like, which may be related to the fear of losing one's face in front of significant others.

Finally, the relationship between WTC and PA appears irrespective of the proficiency level of the student. However, it is the strongest at the intermediate level, when the differences in FL attainments among learners and clash between the students' expectations and actual competencies are

most visible. Such low pronunciation self-perceptions may lead to higher levels of anxiety, and, in turn, result in frequent unwillingness to communicate.

What seems particularly interesting is comparing the link between WTC and PA in the FL classroom context with the real-life setting, in which the actual effectiveness of communication might matter more than the fear related to the pronunciation level. The importance of PA for WTC outside the classroom may also vary, depending not only on the number of interlocutors and formality of the situation in which the communication act is taking place, but also, if not most of all, on whether the interlocutor is a TL native speaker or non-native speaker. This matter constitutes the second part of the project described here, the results of which will be presented in a separate paper.

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