Enhancing Willingness to Communicate in a Foreign Language -Insights from Short-Term Study Abroad Programmes in Melbourne, Australia, Among Participants from The University of Fukuchiyama-

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of short-term study abroad programmes on students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English, focusing on participants from The University of Fukuchiyama. Over three years (2022–2024), three student cohorts engaged in intensive English courses at Deakin University's Burwood Campus in Melbourne, Australia. These programs emphasised developing pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills to support meaningful communication in real-world contexts.

To evaluate the impact of these programmes, data were collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations conducted at three key stages: before departure, during the sojourn, and after returning home. Weekly reflective sessions provided qualitative insights into participants' language experiences and their perceptions of progress beyond self-reported survey data. Findings revealed improvements in WTC, particularly during group-based tasks and interactions in familiar contexts, suggesting that collaborative learning environments foster confidence. Pre-departure training played role in reducing communication anxiety, with participants reporting increased preparedness for engaging in English-speaking environments. However, challenges persisted in less familiar or formal settings, highlighting areas for targeted pedagogical intervention.

Based on these findings, this study recommends integrating small-group activities into pre-departure curricula, using digital tools to enhance language practice, and addressing individual communication apprehensions through tailored strategies. These insights contribute to optimising study-abroad programme design to develop confident language learners. Future research could expand on the role of social dynamics, intergenerational interactions, and digital technology in promoting WTC across diverse cultural and linguistic settings.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, English foreign language, study abroad, international posture, pair and group conversations

1. Background

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) emphasises understanding the factors that motivate individuals to engage in communication in a non-native language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This study investigates the factors influencing WTC in English among students from The University of Fukuchiyama, examining changes before and after their participation in short-term study abroad programmes. The research aims to identify how specific experiences during these programmes impact students' readiness to communicate in English. Data were collected through surveys, interviews, and observations conducted over three separate programmes spanning three academic years. Weekly surveys and debriefing sessions conducted by the chaperone provided additional insights into students' language development and communication skills. The findings contribute to improving pre- and post-study-abroad language instruction, with implications for fostering WTC in similar educational contexts.

Between 2022 and 2024, the researcher chaperoned groups of students participating in short-term study abroad programmes at Deakin University English Language Institute (DUELI) in Melbourne, Australia. Each programme involved intensive five-week courses comprising 20 hours of classroom instruction per week. In 2024, a modified four-week programme option was introduced, offering a 20% reduction in costs. Most participants resided with homestay families near the Burwood campus, except for one student in the initial programme who stayed in on-campus dormitories. Across the three programmes, group sizes varied: four students participated in August–September 2022, six in February–March 2023, and ten in August–September 2024.

2. Literature Review

Peng (2007), in a University of Sydney publication, extends McCroskey and colleagues' foundational work (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1990, 1991) on a personality trait initially conceptualised to explain L1 communicative behaviour. The WTC concept, originally derived from Burgoon's (1976) 'unwillingness to communicate' construct, was later adapted for second language acquisition (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). While Burgoon focused on communicative reticence, MacIntyre et al. (1998) advanced a model positioning WTC as a primary goal

of language teaching, emphasising learners' readiness to pursue and engage in communicative opportunities, both verbally and nonverbally (p. 547).

McCroskey and Richmond (2007) further elaborated on conditions leading to WTC, proposing a logical framework that warrants deeper consideration. Nonetheless, MacIntyre (2007) underscores the critical need to understand the varying degrees of eagerness among individuals to participate in the classroom. This variability highlights the importance of addressing individual differences in WTC, particularly the phenomenon of communication apprehension, which McCroskey (1996) identifies as a significant source of anxiety experienced before engaging in a foreign language. This apprehension aligns with the findings of Horwitz et al. (1986), who also recognise the anxiety that emerges when a second language (L2) supersedes the native tongue.

Before engaging in L2 communication, individuals often assess the appropriateness of their actions in a given context. McCroskey (1982) proposed the concept of "Self-perceived Communication Competence," which, while focusing on cultural differences, requires individuals to critically evaluate how they express themselves in specific settings. Expanding the scope beyond individual contexts, Kang (2005) concluded that learners exhibit greater security in familiar situations and with known interlocutors. Philp (2006) observed that familiarity with both the interlocutor and the topic, as well as the size of the group, significantly influences WTC. Furthermore, the preparation for discussion topics enhances a learner's readiness to communicate. Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) explored the variations in WTC across age and gender, suggesting that students in homestay environments may find it easier to converse with younger children than with adults. Additionally, interactions with individuals of different genders can introduce complexities.

Despite the contributing factors of surroundings and circumstances, MacIntyre (2007) emphasises the necessity of understanding why some language learners are more inclined to speak up in classrooms than others. However, the literature lacks a comprehensive set of techniques and strategies for teachers and learners to effectively address this issue and enhance learning outcomes. Moreover, there remains an absence of a reliable instrument to evaluate an individual's WTC. McCroskey and Baer (1985) proposed a scale of twenty different situations in which an L2 user might communicate, ranging from interactions with strangers, such as salespeople or professionals like doctors, to known individuals, such as a romantic partner. While this scale may be outdated, the relevance of WTC in varying social contexts, whether with individuals, small groups, or

large audiences, continues to hold significance. In addition, previous studies from Yashima (2002) focused on the Japanese EFL context of studying English as an "International Posture." Acquiring this perspective correlates to some degree to having a WTC in L2, in which English is most renowned in Japan.

Richards (2008) categorises interactions into three fundamental types: small talk, transactions, and performances. Of these, small talk is arguably the most critical, as it represents a challenging social skill that learners often lack sufficient practice in. However, small talk is typically considered too mundane to constitute the basis of an entire class, thereby necessitating the development of targeted materials.

Pedagogical implications for enhancing WTC among students studying abroad are significant, particularly in light of the findings by Riasati and Noordin (2011). Teachers play a crucial role in fostering WTC by consistently encouraging students to engage in communication. This encouragement can boost learners' confidence, making them more willing to participate in conversations in a foreign context. Additionally, the integration of technology in language instruction is essential. Teachers must remain innovative and up to date with technological advancements, utilising tools that facilitate interactive and engaging communication practices, which can be particularly beneficial for students adapting to new environments.

Moreover, addressing anxiety, a major barrier to communication, is vital. Teachers need to identify and mitigate sources of anxiety in the classroom, understanding that paired activities often induce less stress compared to larger group settings. This can lead to a more comfortable environment for oral practice, a critical component of language acquisition, particularly in immersion contexts like studying abroad. Finally, tasks should be appropriately challenging to ensure that students remain engaged without feeling overwhelmed. By carefully considering these factors, educators can significantly enhance students' WTC, ultimately leading to more successful language learning experiences abroad.

3. Research Question

To what extent does participation in a short-term study abroad programme affect the willingness to communicate in English among students from The University of Fukuchiyama?

4. Methods of research

This study employs a multi-phase approach to investigate the factors influencing students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English, with three distinct phases of data collection.

The first phase occurred prior to the students' departure, during which they participated in a weekly lunchtime pre-study abroad training programme. This programme was designed to enhance their communication skills, focusing on the development of both linguistic and cultural competencies necessary for effective interaction in an English-speaking environment.

The second phase took place while students were in Melbourne, where they engaged in weekly debriefing sessions. These sessions provided a structured space for reflective discussions on their experiences, allowing students to share insights, challenges, and successes. This communal exchange not only fostered a sense of belonging but also aimed to bolster students' confidence in using English for communication in real-life contexts.

In the final phase, following the completion of the programme, students were required to deliver PowerPoint presentations in English and submit written evaluations of their experiences. These tasks served as both an assessment of their language proficiency and to succinctly articulate their learning outcomes. Moreover, the completion of these deliverables was a condition for receiving financial support from the university, which covered approximately twenty per cent of the programme fees.

5. Results

The participants shared a range of sentiments and insights regarding the pre-departure training. Through Google Forms, they conveyed both excitement and apprehension about their upcoming journey. While some expressed anxiety and nervousness, they also demonstrated a growing sense of anticipation for the opportunities ahead. Many students expressed their intention to enjoy the programme and recognised its potential to significantly improve their English skills, reinforcing their commitment to actively engage in programme activities.

Key takeaways from their training in Japan highlighted several valuable aspects. The emphasis on pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills in English was regarded as essential. Students expressed relief from anxiety, particularly during conversational practice sessions, and recognised that using simpler English in communication was acceptable. The training also provided valuable opportunities to practise English and prepare for meaningful interactions, which students identified as crucial for their experience in Melbourne. Overall, the training contributed significantly to enhancing their confidence for the upcoming programme. However, many students developed a reliance on Google Translate, which disrupted the natural flow of their speech.

Surveys explored participants' preferred learning styles for studying abroad. The results strongly indicate a preference for collaborative learning environments, with "Pair and group conversations" identified as the most effective mode of study. This suggests that participants value opportunities for real-time interaction and peer communication. It is important to note that the sample size over three years was small (n=20), which limits the generalisability of these findings.

During the study abroad programme in Australia, students demonstrated a high willingness to communicate (WTC) across various social contexts. They showed a particularly strong inclination to communicate in English with native speakers. While WTC was generally high, individual factors influenced communication patterns in different situations. Notably, WTC was highest when socialising with friends and participating in class discussions. However, when students became ill, they were uncomfortable sharing information via Google Forms, and when they changed homestay families, there was a tendency to neglect completing their weekly entries. In contrast, during periods of stability, they generally had no issues with reporting their experiences.

The primary function of the Google Form was to facilitate the dissemination of participants' experiences. However, the data recorded may not fully capture individual experiences due to potential social desirability bias, as participants were aware that their responses would be publicly visible. This data was shared with The University of Fukuchiyama Global Committee members, and subsequent weekly discussions revealed a broader range of experiences than those initially captured in the Google Forms. This highlights the limitations of self-reported data in this context, as illustrated by a group of students who went skydiving but did not disclose this experience to their chaperone.

To promote peer-to-peer learning and reflection, students participated in English-language evaluations and presentations shortly after returning to Japan. The majority of returning students also contributed to the recruitment process for future programmes. The primary objective of these presentations was to encourage critical self-reflection. Sharing their experiences with peers fostered the exchange of insights on potential challenges and best practices for navigating study abroad experiences. Moreover, reflective discussions with returnees provided an opportunity for closure and the integration of their learning.

6. Thoughts for the future

Future training programmes should incorporate flipped classroom methodologies to promote pre-class learning at home and foster student-driven activities, such as collaborative projects. This approach would prioritise student-led debriefing sessions, encouraging deeper engagement with the material. Bergmann and Sams (2012) highlight the advantages of flipped classrooms, noting that students achieve more consistent learning outcomes when they are assigned preparatory tasks prior to class. Additionally, the content of these programmes should build upon the foundational work of Richards (2008), extending topics to include areas such as small talk, transactions, and performances to more effectively assess students' willingness to communicate (WTC).

Drawing on Donovan and MacIntyre's (2004) study of WTC across age and gender, future lesson plans should also seek to facilitate intergenerational interactions. In this context, students could engage with the broader community by visiting locations beyond the classroom, encouraging both brief exchanges and extended conversations in various settings across Melbourne.

Moreover, future research should include a comprehensive cost analysis, considering both financial and time commitments. Such an analysis would offer valuable insights into the accessibility of these programmes, ensuring greater participation among students. It is clear that younger participants particularly value peer perspectives, making the inclusion of their voices in programme design crucial.

Finally, while standardised tests remain a key tool for assessing English language proficiency among non-native speakers, future research should explore the integration of social media and online teaching tools to facilitate interaction. This would help maintain

the relevance of language learning programmes within the evolving educational landscape.
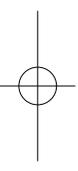
7. Conclusion

This research into the willingness to communicate (WTC) among students from The University of Fukuchiyama offers valuable insights into how study abroad experiences influence their readiness to engage in English communication. Through a combination of comprehensive methods, including surveys, interviews, and observational data collected over three years, the findings indicate a significant increase in WTC following participants' completion of short-term programmes in Melbourne, Australia. The students' experiences underscore the pivotal role of pre-departure training and reflective debriefing sessions in fostering the confidence necessary for effective communication.

The literature reveals critical gaps in the understanding of WTC, particularly regarding the impact of individual differences across varying communicative contexts. This study addresses these gaps, and its implications extend beyond the immediate findings, contributing to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies that cultivate global perspectives. By exploring innovative teaching methodologies, such as flipped classrooms, and integrating technology, the study suggests a way to enhance learner engagement. Ultimately, this approach will bridge the gap between language proficiency and real-world application, enabling The University of Fukuchiyama to better prepare students for effective cross-cultural communication, both in Melbourne and in broader international contexts.

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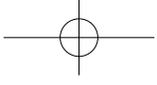
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