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Willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language of the deaf and hard of hearing university students

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Introduction

Research on deaf and hard of hearing students learning and using foreign languages has started not so long ago - in the first years of the 21st century. So far the main topics of it revolved mainly around issues of grammar and vocabulary, reading, writing and speaking acquisition, difficulties experienced by students during this process and strategies of overcoming the possible problems. Some of the personality characteristics, like motivation and learning style were also investigated. In the background of each of these research a conclusion might be visible that a foreign language is best acquired within the context of interaction. It implies the fact that greater attention of both scientists and practitioners should be devoted to active usage of the target language, be it in class or in the more naturalistic setting. The key factor guaranteeing a success is the students' willingness to start and maintain a conversation in a foreign language.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is by some of the researchers understood as the main goal of language instruction and defined as "the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so"

(McCroskey & Baer, 1985) or learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Thus, it can be treated as a psychological readiness to use a second language and understood as something different from objective linguistic competence. Formally speaking, willingness to communicate is observed as a certain type of communication behavior, but this act can be described as a multi-layered one. It is implied by the intention to perform a certain behavior, usually in a specified interpersonal and situational context. WTC might be even conceptualized as a primary goal of foreign language instruction. So far it was language competency that was meant to be the ultimate goal of foreign language instruction. However, as many research showed, a person might be competent in a foreign language but at the same time not eager to use it in real communication. This results from motivational, affective and cognitive propensities, such as self confidence, interpersonal motivation, group motivation, attitudes, communication competence, intergroup climate and personality (cf. J. R. MacDonald, R. Clément, P. D. MacIntyre 2012). It seems that age also plays a role in this process and usually the older the learner, the more hesitant to start learning a foreign language and eager to communicate in it.

MacIntyre (1994) proposed that a model of WTC should consist of two variables: communication competence and communication anxiety. It was presumed that a high level of communication competence and low levels of anxiety would result in a more frequent communication in a foreign language. Later on the same author together with a group of researchers proposed a more detailed model of WTC (MacIntyre et al. 1998). It takes a form of a model consisting of: 1. Stable influences (like personality traits) and situation specific influences (e.g. the interlocutor's characteristics that motivate to or distracts from communication). Further research on the concept of WTC disclosed that it depends on a wide range of factors, such as the degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, and the topic of discussion (MacIntyre et al. 1998, comp. Fig.1). It was also observed that willingness to communicate is hindered in situations when a learner observes that an

interlocutor is more fluent in using the language (Kang 2005) and negative attitude towards the classroom tasks Dörnyei and Kormos (2002)

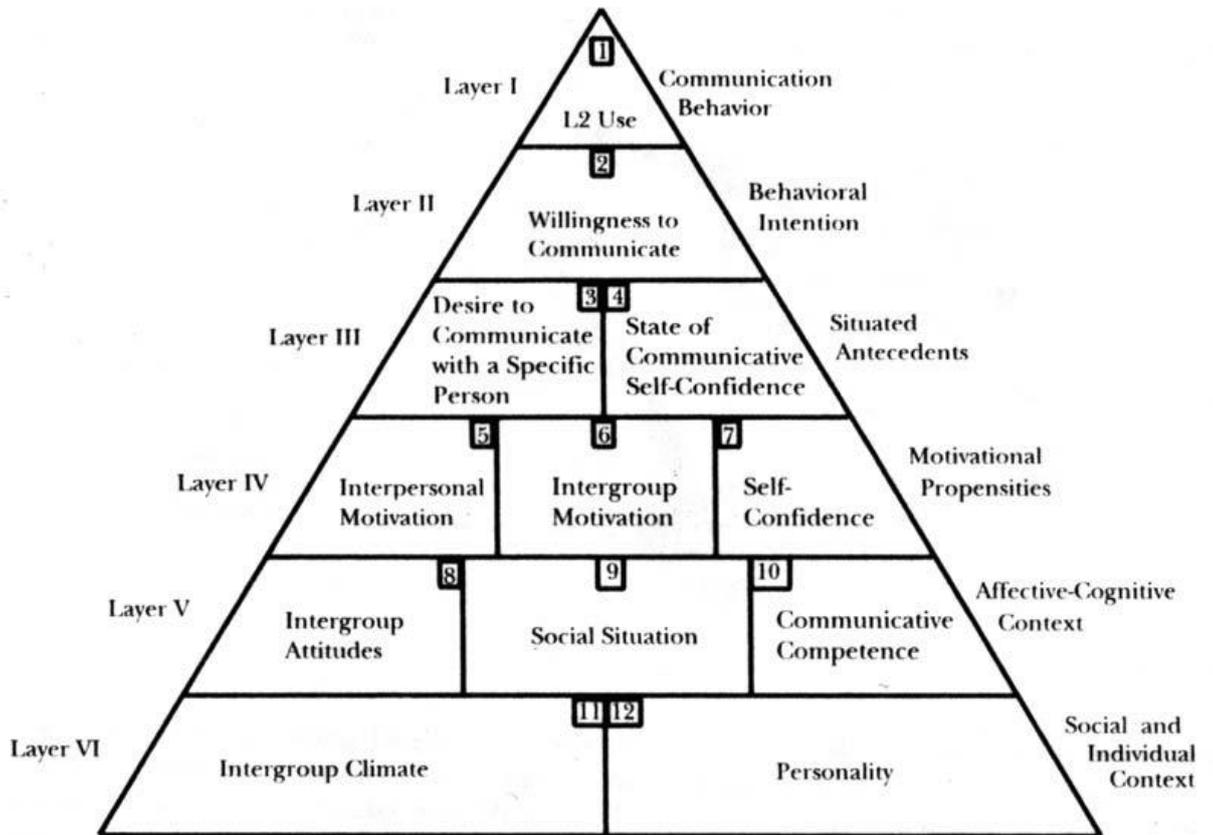


Figure 1. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547)

MacIntyre (2007) points also at a fact that in measuring WTC rigorous conditions should be met and the factors should be clearly described, as the factors might be connected with different aspects of the communication situation e.g. anxiety might be connected with the situation variables or with some personal traits of the learner or the interlocutor.

The constellation of the variables is dynamic in its nature. Apart from measuring WTC the teachers and researchers should concentrate also on pedagogical interventions: it is not only important to diagnose the situation

but also to change the variables that can be changed in order to support the learner's communication willingness.

Research

The issue of willingness to communicate is of an utmost importance in forming and assessing linguistic competence in a foreign language of the deaf and hard of hearing English as a second language students. It happens more than often that even if they master English grammar and vocabulary, they feel very much reluctant to use a foreign language as a means of communication. It is probably connected with some personality features, lack of self confidence and unfavorable social attitudes and prejudices.

In the present paper the results of research on the deaf and hard of hearing university students willingness to communicate will be presented and analyzed. The research group consisted of 15 deaf and hard of hearing Polish and Czech participants of a workshop *English as a tool of international communication*, conducted at Centre of Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of KUL university in Lublin within the program *Network of Expert Centers Providing Inclusion in Tertiary Education- ExpIn*. The control groups consisted of 15 hearing students who did not participated in the workshop but represented the demographical characteristics similar to the research group. The mean time of learning English was 9,3 years for the hearing students and 6,7 for the deaf and hard of hearing ones. The method included a questionnaire checking their willingness to communicate. The results were analyzed statistically, showing high level of willingness to communicate among the research group of students

The research group participated in a workshop *English as a tool of international communication*, that gathered together 20 student with hearing impairment from universities in Lublin, Brno and Poznan. They spent together 5 days, participating in a series of courses, events and games: regular classes on grammar, reading and communication, e-learning class,

Cued Speech classes, a city game (Lublin’s quest) and three cultural events: a visit to a museum (the main Lublin’s museum, The Nazi Concentration Camp in Majdanek, a tour of Polish capital city, Warsaw and intercultural evening prepared by all the participants. Each group of students prepared also a presentations about their town and their university. The main impact during all the classes and events was on communication and students were encouraged both by the teachers and by the conditions prepared to exchange ideas and communicate within a group, either in writing (all students were equipped with a notebook and a set of pens, they also have tablets during the classes and their personal mobiles) or in speech – if possible.

The evaluation of the workshop was very positive (fig. 2). The participants valued mostly the cultural events (visit to a museum, tour to Warsaw and intercultural evening), some of the regular classes: introductory session, grammar classes and e-learning class and also their own presentations.

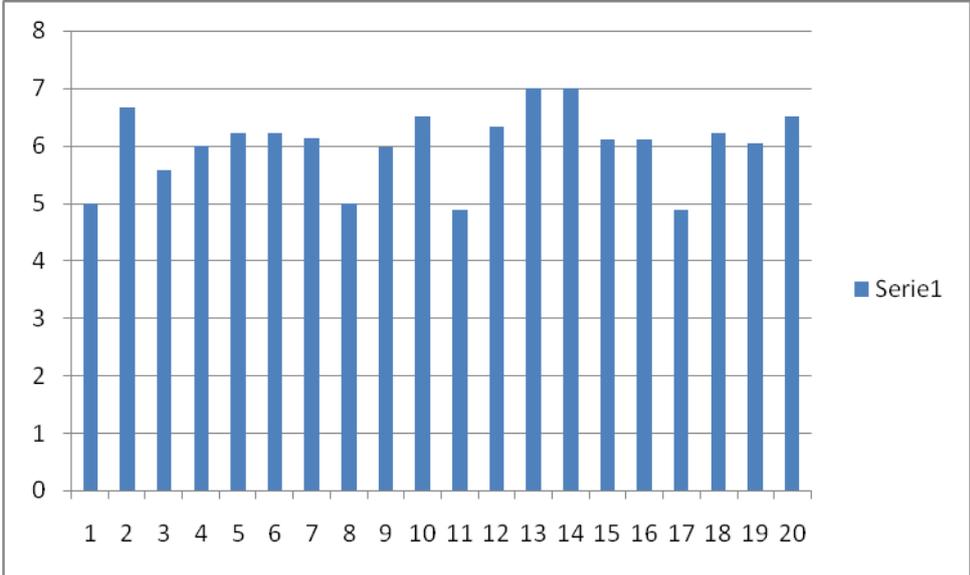


Fig. 2. Workshop evaluation

After the workshop the students were asked to complete a questionnaire on willingness to communicate (Willingness to Communicate Scale, McCroskey, 1992). Their task was to assess to what extent they feel

they are able to conduct a certain language behavior, with the support of writing or PP presentation: to have a small group conversation, to give a presentation in English, to use English in small groups or in large meetings (comp. Appendix 1). The same questionnaire was completed by a control group of hearing students.

The results are outstanding. The group of the deaf and hard of hearing student presented in the research a bigger willingness to communicate than the group of the hearing students. The research group felt sure that they could be able to give a presentation in English to a group of friends or acquaintances, or even strangers. They also felt they will be competent to have a conversation in English with friends or in a small group (fig. 3.).

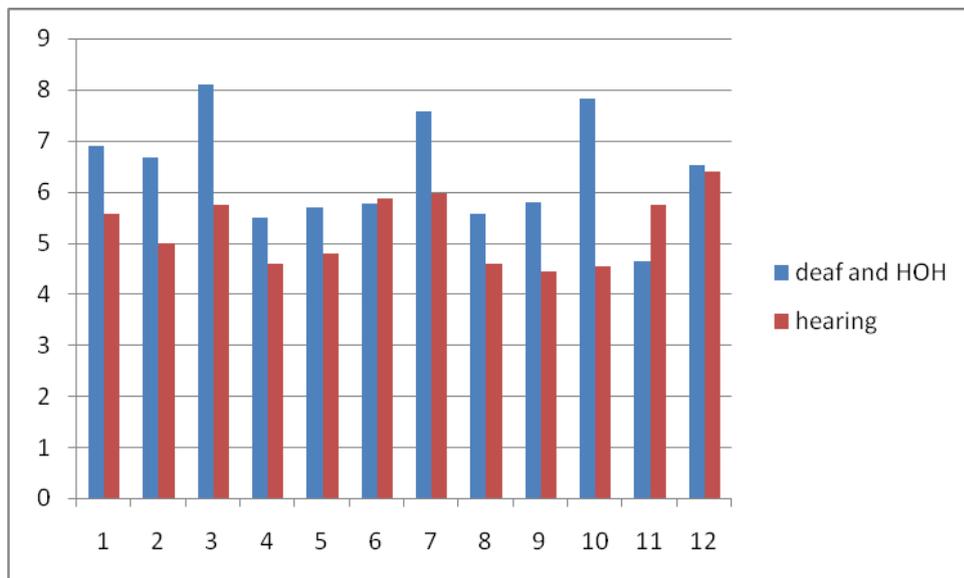


Fig. 3. Comparison of deaf and hard of hearing and hearing students willingness to communicate

Conclusion

Willingness to communicate should be treated as one of major factors facilitating the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language for the deaf and hard of hearing subjects. Both the language teachers and administrators should pay more attention to develop this characteristics among the students and organize supporting communication environment for students to practice their language competence.

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Willingness to Communicate Scale

(McCroskey (1992))

Write using per cents:

0%

100%

(I cannot do it at all)

(I can do it well)

I can do it, using writing or Power Point presentation if necessary:

- _____ 1. I can have a small-group conversation in English with acquaintances.
- _____ 2. I can give a presentation in English to a group of strangers.
- _____ 3. I can give a presentation in English to a group of friends.
- _____ 4. I can use English in a large meeting among strangers.
- _____ 5. I can have a small-group conversation in English with strangers.
- _____ 6. I can use English in a large meeting among friends.

- _____ 7. I can use English with my friends.
- _____ 8. I can use English in a large meeting with acquaintances.
- _____ 9. I can talk in English to acquaintances.
- _____ 10. I can give a presentation in English to a group of acquaintances.
- _____ 11. I can talk in English to a stranger.
- _____ 12. I can talk in English to a small group of friends.