Speaking Anxiety and Intercultural Competence as Predictors of Learner's Willingness to Communicate

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Authors' contributions

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To examine speaking anxiety and intercultural competence as predictors of willingness to communicate.
Study Design: The study employed cross sectional, predictive study design.
Place and Duration of Study: The study was conducted in selected public schools of Region IX Philippines, during the school year 2023-2024.
Methodology: A three-part questionnaire was employed to 400 Grade 12 students from public schools in Region IX, Philippines, selected through stratified random sampling. Data were analyzed by calculating the mean and standard deviation, using Pearson r, and regression analysis to determine the correlation between the variables.
Results: Learners are sometimes observed with speaking anxiety in various situations. Learners also manifest high or frequently observed attributes in both intercultural competence and willingness to communicate. The study revealed that speaking anxiety and intercultural competence are

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significantly correlated to the learner's willingness to communicate. Moreover, regression analysis results pointed out that speaking anxiety is not a significant predictor despite being significantly correlated to the dependent variable which is in contrast to the finding of intercultural competence which manifest a strong influence to the learner's willingness to communicate.

Conclusion: Between two independent variables, intercultural competence emerged as a significant predictor of learner's willingness to Communicate. This means that learner's intercultural competence increases learner's willingness to engage in communications as it is positively correlated to their willingness to communicate. A positive attitude towards intercultural communication and the people who speak it impacts the learner's willingness to participate in a more complex communication. Thus, this calls for a more inclusive and culture-responsive classroom instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The continuous decline in language and speaking skills of Filipinos is one of the pressing issues that confronts the Philippine education system. This is evidenced in Locus [1] and Morallo's [2] articles regarding the low proficiency of Filipinos in speaking. The weakening of these skills can be linked to students' reluctance to engage in classroom discussions where teachers still face the challenge of encouraging their students to speak, as students explicitly refuse to participate in class discussions [3-4], which results in limited language learning [5], and eventually weakens speaking proficiency [6].

Learners reluctance to engage in speaking can be associated to the construct willingness to communicate (WTC) as it is defined by MacIntyre et., al. cited in Dewaele & Dewaele [7] as *"one's readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2".* Language teachers were found to have rated WTC as second most important construct in foreign language learning after motivation [7]. WTC is an important factor in second language acquisition because it influences learners' overall language development as well as their ability to communicate effectively in the target language [8]. Several studies have indicated that the willingness to communicate positively impacts the development of self-confidence, which helps increase classroom participation [9]. It has also been identified that students' willingness to communicate aids in developing their personality, interpersonal skills, self-confidence, social situation, communicative competence, intergroup climate, intergroup behavior, and intergroup motivation [10] and reflects their level of comfort, confidence, and involvement when using a target language [11].

Willingness to communicate lies solely on the learner's own decision. MacIntyre et al's. (1998) Heuristic or Pyramid Model posits that students reach a deciding point whether to continue or withdraw in communication [12]. This model had shed light on the complex processes involving one's willingness to communicate which include predictors such as linguistic, psychological and social variables, organized in the form of a six layer pyramid with L2 at the top and WTC just underneath [7]. The six layers of the model are organized into three lower layers that reflect distal, enduring, and widely applicable influences on L2 communication and three top layers that reflect immediate, transient, situation-specific influences on WTC at a given moment [12].

Speaking anxiety, on the other hand, is categorized as psychological, and among the most explored factors of willingness to communicate. It has been long recognized as a significant barrier in effective communication [13] as it undermines a student's desire to communicate by decreasing their self-confidence [14]. Anxiety leads to self-doubt and negative self-evaluation resulting in the avoidance and rejection of opportunities to speak. It refers to the anxiety or fear that people feel when they are required to speak or engage in oral communication in a second or foreign language. This anxiety can have a big impact on learners' willingness to communicate, particularly on the motivation and desire to use the target language in real-life situations [15].

While speaking anxiety can limit one's willingness to communicate, intercultural competence does otherwise [16]. Wei & Xu emphasized that people with high intercultural competence equips individuals with the knowledge and strategies to navigate cultural differences and potential misunderstandings [17].

These people are more aware of potential cultural barriers and have the skills to bridge those gaps. This gives them more confidence when engaging in cross-cultural communication and reduces anxiety associated with potential misunderstandings or conflicts [18]. Intercultural competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to effectively communicate and interact with people from various cultures. Individuals with high levels of intercultural competence understand cultural differences and can modify their communication styles accordingly [16]. The ability to interact and engage with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is a valuable skill that can lead to enhanced personal, academic, and professional opportunities [19].

While bulk of research has looked on the complex and multifaceted relationship of WTC and speaking anxiety independently, there is still a lack of a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interrelate, putting into consideration intercultural competence as the latter's effect to WTC. As a result, the purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature by looking into the effect of both speaking anxiety and intercultural competence on the outcome variable among grade 12 students.

This study aimed to investigate the predictor of learner's willingness to communicate using the two independent variables. Specifically, it seeks to address the following: determine the level of speaking anxiety, intercultural competence and learner's willingness to communicate; determine the significant relationship and influence of speaking anxiety and intercultural to willingness to communicate.

Further, this paper fosters a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to learners' willingness to communicate through a thorough examination of these interconnected factors. Furthermore, this research aimed to contribute to the development of more inclusive language teaching methodologies and interventions, ultimately developing confident, skilled, and culturally sensitive communicators by unraveling the complex dynamics at work.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design and Procedures

The study employed a cross sectional, predictive study design. This design focused on predicting the future status of one or more dependent variables based on one of more independent variables. Cross sectional design allows data collection on a single time [20]. Statistical tools such as Regression analysis, Pearson r, and Mean were utilized to treat data.

2.2 Participants

This study's population includes Grade 12 students who were enrolled in the public schools in Region IX, Philippines. A total of 400 respondents from the population were selected as per recommended by the Raosoft sample size calculator [21]. Respondents were selected through stratified random sampling technique.

2.3 Research Instrument

The study adapted three survey questionnaires from reputable journals. Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adapted by Alfiani, Asib & Supriyadi [22] was used to assess learners' speaking anxiety. To measure intercultural competence, a self-report questionnaire developed by Deardorff's (2006) and Fantini's (2009) entitled Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS) adapted by Miauw & Guo [16] was employed. The Willingness to Communicate scale developed by Tavakoli & Davoudi, [4] was utilized in assessing learner's willingness to communicate.

The survey questionnaires were subjected to several validation procedures after minor modifications were made. Six experts in the field were consulted to enhance the quality of the test items. Pilot testing procedure was also conducted to establish the data's dependability or internal consistency. All items within all indicators revealed a high Cronbach's alpha coefficient, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability for all measures. This suggests that the instruments used were highly reliable, and the items within each construct are consistently aligned with one another.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Learner's Speaking Anxiety

Table 1 displays the levels of speaking anxiety. Levels are based on three indicators such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Upon examining each indicator, two indicators have obtained a moderate level of anxiety such as communication

apprehension (3.16 mean) and fear of negative evaluation with the mean of 2.39. Meanwhile, test anxiety obtained the highest mean of 3.40 (SD 0.81). In total, speaking anxiety has obtained a mean of 3.32 (SD 0.72), indicating a Moderate descriptive level which suggests that speaking anxiety among students in Region IX is sometimes observed on various occasions.

Table 1. Level of student's speaking anxiety

Indicators	(SD)	Mean	Descriptive
Communication Apprehension	0.76	3.16	Moderate
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.89	3.39	Moderate
Test Anxiety	0.81	3.40	High
Total	**0.72**	**3.32**	Moderate

The findings suggest that learners who are engaged in situations where they are tested causes them fear and that allows the feeling of self-doubt, low self-confidence and fear of being judged to exist that further leads to low engagement to communication. Having the feeling of fear of negative evaluations affects the speaking of the learners in a way that they tend not to participate in open discussions [23]. Rahmadani & Etfita asserts that students are experiencing anxiety in speaking, especially in testing, is due to the low self-confidence, unpreparedness, fear of being judged, nervous, and fear of getting low scores, forgetful, low proficiency in grammar, and weak vocabulary skills [24]. The results are consistent with Pontillas & Talaue [23] and of McCain in Raja [25], most of the students manifest speaking anxiety in public. Lall et., al asserted that some of the causes of anxiety are feeling nervous, low self-confidence and low language proficiency as well [26]. Problems in communication arise from the lack of motivation of the learners in learning the subjects such as Filipino and English [24].

3.2 Learner's Intercultural Competence

Table 2 shows that the levels of all indicators of intercultural competence such as knowledge, attitude and skills are high as evident in obtained mean, 3.95, 3.85, and 3.51. The overall mean, 3.77 (0.67 SD) is described as High or frequently observed attributes among the learners. Of the three indicators, knowledge obtained the highest mean of 3.95 (SD 0.74), followed by attitude with a mean of 3.85 (SD 0.80), and skill obtained a mean of 3.51 (SD 0.77).

Table 2. Level of intercultural competence

Indicators	(SD)	Mean	Descriptive
Knowledge	0.74	3.95	High
Attitude	0.80	3.85	High
Skills	0.77	3.51	High
Total	**0.67**	**3.77**	**High**

This result is consistent with the findings of Kuang et. al., cited in Chen [27]. The study of Günçavdi & Polat [28]; Miauw & Guo [16] also confirmed the finding. The result implies that when students have high knowledge, attitude, and skills in intercultural matters, they have a higher opportunity to succeed in oral interactions especially when facing complex communication situations arising from cultural diversity. Learners are also able to gain more confidence when engaged in cross-cultural communication and are able to reduce anxiety associated with potential misunderstandings or conflicts [18].

3.3 Learner's Willingness to Communicate

Table 3 presents the level of learner's willingness to communicate which shows that all the indicators have obtained High mean. This implies that learner's willingness to engage in communication with their teacher and the class, friends and the class, and strangers is always observed.

Table 3. Level of learner's willingness to communicate

Indicators	(SD)	Mean	Descriptive
Teacher and Class	0.68	3.48	High
Friends and Class	0.85	3.70	High
Strangers	0.79	3.44	High
Total	**0.64**	**3.54**	**High**

When examining each indicator, students in region IX show higher levels of willingness to communicate with their teacher and classmates, as evidenced by the mean score of 3.70 (SD 0.85). This is followed by communication with the teacher and classmates, which has a mean score of 3.48 (SD 0.68) and the lowest mean score of 3.44 (SD 0.64) is obtained by the willingness to communicate to strangers. All scores indicate a high level of willingness to communicate among the students.

The same findings is evident in the study MacIntyre & Wang [12]; Rastegar & Karami as cited in Yan, Ahmad & Nawi Che [29]. High level of willingness to communicate means that learners are active interlocutors, and this would allow opportunities to develop their speaking and language proficiency. As it reflects their level of comfort, confidence, and involvement when using a target language [11]. The findings of Valadi et. al. [10] confirms that learners with high WTC are most likely to start conversations. Schmitt [9] emphasized that WTC positively impacts the development of self-confidence, which in return helps learners increase their classroom participation.

3.4 Relationship of Speaking Anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate

The findings in Table 4 show the results of correlational analysis between each indicator of speaking anxiety and of the WTC. The result reveals that communication apprehension shows a relationship to teacher & class r=.218, moderately related to friends and class r=.100 as well as to strangers r=.158, and obtaining an average mean of r=.186. Meanwhile, fear of negative evaluation shows a significant relationship to the teacher & class r=.151, moderately related to friends and class, and not significantly related with strangers.

However, when all the scores are combined, a significant relationship with r=.131 was established. The result conformed to the findings of Valadi et. al. [10] which highlighted the significant relationship of willingness to communicate and speaking anxiety. Similarly, Al-Mukdad pointed out that learner's WTC is associated with anxiety and the way learners perceive their competence in the sense that they might underestimate their abilities and thus, tend not to speak [30]. Palupi added that speaking anxiety in students can have serious consequences as anxiety can impair cognitive processes, making it difficult for students to think clearly and effectively express their ideas. As a result, students may struggle to convey their knowledge and demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter, which can lead to poor speaking performance [31].

3.5 Relationship between Intercultural Competence and Willingness to Communicate

In Table 5, a significant relationship is observed between intercultural competence and learner's willingness to communicate with an overall *r-value* of .645 and corresponding p-value of 0.000 which is much lower than the .05 level of significance.

Table 4. Relationship of speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate

Speaking Anxiety	Willingness to Communicate			
	Teacher & Class	Friends & Class	Strangers	Total
Communication Apprehension	.218[**]	.100[*]	.158[**]	**.186[**]**
	.000	.047	.002	**.000**
Fear of Negative evaluation	.151[**]	.126[*]	.052	**.131[**]**
	.002	.012	.301	**.009**
Test Anxiety	.189[**]	.131[**]	.105[*]	**.167[**]**
	.000	.009	.037	**.001**
Total	**.210[**]**	**.136[**]**	**.117[*]**	**.182[**]**
	.000	**.007**	**.020**	**.000**

Table 5. Relationship between intercultural competence and willingness to communicate

Intercultural Competence	Willingness to Communicate			
	Teacher & Class	Friends & Class	Strangers	Total
Knowledge	.382[**]	.442[**]	.333[**]	**.465[**]**
	.000	.000	.000	**.000**
Attitude	.438[**]	.551[**]	.444[**]	**.579[**]**
	.000	.000	.000	**.000**
Skills	.527[**]	.507[**]	.485[**]	**.608[**]**
	.000	.000	.000	**.000**
Total	**.526[**]**	**.586[**]**	**.493[**]**	**.645[**]**
	.000	**.000**	**.000**	**.000**

Table 6. Influence of Speaking Anxiety and Intercultural Competence to the Learner's Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to Communicate						
Variables		**B**	**β**	**t**	**Sig.**	**VIF**
Constant		1.093		6.615	.000	
Speaking Anxiety		.045	.051	1.295	.196	1.045
Intercultural Competence		.608	.635	16.213	.000	1.045
R	.647					
R^2	.419					
ΔR	.416					
F	142.715					
ρ	.000					

The results suggest the rejection of the null hypothesis and accepts the alternative which states that there is significant relationships between intercultural competence and learner's willingness to communicate. It reinforces that the learner's intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills are positively correlated to their willingness to communicate. Further, it shows that intercultural competence is significantly related to the learner's WTC on teacher and the class with r=.382, friends and the class with r=.442, and to the strangers with r=.333, obtaining an overall correlation of r=.465. Intercultural Attitude also shows a positive correlation to all indicators of WTC having an overall correlation of r=.579. There is a positive relationship with both the teacher and class r=.438, friends and the class r=.551,and talking to strangers with r=.444. Moreover, students' intercultural skills indicate positive relationships with WTC teachers and the class with r=.527, friends and the class with r=.507, strangers r=.485, with overall correlation of r=.608. This result echoed Miauw & Guo's [16] finding states that when one's intercultural competence is developed, his/her willingness to communicate is also developed. The positive correlation is also confirmed by Bosuwon [32] in which the same positive relationship between WTC and intercultural competence was highlighted. To increase learner's WTC intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills must be applied [16].

3.6 Influence of Speaking Anxiety and Intercultural Competence to the Learner's Willingness to Communicate

Table 6 presents the results of multiple regression analyses employed to identify whether learners' speaking anxiety and intercultural competence are significant predictors of their willingness to communicate. Results revealed that the overall regression model reflecting the independent variables (*speaking anxiety and intercultural competence*) is statistically significant in predicting the dependent variable (*willingness to communicate*) thus, it can be said that the regression model is a good fit for the data, *F*=142.715, *p*=.000. Furthermore, the regression model yielded an acceptable R^2=.419 [33] which depicts that 41.9% of the variance in the learners' willingness to communicate is explained by their speaking anxiety and intercultural competence while 58.1% can be attributed to other possible predictors not included in the study.

Moreover, the unstandardized coefficients of the learners' speaking anxiety and intercultural competence were assessed to ascertain its significance as a predictor of their willingness to communicate. The results revealed that the learners' intercultural competence is a significant predictor of their willingness to communicate, *B*=.608, *t* = 16.213, at *p* = .000. This means that for every 1 unit increase in the level of the learners' intercultural competence, their level of willingness to communicate also increases by .608 units. On the other hand, the learners' speaking anxiety was found to be not a significant predictor of their willingness to communicate, *B*=.045, *t*=1.295, at *p*=.196. This connotes that their level of willingness to communicate barely changes only for about .045 units for every unit increased in their level of speaking anxiety. Thus, in reference to the unstandardized coefficients of the independent variables and its statistical significance, the regression model below was derived. This model also confirms the strength of relationship that exists between the dependent variable and the independent variables.

Willingness to Communicate = 1.093 + .045 (Speaking Anxiety) + .608 (Intercultural Competence)

The model shows that willingness to communicate is significantly predicted by the combination of the two independent variables. Although speaking anxiety was identified to be not a significant predictor, it is still retained in the model since the preceding analyses confirmed the existence of its significant correlation with the learners' willingness to communicate suggesting it could somehow have an influence. Additionally, the test of multicollinearity shows that speaking anxiety being not a significant predictor is clearly not due to the presence of a strong correlation with intercultural competence. This can be seen on the values of their variance inflation factor (VIF) which are all closer to 1 but not more than 5 [34], thus, there is no collinearity between the two independent variables that could have caused speaking anxiety not to be a significant predictor of learners' willingness to communicate. This leads the researcher to believe that the fact anxiety is correlated to the learner's WTC, its effect depends on specific conditions such as the learner's tolerance. As pointed out by previous research, when students are in a learning environment with high linguistic tolerance, anxiety does not have a great impact on their willingness to communicate. On the contrary, if students are in a learning environment with low linguistic tolerance, anxiety will seriously affect their WTC [29].

Moreover, intercultural competence emerged as a significant predictor of WTC. Bosuwon [32] and Miauw & Guo [16] reinforce the interconnectedness between intercultural competence and learner's WTC. They further emphasized that adaptability and flexibility to other cultures will help increase willingness to communicate. Higher intercultural competence would also mean learners are better able to maintain their interest in engaging in conversations. As cited in Miauw & Guo [16] Moloney (2009) asserted that when a speaker feels comfortable to face the culture of the target language, he/she is more likely to use the target language for communication. Furthermore, McIntyre's Heuristic Pyramid Model supports the finding of this study. Layer IV of the pyramid model pointed out that learner's willingness to communicate is associated with 'motivational propensities' influences, which include interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation and self-confidence. Emphasizing that positive attitudes toward the language and the people who speak it supports willingness to communicate [12].

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of the study is to examine the predicting variables of learner's WTC between speaking anxiety and intercultural competence. The interplay among the three variables clearly establishes a cycle that is significantly related to learner's willingness and unwillingness to communicate. Learner's manifesting moderate level of anxiety or sometimes observed leads to the conclusion that there exist significant correlations among the variables. Surprisingly, despite being significantly correlated to WTC, speaking anxiety does not predict a learner's willingness to communicate and this leads to the conclusion that its effect might be observed in some certain conditions. On the contrary, intercultural competence strongly predicts the learner's willingness to communicate.

Thus, it is safe to conclude that learners who are culturally conscious, open to other cultures, and skilled in developing strategies to deal with others strongly affect their willingness to communicate as they could navigate through cross-cultural communications smoothly. It is emphasized that positive behavior towards communication and intercultural engagements play a significant role in communication impacting the desire to be engaged in a more complex communication. Finally, this study pointed out pedagogical implications; first, this shed light on the importance of incorporating intercultural activities in and out of the classroom to enhance learner's WTC. Second, it calls for a more inclusive, integrative, and culturally-responsive classroom instructions.

Finally, this study has its limitations. First, learner's responses are limited on the predetermined items provided in the survey questionnaires and there is lack of in-depth understanding on how their perceived anxiety and intercultural competence affects their daily lives and this suggests a qualitative approach. Second, future researchers may also look into the lens on how intercultural competence mediates the relationship of speaking anxiety and WTC.

CONSENT

As per international standards or university standards, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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