

Creating Willingness to Communicate through L2 blogging

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Abstract

This paper uses the concept of Willingness to Communicate to discuss the conditions leading to language production in L2 blogging. It provides an overview of the concept, which has been defined as a “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998, p. 547) and proposes that the choice of a different channel of communication, blogs, affects a language learner’s willingness to communicate. The discussion is based on the experiences of 15 language learners who used a blog for self-reflection and learner-to-learner interaction as part of a tertiary German language course. The analysis of the collected data (blog entries, focus group interviews) showed that blogs are perceived as protected spaces (Gumbrecht, 2004) in which L2 learners gain L2 confidence and seek opportunities for L2 use. The paper concludes with four suggestions on how blog learning environments can create willingness to communicate.

Keywords: L2 blogging, Willingness to Communicate, Language Anxiety

Introduction

In 2004, a time when blogs started to become mainstream and push button publishing made blogging accessible to many, Gumbrecht (2004) suggested that some people engage in blogging - and even prefer blogging to telephone, or to face-to-face conversations - to avoid the immediate reaction of their interlocutor. Blogging had become popular for many reasons and Gumbrecht pointed to a particular quality of the new medium: the limited interactivity of blogs provided a *protected space* for communication. Communication research has shown that communication apprehension, described by McCroskey (1984) as the “fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p.13), determines to a large degree whether or not people are willing to communicate (MacIntyre, 1994). Blogs provide a structure for communication which is controlled by the bloggers; they initiate the conversation, decide on the topic, and they receive feedback on their terms. As Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright (2004) put it, blogs “allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space” (p. 11).

The implication that blogs could function as protected spaces for language learners is thought provoking. Language anxiety is a widely researched area in second language acquisition (SLA) and speaking in class has been shown to be “the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 132). Broady

(2009) used the term *comfort zone* to emphasize the need for language learners to operate in an anxiety-free environment, which is more conducive to extending their learning potentials. I would like to suggest yet another concept to discuss the antecedents of communication in L2 blogging, willingness to communicate, or WTC.

Willingness to Communicate

WTC originated in the communication literature. It evolved from Burgoon's (1976) concept of *unwillingness to communicate* and was initially defined by McCroskey and his associates as "an individual difference reflecting a general propensity to a person's intention to initiate communication when free to do so" (MacIntyre, MacMaster, & Baker, 2001, p. 469). It was conceptualized as a personality-based, trait-like predisposition that remains stable over time and across situations. Introversion, self-esteem, self-perceptions, communication competence, communication apprehension and cultural diversity were identified as variables affecting an individual's willingness to communicate (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). MacIntyre (1994) showed that two of these variables, communication apprehension and perceived communicative competence, were key predictors of an individual's WTC: "people are willing to communicate to the extent that they are not apprehensive about it and perceive themselves to be capable (competent) of effective communication" (p. 137-138). While these factors turned out to be just as relevant for language learners, WTC needed to be extended to address the specific conditions that determine a person's intention to initiate communication in a second language.

MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) broadened the concept significantly. The original focus on spoken language was extended to other modes of oral and written communication. They treated communication behavior in a very general sense, not limited to personal interaction but also entailing a range of L2-oriented activities, such as "speaking up in class", "reading L2 newspapers" or "watching L2 television" (p. 547). WTC was conceived as a pedagogical goal, as the authors put it, "a proper objective for L2 education is to create WTC" (p. 547). However, the main difference from McCroskey's construct lies in its redefinition as a situated concept. MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggested that WTC in a second language is not only a personality trait, but is also highly dependent on situation and state. The L2 WTC model, visually represented as a multilayered pyramid, consists of both enduring and situational factors. It includes a range of psychological and linguistic variables, which affect an individual's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547).

The 1998 model provided a new perspective on WTC, but it was, in the authors' own words, "more a starting point than a finished product" (p. 559). According to one of the co-authors it "offers a clear representation of the multiple layers and variables feeding into the behavioral intention of WTC, [but] it fails to describe the interrelationship and the weighting of the various components (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 208). It could be argued that the concept addressed too many areas of language learning, both inside and outside the classroom, in foreign language and second language contexts, which are difficult to

capture in one model. Yet, it is precisely this variety of components, which provides a rich ground for new conceptualizations. A range of studies on WTC have emerged from MacIntyre et al.'s model, focusing on various aspects of WTC, such as sex and age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002), extraversion and introversion (MacIntyre, Clément, & Noels 2007), attitude (Yashima, 2002) and cultural differences (Wen & Clément, 2003). It was found that social support - particularly from friends, outside the classroom (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001), immersion programs (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000) and prior immersion experience (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003) resulted in higher WTC amongst high school students. More recently Kang (2005) identified security, excitement and responsibility as psychological conditions influencing WTC. She proposed a new definition for a situational WTC: "Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291). In a similar vein, Cao and Philp (2006) focused on the situational context and found that WTC was influenced by group size, self-confidence in communicative ability and interlocutor familiarity.

Willingness to Communicate in Computer Mediated Communication

Considering the wealth of research on contextual variables, it is interesting that the impact of different channels of communication on WTC has received little attention. MacIntyre et al. (1998) mentioned the inhibiting effect of telephone conversations on L2 WTC, which they described as "notoriously difficult for many L2 learners" (p. 554) but no further research emerged from this observation. MacIntyre (2007) alluded once to online chatting, but Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) have supplied the only study so far on the effect of chatting on WTC. They identified anxiety, power, control, and confidence as influencing factors and they concluded from their findings that online chatting provides "a more comfortable environment" than face-to-face conversations, enhancing students' willingness to communicate" (p. 189). Equally positive were the results of a recent study conducted by Reinders & Wattana (2015) which showed that digital gameplay can lower affective barriers to learning and increase willingness to communicate.

While there are no studies on L2 blogging and WTC, it should be mentioned that some researchers have pointed to the perception of blogs as more comfortable and more personal spaces for reflection and communication than L2 classrooms (Alm, 2009; Ducate & Lormicka, 2008; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Lee, 2010). Blogs have been used for a range of pedagogical and communicative purposes such as for self-reflection (Murray & Hourigan, 2008), learner-to-learner (Pinkman, 2005; Dippold, 2009) or learner-to-native speaker interactions (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Lee, 2009).

In light of these observations, I propose to take a closer look at a group of L2 bloggers to investigate the question if indeed blogs provide a *protected space* for self-reflection and interaction. I will use the WTC concept to discuss conditions leading to language use in L2 blogging.

Method

The study was part of a larger research project on the use of blogs and podcasts in language learning (Alm, 2013) conducted at a university in New Zealand. 28 students of an intermediate German language class (B2 level), all native English speakers, took part in the main study. As part of their out-of-class coursework, the participants wrote weekly blog entries for the period of one semester (13 weeks). They were asked to write about topics discussed in class (set topic), German-related activities they engaged in outside class, such as listening to German podcasts (self-selected topic) and to reflect on their learning experiences. Each student had their own blog (blogger.com) and by subscribing to the blogs of their classmates they were able to follow each other's blogs and to read and comment on other blog entries. The commenting space was used solely for student-to-student interaction and not for teacher comments. Instead, students received a feedback sheet for each blog posts, assessing the coverage of the content areas (set and self-selected topics) and the levels of reflection and interactivity (comments, reference or discussion of topics from other blogs). This weekly blog activity (13 blog entries in total) represented 30% of the final grade for the course.

At the end of the semester, all students were invited to take an online survey on their blog and podcast experiences (an extract relating to the blog activity described in this article can be found in the appendix), managed by *SurveyMonkey*. 28 students completed the survey and 15 students volunteered to join a focus group on the topic after the completion of the course. It is therefore a self-selected group and this can be seen as a limitation of the study. The survey results (n=28), however, are provided for a more representative insight into the learner perception of the activity. For the focus interviews, participants met in three groups of five, to encourage participation and even contributions. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed participants to respond to and to elaborate on each other's comments. A research assistant audio-recorded the interviews and took notes. The data from the three interviews was then transcribed verbatim. For the purpose of this study, all sections relating to the participants' blogging experiences were identified and collated in one document. This document was then entered into TAMS Analyzer, a free qualitative coding and analysis program for Macintosh OS X, and coded. The codes evolved iteratively from concepts related to space I had observed in the learner blogs prior the interviews and during the interviews by the participants. This analysis led to the classification of four categories, protected space, personal space, conversational space and communal space, which will be discussed with reference to WTC in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

A Protected Space

As already suggested in other studies (e.g. Ducate & Lormicka, 2008; Lee, 2010) blogging provided students with time to find right words and language, to think about what they had to say, and to express their ideas accurately, as Sally (all names are

pseudonyms) put it “to gather your thoughts and actually structure what you are going to say”. They further explained that it allowed them to expand on their ideas and to comment on class topics. In this sense, blogs are similar to learning journals. They enable learners to reflect on issues they did not have time to resolve in class.

The participants described their blogs as a space in which they could express their personal opinions. Mary compared it to a diary where “you write how you are feeling about things, your own actual opinion”. Some seized the opportunity to write about their likes and dislikes of the class, as Clare explained: “sometimes you’d like to say something about the class or something you don’t like about the class and you can just put them out there. Anyone can say exactly how you felt about it which was good”.

The aspect of limited interactivity (Gumbrecht, 2004) might account for the willingness of these students to share their personal opinions, even if they contradicted other class members or the teacher. In the interview Martin explained, “you do not know whether people actually read your blogs, but in class people really hear you”. As with Gumbrecht’s participants who preferred blogging to face-to-face conversations to avoid “immediate retribution” (p. 5), the students of this class felt protected from their classmates and from their reactions. This aspect was addressed repeatedly, “you can get everything out, without anybody arguing against you” (Sarah), “you don’t have people watching you or listening to you, don’t have to fight so much with their reactions” (Milly). The perceived protection in the blogs was contrasted with experiences from the classroom. Students talked about “stage fright”, and the fear of looking “like an idiot” in front of their peers. They were indeed afraid of the “instant reactions of others” and disliked the “pressure when everyone is looking at you, you keep on talking and it doesn’t make sense” (Clare).

These reactions show that communication anxiety is very present in the mind of these students and that it interferes with their performance. Communication anxiety and perceived competence have been shown to be highly correlated in L2 (cf. Clément & Kruidenier, 1985) and are subsumed under L2 self-confidence in the WTC model. The comments from the students indicate that their L2 self-confidence is higher in their blogs than in the classroom. This also explains Cara’s observation that “some people wrote heaps and heaps in their blogs, and talked very little in class”.

These reflections indicate that the blog environment provided a space for learners in which they felt safe to write about themselves. This is in line with Gardner and MacIntyre’s (1993) finding that anxious students are “more reluctant to express personal relevant information in a second-language conversation” (p. 6). The next section will illustrate that the blog itself was an important tool for their personal expression.

A Personal Space

The blog was perceived as a more personal space for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of students wrote their blogs in their home environment. As Hanna explained:

“most people have computers at home, so you can be doing it at midnight, you know, really comfortable surroundings, you are not in some computer lab at the University, and that makes you more casual, you are sitting in your living room

curled up on your sofa with the cat and typing something that puts you into a mindset that is more personal”.

For most students computers had become an integral part of their lives and the interaction with the computer itself made blogging “feel more personal”. Their ubiquitous access to networked computers, gave students the feeling that their blog was “always there”. (This became particularly relevant when three class members went overseas during the semester and continued to be part of the blogging community.) Learners felt in control of their blogs because they could “always change it if you want, it’s in your reach all the time” (Tom). Unlike the spoken word or the presented assignment, blogs’ entries remain in the control of the blogger and can always be modified, improved, or deleted. By drawing the language learning activity in the realm of their personal lives, students started feeling less vulnerable and as a consequence more open in expressing themselves and in engaging with other learners.

The second reason relates to the blog space. The L2 bloggers of this class took some pride in personalizing their blogs by choosing different backgrounds and by adding photos and sometimes even videos. This is a characteristic feature of blogging, as boyd (2006) explains: “... bloggers speak of it being *their* blog. Bloggers discuss their blogs as though it is their home and others are invited to come over” (para 48). Peter conveyed precisely this idea in his first blog post:

Servus! Mein Name ist Peter und mir gehoert dieses Blog. Sitzen sie sich angenehm hin und geniessen sie was ich zu schreiben hab.

[Welcome! My name is Peter and this blog belongs to me. Sit down comfortably and enjoy what I have to write...].

boyd argues that it is the control of the blogger over his or her blog, which gives it “this sense of ownership that makes the blog feel like a personal space,” (para 48). The idea of ownership is particularly interesting in the context of L2 blogging, where L1 and L2 identities merge.

The participants admitted that they prepared their blogs for their readers (not unlike hosts who prepare their homes for visitors). Mary said she put more effort into it, knowing that “other people are looking” and Sally explained in more detail:

“there was that sort of subtle pressure that you knew that people were going to look to see to make sure you wrote it, that made you do it. It was nice - I should do it, they are going to come and see and if I don’t have everything there - You try and make it good, you spend a bit more time on it.”

Kang (2005) considers “responsibility” to be a psychological antecedent of situational WTC. Sally clearly feels responsible for her space and has, as Kang phrases it, “a feeling of obligation or duty to deliver” (p. 285). And while this behavior emanates from a completely different context to the one in Kang’s study, it is conceivable that this positively perceived pressure to perform leads to WTC.

Interestingly, these students describe their blogs as a physical space, in which they expect people to “come” and see” what is there, or to have a “look”. They also talked about their blogs as places where they could “meet everybody”, and have a conversation.

A Conversational Space

While talking in front of an audience was perceived as intimidating for most students, the participants agreed that writing for an audience was a positive experience. They feared the reactions of others in the classroom, but they were looking forward to receiving comments on their blogs. Some said they published their weekly blog entries early in order to get their classmates’ attention and to receive more comments. Leaving comments on the other hand was initially difficult for some students, “really daunting at first” (Erika). Cara admitted that she “couldn’t be bothered at first” but that she started enjoying it after she had established a relationship with her classmates. Once they got more familiar with each other and with the online environment, they left more comments and their interactions increased. Mary felt that “by leaving little comments, it brings more German into everyday life. You have conversations about normal things”. Blogging enabled them to have conversations, which they felt they could not have had in class. Sitting in different parts of the classroom, it was “not easy to go to people and talk to them, so it’s much better commenting on blogs” (Tom). Abby told me, “when you are teaching we can’t really have a conversation with one another”. I do not doubt that these students talked to each other during my class, but these informal conversations would most likely have been in English. They would have only spoken in German if I had told them to engage in an oral activity. In their blogs, however, which was their own German space, everything they wrote was in the L2, from personal reflections and learning experiences to communications with other learners.

It is interesting to note that the written interactions were actually perceived as “conversations”, a term participants repeatedly used to refer to their written exchanges. The conversational nature of blogging has been mentioned in Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) who suggest, “that blogging is as much about reading as writing, as much about *listening* as *talking* (p. 231, italics added).” boyd (2006) conceptualizes this phenomenon and argues, “using terms like *reading* and *listening* interoperably ... signals fluidity between the literary and oral qualities of blogging” (para 40). For this group of students, blogging seemed to fulfill both the purpose of talking to others and writing for an audience. Tom, for example, contrasted his blog writing with conventional essay writing:

“Essays are completely different, short comments and goes into bin straight away, but with blog you know people read it and get feedback. That’s the thing. When you write essays, you spend all that time, you hand it in, it comes back and then it goes in the bin, you know, and one lecturer has read it at three in the morning, two minutes, he’s got a big pile of them or something. So it was quite good that others [could read it].”

This statement (which was supported by the other participants) contrasted blogging from

other product-oriented assessment practices. It also contradicts the assumption from skeptics like Richardson (2006) who claim that “students who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher” (p. 24). It shows that these students were looking for feedback and recognition and that the interactions with their classmates brought meaning and purpose to their learning activities.

A Communal Space

Reading about their classmates’ experiences provided students with a feeling of comfort and security. Unlike textbooks or other reading materials, which were often perceived as irrelevant and too difficult, they could relate to and identify with the blogs of their classmates, as explained by Martin:

“I am very comfortable with blogs because they use the same grammatical level, and same range of vocab that you can read it and actually understand it whereas you get a newspaper, what’s that word, what’s that word. Generally, you can quickly and easily read someone’s blog and it’s not a trial. You talk about the same things, understand it all. It feels nice to read without a dictionary and without a lot of pain.”

They shared learning activities and engaged in new ones as they discovered them in their classmates’ blogs, as Sarah explains, “I only started watching *Alisa* [a German video podcast] because others were writing about it”.

Reading each other’s blogs also helped students to overcome learning anxieties. They felt less isolated with their problems - “you are never really alone, there is always someone else that will feel the same way” (Cara), and found allies in their classmates, “after you read other people’s blogs,.. it’s okay if you feel that way, it’s okay to say you don’t understand something, because others feel the same, it’s like we are all in the same boat” (Abby), “it made you feel comfortable, admitting that you weren’t finding it so easy. When you have trouble with grammar, or whatever...” (Emma). Empathizing with others also had an uplifting effect on some, they found it “encouraging” to see how their classmates dealt with learning issues, giving them the feeling that “I can do this, too” (Emma).

Mary found that “seeing everyone else’s blogs and commenting, it was a really good sense of community”. The online interactions often triggered further engagement in class, as Martin said “I hardly really knew John, but it was only because the time on the blog - and then you talk in class because you left a comment”. Through reading each other’s blogs and commenting, the class grew closer together, “you actually feel you are getting to know these people” (Mary). As a consequence, interest groups formed, “after a while it was often the same people that you found yourself relating to” (Sally). Students found others they wanted to talk to/ write for because they genuinely had something to say to each other.

Conclusion

The interviews confirm that blogs can provide a protected space for L2 communication. The limited interactivity provided learners with control over their interactions and reduced their speaking anxiety, the access to and individualization of their personal blog space provided them with a sense of ownership and responsibility, and the occurrence of common experiences and interests engaged them in reflections and interactions, which were meaningful and relevant to them.

Situational L2 self-confidence (low anxiety and high perceived competence) and affiliation motives (the desire to speak to a person) are the most immediate determinants of L2 WTC and it appears that blogs have provided a space, which supported both variables. Blogging has given these students an environment in which they felt confident and in which they could find like-minded people to share their experiences.

Creating WTC is, according to MacIntyre et al. (1998), a fundamental component of language instruction and I would like to suggest that blogs can support this goal in a number of ways:

1. The limited interactivity of blogs provides a protected space for L2 use.
2. The construction of a personal space enables learners to transfer items of personal interest and relevance to the L2 context. It could be argued that this provides them with “strong identity positions from which they get the power to speak” (Norton, 2009).
3. The dialogic structure of blogs plus the genuine desire to talk to each other account for self-initiated learner-to-learner interaction in the blogs.
4. The blogs support the creation of a learning community, which in turn creates new opportunities for L2 use. Common interest leads to uptake of L2 activities observed in other blogs.

WTC defines the probability of speaking “when free to do so” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 564). The students of this group seized the opportunity to engage with the L2 because the blogs enabled them to do so on their own terms. This also impacted positively on the class dynamics and attendance (which was not mandatory), as observed by Clare:

“I am quite impressed how many people did it every week, in other courses I do there are always people who never hand in their homework or do tutorial assignments. We had a much larger percentage in this class where it seemed to me like everyone was coming to class and was doing their blogs and sticking to it.”

This study has shown that blogging can support WTC by shifting the control over the communication episode from the teacher to the learner. It goes without saying that this principle is not restricted to the blog environment. On the contrary, it is crucial to support this process in the classroom, where students meet and should be given the opportunity to continue the dialogue they started in the online environment. Blogging created a special bond between these L2 learners and this allowed them to see each other as people rather than students. This was also suggested in the interviews, in which the participants

referred to each other without exception as people, rather than students, indicating that they had been involved in a real-life learning activity.

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Appendix

Extract of survey (relating to blogs) N=28

	strongly disagree	disagree	partly disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree
In the blog I could write about things which I could not say in class	0	2	5	7	10	4
I found it inhibiting to expose my German writing in front of my classmates.	6	9	3	7	3	0
I liked sharing my thoughts and ideas with my classmates.	0	1	0	7	14	5
Writing for an audience made me more conscious of what I was writing.	0	0	4	6	14	4
Reading about what the other students were doing helped me to evaluate my own learning practices.	0	0	0	10	11	7
The comments I received from my classmates motivated me.	0	0	1	9	13	4
I never read the comments I received on my blog.	19	5	2	1	0	0