Conference Paper

Assessing Willingness to Communicate in the Multilingual Environment

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Abstract

The paper describes the results of an empirical study supported by the McCroskey's Willingness to Communicate Scale and the findings of the self-assessed communication apprehension survey. The research was carried out in the context of the Russian regional university under internationalization. The respondents included two groups of Russian students and one group of foreign students (52 people in total). The answers given by the students enabled assessment of the level of anxiety they could experience in the proposed communication contexts: public speaking; communication in a small group; speech at a meeting; and interpersonal talk. Supposedly, a high level of readiness for communication in a foreign language would indicate the person's psychological security and lack of discomfort when networking. In addition, the research aimed to find a correlation between the number of foreign languages and the duration of their study, and the individual's desire to engage in verbal communication with strangers. According to the results of the communication apprehension test, all the students showed an average index of communication anxiety, and this moderate level can complicate their future introduction into a diverse professional community. Also, this study revealed that the number of languages and the willingness to communicate do not correlate. However, the number of years students learn languages is directly linked with their willingness to communicate. It is suggested that the quasi-communicative format of teaching foreign languages in the classrooms contrasts sharply with the emerging dynamic multicultural space of the university.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, foreign language environment

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1. Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by the rapid development of digital technologies and the Internet environment, and also by the fast-social transformations triggered by new forms of communication networks. From mostly monolingual, limited by the scope of the territory of residence or country, communication is increasingly taking the form of multilingual. This is especially noticeable in the emerging multilingual space of Russian

universities, which are taking steps towards greater internationalization, unevenly and with varying degrees of efficiency.

Ural Federal University (UrFU) has been accepting foreign students for undergraduate and graduate programs for several years. At the moment, their number is a little over 4,000, which in comparison with the total number of students amounts to 12% [1]. However, even such a small percentage of students from the total number of learners (about 35,000), representing a variety of learning styles and having their own unique cultural and educational experience, calls for new models of student-student and teacher-student interactions, as well as more effective forms of learning arrangements. Increasingly, in their teaching practices the teaching staff refers to a variety of techniques initiating group work: dialogue method, case-method, project method, and heuristic method.

Nevertheless, the project activity, which is considered as an important content component of university programs, has not yet received an appropriate response from students [2]. This can be explained by the fact that the modern younger generation prefers other ways of obtaining information, as the Internet has made access to it much easier and faster. Also, in order to create a truly interactive learning space, it is necessary to address both the effective methods of learning and emotive connotations that make up the emotional context of group learning, which in turn imparts dynamism to the interpersonal relationship and is sometimes unpredictable due to national and cultural specifics.

Finding themselves in an unusual environment and in a state of broken habitual social ties, foreign students begin to create their universe, hoping to weave it into a diverse mosaic of the strange worlds. Not only the language, but also the psychological barriers can be a serious obstacle to building a dialogue. Psychological barriers include increased anxiety when speaking and fear of incorrect assessment of speech errors by the teacher and other students [3]. The state of anxiety can explain the reluctance to engage in dialogue with other owners of the worlds, so teaching how to control such situations should be an integral part of the methodology of learning foreign languages, according to Nikulicheva [4].

Willingness to communicate in a foreign language is a relatively recent research field [5–8]. Russian studies are of a single nature [9, 10] and mainly highlight the willingness to communicate as an aspect of the foreign language communicative competence.

Communicative competence as an integrated goal of learning a foreign language at the university level includes the developed skills of foreign language interpersonal and

intercultural communication with native speakers within the specified limits. But communication in a foreign language also requires skills of accommodation to the interlocutor, ability to evaluate communicative situations and one's language capacity, and to make the necessary decision [11]. Therefore, the entire process is determined by a number of indicators, the most important of which are pragmatic and socio-psychological aspects. The pragmatic aspect concerns the effectiveness of communication and is determined by the achievement of the goal and the successfully addressed hindrances encountered in the course of its achievement. The socio-psychological aspects are responsible for the satisfaction from the communication. The higher mentally and socially mature a person is, the less they are susceptible to psychological tension and stiffness, which, being subjective feelings, affect the impression of adequacy and stability of interpersonal relations.

1.1. Purpose of the study

Since willingness to communicate (WTC) varies from person to person depending on the communicative situation, personality type, and even one's mood, a clearer insight into how much volatility in verbal behavior is rooted in the individual variable will help in designing an effective educational model in an academic bilingualism setting. Willingness to communicate supposes that language learners are actively looking for speaking opportunities and really communicate, leaving the comfort zone of the classroom. The creation of motivational prerequisites for the involvement of foreign language learners in a variety of communication formats is a professional task of foreign language teachers. It is obvious that dialogue interaction is most conducive to speaker's communicative strategies, but it should also be understood that a higher willingness to communicate determines the frequency of foreign language acts. Facilitation of confident communication as a goal of learning a foreign language provides the necessary incentive to actively explore the various variables and preceding factors that underlie the concept of willingness to communicate.

2. Methodology

The study is built on an empirical approach, in particular, the method of subjective analysis (surveying of UrFU students), as well as the quantitative analysis of the data obtained using the Willingness to Communicate Scale [12] and the results of the self-assessed communication apprehension survey using the PRCA-24 Likert-type scale

[13]. The survey involved 52 students who are currently taking undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The participants were divided into three groups: students of humanities, international students, and science and engineering students. We have put forward the following hypotheses:

a) a higher level of foreign language proficiency correlates with a higher level of willingness to communicate in a foreign language;

(b) the number of foreign languages the students are taking increases the willingness to communicate in a foreign language;

(c) the length of study of a foreign language affects the increased rate of willingness to communicate in a foreign language.

The Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTC) is a 20-point probability scale with three sub-scales representing a communicative situation (strangers, acquaintances, and friends) and four sub-scales representing types of communication contexts (public speaking, meeting, group communication, and dialogue). The students are encouraged to freely choose the percentage of times they would communicate in each situation ("0" is never; "100" is always). The findings of the survey may indicate that a person's willingness to communicate in one situation or within one type of context is closely related to their willingness to communicate in other situations and within other types of contexts.

For the purpose of pragmatism, the situation "Talk with a garbage collector" of the original WTC scale was replaced by "Talk with an unfamiliar student", as in the conditions of the Russian university this communicative situation is more typical.

The PRCA-24 instrument chosen as an estimate of communication apprehension (CA) consists of 24 points and is the most popular and reliable measuring scale. The PRCA-24 assesses an individual's communication alertness in four separate communication contexts: public, small group, meeting, and interpersonal contexts. Each context is represented by six items. When filling out the form, the persons indicate the level of anxiety they feel about participating in various verbal communication situations within one of the four contexts. A person's CA score on PRCA-24 is determined by summing up the responses across all four contexts. High level of communication apprehension is ranged from 83 to 120, average level is ranged from 55 to 82, and low level is ranged from 24 to 54.

3. Results and Discussion

Before assessing the students on the WTC and PRCA-24 scales, they were asked to fill in a preliminary questionnaire containing among other issues the item on the level of foreign language proficiency in accordance with the European scale (CEFR). The UrFU students are familiar with this scale and the assessment presented no difficulty for them. In addition, the questionnaire contained items on the stay of students abroad (educational or tourist trips), as well as the duration of learning a foreign language and the possibility of passing a language proficiency test. The students also specified the number of foreign languages they were able to speak.

The respondents' answers showed that the maximum number of foreign languages spoken by one individual was five, and the average level of language proficiency was B1. Twenty-five people (48.1%) passed the international language exams, twenty-two (42.3%) were planning to take exams in the near future, and five respondents (9.6%) had no plans about it.

The mean score on WTC (fig.1) in the first students' group was 71.5 (average level), while for the group of international students (second group) it was 25.16 (low level), and the group of science and engineering students (third group) scored 59 (average level). Thus, it can be concluded that students of humanities have a higher rate of willingness to communicate in a foreign language. However, this does not mean that they are equally willing to communicate in all situations and with all types of the communicants. In fact, the main average differences were observed in the sample concerning the type of communicant. It can be inferred that the greater the number of the communicants represented in the communicative situation and the longer the individual interacts with them, the less desire to speak will be shown.

It is also worth noting that most of the first group's interviewees had a study abroad experience, which may have a positive impact on the overall level of WTC in the group. Among the interviewed students of the third group, only five of the fourteen people gave a positive answer, indicating that their study abroad program was short. Their average WTC is also higher compared to the index shown by the rest of the group.

The average rate of general communication apprehension (CA) among students in the first group was 59.64 (average level), in the second group it was 70.47 (average level), and the third group showed 64.71 (average level).

Thus, all three groups have an average indicator of communication apprehension. However, the CA level of international students is the highest among the three groups. The CA index of the students of the first group is the lowest, as they have the highest
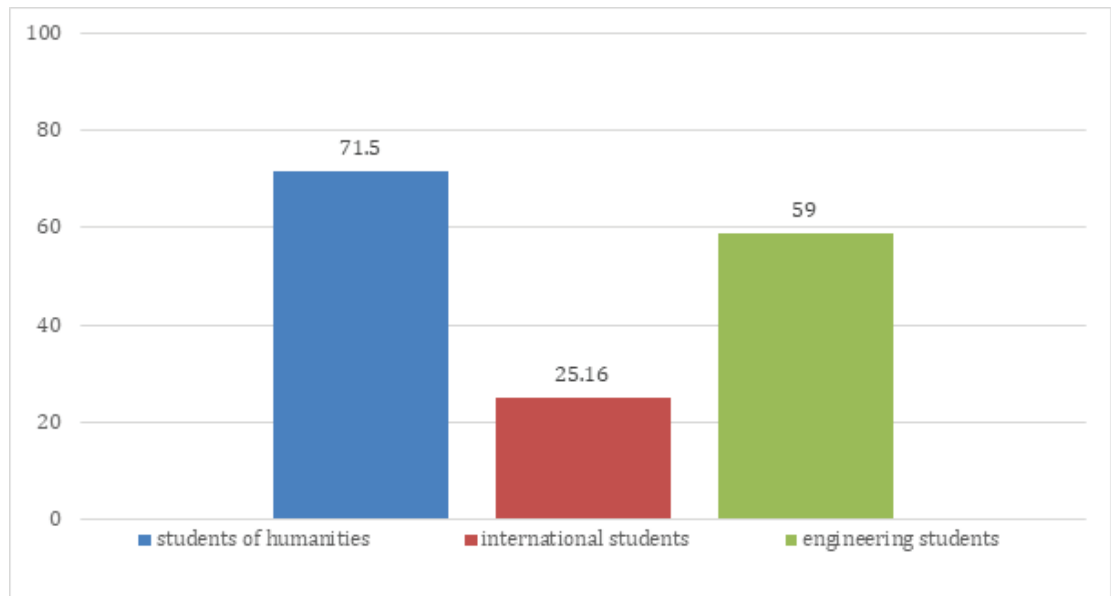
Figure 1: WTC mean values

WTC rate and the majority of them studied abroad. Also, they learn more foreign languages and far longer than the students of the other two groups.
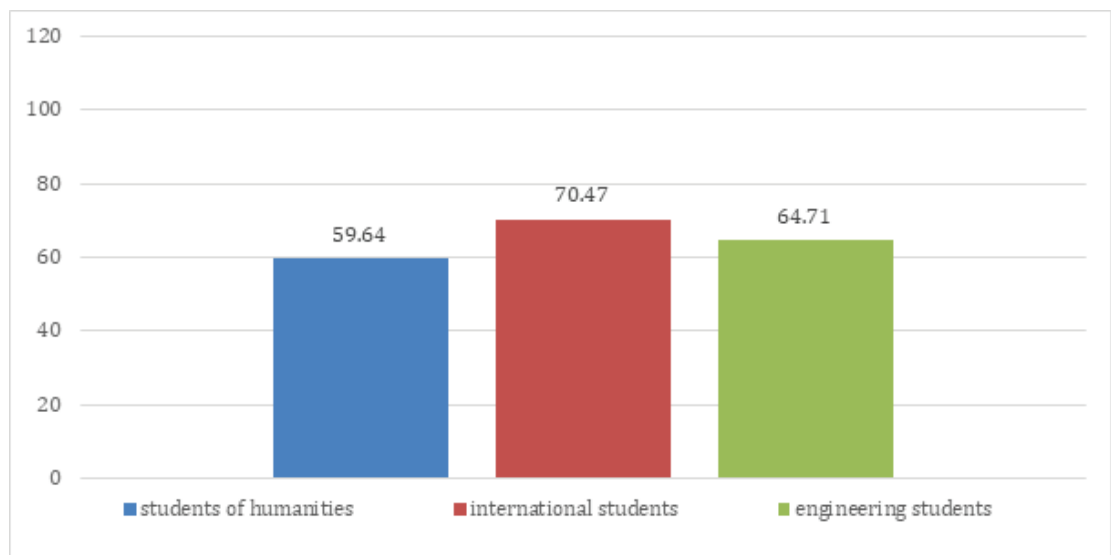

Figure 2: PRCA mean values

3.1. Testing hypotheses

Spearman correlation coefficient, a measure of linear relationship between random variables, was used to test the hypotheses. Spearman correlation is rank, that is, numerical values are not units of measuring the strength of the connection, but the corresponding ranks. Normative value of the indicator is -1; 1, where 0 = no correlation.

When testing the first hypothesis (correlation of the level of language proficiency with the level of WTC), all indicators of the WTC and PRCA scales from all three groups were considered and the Spearman correlation coefficient and the P-value were calculated.

The overall correlation between WTC and PRCA was as follows: rest = minus 0.44771, where p = 0.00087, p<0.05.

Thus, there is a negative correlation coefficient (the values of one variable decrease, and the values of the other increase), which is minus 0.44771 at a value of p<0.05. This confirms the hypothesis: the higher the student's level of willingness to communicate in a foreign language, the lower their communication apprehension, and vice versa, the lower their communication apprehension, the higher the level of WTC.

When testing the second hypothesis, all indicators of the number of foreign languages studied by students and the WTC scale from all three groups were considered, and then the Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated, as well as the P-value.

The overall correlation between the number of foreign languages and WTC was as follows: rs = 0.21848, where p = 0.11969 and p>0.05.

Thus, it is obvious that the correlation coefficient is positive (the relationship is direct), but it is close to zero (the relationship is weak) and is 0.21848 at the value of p>0.05. Therefore, the second hypothesis has not been confirmed, which means that there is practically no connection between the number of foreign languages and the level of willingness to communicate.

When testing the third hypothesis, all indicators of the duration of language learning and the WTC scale from all three groups were considered, followed by the calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient, as well as the P-value.

The overall correlation between the duration of study and WTC was as follows: rs = 0.44958, where p = 0.00083 and p<0.05. The correlation coefficient in this case is positive (direct correlation) and is 0.4958, when p<0.05. Therefore, it is obvious that the third hypothesis has been confirmed, which means that the longer the students learn foreign languages, the higher their WTC is.

Thus, the two hypotheses have been confirmed and one was refuted due to the low value of the Spearman correlation coefficient.

The students of the first group showed the highest willingness to communicate in a foreign language, as well as the lowest level of communication apprehension compared to the other two groups. This is due to the fact that the curricula of the humanities allocate more academic hours to foreign languages. Also, students of humanities have

greater opportunities for interaction with foreign language speakers, both in the classroom and outside it, which involves a higher level of motivation to learn a new language and its culture. The first group was partly represented by the students of linguistics and oriental studies, who on average study three foreign languages, while the majority of science and engineering students learn only one or two foreign languages. Also, it is worth mentioning that the students of humanities can choose from the variety of foreign languages and their choice is based on the individual's preferences and the previous school experience. Of this group, 11 out of 17 students studied abroad, which probably had a positive impact on their willingness to communicate and the communication apprehension.

A group of international students showed the worst results on two indicators: the lowest level of willingness to communicate in a foreign language (25.16) and the highest level of communication apprehension (70.47). This can be explained by the specific factors the international students have to face in the Russian university. One of the external factors is staying in a new, sometimes unfriendly environment. Most of the foreign students surveyed came from Asian countries (China, South Korea, etc.), whose cultures are strikingly different, and this causes an inevitable long-term culture shock. The essence of culture shock is the conflict of old and new cultural norms and orientation, the conflict of two cultures at the level of individual identity. The rupture of the habitual ties is always a painful experience resulting in a feeling of anxiety and emotional disorder [14].

The WTC and PRCA indicators shown by the group of international students are explained by the objective conditions. The survey was conducted in April 2019, and some foreign respondents arrived at UrFU just six-seven months before classes start. Consequently, they are still experiencing the crisis phase and the environment is having a negative impact on them. In such situations, people tend to avoid or minimize contacts with everything foreign, retreating into themselves and seeking support from compatriots.

The adaptation to a new culture includes many aspects complicated by the need to get used to unfamiliar learning activities, which require a sufficiently high level of proficiency in the Russian language. According to the survey, the majority of international students consider their level of Russian language proficiency sufficient for everyday communication, but insufficient for the educational purposes (academic texts analysis and after-question reading, comprehension of lectures, and oral interaction). Hence, they assess their language level not higher than A2-B1, which is insufficient for the full mastering of the bachelor and master's programs.

The third group (science and engineering students) being rated on the WTC and PRCA-24 scales showed the results that indicate their willingness to communicate lower than the first group's indicators, but much higher than in the second group. The communication apprehension rates are higher compared to the first group, and lower than in the second group. These results can be associated with a different direction of study. Besides, science and engineering students are deprived of the opportunity to continue learning a foreign language at the senior undergraduate courses, which leads to the unavoidable loss of knowledge and skills and weakens motivation to further learn a foreign language on their own. In addition, the choice of a foreign language is limited to only one language under the curriculum. The results of the survey showed that the majority of the third group's students did not study abroad or visit other countries. This may be due to the fact that the students erroneously consider their chances of using a foreign language in the professional activities as rather poor, or they believe that the achieved language level is sufficient to succeed in life.

The indicators of WTC and CA regarding the types of communicants proposed in the survey were not equally evident. The CA indicators in the "meeting" types should be regarded as the main predictor of people's willingness to start speaking. According to one research [15], the need to speak in such contexts is related to the disturbing feeling that people experience in real or expected communication with others even in a very small group, such as classroom. Interaction even with familiar people (not friends) can be seen as formal situations, and this contributes to increased anxiety due to the expected assessment from others, which affects the increased level of CA. The unfamiliar situation also adds uncertainty and forces individuals to avoid communication, seeking to save face while in a safety zone. The comfortable communication is determined by the factor of acquaintance with the interlocutors, and the lack of security reduces the WTC of individuals and is indicated by the lack of conversation.

4. Conclusion

The study showed that the general level of willingness to communicate in a foreign language among the students of all three groups is insufficient to successfully achieve the academic or professional goals in the context of fierce competition in the global labor market. Despite the efforts of teaching staff and the introduction of innovations in the educational space of the universities, language, cultural and psychological barriers impede contacts with native speakers and other bilinguals and remain an unsolvable

task. There is a need for purposeful actions on the part of all involved in the organization of the learning setting to analyze the existing practices of creating appropriate conditions for the effective multilingual environment.

Abramova and colleagues described an interesting ten-year experience of testing the model of a single foreign language space [16]. The authors believe that their model encourages harmonious communication in the simulated situations of academic and professionally oriented communication in English. The situations include variable elements, when prior to opening of the conversation the students are unaware of their communication partner and the evaluator. According to the authors, the change in the sociolinguistic setting will facilitate the foreign language socialization of bilinguals, increase motivation to learn English and the need to speak it in a single foreign language environment of a non-linguistic university.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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