INTERNATIONAL EAL STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC SELF-PERCEPTION AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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This mixed-methods study used the Willingness to Communicate framework to investigate international EAL students' classroom participation in relation to both actual and perceived oral proficiency. We surveyed 41 EAL linguistics students from a Canadian university about their behaviors and self-perceptions on the dimensions of accentedness, fluency, and intelligibility. The speech of a subset of 19 students was recorded in an oral task and assessed by native-speaking listeners. The students also participated in semi-structured interviews about their linguistic experiences and self-perceptions. Quantitative results showed that EAL students felt that their language skills held them back from participating in class. Participants were moderately accurate in their L2 self-assessment, in contrast with previous research. Self-perception ultimately did not correlate with participants' reported in-class behavior, suggesting that other factors influenced their decision to participate. In the qualitative results, students' views of their speech were influenced by their knowledge of SLA and sociolinguistics. Students held conflicting attitudes, simultaneously recognizing that nonnative speech does not necessarily impede communication, while also expressing a desire to sound more native-like. Our results may assist post-secondary institutions in better supporting EAL students' integration in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the recent growth in international post-secondary attendance, it is important to address the barriers that international EAL students face throughout their university careers. International students often feel somewhat excluded in class and socially (Deygers, 2018) and report having very limited opportunities to interact in English, which ultimately results in only modest language gains, even after years of study in the target language (TL) environment (Ranta & Mackelborg, 2013). The current study aimed to explore one specific aspect of EAL international students' experience: in-class participation as it relates to their linguistic self-perception and Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

McCroskey and Baer (1985) defined WTC as the reason "why one person will communicate and another will not under identical or virtually identical situational constraints" (p. 3). MacIntyre et al. (1998) applied the construct to SLA, identifying L2 WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). L2 WTC is known to influence numerous aspects of linguistic and social experience. Gallagher (2013) examined the extent to which L2 WTC serves as a predictor of environmental stressors among international students. Participants were surveyed about their WTC in a variety of situations outside of the

classroom, the extent to which they recalled experiencing various common "daily hassles" during the previous month, and their L2 confidence in English. The outcomes underscored the importance of this construct in predicting international students' quality of life abroad: students who were more willing to initiate L2 communication were found to be "less burdened by social isolation, time and financial constraints, and communication difficulties" (p. 66).

Gallagher (2013) also found that students' confidence in their language abilities strongly predicted their WTC outside of the classroom, where communication is under their volitional control. Communication in the university classroom, however, is less straightforward in that respect, and it remains to be seen whether L2 self-perception determines WTC in class to the same extent.

A related issue is the degree of correspondence between speakers' beliefs about their own speech and assessment of their speech by listeners. Trofimovich et al. (2016) found that higher-proficiency L2 speakers tended to underestimate their performance, while speakers of lower proficiency were more likely to overestimate. While perceived L2 competence seems to have a stronger effect on speakers' psychological experience (e.g., language anxiety) than their actual performance (Baran-Łucarz, 2011), the effect on WTC is unclear. Therefore, we considered self-perceptions of L2 competence from our group of EAL international students in relation to judgments from a group of raters.

The present study used both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the linguistic and academic experiences of EAL international students at a Canadian university. Class participation was a key variable, as it is a relatively comprehensive way of gauging whether students are actively included and engaged in the educational experience. Regarding theoretical implications, the study investigated the extent to which speakers' L2 confidence mediates WTC and actual behavior in the university classroom, where communication is under some degree of volitional control.

Research Questions

For the quantitative portion of the study, our research questions were as follows:

1) Do EAL and NS students differ in their in-class participation behavior?

2) How accurate are EAL students' beliefs about their own speech?

3) What is the relationship between L2 self-perception of speech and speaking and WTC?

4) What is the relationship between students' (hypothetical) WTC and their self-reported in-class behavior? Between behavior and L2 self-perception?

The purpose of the qualitative data was to examine the students' linguistic experiences and self-perceptions more comprehensively, allowing us to understand their perspectives through a less structured technique.

METHODS

Study Design

Our study consisted of two main parts: (1) an online survey completed by both NS and EAL students and (2) an in-person follow-up, in which a subset of EAL students completed two speaking tasks and a semi-structured interview.

Participants

115 students completed the survey portion (74 English L1; 41 self-identified L2). All had taken at least one linguistics class and 73% were linguistics majors or minors.

Nineteen self-selected participants from the L2 group participated in part two, with L1s being Cantonese (6), Mandarin (5), Korean (2), French (2),Vietnamese (2), Spanish (1), and Japanese (1). Mean length of residence in Canada was 6.25 years (SD = 5.3). Nine had relocated to Canada from their home countries after secondary school, while several others had grown up locally and therefore had much more English experience.

Data collection

Online survey

Part A of the online survey consisted of 33 questions. Participants reported in-class behavior (the frequency with which they, for example, respond orally to the instructor's questions during lecture) and their attitudes about participation (for example, degree of agreement with a statement like "I believe that speaking in class can have a positive effect on my grades"). In Part B (30 questions), EAL speakers self-assessed their comprehensibility, pronunciation, accentedness, and fluency by reporting their agreement with statements like "when I speak English, other people understand me." (see Tables 2 and 3 for a complete list). We assessed the EAL speakers' WTC using 10 questions asking how likely the participants would be to speak in a particular situation (e.g., to a professor after class about an assignment, or to someone they don't know while waiting in line).

Speaking tasks

In the first spontaneous speaking task, participants viewed the suitcase story (Derwing et al., 2009) and described its events. In the second, they read (silently) an excerpt from an introductory linguistics textbook and summarized its main points out loud, as if explaining it to a classmate. Recordings were made in a sound-treated booth. No limit was placed on speaking time.

Speech assessment

Speech samples were trimmed to the initial 30 seconds each and assessed for comprehensibility and fluency (randomized presentation; seven-point Likert scales) by five native English raters with experience in linguistics and SLA. Interrater reliability (Cronbach's alpha) reached .781, which was deemed acceptable.

Interview

With the subset of 19 EAL participants, we conducted semi-structured interviews about their experiences in class and in Canada. The questions loosely followed MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramidal heuristic model of L2 WTC, with questions addressing the different levels of individual and social variables that may influence an L2 speaker to communicate in a given situation. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes on average.

RESULTS
Quantitative
RQ1: Do EAL and NS students differ in their in-class participation behavior?

For RQ1, a comparison of L1 and L2 speakers' survey responses is given in Table 1. As expected, EAL students reported participating less in class than native speakers (e.g., question 2) and were more likely to say that they wish to participate more (question 3). EAL students were also much more likely to say that their language skills hold them back from participating (question 4); regarding knowledge of linguistics, however, the groups reported comparable levels of confidence (question 5).

Table 1

Comparison between English L1 and L2 students (participation)

Question	Mean		Median		U^a	p
	L1	L2	L1	L2		
1. I don't like drawing attention to myself by speaking up in class	3.61	3.96	4.00	4.00	1546.50	.152
2. During small group discussions, I communicate with other students…	3.04	2.76	3.00	3.00	1435.50	.040*
3. I wish I participated more in class	3.45	3.80	3.00	4.00	1406.50	.027*
4. I believe that my English language skills are strong enough to participate in class	4.59	3.59	5.00	4.00	828.00	.000**
5. I believe that my knowledge of linguistics content is strong enough to participate in class	3.69	3.63	4.00	4.00	1695.00	.514
6. I worry that I can't express myself well enough when communicating with others	2.59	3.53	2.00	4.00	1099.00	.000**

[a] Mann-Whitney U statistic; * $p < .05$; **$p < .001$

RQ2: How accurate are EAL students' beliefs about their own speech?

For RQ2, we compared the EAL students' beliefs about their own speech with native rater judgments. Table 2 shows moderate Pearson correlations between comprehensibility and fluency ratings and speakers' responses on questions targeting their beliefs about their own output; speakers who reported worrying more about the quality of their pronunciation (question 7), for instance, were rated as less fluent and less comprehensible by the judges.

Table 2

Pearson correlations between L2 speakers' self-assessments and native judges' ratings

Self-report	Listener rating	Correlation (*r*)	*p*
7. I worry that my English pronunciation is not good enough	Comprehensibility	.584	0.009**
	Fluency	.523	0.022*
8. When I speak English, I find it easy to put the right words together quickly	Comprehensibility	.568	0.011*
	Fluency	.467	0.044*
9. Some people have criticized my English	Comprehensibility	.605	0.006**
	Fluency	.574	0.01*
10. When I speak English, people often ask me to repeat myself	Comprehensibility	.477	.039*
	Fluency	.443	.057

RQ3: What is the relationship between L2 self-perception of speech and speaking and WTC?

Table 3 shows selected correlations between participants' self-assessments of their pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility and their reported WTC. In this case, WTC was calculated as the mean of participants' responses to 10 hypothetical situations, as explained in Methods. As expected, participants who had a relatively negative view of their speaking skills (i.e., low scores for questions 11, 12, 13, 16, and 17, and high scores for questions 14, 15, 18, and 19) were significantly less likely to say that they would choose to communicate in the 10 scenarios, and vice versa.

Table 3

Pearson correlations between L2 speakers' self-assessments and reported WTC

Question	Correlation with WTC (*r*)	*p*
11. When I speak English, I find it easy to put the right words together quickly	.710	.001**
12. When I speak English, my accent sounds good	.575	.010*
13. When I speak English, other people understand me	.613	.005**
14. When I speak English, people often ask me to repeat myself	-.603	.006**
15. When people misunderstand what I say, it is mainly due to my pronunciation	-.582	.009**
16. I consider my English pronunciation to be (very poor— very good)	.751	.000**
17. My pronunciation of English is close to that of native speakers	.640	.003**
18. I often have difficulties understanding spoken English	-.777	.000**
19. Some people judge me negatively because of my English skills	-.528	.020*

RQ4: What is the relationship between students' (hypothetical) WTC and their self-reported in-class behavior? Between behavior and L2 self-perception?

For RQ4, we compared participants' self-reported in-class behavior with the WTC measure discussed above, as well as with their L2 self-perception. To operationalize behavior, we calculated the mean of their responses on frequency of answering questions in class, frequency of asking questions in class, and frequency of communicating with other students during small group discussions. There was a weak correlation between this behavioral measure and WTC ($r = .404$, $p = .086$). There were no significant correlations between any L2 self-assessment questions and reported in-class behavior.

Qualitative findings

The interview data provided us with many insights into students' nuanced feelings regarding their ability to communicate in English, life in Canada, and their experiences in class. Two main themes

emerged from the interviews: students' (often ambivalent) thoughts about their L2 accent and their varied reasons for not participating in class. Additionally, students cited several specific factors that increase their WTC in class.

To examine participants' feelings about their accent and accentedness in general, we asked the following question, adapted from Derwing (2003): "if it were possible to sound exactly like a native Canadian speaker of English, would you choose to speak that way?" Only two respondents answered this question with a definitive yes, citing a desire to be more comprehensible. Overall, this question garnered mostly negative responses, with many participants expressing that they aren't particularly concerned with sounding like a native speaker, instead prioritizing being comprehensible: "In Canada there's no standard for languages…as long as people understand me, it's fine for me. And in Canada there are so many accents, so I just don't care" (P101).

Several other participants said that they would not want to sound like a native Canadian speaker because they felt it would compromise their identity in some way. P119 said: "I would not do that. Because that's what I am. I'm from Hong Kong…it would be strange to be a native speaker." Similarly, P115 stated that "my accent is my identity…if I sound the same as everyone else, then they might not know where I'm from."

Many of the participants' responses also reflected knowledge gained from their courses, namely an understanding of principles from sociolinguistics and SLA. Students acknowledged that "there are many ways of speaking English" (P119) and that "everyone has an accent, not just [nonnative] speakers" (P101). They also expressed an awareness of the near-impossibility of sounding native-like in a late-acquired second language: "I think it's really hard to get rid of the accent. The only [thing] for nonnative speakers to do is to get [closer] to the native sound that a native speaker has" (P114).

Alongside this awareness, however, often coexisted an acknowledgement of the privileges that may come with having a native-like accent: "I don't think [sounding like a native speaker] is important. But if you can get a really native sound, if you have a good pronunciation, it's better for you. People will go, "oh, your English is so good!" (P114). P103 expressed similarly ambivalent feelings towards her accent : "I don't care about accents, because if people understand me, it's kind of okay. [But] I would love to have like a perfect accent, like some students have… it feels like you speak English very well if you don't have an accent."

Turning to the issue of participation, participants cited several factors that contribute to feeling reluctant to speak in class. Many of these relate to language anxiety, particularly the fear of negative evaluation by others. Participants said they were often worried about "looking bad" in front of their classmates and that this held them back from expressing themselves, as expressed by P115: "I care about what others think of me, so I don't wanna make a fool of myself, like saying something wrong or pronouncing something wrong. It's a dilemma… like you want to express something, but at the same time you're scared of looking bad." This fear was frequently linked to negative self-evaluation of their accent and pronunciation; P118, for example, stated that "I'm not comfortable speaking up in big lectures, 'cause sometimes I feel that my accent is not good enough or I can't really paraphrase my questions. I just don't want to look bad in class." Overall, though, participants' fear of negative evaluation seemed to stem from a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors, including perceived lack of knowledge in a given subject area.

Related to fear of negative evaluation is the notion of not wanting to "waste others' time" in class, which was explicitly brought up by three participants. P105, for example, stated that "Sometimes in class if you have both native and non-native [students], you don't want to waste their time. If you're the only one who has a problem, like it's not a class problem, and you need help, I would hesitate, 'cause you don't want to ruin their time for the class."

Lastly, it is important to note the influence that students' home culture has on class participation. Many participants expressed that they feel uncomfortable or unnatural speaking up in class because of the different norms for behavior in their home countries. P104, from Hong Kong, expressed that "in Asian countries we don't speak in class. We only listen and learn, and only the teacher will speak. So that's why we're not very used to speaking class." This sentiment often held true even when the students were aware of the differences in classroom participation expectations in the Canadian context. P116, for example, stated that, after attending university in Canada for several years, "now I kind of know that being wrong is okay and participating is fine, but I think I still have that mindset from the Korean educational system, so that could be why I don't [participate] sometimes." It is important to highlight that the differences in levels of participation between L1 and L2 students may be driven by these non-linguistic, cultural factors.

Participants listed several factors that contribute to feeling comfortable enough to participate in class. They reported speaking more in classes where the professor is friendly, caring, not overly serious, approachable, and actively engages students. Participants also expressed that they appreciate when professors directly acknowledge nonnative speakers in the class, offer them additional support, and show patience and understanding towards language difficulties, or—as stated by P115—"if they don't mind that my English is bad." Participants also appreciated when professors include examples from many different languages and encourage students to contribute their knowledge of their own L1s. Finally, several students expressed their preference for small group discussions, which they considered easier than being asked to share their thoughts in front of the entire class.

DISCUSSION

EAL students reported participating less in class than their NS classmates and were more likely to say that they wished to participate more. These findings were somewhat expected, given anecdotal reports from instructors. EAL students were also much more likely to say that their language skills, as opposed to knowledge of linguistics, held them back from participating.

Within the group of EAL students who participated in the follow-up study, we found that participants responses on their own comprehensibility and fluency were somewhat related to those of the raters. We saw moderate negative correlations between, for instance, increased anxiety about pronunciation and fluency and listeners' comprehensibility ratings.

These results deviate somewhat from those of Trofimovich et al. (2016), given that L2 speakers' responses were not as divergent from those of the raters. There are several possible reasons for this difference. First, our participants generally had significant experience interacting with native speakers: all except one had spent at least two years in Canada, and nearly 70% had spent over four years. During this time, we can assume that they received direct and/or indirect feedback from other speakers, which may have sharpened their insight into how their speech is perceived by

others. Another reason for the difference may be methodological: while we asked participants several different questions that targeted their self-perception, they were not asked to explicitly rate their comprehensibility or fluency on a seven-point scale, as was done by the NS raters. Self-perception prompts such as "when I speak English, other people understand me" may be easier for L2 speakers to assess than conceptualizing where they rank on a hypothetical comprehensibility or fluency scale. Lastly, the academic backgrounds of our participants may have influenced their self-perception; experience in linguistics courses may have led them to be more attuned to minor differences in accent or pronunciation.

Our data on L2 confidence correlated significantly with our measure of WTC. This is in line with previous findings by Gallagher (2013), who found a strong predictive relationship between the two variables. It is important to note, however, that our WTC measure did not show a strong association with students' reported behavior. Moreover, there was an even weaker connection between reported behavior and L2 self-perception; in fact, some of the students with the highest reported participation scores exhibited some of the lowest L2 self-perception ratings. This finding suggests that non-linguistic factors may be involved in whether an EAL student decides to actively participate in class. One contributor may simply be the value the student places on class participation and whether they expect it to reflect positively on them or their grades. Also, relatively low L2 confidence might sometimes be overridden by the context, or by the student's increased motivation to do well in the course.

Limitations

Quantitative comparisons between EAL and NS students did not always yield clear results, due in large part to the way in which participants were recruited into each group. Some of the participants who identified as EAL had spent most of their life in Canada and were not international students. In the future, it may be helpful to compare EAL students who grew up with a non-English home language while attending local schools with those who arrived in Canada relatively recently.

Another important limitation is the way in which WTC was operationalized in the study. Our measure of WTC likely did not accurately capture the dynamic nature of this construct. In future work, trait-like conceptualizations of WTC (such as the one in this study) should be supplemented with less static measures to better capture both aspects of the construct.

Lastly, while it is certainly informative to assess the extent to which students *think* they are participating in class, it is not clear whether self-reported data accurately reflects the frequency with which they actually engage in participatory behaviors. Ideally, we would attempt to corroborate self-reported data with classroom observations or reports from instructors.

CONCLUSION

International students who are L2 speakers of English and are studying in English-medium universities constitute a particularly significant demographic of learners, one that is likely to expand even further in the coming decades. This study examined these students' experiences from both qualitative and quantitative angles. Quantitative results confirmed that many EAL students feel that their language skills act as a barrier to class participation. However, the relationship between linguistic self-perception and participation is not straightforward; more research is needed

to elucidate the links between self-perception, WTC, and actual behavior. The interview data highlighted students' nuanced self-perception and understanding of accentedness. It also underscored the importance of students feeling support and acceptance from their instructors and peers. Acknowledging EAL students' unique set of circumstances and understanding the factors that drive students' willingness to communicate will go a long way towards encouraging active participation in classes, which may ultimately create a more inclusive university environment.

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