

The Influence of Online Classrooms on EFL Students' Willingness to Communicate at NTTU

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Abstract

Online learning has been brought into the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education as a significant transformation which requires an analysis of the key factors in the virtual classroom environment to identify whether it fosters or hinders students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. The research was conducted with 137 EFL students in their second year and 35 lecturers teaching online classes at university with data collected from doing online surveys for two groups of participants, so a quantitative method was employed. Based on the research results, the enhancing and decreasing factors of WTC are found to point out though online learning platforms offer opportunities to motivate students to interact and overcome several obstacles. Findings from the present study also suggest measures for EFL instructors at Nguyen Tat Thanh University to maximize online classroom functions to boost learners' communication and engagement.

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1 Introduction

With the increasing reliance on digital education, experts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have been striving to identify the factors that influence EFL students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a second language (L2) [1]. The concept of WTC in L2 as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2." [2]. Therefore, WTC is a critical factor in determining the success of language learning, particularly in EFL contexts, where opportunities for authentic communication are often limited, as high level of WTC is closely linked to greater language use, increased confidence, and more active participation in communicative tasks.

In virtual classrooms, learners encounter both challenges and opportunities that affect their abilities to

do so. These include feelings of social isolation, reduced non-verbal cues, limited spontaneous interaction, and increased dependency on technological tools. However, online learning environments can also provide flexibility and comfort of engagement that may enhance learners' confidence and willingness to speak. This research investigated the factors in online classrooms that influenced EFL students' WTC and the instructional strategies lecturers use to enhance students' WTC in online environments, all to improve WTC in online EFL education and to contribute to more effective pedagogical strategies in virtual settings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Contextual Framework

L2 WTC is more complex than its counterpart in a first language (L1), as it cannot be directly transferred from one language to another and it is not a fixed trait but a dynamic construct shaped by both internal and external

factors.[2] Therefore, this study is designed within a conceptual framework which identifies and links key psychological, situational, and technological variables influencing EFL students' WTC in online classrooms. On the psychological level, anxiety and motivation are two main factors. Some studies have suggested that a certain level of language anxiety may encourage learners to put in more effort and maintain concentration [3]. However, in most cases, anxious learners tend to avoid volunteering answers or expressing their ideas in class. As a result, they participate less or remain silent, often forgetting previously learned material. Motivation, in contrast, has a strong positive relationship with learners' active engagement. Furthermore, when a student sees their peers participate actively in an online class, it can be caught and later becomes "L2 emotional contagion" [4]. Students would want to get involved more as they have evaluated their chance of joining based on other peers' performance and teachers' positive feedback.

From a situational viewpoint, positive interactions with teachers and peers have been proven to increase L2 WTC in EFL classes, specifically the support from the instructors [5, 6]. Communication opportunities online can make a significant impact. However, the lack of immediate feedback and non-verbal cues may limit spontaneous responses from learners, which is why teachers' strategies are considered to be as crucial.

Experts in TESOL and CALL have investigated the potential impact of technological factors on learners' WTC in the target language [7]. Tools such as digital games, virtual reality environments and conversational AI like Google Assistant can effectively enhance EFL learners' L2 WTC [8, 9, 10]. Interactive platforms can boost interactions through discussion boards, breakout rooms, and chat functions as they provide a low-stress environment where students can engage in conversations more easily, namely Blooket, Kahoot or Quizizz [11].

Table 1 Conceptual Framework on Factors Influencing EFL Students' WTC in Online Classes

Category	Variables
Psychological Factors	- Language Anxiety - Motivation - Emotional Contagion

Situational Factors	- Teacher Support & Strategies - Peer Interaction - Classroom Atmosphere
Technological Factors	- Digital Literacy - Game-based Platforms (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz) - Interaction Tools (e.g., breakout rooms, chat functions)

2.2 Online Classes and L2 WTC

In the growing context of technology, students and lecturers are offered more pathways to create an appropriate learning environment. While research on learners' WTC continues to expand, the access to insights about this aspect of online learning lecturers compared to their face-to-face counterparts is lesser than. This gap is significant because learners' levels of willingness can be affected by the aforementioned variables in the online environment just as much as in physical classes [12]. Moreover, studies that explore L2 WTC in online classes from two different perspectives, lecturers and learners, remain limited [13]. Therefore, it is crucial to explore whether the online language learning landscape has positive or negative impacts on students' WTC, in connection with a clear view into teachers' strategies.

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and Participants

The context of adding online classes into the General English program at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) has been on since the academic year 2003-2004. The survey was completed by 137 undergraduate students (female 107 or 78.11% and male 30 or 21.89%) of NTTU, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam with the sample size following the sample-to-item ratio of 5-to-1. The participants, whose classes are in English level 4 (B1 in CEFR) were in their second year and are pursuing different majors, namely Medicine, Pharmacy and Nursing.

Meanwhile, the teachers' perception questionnaire was carried out by 35 lecturers who have had experiences in teaching English in online classes at the university and they were chosen by the means of convenience sampling.

3.2 Instrument and Procedure

The instrument of the present study was a questionnaire which aims to investigate the students' WTC and teachers' perception of strategies in online classrooms. The first online questionnaire for learners was measured by the 22-item Likert-scale on which 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. All items were written in English and the students had to rate the perceptions and experiences in an online L2 learning environment. The Cronbach's Alpha score of this survey was 0.947. After students had finished all 5 of their online sessions, which are the equivalent of 20 periods before they were asked to provide their rating for this study.

Meanwhile, the same method was conducted for the group of lecturers but with a 15-item Likert-scale, specifically 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always. Through reliability statistics, this

questionnaire had Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.839. These participants are asked to rate how often they apply engaging and motivating approaches in their lesson plans.

3.3 Data Analysis

After two groups had completed their surveys, the collected data were downloaded from Google Form and converted into an excel file. Secondly, the data were coded to ease the quantitative analysis. Then, descriptive statistics, including frequency analyses, means, standard deviation (SD) and correlation analyses were conducted using the SPSS tool.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Students' Perception of Online Classes on L2 WTC

Table 2 The result from students' questionnaire on how online classrooms affect L2 WTC (%)

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I am excited to speak in online English class	5.1	5.1	27.7	32.1	29.9
2. I don't feel nervous to express feelings, opinions, thoughts, and ideas.	3.6	10.2	29.9	31.4	24.8
3. I prefer listening rather than talking in online classroom discussion.	2.9	2.9	25.5	43.8	24.8
4. Group discussions in breakout rooms are the activities I enjoy most in online English class.	1.5	3.6	35	39.4	20.4
5. I always want to talk with classmates and teachers when lessons take place.	0.7	3.6	35	39.4	21.2
6. I am interested in speaking in group discussions if the topics discussed are interesting.	0.7	2.9	35	38.7	22.6
7. I don't feel ashamed to start a classroom discussion by asking questions.	3.6	6.6	37.2	32.8	19.7
8. I am always eager to speak to practice my speaking skills.	2.2	6.6	39.4	32.1	19.7
9. I find it difficult to understand other people's talks in classroom discussions.	1.5	12.4	39.4	29.9	16.8
10. I'm the type of student who doesn't like to talk in group discussions.	3.6	29.2	29.9	23.4	13.9
11. I feel ashamed if my answers are wrong in classroom discussions.	2.2	17.5	33.6	27	19.7
12. Online classes encourage active participation in discussions.	0.7	2.2	35.8	37.2	24.1
13. I am able to understand concepts effectively through online lectures.	0.7	4.4	0.38	42.3	14.6

14. The assessments (quizzes, assignments, exams) are fair and aligned with the learning objectives.	0.7	2.2	21.9	49.6	25.5
15. I have access to a stable Internet connection for online classes.	0.7	3.3	33.6	38	24.1
16. I experience minimal technical difficulties during online sessions.	1.5	10.2	43.1	30.7	14.6
17. The learning platform (LMS, Zoom, Google Classroom, etc.) is easy to navigate.	1.5	4.4	27.7	44.5	21.9
18. I receive timely support for technical issues when needed.	0.7	1.5	34.3	42.3	21.2
19. My teachers are available to answer questions and provide guidance.	1.5	1.5	19	40.9	37.2
20. I receive timely feedback on my assignments and assessments.	1.5	1.5	24.8	41.6	30.7
21. The communication between students and teachers is effective.	1.5	1.5	24.1	37.2	35.8
22. My teachers use engaging teaching methods in online classes.	2.2	1.5	21.9	40.1	34.3

The results from Table 2 indicate that students generally exhibit a positive attitude in terms of readiness to communicate (WTC) in online English classrooms. Items 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8 revealed that a substantial percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt excited to speak (62%), and there was little to no sign of nervousness when expressing themselves (56.2%), and 61.3% were eager to participate in discussions when they found the given topics were interesting. Though a small number (16.8%) of respondents felt the discomfort in starting discussions and 37.2% remained neutral. For participation preferences in Items 3 and 4, almost two-thirds preferred listening over speaking, indicating a potentially passive communication style. However, a majority of learners enjoyed group discussions with classmates and teachers (Item 5). Plus, the percentages of Items 9 and 11 related to learners' confidence revealed moderate concern, with half indicating the struggles to understand others and an equal proportion expressing embarrassment after giving incorrect answers, highlighting lingering barriers. Finally, items 12 to 22 assessing teaching quality reflected high satisfaction with the online learning environment and students' ability to use new technological tools. The numbers showed strong agreement with the fairness of assessments (75.1%), access to stable Internet (62.1%),

and easy platform navigation (66.4%). Moreover, 78.1% agreed that teachers were available for immediate guidance with the application of motivational teaching strategies (74.4%), combining the supportive instructional context within which students' WTC is fostered.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics from students' questionnaire (N = 137)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item1	1	5	3.77	1.093
Item2	1	5	3.64	1.077
Item3	1	5	3.85	0.931
Item4	1	5	3.74	0.877
Item5	1	5	3.77	0.851
Item6	1	5	3.80	0.850
Item7	1	5	3.58	0.997
Item8	1	5	3.61	0.950
Item9	1	5	3.48	0.963
Item10	1	5	3.15	1.102
Item11	1	5	3.45	1.064
Item12	1	5	3.82	0.851
Item13	1	5	3.66	0.808
Item14	1	5	3.97	0.795
Item15	1	5	3.81	0.871
Item16	1	5	3.47	0.916

Item17	1	5	3.81	0.879
Item18	1	5	3.82	0.806
Item19	1	5	4.11	0.863
Item20	1	5	3.99	0.866
Item21	1	5	4.04	0.890
Item22	1	5	4.03	0.907
Valid N (listwise)		137		

The descriptive statistics display a further support to the overall positive perspectives of students on online classes, particularly linking to lecturer support and instructional quality. The highest mean scores belonged to Item 19 (instructor availability, $M = 4.11$), Item 21 (effective communicative activities, $M = 4.04$), and Item 22 (engaging teaching approaches, $M = 4.03$).

These numbers demonstrated a great level of satisfaction with the instructors and their current teaching methods. In contrast, the lowest mean scores appeared in Item 10 (dislike of group discussion, $M = 3.15$) and Item 9 (difficulty understanding others, $M = 3.48$), suggesting that while a significant number of learners enjoyed this kind of activity, certain communicative blocks due to anxiety still stayed with some. There was a positive trend across students' answers as most of the rest got into the mid-to-high mean range, between 3.6 to 3.9.

The range of SD went from 0.795 to 1.102, hinting at moderate variability in students' responses, with the biggest distribution seen in Item 10, which pointed out more different attitudes towards doing group discussions.

Table 4 Correlation analysis related to students' WTC in online English classrooms

		Item1	Item2	Item5	Item6	Item7	Item8
Item1	Pearson Correlation	1	0.558**	0.368**	0.344**	0.443**	0.428**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137
Item2	Pearson Correlation	0.558**	1	0.444**	0.424**	0.638**	0.491**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137
Item5	Pearson Correlation	0.368**	0.444**	1	0.706**	0.664**	0.631**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137
Item6	Pearson Correlation	0.344**	0.424**	0.706**	1	0.619**	0.555**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137
Item7	Pearson Correlation	0.443**	0.638**	0.664**	0.619**	1	0.656**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137
Item8	Pearson Correlation	0.428**	0.491**	0.631**	0.555**	0.656**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	137	137	137	137	137	137

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results revealed positive correlations between all item pairs at the 0.01 level, with coefficients ranging from $r = .344$ to $r = .706$. The strongest correlations were found between Item 5 and Item 6 ($r = .706$), as well as between Item 7 and Item 8, reflecting confidence and eagerness to speak ($r = .656$). results show that learners' enjoyment, confidence, and reduced anxiety are closely interconnected,

strengthening how WTC in virtual classrooms is a multi-dimensional foundation supported by motivational factors. They support the potential to treat these items as components of a unified WTC scale in further analysis.

4.1.2 Teachers' Perception and Strategies to Enhance Students' L2 WTC in Online Classes

Table 5 The results from lecturers' questionnaire on how to enhance students' L2 WTC (%) in online classes (%)

Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I use short opening activities to start each class (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz).	0	0	14.3	14.3	71.4
2. I ask students to use a real-time collaborative web platform (e.g., Padlet, Jamboard) to brainstorm ideas about a particular topic.	0	0	57.1	28.6	14.3
3. I use discussion groups in breakout rooms to let students of similar interests talk together	14.3	14.3	42.9	14.3	14.3
4. I reformulate all or part of the incorrect answer and insert them in the chat box.	28.6	14.3	28.6	14.3	28.6
5. I create a supportive and pleasant online classroom climate where students are free from embarrassment and ridicule.	0	0	14.3	14.3	71.4
6. I use a variety of vocal expressions while talking to the class.	0	0	28.6	14.3	57.1
7. I give clear instructions on how to carry out a task by modelling every step that students will need to do.	0	0	0	42.9	57.1
8. I give good reasons for students as to why a particular activity is meaningful or important.	0	0	28.6	28.6	42.9
9. I design tasks that are within learners' ability so that they get to experience success regularly.	0	0	0	57.1	42.9
10. I monitor students' accomplishments and take time to celebrate any success or victory.	0	0	28.6	42.9	28.6
11. I encourage students to try harder by making it clear that I believe that they can do the tasks.	0	0	14.3	28.6	57.1
12. I positively evaluate students' responses with words like 'excellent, very good, great, etc.'.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4
13. Before giving feedback, I take the time to listen to students till they give the whole answer.	0	0	0	42.3	57.1
14. I provide clues to encourage students to self-correct.	0	0	28.6	14.3	57.1
15. I pinpoint the errors of students and provide the correct answer.	0	0	0	42.9	57.1

Table 5 provides data about the quantity of lecturers who employed engaging and motivating teaching techniques was substantially high. To be specific, 71.4% "always" use short opening activities (Item 1) and create a supportive and pleasant environment (Item 5), suggesting a consistent focus on establishing a positive tone and reducing anxiety at the beginning of lessons. A similar trend was respectively witnessed in item 7 and 12 where 71.4% reported always using effective verbal reinforcement, and more than half

claimed that they consistently did task demonstration instructions clearly. There was also a majority of lecturers who give students time to fully answer the questions before providing feedback (Item 13) and motivating self-correction by providing hints (Item 14). In addition, other commonly used strategies include persistence on instructors' encouragement, with 57.11% for Item 11, with the same amount for using vocal expression to maintain attention in Item 6 and designing achievable tasks in Item 9. An opposite trend

of lower-frequency methods was recorded in collaborative brainstorming areas using interactive websites, where only about 15% said to "always" do this in class, and reformulating incorrect answers (Item 4), which had a mean score of only 2.71 and a high standard deviation, showing a substantial diversity.

Table 6 Descriptive Statistics from teachers' questionnaire (N = 35)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item1	3	5	4.00	0.542
Item2	3	5	3.57	0.739
Item3	1	5	3.00	1.213
Item4	1	5	2.71	1.405
Item5	3	5	4.57	0.739
Item6	3	5	4.29	0.893
Item7	4	5	4.57	0.502
Item8	3	5	4.00	0.767
Item9	4	5	4.43	0.502
Item10	3	5	4.00	0.767
Item11	3	5	4.43	0.739
Item12	4	5	4.71	0.458
Item13	4	5	4.57	0.502
Item14	3	5	3.86	0.648
Item15	4	5	4.57	0.502
Valid N (listwise)	35			

The mean scores in Table 6 indicate a strong support for these statistics. The highest number belonged to Item 12, which is about positive comments ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.458$), followed by Items 5, 7, 9, 13, and 15 (all with $M \geq 4.43$), showing great focus on the importance of emotional support, clear and concise instructions, and constructive error correction methods. On the other hand, the Items related to breakout rooms for similar interests and fixing incorrect answers came with the smallest mean scores ($M = 3.00$ and 2.71 , respectively), with relatively high standard deviations (1.213 and 1.405), giving proof that these practices are unlikely to be implemented by teachers.

4.2 Strategies to Enhance WTC in Online Classrooms
Combining the data analysis from the two groups of participants on the main variables, these strategies aim at maintaining the strengths and working on limiting negative influences.

Firstly, online classroom, teacher support is critical for EFL students [4] because it will create a foundation to boost the students' confidence and encourage risk-

taking in communication. This is particularly relevant through the lens of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that when learners experience lower anxiety, higher motivation, and greater self-confidence, their affective filter is lowered, making language input more effective. To lower this filter, lecturers must ensure that tasks are clearly structured and not beyond the students' English proficiency. Most of the participants understood lesson content (Mean = 3.66), but a slightly significant proportion still found it difficult to follow others during discussions (Mean = 3.48). The solution is to consistently demonstrate the tasks, preferably with a few higher-level students in the class and integrate visuals, examples or interactive games when possible. In addition, more focus should be placed on normalizing mistakes and applying indirect correction strategies, such as providing clues to encourage self-correction. Learners should also be constantly reminded that mistakes are considered as one of the ways to remember the lessons longer. Nevertheless, the results indicated that students endorsed high levels of teacher availability and feedback (Mean = 4.11 and 3.99, respectively), which means that instructors' presence and support are crucial.

The third key strategy for enhancing L2 WTC involves cultivating a supportive learning atmosphere, a principle aligned with the core ideas of Positive Psychology in Second Language Acquisition. About two thirds of students reported feeling excited to speak and not nervous when expressing themselves, suggesting that they already felt comfortable with participating. This aligns with lecturers' responses, as most of whom stated that they strive to create a cheerful atmosphere (Mean = 4.57). When a student sees his or her peers participate actively in an online class, this vibe can be caught and later becomes "L2 emotional contagion", a phenomenon emphasized in Positive Psychology, whereby positive emotional experiences promote greater communicative engagement [4]. To maintain this, lecturers should apply tactics such as offering compliments regularly, showing patience during responses, keeping an uplifting attitude when giving feedback and reassurance.

Next, the overall engagement stays in a high tendency, unfortunately, approximately 70% of students showed a tendency toward passive participation. Meanwhile,

lecturers reported only moderate use of collaborative tools like Padlet or Jamboard (Mean = 3.57). Hence, increasing the use of such tools can reduce pressure so students can ease into participate actively in alternative formats. These platforms are especially effective for scaffolding less confident and lower-level learners into speaking roles. This at the same time can help develop the outcome of doing group discussions since nearly 30% remained neutral, and half of that did not enjoy them.

The findings above are consistent with the aspect that online learning will continue to exist and evolve in the future so upgrading teaching strategies to suit learners' needs is required [14]. These statistics can also guide practical improvements in curriculum design and educator training for online L2 education.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, enhancing students' L2 WTC in online environments requires a multifaceted approach that builds on strengths while addressing key challenges. This study found that while learners view online

learning positively, especially teacher support and accessible platforms, many still prefer listening over speaking, indicating passive participation. Lecturers often use motivational strategies such as creating a supportive atmosphere and clarifying tasks. However, ongoing professional development and institutional support are essential to help teachers align their strategies more closely with students' needs, particularly in areas like group interaction, feedback, and digital skills, to strengthen WTC in online EFL classrooms.

Nevertheless, there are a few limitations to this study as it was based solely on a quantitative approach and involved participants from a single university, which may limit the findings. Hence, a new direction would be to apply a mixed-methods design to fulfil both statistical qualitative perspectives. Additionally, future research could explore the impact of culture on learners' WTC, which remains under-investigated yet full of potential.

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Tác động của lớp học trực tuyến đến “mức độ sẵn sàng giao tiếp” của Sinh viên EFL tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

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Tóm tắt Việc học trực tuyến đã được đưa vào lĩnh vực giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) như một sự chuyển đổi quan trọng, đòi hỏi phải phân tích các yếu tố then chốt trong môi trường lớp học ảo nhằm xác định liệu nó thúc đẩy hay cản trở mức độ Sẵn sàng Giao tiếp (WTC) của sinh viên tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện với 137 sinh viên năm hai chuyên ngành tiếng Anh và 35 giảng viên đang giảng dạy các lớp học trực tuyến tại trường, với dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua khảo sát trực tuyến đối với hai nhóm đối tượng tham gia, do đó phương pháp định lượng đã được sử dụng. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, các yếu tố thúc đẩy và làm giảm WTC đã được xác định, cho thấy rằng mặc dù các nền tảng học trực tuyến mang lại cơ hội thúc đẩy sinh viên tương tác và vượt qua một số rào cản, nhưng vẫn tồn tại những trở ngại nhất định. Kết luận của nghiên cứu này cũng sẽ đề xuất các biện pháp giúp giảng viên tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành tối ưu hóa chức năng của lớp học trực tuyến nhằm nâng cao khả năng giao tiếp và mức độ tham gia của người học.

Từ khóa sự sẵn sàng giao tiếp, lớp học trực tuyến, tích cực, chiến lược