ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA MÔI TRƯỜNG LỚP HỌC
ĐẾN MỨC ĐỘ SẴN SÀNG GIAO TIẾP
CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM
HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ
DƯỚI GÓC NHÌN CỦA SINH VIÊN

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Nghiên cứu này khám phá nhận thức của sinh viên Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ về các yếu tố môi trường lớp học ảnh hưởng đến sự sẵn sàng giao tiếp của họ thông qua phương pháp hiện tượng học. Qua phân tích chủ đề từ các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, ba nhóm yếu tố chính đã được xác định: các yếu tố liên quan đến giáo viên, động lực giữa bạn học, và nhiệm vụ học tập. Trong số các yếu tố liên quan đến giáo viên, phong cách giảng dạy, sự hỗ trợ tinh thần, mức độ gần gũi, thời gian chờ và phản hồi được coi là có tác động lớn nhất đến mức độ sẵn sàng giao tiếp của sinh viên. Các yếu tố liên quan đến bạn học như mối quan hệ, sự hợp tác, thái độ học tập và trình độ ngôn ngữ cũng có vai trò quan trọng. Ngoài ra, chủ đề thảo luận và loại hình nhiệm vụ học tập cũng là những yếu tố dự báo rõ nét về mức độ sẵn sàng giao tiếp. Tuy chỉ giới hạn ở sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh và sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc nhưng nghiên cứu này cung cấp những thông tin quý giá và đề xuất được các khuyến nghị mang tính sư phạm. Giáo viên được khuyến khích áp dụng các phương pháp giảng dạy giao tiếp và xây dựng mối quan hệ tốt với sinh viên. Hơn nữa, sự cộng tác tích cực của bạn học được coi là động lực khuyến khích sự tham gia của sinh viên, đặc biệt đối với những người có trình độ tiếng Anh thấp.

Từ khóa: *các yếu tố môi trường lớp học, tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, sự sẵn sàng giao tiếp.*

This study explores Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of classroom environmental factors influencing their WTC using a phenomenological approach. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, three main categories emerged: teacher-related factors, peer dynamics, and learning tasks. Among teacher-related elements, teaching styles, emotional support, immediacy, wait time, and feedback were identified as having the most impact on students' WTC. Peer factors, such as relationships, cooperation, learning attitudes, and language proficiency, were also significant. Additionally, the topic of discussion and task type were strong predictors of WTC. Although limited by the exclusive focus on English-majored undergraduates and the use of semi-structured interviews, the research offers valuable insights and proposes

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pedagogical recommendations. Teachers are encouraged to adopt communicative teaching methods and foster positive relationships with students. Furthermore, peer engagement is highlighted as key to encouraging participation, particularly for students with lower proficiency levels.

THE EFFECT OF CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT ON VIETNAMESE EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

1. Introduction

In recent years, approaches to language teaching and learning have increasingly focused on developing learners' communicative competence so that they can use foreign languages more effectively in real-world communication (Thornbury, 2016). Subsequently, willingness to communicate (WTC), which is defined as "a readiness to enter into a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a second language (L2)" (McIntyre et al., 1998; p. 547), has received huge attention in the field of second language teaching and learning, not only for its role in language learning but also as an important non-linguistic outcome of the language learning process (MacIntyre, 2007). As a result, extensive research has explored various factors influencing learners' WTC, both within and outside the classroom (Léger & Storch, 2009; Cao, 2011; Pawlak et al., 2016; Peng, 2019; Aomr et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022).

One of the most significant factors influencing WTC is the classroom environment, which encompasses not only the physical space but also the psychological and social dynamics of the classroom (Cao, 2011; Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). A positive classroom environment—characterized by supportive teachers, cooperative classmates, and engaging topics—can foster student confidence and encourage active participation in classroom discussions (Khajavy et al., 2017). This is particularly crucial in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where learners often have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom (Wei et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the environmental factors that influence students' WTC in the classroom is key to creating conditions that promote communication and facilitate language acquisition.

Previous research has acknowledged the importance of the classroom environment in shaping students' WTC, especially in non-English-speaking countries (Peng & Wood, 2010; Zarrinabadi et al., 2014; Aomr et al., 2020). However, these studies have often only partially explored the comprehensive

impact of the classroom environment on WTC, leaving certain aspects under-researched. This gap provides an opportunity for further investigation, particularly in the context of Vietnam, where English is widely taught but opportunities for authentic language practice are limited.

Vietnam, a rapidly globalizing nation, regards English as a vital tool for knowledge exchange across various sectors (Tran & Tanemura, 2020; Le & Vu, 2021). Furthermore, English is a mandatory subject from primary education to higher education (Nguyen, 2012; Van, 2013; Nguyen, 2016). Despite the significant amount of time spent learning English in schools, Vietnamese students often graduate with low levels of communicative competence (Nguyen, 2016). One contributing factor may be the reluctance of students to engage in English conversations during class, which can hinder their speaking ability (Nguyen, 2019; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Hence, enhancing students' WTC could play a crucial role in improving their speaking proficiency.

Given the importance of classroom environment as a predictor of WTC, it is essential to explore this factor in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where opportunities for English practice are limited outside the classroom (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). To date, few studies have examined how the classroom environment impacts WTC in the Vietnamese EFL context. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the classroom environmental factors that influence Vietnamese EFL students' readiness or reluctance to speak English.

This paper seeks to explore students' perceptions of the classroom environmental factors that affect their WTC in EFL settings. The findings are expected to provide pedagogical insights that can help teachers and learners foster a more communicative classroom environment. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of classroom environmental factors that enhance their WTC?

2. What are students' perceptions of classroom environmental factors that hinder their WTC?

2. Literature review

2.1. Willingness to communicate in L2 acquisition

2.1.1. Definition of WTC and its importance

The concept of WTC first emerged from research on interpersonal communication in the first language in North America during the late 1970s (Peng, 2009). McCroskey and colleagues discovered that some individuals, despite possessing high linguistic competence, were less conversationally engaged, which they attributed to differences in WTC, defined as a person's tendency to initiate

communication when given the choice (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; as cited in Zarrinabadi & Tanbakooei, 2016). As the communicative approach in L2 education gained prominence, emphasizing the importance of authentic interaction in language acquisition, WTC became a critical concept in L2 pedagogy (MacIntyre et al., 2007). Since interaction fosters fluency, learners with higher WTC are more active, seeking out opportunities for real-life communication and thus enhancing their language learning (Kang, 2005). Studies, such as Baghaei et al. (2012), have shown that WTC in school settings is a strong predictor of language proficiency, and consequently, promoting WTC has been identified as a key goal in language teaching (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 2007). Initially, research focused on WTC as a stable trait influenced by individual factors like gender, age, and communication anxiety (McIntyre et al., 2003; Baker & MacIntyre, 2003), with integrative motivation (Hashimoto, 2002) and self-confidence (Léger & Storch, 2009) emerging as strong predictors. However, more recent perspectives argue that WTC is also shaped by situational variables, as demonstrated in McIntyre et al.'s (1998) comprehensive model, which integrates linguistic, psychological, and social factors, explaining why even proficient learners may be hesitant to speak. Subsequent research supports the interplay between trait-like and situational WTC, with situational factors determining if and when

an individual chooses to engage in a specific conversation (Kang, 2005; Cao, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2010). This evolving understanding of WTC has contributed significantly to L2 acquisition by integrating various psychological, linguistic, and educational approaches (MacIntyre, 2007). As a result, scholars like Kang (2005) have highlighted the need to prioritize WTC in both L2 acquisition and L2 instructional contexts to improve learner outcomes.

2.1.2. Willingness to communicate in the classroom context

The impact of WTC on L2 acquisition underscores the importance of examining WTC within the classroom setting (Cao, 2011). Khajavi et al. (2017) defined classroom context as encompassing all factors present in the classroom that can influence communication engagement, including individual, psychological, and contextual factors. Initial research on WTC in the classroom predominantly utilized quantitative methods, employing survey instruments from social and personality psychology to assess students' WTC levels (Dörnyei, 2015). For example, Peng and Wood (2010) proposed a WTC model for the Chinese EFL context, highlighting the combined influence of individual and contextual factors such as communication confidence, motivation, and classroom environment. This model was supported by Khajavi et al. (2014), who identified the classroom environment as the strongest

predictor of WTC among Iranian EFL students. However, McIntyre (2007) argued that quantitative methods provide only a "snapshot" of WTC, suggesting the need for qualitative approaches to explore the dynamics of WTC more comprehensively. In line with this, recent qualitative studies have investigated situational aspects of WTC. For instance, Riasati (2012) identified task type, discussion topics, and classroom atmosphere as key factors influencing WTC among Iranian learners, while Kang (2005) emphasized excitement, responsibility, and security. Similarly, Léger and Storch (2009) found that French students' WTC was shaped by their perceptions of communicative competence and attitudes towards speaking activities, and Pawlak et al. (2016) observed that WTC among Polish students varied with individual and contextual factors, particularly familiar interlocutors and personal topics. These findings indicate that classroom WTC is highly situational and influenced significantly by contextual factors, with the classroom environment being a major determinant (Khajavi et al., 2017; Peng, 2019). The next section will delve into the concept of classroom environment in educational research and its role as an antecedent of WTC in this study.

2.2. Classroom environment

The concept of classroom environment has been a significant focus in educational research since the 1970s, highlighting its impact on pedagogical processes and outcomes (Gettinger et al., 2011). Researchers have emphasized the need to understand various dimensions of the classroom environment, given that students spend considerable time in these settings (Fraser, 2012). Two pivotal studies in this field are Moos' 1979 research and the WIHIC (What is Happening in This Class) scale developed by Fraser and colleagues (Peng, 2009). Moos conceptualized the classroom environment through three elements: Relationship (interpersonal dynamics), Personal Development (students' self-improvement and goals), and System Maintenance and Change (environmental expectations and adaptability). Meanwhile, the WIHIC scale assesses classroom environment quality across eight aspects, including student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, and task orientation. Although these studies approached classroom environment differently, they both emphasize the interactions among various classroom elements, suggesting that the environment is both a physical space and a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological and social climates (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). Researchers examining WTC have applied these educational perspectives to explore how classroom environments influence students' communication readiness. Peng and Woodrow (2010) linked WTC to aspects such as teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. This conceptualization, focusing on the

supportive role of teachers, student cooperation, and task relevance, has been widely adopted in subsequent research (Khajavy et al., 2017; Aomr et al., 2020). However, later studies have expanded this view by incorporating additional dimensions of the classroom environment. Cao (2011) defined it as encompassing all external factors within the immediate classroom that affect learners' WTC, including the teacher, classmates, task types, and interaction patterns. Peng (2012) categorized classroom environments into atmosphere, teacher factors, and learning tasks, with further analysis in her subsequent work (Peng, 2019). Building on these insights, this study conceptualizes the classroom environment as a blend of external factors related to teachers, peers, and tasks, setting the stage for a detailed examination in the following section.

2.3. Components of the classroom environment and its effect on WTC

2.3.1. The role of the teacher

In the realm of WTC, teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and can significantly impact students' communication readiness (McIntyre et al., 2011). Research has identified several teacher-related factors that influence WTC, with teacher support being a key area of focus. Wen and Clément (2003) found that teacher support, including factors such as teacher attitude, involvement, immediacy, and teaching styles, affects students' WTC, with teacher

involvement and immediacy being particularly influential. Teacher involvement pertains to the quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, while immediacy includes both verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that reduce psychological and physical distance, such as smiles and encouragement. Yu (2009) further showed that teacher immediacy affects WTC indirectly through variables like communication apprehension and self-perceived competence, a finding supported by Gol et al. (2014), Sheybani (2019), and Alrabai (2022). Teaching styles also play a crucial role, as methods and strategies employed by teachers can impact students' psychological and cognitive states, thereby influencing their WTC (Kang, 2005; Zarrinabadi, 2014; Vongsila & Reinders, 2016). For example, frequent use of the target language by teachers can foster a positive classroom environment that encourages student participation (Dewaele, 2019). Conversely, a mismatch between students' and teachers' styles may lead to demotivation (Rao, 2010). Additionally, teacher interaction strategies, such as providing prompts and adjusting wait times, can maintain students' willingness to communicate (Peng, 2020). However, non-verbal cues from teachers may be interpreted differently by students (Zhang et al., 2018), highlighting the need for research from students' perspectives to fully understand how teachers can effectively influence WTC.

2.3.2. The role of peers

The role of peers in influencing WTC is significant, as outlined in McIntyre et al.'s (1998) original WTC model, which highlights that WTC can vary depending on the characteristics of the interlocutor, or the person with whom one communicates. In the classroom setting, peers are critical interlocutors, and research has shown that factors such as student cohesiveness, familiarity with interlocutors, and demographic features impact WTC (Kang, 2005; Cao & Philip, 2006; Riasati, 2012; Pawlak et al., 2016). Student cohesiveness, defined as the level of cooperation among classmates, has been found to significantly affect WTC, with a supportive environment encouraging students to share ideas more freely (Peng & Wood, 2010; Khajavy et al., 2014). However, excessive participation by a few can make others feel excluded, thereby reducing their WTC (Léger & Storch, 2009). Thus, a collaborative and supportive classroom atmosphere is crucial for enhancing communication confidence (Aomr et al., 2020). Additionally, familiarity with interlocutors positively correlates with WTC, as students prefer speaking with friends over acquaintances or strangers (Kang, 2005; Cao & Philp, 2006; Riasati, 2012). Research indicates that students are more willing to communicate with familiar peers due to reduced fear of judgment (Riasati, 2012), and larger groups with many unfamiliar members can diminish WTC (Başöz & Erten, 2019). Demographic features, such as age, gender, and L2 proficiency, also influence WTC, although findings are mixed. For example, students may feel intimidated by peers with higher L2 proficiency (Başöz & Erten, 2019), while others may be motivated to engage with more competent classmates for learning purposes (Cao, 2011).

2.3.3. The role of tasks

Tasks play a crucial role in shaping students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the classroom, as research shows that WTC fluctuates based on the topic of discussion and task design (Zarrinabadi et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). For instance, familiarity with a topic and personal interest significantly boost students' WTC, as they feel more confident and engaged when discussing subjects they know well or find intriguing (Cao, 2011; Zarrinabadi et al., 2014). Additionally, topics related to personal experiences tend to be more appealing, as students enjoy sharing things others may not know (Pawlak et al., 2016). In terms of task types, students generally prefer interactive, game-like tasks such as role-play or quiz games (Syed & Kuzborska, 2018), while others favor more structured activities like debates or video presentations (Riasati, 2012). Group activities are also preferred over teacher-fronted ones, as they provide more opportunities for participation (Cao, 2011). Moreover, adequate preparation time is essential for encouraging WTC, as tasks requiring spontaneous responses often lead to lower participation due to the lack of time to formulate ideas (Zarrinabadi, 2014; Zhong,

2013). Despite these insights, research on the impact of tasks on WTC remains limited, and the findings on students' task preferences are still inconclusive, suggesting the need for further studies to explore how tasks can best support or hinder WTC.

3. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological strategy, which has proven useful in the field of education and pedagogy because it offers an in-depth understanding of human thoughts and beliefs (Denscombe, 2021), in this case, the perceptions of students regarding the classroom environmental factors influencing their L2 WTC. Additionally, as a qualitative approach, phenomenology allows for "thick description" (Dörnyei, 2007), helping to comprehensively understand the complex dynamics of students' WTC in classroom settings. Previous research has also highlighted the benefits of qualitative methods in studying WTC. For instance, MacIntyre (2007, p.572) pointed out that qualitative approaches offer "rich descriptions of the dynamic process in participants' own terms." Kang (2005) similarly stressed that qualitative instruments offer more insightful understandings of situational variables affecting L2 WTC.

In this study, an interview was employed as the primary data collection method, a common technique in phenomenological research (Denscombe,

2021). Interviews are particularly useful for exploring phenomena that cannot be directly observed, such as students' self-reported perceptions and attitudes (Mackey & Gass, 2015, p.173). Hence, this method is well-suited to the purpose of this research: exploring students' perceptions of their WTC within the classroom context. To delve into these complex relationships, the study used semi-structured interviews, which provide a framework of pre-prepared questions while allowing the interviewer the flexibility to explore topics in more depth (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). This type of interview facilitates open-ended answers, enabling participants to elaborate on their ideas (Denscombe, 2021) and providing the researcher with a wealth of data. The flexibility in question order and style (Denscombe, 2021) allows for a deeper understanding of students' experiences. The interview questions were developed based on themes identified in the literature and aligned with the study's research questions. There are three main themes including teachers (interview questions 7-11), peers (interview questions 12-15), and tasks (interview questions 16-19).

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, a method recognized for its capacity to offer a comprehensive understanding of human experiences, thoughts, and beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A deductive approach was applied to categorize the data into three main themes: teacher, peer, and task. The

interview recordings were transcribed and translated into English, after which the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data and identify key themes. The next step involved coding, where the researcher identified meaningful segments within the data by highlighting phrases, sentences, or statements that captured relevant information related to the study's objectives. Each segment was assigned a code that summarized its content. For example, statements regarding a teacher's encouragement might be coded as "teacher support," while comments on classmates' influence could be coded as "peer cooperation." The researcher then grouped similar codes into sub-categories within each theme. For instance, under the "teacher" theme, codes like "teaching style," "emotional support," and "feedback" were clustered together, as they all related to various aspects of teacher influence on students' willingness to communicate. These sub-categories were further refined through continuous comparison and re-evaluation, ensuring that each sub-category accurately represented a distinct aspect of participants' experiences. Overlapping codes were merged or reassigned, enabling the researcher to build a structured framework of themes and sub-themes for discussion.

The participants were selected through criterion sampling, which requires participants to meet some specific predetermined criteria (Denscombe, 2021). This approach was appropriate because it allowed for a targeted selection of individuals with relevant experiences and characteristics that can support the study's objective of understanding how Vietnamese students perceive the classroom environment's role in their language communication readiness. According to Denscombe (2021), qualitative research often benefits from smaller, manageable sample sizes, enabling researchers to obtain rich and detailed insights while maintaining a feasible scope for data collection and analysis. Therefore, the participants in this study were eight Vietnamese undergraduate students from language universities in Vietnam, chosen to balance depth with manageability within the study's timeframe. The inclusion of students from different universities aimed to capture a broad understanding of the classroom environment, as each university may have a distinct classroom style. All participants had taken the IELTS exam with a minimum speaking score of 6.0, indicating sufficient communicative competence. Furthermore, the participants were English majors with daily classroom communication in English and had completed at least their first year of university, providing them with adequate classroom experience to reflect on.

Data collection commenced once ethical approval was granted and participants' consent was obtained. A pilot

interview with two participants was conducted to adjust the interview guide and ensure that the questions elicited sufficiently rich data while allowing for a natural conversation flow (Donyei, 2007, p.137). The interview protocol (Appendix 1) was adapted from earlier research (Kang, 2005; Cao & Phillip, 2006; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Zhang et al., 2018), covering aspects of the classroom environment including teacher, peers, and tasks. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants, each lasting approximately one hour, and held via online platforms such as Teams or Zoom due to geographic distance. The interviews were recorded, transcribed into text data, and translated into English. Both the interviewees and a professional translator, who is also an English teacher, verified the accuracy of the translations.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. The interview questions were reviewed by the researcher's supervisor to reduce bias. Conducting the interviews in Vietnamese ensured that participants fully understood the questions, thereby increasing the validity of their responses. After transcription, the data was translated into English by an experienced Vietnamese-English translator. The English versions were then sent to the participants for verification to avoid potential misunderstandings. Additionally, participants were invited to provide feedback on the research findings and themes.

Given time constraints, the study only used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Other data collection methods, such as reflective journals or stimulated-recall techniques, could have enhanced the study by offering different data sources. The participants were limited to English-major undergraduate students, and thus any generalizations should be made cautiously.

4. Findings and discussion

The analysis of data from semi-structured interviews concerning students' perceptions of the classroom environment identified several main environmental variables of WTC. Those factors are presented under three sections corresponding with three main themes, including teacher, peers and learning tasks. Interviewees are mentioned under the letter sequence of the alphabet, starting from A to K (e.g., participant A, participant B).

4.1. The role of the teacher

Teachers were consistently identified by all participants as a major influence on students' WTC in class. Five key aspects - teaching styles, emotional support, immediacy, wait time, and feedback - were highlighted as directly affecting students' WTC.

Teaching styles were crucial, with eight participants mentioning that their teachers lacked methods encouraging speaking, which reduced their WTC. One student

described her teacher as *"quite conservative and always using traditional methods that demotivate her WTC,"* as she mostly lectured without interaction, echoing findings by Basöz & Erten (2019). This traditional, teacher-fronted approach, common in some Asian countries (Vongsila & Reinders, 2016), left students feeling passive. In contrast, alignment between teaching style and learning preference improved engagement. For example, H noted, *"I learned better with visual illustrations, so I think I would be more active if my teacher used them."* Students also stressed the importance of teachers frequently using English, aligning with Dewaele's (2019) view that regular target language use enhances WTC. While Dewaele found no direct link between accents and WTC, students in this study indicated that teachers with native-like accents made them more willing to speak, echoing Miller and Pearson (2013). Moreover, clear voices encouraged participation, while unclear voices distracted students.

Emotional support from teachers played a significant role in increasing WTC. Friendly teachers created a relaxed environment, as D mentioned, feeling more comfortable speaking with a supportive teacher. J agreed, stating that a good relationship with teachers encouraged him to speak more, supporting Khajavy et al. (2017). However, strict or inattentive teachers demotivated students, as B shared, *"I was afraid of speaking in class...*

everything I said was unpleasant for her." Similarly, F felt *"abandoned and demotivated"* when teachers only focused on more competent students.

Teacher immediacy—defined as verbal and non-verbal behaviors that foster closeness (Mehrabian, 1969, p.202; as cited in Liu, 2021)—was another key factor. Participants unanimously agreed that immediacy increased their WTC. G shared, *"I found myself very pleased when teacher X called my name and smiled at me,"* while C appreciated a teacher who used Vietnamese to explain difficult concepts, enhancing his WTC as a sign of respect. Immediacy also fostered confidence, as praise and positive feedback helped students feel more comfortable speaking, reducing anxiety (Alrabai, 2022).

Teacher wait time, or the pause between asking a question and expecting an answer, was crucial for foreign language learners who needed more time to formulate responses. H noted that impatient teachers made her feel awkward, while D appreciated teachers who gave hints and patiently waited for her answer. Providing sufficient wait time, as supported by Ingram & Elliott (2015), allowed students to feel more prepared and participate more readily.

Feedback had a mixed effect on WTC. Immediate corrections often caused stress and reduced confidence. E shared, *"I became stressed and could not control my*

speaking" due to constant corrections. Delayed feedback, however, was preferred as it allowed students to finish their thoughts and reflect on their mistakes, as C stated, *"I prefer feedback given after I finish speaking... I felt more respected."* The delivery of feedback also mattered, with overly strict correction methods, like forcing students to repeat words, having negative effects, as B recounted.

In summary, teaching styles, emotional support, immediacy, wait time, and feedback are crucial factors influencing WTC. Traditional methods, lack of language use, and unclear accents can reduce WTC, while supportive relationships, emotional care, extended wait times, and encouraging feedback increase participation and confidence in class.

4.2. The role of peers

The interviews provided valuable insights into how peer factors influence students' WTC, categorized into four main aspects: relationships with peers, peer cooperation, peer learning attitudes, and language proficiency.

Relationships with classmates either facilitated or hindered communication, with most students feeling more comfortable speaking to those they knew well. As C said, *"It is easier for me to start a conversation with my desk mate,"* and H admitted feeling reluctant to speak with unfamiliar classmates, fearing ridicule. However, B preferred talking to unfamiliar

peers, believing it would help form friendships, aligning with affiliation motivation theory (Hofer & Hagemeyer, 2018). Interestingly, some students found their WTC increased during discussions with peers who had opposing views, as D explained, *"I was excited with conflicting ideas and ready to protect my viewpoints."*

Peer cooperation also played a role in shaping WTC. Students in cohesive groups felt more relaxed and secure, making them more willing to speak, as K noted: *"I can talk confidently without being afraid of being ridiculed."* However, large class sizes, common in Vietnam, hindered peer cooperation, with students often remaining silent and waiting for others to speak. This highlights the importance of peer participation, as H remarked that she felt awkward when her partner just listened and didn't contribute to the conversation. Similarly, G admitted choosing not to talk in class because most of his classmates remained quiet.

Peers' learning attitudes influenced WTC, with students feeling more motivated to speak when classmates actively engaged in discussions. Student C shared that his eagerness to speak in the class came from his appreciation of his interlocutor's learning attitude, who *"is always ready to answer teachers' questions and seriously participates in any discussion."* G echoed this sentiment, explaining that he didn't want to be left behind, so he actively participated. However, H expressed frustration when

her group members didn't contribute, leaving her to do all the work, which discouraged her from speaking.

Finally, *peers' language proficiency* levels affected WTC, with most students avoiding communication with peers they considered less proficient. C felt that speaking with such classmates was unproductive, as they didn't contribute ideas or help improve his speaking skills. G added that his partner often didn't understand him, making it difficult to engage in meaningful conversation. *"My partner sometimes did not even understand what I was saying, let alone correct my mistakes",* he said. On the other hand, some students, such as K, held back in class to give less proficient classmates more opportunities to practice. Others enjoyed dominating conversations with less fluent peers, but this could unintentionally lower the WTC of those with lower proficiency.

In conclusion, peer factors such as familiarity, cooperation, learning attitudes, and language proficiency can both enhance and hinder students' WTC. While familiarity and positive peer engagement generally boost communication, the absence of collaboration or engagement and mismatched proficiency levels can suppress it.

4.3. The role of learning tasks

Learning tasks are crucial in influencing students' WTC, particularly through discussion topics and task types.

Regarding the *topic of discussion*, this study aligns with previous research (Kang, 2005; Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre et al., 2011), showing that the teacher's chosen topic motivates students to speak. Most participants highlighted the importance of topic familiarity and interest in increasing WTC, confirming prior findings (Cao & Philp, 2006; Zarrinabadi et al., 2014; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018). For example, students felt more comfortable discussing familiar subjects like hometowns or hobbies, as they had prior knowledge and practice. Familiarity with a topic boosts confidence, as reflected in comments from Student C: *"I am more confident when talking about topics that I have a lot of knowledge about."* However, repetitive topics could reduce WTC by feeling unnatural or boring, as Student H explained. Many students reported higher WTC when topics were engaging or personally relevant. As Kang (2005) observed, WTC peaks when students are interested but decreases with uninteresting topics. Student D mentioned that viral topics in lessons made the class more active. Some students also enjoyed debating challenging or controversial issues, as these topics stimulated discussion and allowed them to defend their viewpoints.

The *type of task* also significantly affects WTC. Previous research consistently shows that students prefer pair or group discussions over individual tasks like presentations (Kang, 2005; Cao & Philp, 2006). Similarly, this study confirms that students are more

willing to engage in interactive tasks such as discussions or debates, which require meaningful interactions and thus keep them engaged in conversations (Peng, 2012). Furthermore, respondents emphasized that they were most attracted to game-like activities, such as role-play and board games, because these fun tasks help reduce stress and stimulate positive energy (Eddy-u, 2015). On the other hand, teacher-led tasks, where students are randomly called on to answer after a long lecture, tend to increase anxiety and reluctance to speak (Syed & Kuzborska, 2018). This reflects the negative impact of rigid, teacher-controlled interactions (Garton, 2012). Additionally, several task characteristics were reported to influence students' WTC. For instance, tasks that require creativity were found to be more engaging. The more creative freedom a task allowed, the more willing students were to participate (Albert & Kormos, 2011). For example, project work was popular among students because they *"could freely make a plan and realize their own ideas"* (G's response). Moreover, students were more willing to communicate when tasks matched their cognitive and linguistic levels, enabling them to complete the task successfully. Previous research supports the idea that the

sense of accomplishment boosts motivation, thereby enhancing WTC (Lee, 2020). Furthermore, tasks need to provide equal opportunities for participation, as a lack of involvement can lower WTC. For example, D stated, *"I don't want to contribute anymore because my English isn't as good as others."* It was also found that students' WTC increased when they perceived tasks as useful. For instance, F enjoyed presentations because she believed they improved her public speaking skills. This aligns with previous findings (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Peng, 2019).

Overall, both discussion topics and task types have a significant impact on WTC. Familiar and interesting topics, along with interactive and creative tasks, promote communication, while repetitive topics and teacher-fronted activities can hinder it. Task suitability and perceived usefulness also play a key role in fostering students' WTC.

In conclusion, through thematic analysis of interview responses, the two research questions were comprehensively answered, identifying both beneficial and detrimental factors for students' WTC. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Classroom environment factors affecting EFL students' WTC

Classroom Environmental Factors	Enhancing WTC (Research Question 1)	Hindering WTC (Research Question 2)
Teacher Factors	- Motivating teaching styles	- Traditional, lecture-based methods
	- Emotional support	- Lack of target language use in instruction
	- Teacher immediacy	- Unclear teacher accents
	- Extended wait times	- Insufficient emotional support
	- Encouraging and constructive feedback	
Peer Factors	- Familiarity with peers	- Lack of peer engagement
	- Cooperative peer relationships	- Absence of collaboration
	- Positive peer learning attitudes	- Mismatched language proficiency
Learning Task Factors	- Interesting and familiar topics	- Unfamiliar, challenging topics
	- Interactive and game-like activities	- Lack of interactive activities
	- Tasks requiring creativity	

5. Conclusion

This research aims to explore students' perceptions of classroom environmental factors that influence their WTC in EFL settings, utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese undergraduates, several key factors were identified and categorized into three main groups: teachers, peers, and learning tasks. In terms of teacher-related influences, factors such as teaching styles, emotional support, teacher immediacy, wait time, and feedback were perceived as the most impactful. Similarly, peer-related elements, including relationships, cooperation, learning attitudes, and language proficiency, were found to significantly shape students' WTC. Additionally, both the topic of discussion

and the type of task emerged as strong predictors of students' willingness to engage in communication.

This study effectively addressed its research questions, offering valuable contributions to the literature by reinforcing previous findings and addressing gaps in Vietnamese research on willingness to communicate (WTC). However, several limitations warrant attention. First, the study's reliance on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method may have introduced potential biases; future research could benefit from triangulated methods, such as surveys or observational data, to validate and enrich the findings. Second, as the participants were exclusively English majors, the results may not be fully applicable to students from other academic disciplines. Broadening future samples to include students from diverse fields could enhance the generalizability of the results. Lastly, although the study acknowledged individual variations in WTC, these differences were not explored in depth. Future research could employ a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative methods to measure correlations between classroom environmental factors and other influences. This approach would allow a more nuanced examination of how individual factors, such as personality traits and language proficiency, interact with environmental elements to shape WTC more comprehensively.

In conclusion, the study offers several pedagogical recommendations to enhance students' WTC. First, teachers should move away from traditional teaching methods and adopt innovative approaches, such as communicative or task-based language teaching. Additionally, teachers should focus on building positive interpersonal relationships with their students and fostering a supportive learning environment. Constructive feedback is also essential in motivating students. Finally, more proficient students should engage actively in class discussions to encourage participation from peers with lower proficiency, thus creating a more inclusive and communicative classroom environment.

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