

# Comparative Study on Willingness to Communicate among Four Different Countries: Japan, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, and Spain

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## Abstract

本研究では、4 か国（日本、スロバキア共和国、チェコ共和国、スペイン）において Willingness to Communicate (WTC)を用い、各国の大学生の英語学習に対する姿勢に関する比較研究を行った。WTC の先行研究では、各研究での被験者の特徴分析等はあるが、複数の国を比較検証した研究はなく、特にアジアとヨーロッパを比較した研究は、英語教育の分野では皆無である。アジアとヨーロッパでは文化的、歴史的背景、そして言語使用に関してもかなりの乖離があり、英語学習に対する姿勢に対しても大きな差がみられるのではないかとの見地から本研究は始まった。4 か国で、様々な学部在籍する 653 名の被験者を対象とし、記述統計や因子分析を用い、データの比較を行った。その結果、地理的、文化的、そして言語的にも違いが表れた。中でも特筆すべきはヨーロッパの被験者からは、かなり同様な結果が表出した。この結果を 4 名の研究者がそれぞれの背景を踏まえ、考察を行った。

## Introduction and Literature Review

There is a general consensus that in skill acquisition, practicing the target activity that leads to the objective is the only way to acquire it. As the ancient saying goes, writing the language requires practice writing, speaking the language requires practice speaking it. This is the context in which the interest in willingness to communicate (WTC) emerged. Communication competence can be acquired via practicing communication.

WTC has been a popular topic of interest in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The concept of WTC was coined by McCroskey and associates (McCroskey and Baer, 1985; McCroskey and Richmond, 1987, 1990, 1991). MacIntyre and associates applied it in L2 context (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, 1998).

In the 1980s and 1990s, WTC developed into a concept of describing, explaining, and predicting second language communication (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998). As with any complex phenomenon, there are many aspects to WTC. In order to understand WTC, this research collects data from various scientific fields, with the individual researchers presenting the results of their work from different perspectives. Almost all of them claim that producing the target language is an important factor that contributes to success in language acquisition (Swain and Lapkin, 1995). Thus, the efforts of many researchers have been streamed to identify the barriers that may hinder WTC. MacIntyre's six-layer pyramid of WTC covers many of these barriers (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, 1998). They stem from an individual's restraints, such as personality traits (self-confidence, willingness to grow, etc.) including gender differences, and the affective and cognitive context of an individual (self-related and integrative motives, situational motives, and so forth.) (e.g., Gardner and Lambert, 1959; Gardner, 1985). Thus, the researchers attempt to depict the processes and restraints to identify the context in which an individual decides whether or not to communicate when the opportunity arises at a particular time, with a specific person or group of people (MacIntyre, 2007).

The research related to WTC covers several fields. Firstly, L2 acquisition stems from the assumption that "...producing the target language is an important factor in contributing to success in language acquisition" (Swain and Lapkin, 1995). Secondly, language pedagogy is the field that looks at the authentic use of a language to develop the learner's communicative competence. This also introduces the need to communicate beyond the class (MacIntyre et al., 2003). While it requires more potential to practice the second language (MacIntyre et al., 2001), it likewise results in higher levels of language fluency (Derwing, Munro and Thompson, 2008), greater language proficiency (Yashima, 2002), and more improvement in one's communication skills (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu, 2004). Based on the findings, probability of speaking L2 when free to do so leads to WTC increase (e.g., Yashima and Tanaka, 2001; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising that numerous surveys deal with English as L2, being the most widely used L2 both inside and beyond the classroom. Thirdly, on an individual level, it has been found that the more the motivation to speak L2 increases, the less anxiety there is to speak it (Young, 1999). This change refers to the relation between WTC and demographic variables, such as proficiency level, length of studying L2, being abroad, communication with foreigners (McCroskey, 1992) and, in addition, latent variables

labelled international posture (meaning general attitude toward the international community and foreign language learning). Yashima (2002) claims that such an international posture influences motivation, which, in turn, influences proficiency [in English]. It has been proven that language prestige is crucial in this context (Giles, Bourkis and Taylor, 1977).

In addition to an individual's attitude towards L2 and their motivation, the communicative behavior of individuals is influenced by a socio-educational context (socio-educational model introduced by Gardner, 1985). L2 communication reflects the behavior that an individual displays in L1 communication (McCroskey and Baer, 1985; McCroskey and Richmond 1987, 1990, 1991), i.e., it stems from the learned communicative behavior and the communicative behavior typical of the educational system. Cultural norms play an important role in governing individuals' communicative behavior (Barracough, Christophel and McCroskey, 1988; McCroskey and Richmond, 1990). In the 1990s, researchers started using the quantitative approach to measure the levels of WTC consisting of several variables (e.g., international posture, motivation, self-confidence, and the like). Various models include different combinations of variables and focus on different aspects of this complex phenomenon. For instance, the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach applied in the field of WTC strongly relies on L1 communicative behavior. Its strongest drawback conceives WTC as stable across different situations. Later on, MacIntyre et al. (1998) introduced WTC as a situational construct. Another model introduced by Fushino (2008) is based on Co-operative Learning, i.e., the group support in WTC. Peng and Woodrow (2010) introduced a multifaceted model related to the classroom environment, comprising the following points; teacher support, student cohesiveness, task orientation, beliefs about English learning, beliefs about class communication, English meaning-focused activities, English form-focused activities, communicative anxiety in English, perceived communicative competence in English, external regulations, identified regulations, and intrinsic motivation (p. 853). Weaver (2010) argues that more models are needed to achieve a better understanding of WTC. Many aspects have yet to be researched, e.g., the social context influencing communicative behavior, strengthened by the education system in question.

Research on L2 WTC has been published in recent journals (e.g., Khajavy et al, 2016; Okayama et al, 2006; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Khajavy et al. (2016) investigated WTC in the classroom context in Iran, wherein a WTC questionnaire was administered to

243 university students. The authors showed results of SEM, which indicated that classroom environment was the strongest predictor of L2 WTC. Okayama et al. (2006) examined to what extent WTC can be used as an alternative assessment to measure communicative competence in Japan. Based on the results of pre-post questionnaires, it was revealed that there was some increase in confidence, but not in willingness and anxiety. The authors concluded that the increase in confidence could be related to academic majors. Peng and Woodrow (2010) administered WTC to 330 university students in China. The data were analyzed through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. The results showed that classroom environment influences WTC, communication confidence, learner belief, and motivation. However, all the three studies reviewed were conducted in Asia. There were no studies done using WTC questionnaires in Europe. Thus, in order to fill the gap in the field, this study investigates WTC with European participants.

The study aims to verify whether there are any cultural or country differences in students' attitudes toward English in four distinct countries. WTC and the need to utilize English differs in each situation; however, there is no clear evidence on how they differ and what contributes to the differences. There might be a particularly wide gap between Europe and Asia regarding attitudes and needs toward English.

### **Research Question**

The purpose of the study is to discover whether there are any cultural or country differences in students' attitude toward English. The following two research questions were posed:

1. Is there a definitive tendency among the four countries?
2. If there exist differences, what could be some of the reasons for the differences?

### **Method**

Four researchers from Japan, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, and Spain participated in the research. They administered a questionnaire to university students in their respective countries. The participants consisted of students of two private universities in Japan, two public Slovak universities in Bratislava, one public university in the Czech Republic, and one private university in Spain. The age of the participants ranges from 18 to 25. First, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating means and standard deviations. Since it is always straightforward to show data graphically (Hudson,

2015), the data were reported in bar charts to visualize the comparison of the four countries. In order to analyze the dataset further, the top and bottom 2 items in the four countries were illustrated in a table. Finally, the data were analyzed through exploratory factor analysis to discover categorical features.

## **Participants**

First, details of the characteristics of each participant from the four countries will be described. The summary of the participants will be shown in Table 1.

### **The participants from Japan**

The participants consisted of two private universities in Japan. Overall, 129 first year through third year Japanese university students participated in the study. Their academic majors include English studies, German studies, French studies, and International business. English proficiency of the participants ranged from A2 to B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They all had six years of English study prior to their university studies.

### **The participants from the Slovak Republic**

The participants are students of two large public Slovak universities, studying at two faculties, 65 from the faculty of natural sciences and 44 from the faculty of arts. The age of the students of natural sciences ranges from 19 to 22, including 12 doctoral students in the age range of 24 to 26. The age of the students of humanities ranged from 19 to 22. Only 2 students of Asian studies had to pass an entrance exam in English. The participants in the other university studied in the fields of management and international relations, 11 of them at the faculty of international relations and 33 at the faculty of business management. The age of the students of international relations ranged from 18 to 20. Some of them had stayed in English-speaking countries for some time. The age of the students of management ranged from 19 to 21. All students study in the courses at C1 level of CEFR. Their initial level was mostly B2, however, the groups included some students at B1 or B1+ level. The students had learnt English for 4 to 8 years before they started studying at the university.

### The participants from the Czech Republic

The participants involved 433 undergraduates of the faculty of mathematics and physics in one public university. Out of all the participants, there were 138 students of physics, 138 students of mathematics, 135 students of computer science and 20 students of a two-subject combination within the teacher-training study program. Two participants did not specify their field of study.

### The participants from Spain

The participants were 93 undergraduates of the department of applied languages and education from the faculty of arts in one private university. Out of all the participants, there were 19 students of modern languages, 8 students of the double degree of translation & modern languages, 25 students of primary education, 21 students of pre-primary education and 20 students of the double degree of pre-primary and primary education.

Table 1 Characteristics of the participants

	Japan	Slovak Republic	Czech Republic	Spain
Number of participants	129	138	299	93
Age	18-21	18-23	18-25	18-24
Schools	Two private universities	Two public universities	One public university	One private university
Majors	Law German	Management Philosophy	Teacher Training Physics	Modern Languages Translation & Modern Languages, Primary Education, Pre- Primary Education
	International Business English French	International Relations Financial Journalism Marketing Geography Biology Biological Chemistry	Computer Science Mathematics	

Initially, there were 131 participants in Japan; due to missing data, the number decreased to 129. There were likewise 152 and 433 participants in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, respectively. However, due to missing data and excluding students of doctoral and master study programs from the sample, the number dropped to 138 and 299, respectively. In Spain, there were no missing data and a sample size of 93 was kept. Thus, the total sample size was 653.

### **Instrument and Procedure**

A questionnaire was adapted from Iwamoto (2014) which was developed through multiple studies (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) with some modifications. The questionnaire has 30 items which represent WTC statements. There are, for example, statements in the questionnaire such as “I worry that other students might think that my English speaking ability is low”, “I would be willing to participate in an English discussion with three or four students in English class”, and “I think I try to speak English more than other students”. Participants answered the questions on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was administered around the same period in the four above-mentioned countries.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Figures 1 to 4 show the descriptive statistics of all the participants. The figures of European countries look very similar, especially the ones from the Slovak and the Czech Republic. The Japanese data, however, show the higher response rates in the first ten items.

Figure 1 Descriptive Statistics of the participants from Japan

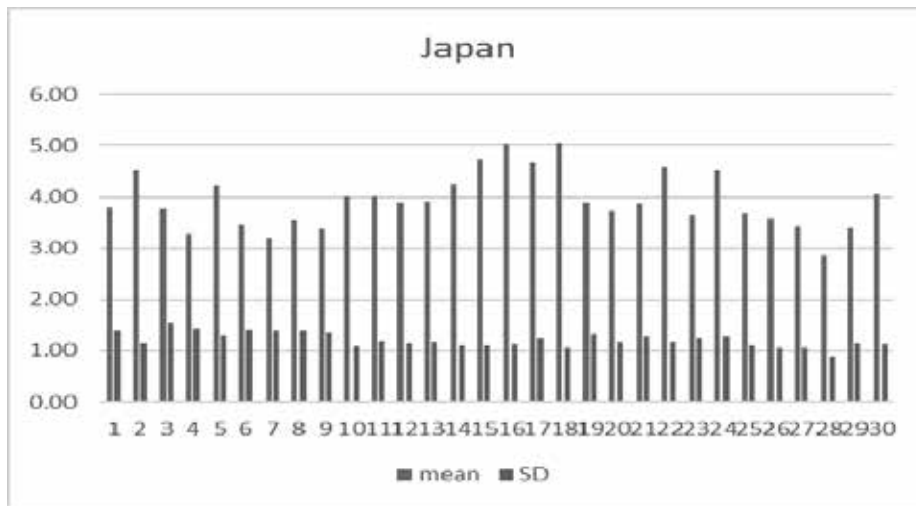


Figure 2 Descriptive Statistics of the participants from the Slovak Republic

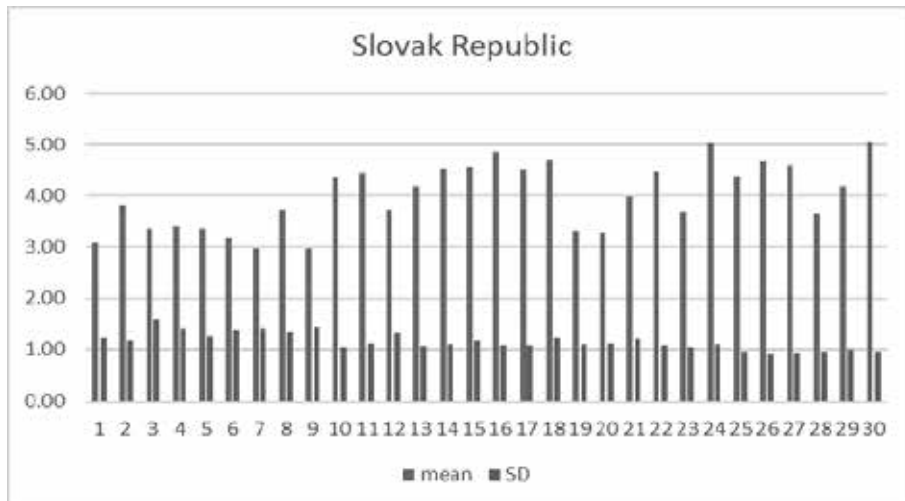




Figure 3 Descriptive Statistics of the participants from the Czech Republic

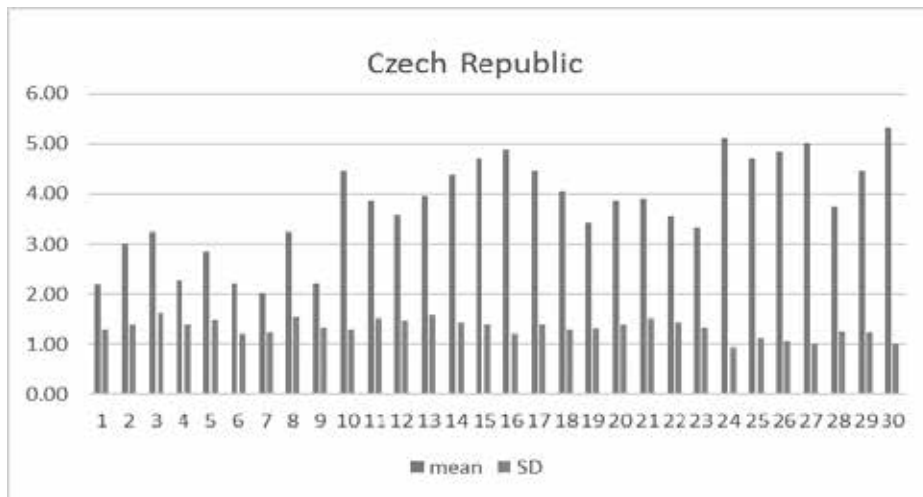
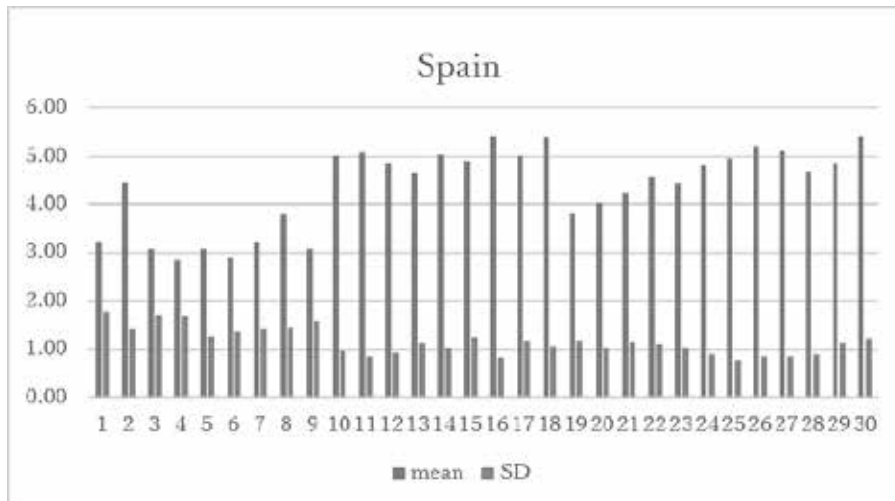


Figure 4 Descriptive Statistics of the participants from Spain



In order to investigate the data more closely, Table 2 displays the summary of the top and bottom 2 items of the questionnaire. Item 30 is shared in all the European countries as one of the top items, which might indicate that they have a basic proficiency of informal conversation in English. Interestingly, the 4 items in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic are exactly the same.

Table 2 Top and bottom 2 items of the questionnaire from each country

Japan	Top 2	(M =5.03) Item 16. I am very interested in learning to speak English				
		(M =5.05) Item 18. I consider speaking English to be one of the most important skills to learn in school.				
	Bottom 2	(M =3.19) Item 7. I feel nervous speaking English.				
		(M =2.86) Item 28. I can talk about academic topics in English.				
Slovak Republic	Top 2	(M =5.03) Item 24. I believe that Slovak students should be taught to speak English at school.				
		(M =5.04) Item 30. I can talk about what I did last weekend in English.				
	Bottom 2	(M =2.96) Item 7. I feel nervous speaking English.				
		(M =2.98) Item 9. I feel nervous having a conversation in English.				
Czech Republic	Top 2	(M =5.11) Item 24. I believe that Czech students should be taught to speak English at school.				
		(M =5.34) Item 30. I can talk about what I did last weekend in English.				
	Bottom 2	(M =2.01) Item 7. I feel nervous speaking English.				
		(M =2.20) Item 1. I worry that other students think my English speaking ability is low.				
		(M =2.23) Item 9. I feel nervous having a conversation in English.				
Spain	Top 2	(M =5.41) Item 30. I can talk about what I did last weekend in English.				
		(M =5.42) Item 16. I am very interested in learning to speak English				
	Bottom 2	(M =2.85) Item 4. I feel nervous about speaking English in class activities.				
		(M =2.90) Item 6. I worry that my English teacher thinks that my English speaking ability is low.				

Note. Bottom three items are displayed for the Czech Republic in order to show the similarity between Slovak and Czech responses.

The dimensionality of the 35 items over the four countries was analyzed using Principal axis factor analysis. However, due to the limited sample size in Spain, factor analysis could not be conducted with the sample. Thus, the remaining three samples were analyzed. Three criteria were utilized to determine the number of factors to rotate: 1) the a priori hypothesis that the measure was unidimensional, 2) the scree plot, and 3) the interpretability of the factor solution. The scree plot indicated that unidimensionality was incorrect. Based on the plot, four factors were rotated using Promax rotation. They all have four factors, although the degree of loadings on the factors slightly differ. Table 3 shows the results of the loadings for each factor. As shown in Table 4, four interpretable factors were labelled respectively. In Japan, self-confidence, positive attitude toward speaking English, speaking nervousness, and willingness to communicate were yielded. In the Slovak Republic, speaking nervousness, willingness to communicate, self-confidence, and motivational intensity were yielded. Finally, in the Czech Republic, fear of negative evaluation, motivational intensity, self-confidence, and willingness to communicate were yielded. Among the factors, self-confidence and willingness to communicate were observed in all the countries, which indicates that they all have a positive attitude toward English.

Table 3 Loadings for each factor

	Japan	Slovak Republic	Czech Republic
Factor 1	Items 26-30	Items 3, 7-9	Items 1-2, 5-6
	Loadings from .539 to .901	Loadings from .656 to .882	Loadings from .549 to .860
Factor 2	Items 15-17	Items 10-14	Items 16-19, 21-23
	Loadings from .656 to .787	Loadings from .511 to .757	Loadings from .514 to .744
Factor 3	Items 3-4, 7-9	Items 26-27, 30	Items 25-27, 29-30
	Loadings from .633 to .939	Loadings from .828 to .937	Loadings from .539 to .901
Factor 4	Items 11, 13-14, 18	Items 19-20, 22-23	Items 11-13
	Loadings from .506 to .660	Loadings from .519 to .817	Loadings from .598 to .742

Table 4 Labels of the four factors

	Japan	Slovak Republic	Czech Republic
Factor 1	Self-Confidence	Speaking nervousness	Fear of negative evaluation
Factor 2	Positive attitude toward speaking English	Willingness to communicate	Motivational Intensity
Factor 3	Speaking nervousness	Self-Confidence	Self-Confidence
Factor 4	Willingness to communicate	Motivational Intensity	Willingness to communicate

## Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results, several notable points were observed, as follows:

1. The results from the questionnaire in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic are very similar, which may indicate the similar nature of students' willingness to communicate in English.
2. All the participants recognize the importance of English, but they are not confident enough to actually use it. (e.g., item 7, they feel nervous using it)
3. Japanese participants are particularly worried about the use of English in an academic context. Thus, practicing talking about academic topics should be encouraged in the classroom.

Interestingly, even though descriptive statistics produced very similar results in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, they are not exactly the same. For example, items 1, 2, 5, and 6 loaded onto Czech factor 1, but did not do so in Slovak factor 1. Further investigation revealed that Slovak participants feel nervous speaking in English, whereas Czech participants feel nervous being evaluated negatively when speaking in English.

In European countries, items 16, 24, and 30 are chosen the most. This is also intriguing in that they can talk about what they did last weekend in English, but they feel that they are not taught enough in spoken English. Nervousness is shared in the four countries as one of the least chosen items. One might assume that they might feel nervous speaking in L2, but the results did not support that; they do not worry about what others think about their speaking ability. This tendency is only apparent in the Czech Republic ( $M = 2.01$ , item 7), where students in the faculty of mathematics and physics participated in the inquiry. The faculty is a research institute focusing on research and development in physics, mathematics, and computer science. It implies that the studies are highly theoretic and specialized. All applicants to the institute have to pass a secondary school leaving examination at B1 level of the CEFR (i.e., intermediate and above). However, according to the CEFR, the level of language proficiency of 90% of first-grade students is B2 (i.e., upper-intermediate and above). It can thus be concluded that students of the faculty tend to be of above average language proficiency in comparison with other high-school graduates. It might indicate that they have well-developed language skills and they consider language learning as an important part of education and their future career.

However, there are certain negative aspects that concur with highly intelligent students of mathematics, physics and computer science. One of the authors has personal experience with teaching students of highly theoretical disciplines. He has observed that

the population of students comprised a higher proportion of students with special learning difficulties (i.e., dyslexia, Asperger syndrome, other forms of autism, and language deficiencies such as stutter). These special difficulties might become a primary cause of foreign language anxiety (Šebesta et al., p. 79).

In terms of English learning, students in the faculty of mathematics and physics are supposed to be highly motivated, because the vast majority of them will commence their career in science and/or business. English in these spheres represents the *lingua franca*. Undergraduates are expected to write their theses in English (i.e., approximately 30 % of bachelor students and 50 % of master students). Furthermore, to be able to write scientific tests (theses, articles and other publications), students have to undertake extensive language programs. In all study programs, students develop not only general English proficiency, but also proficiency in English for specific academic purposes (English for mathematicians, English for physicists, English for computer science, and so forth). This program helps students overcome difficulties with the specific academic discourse, as this type of specific academic communication is completely new to students.

Considering fear of negative evaluation (Factor 1), a lot of the Czech students express their fear of making mistakes when speaking a second (foreign) language. The fear appears to increase when students have to communicate with a native speaker. They are anxious about understanding or being understood due to difficult English pronunciation (with many phonemes unknown to Czech speakers and with very different prosody) although half of the teachers at the department of language education are native speakers of English. Hence, it might be the reason why fear of negative evaluation is a significant factor for the Czech students. In addition, a significant number of students suffer from pathological anxiety (they feel anxious communicating both in Czech and in foreign languages) or consider themselves as introverted people. Furthermore, students of these disciplines are very rigorous people, who have a negative attitude toward mistakes. As precision and accuracy is a goal in their majors, mistakes are undesirable. This also confirms the above hypothesis and experience of one of the authors that students of these disciplines are more prone to feeling anxious in language classes.

The motivational intensity (Factor 2) of the Czech students is both internal and external. As noted previously, they are supposed to attend extensive English language programs and write their theses in English. As many students will work abroad as scientists, IT specialists, and business people, they definitely agree education in English is

indispensable to their studies. They also state that they want to improve their English and study hard to be able to communicate in English on a professional level.

As for self-confidence (Factor 3), Czech students appear to be self-confident when speaking a foreign language in English on general topics. However, they lose their confidence when required to communicate on academic topics. As their majors are highly theoretical disciplines, undergraduates in mathematics, physics, and computer science do have little opportunity to speak on such topics during their previous studies or in informal environments (outside classroom settings). In addition, the language discourse of mathematics is extremely strict in the use of prefabricated rigorous formulations. Some students claimed they are not able to express their ideas accurately and appropriately on professional topics or in very formal contexts.

Regarding willingness to communicate (Factor 4), students are willing to start conversations in English. However, they prefer informal settings (e.g., outside of classrooms, talking to foreign tourists) with people they do not know well, which probably reduces the anxiety mentioned above. Some students also claimed that they do not feel comfortable when playing roles in the classroom. Hence, their willingness to communicate depends on the type of communicative activity. It can be presupposed that activities requiring extraversion increase students' anxiety and reduce their willingness to communicate.

It can thus be summarized that the factors are affected by discourse features of particular disciplines, as well as by specific personality traits of students majoring in mathematics, physics, and computer science. The difference (namely fear of negative evaluation) between Slovak and Czech students can be caused by these specifics.

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