MAI NELLY KAW

Doctoral School of Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University
nellykaw.mai.mm@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7831-0108

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Non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English: An interview study in Hungarian tertiary education

In today's globalized world, English proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success; yet, willingness to communicate (WTC) in English is equally vital for effective language use (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This study investigates the factors that seem to influence WTC among non-English majors in Hungarian higher education. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with 10 non-English majors, the research examines WTC in the classroom, online, and real-life contexts. Findings reveal that WTC is perceived to be shaped by comfort with interlocutors, supportive classroom environments, teacher-student and peer interactions, confidence, personality traits, emotional states, and attitudes toward mistakes. These findings provide practical implications for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and policymakers to foster supportive environments that enhance English communication and language learning outcomes.

Keywords: EFL, Hungarian tertiary education, interview study, non-English majors, WTC

1. Introduction

As global interactions grow, both proficiency in English and the willingness to communicate (WTC) are vital for effective use of the language in educational and professional contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998). WTC reflects learners' motivation and readiness to seek communication opportunities, serving as an important indicator of success in second language (L2) learning (Havwini, 2019; Yashima et al., 2018). While communicative competence is a primary goal of language education (Khajavy et al., 2016), it alone does not guarantee learners' willingness to communicate. Therefore, understanding the various factors that influence WTC, especially in diverse educational environments, is crucial.

Previous research has highlighted factors shaping L2 WTC, including classroom atmosphere, motivation, self-confidence, perceived competence, and emotional states such as anxiety and enjoyment (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2016; Lee & Drajati, 2019). Recent studies have emphasized positive psychological constructs such as grit, enjoyment, and the ideal L2 self in fostering WTC (Lee & Chen Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Taylor, 2024). Teacher-student interactions, teaching methods, and digital environments also significantly influence WTC (Bui et al., 2022; Kruk, 2022; Reinders & Wattana, 2015). However, research gaps remain, particularly regarding non-English majors in

contexts where English is taught as a foreign language rather than a medium of instruction.

This study explores factors influencing non-English majors' WTC in English in Hungarian higher education, where English serves as a lingua franca for local and international students. Despite its importance, limited research has examined WTC among non-English majors in classroom and real-life settings. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning introduced new dynamics, potentially affecting students' psychological and emotional states and their WTC. While some studies have explored digital learning environments' impact on WTC (Kruk, 2022; Reinders & Wattana, 2015), research on non-English majors in post-pandemic contexts remains scarce.

Non-English majors were purposely chosen for this study because they may have different motivational profiles and faced greater challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These learners needed to balance their main academic coursework with English language learning in an unfamiliar online environment. This situation highlights the importance of understanding how both external pressures and personal goals affect long-term motivation. Unlike English majors, who tend to have strong intrinsic motivation and study English for personal or academic reasons (Ngo et al., 2015), non-English majors are often motivated by external factors, such as meeting degree requirements or enhancing career opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2024). The added demands of adapting to digital learning may have further reduced their engagement and motivation (Fišer, 2023). Consequently, even when external support is available, their WTC in English may be limited by a weaker internal drive to learn the language. This idea is supported by research showing that internal motivation strongly influences learners' communicative behaviour (Yashima, 2002). Therefore, it is crucial to explore how personal aspirations and academic identity interact with environmental challenges to develop effective strategies that promote WTC among non-English majors, especially in online or blended learning contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating how online learning transitions and other contextual factors have influenced communication behaviours among non-English majors in Hungarian tertiary education. Their unique experiences, highlighted in this research, contribute to the WTC literature and offer insights into creating more supportive and engaging learning environments.

2. Literature review

2.1. Willingness to communicate in a second or foreign language learning

The concept WTC in a second or foreign language originates from studies of first language communication in North America during the late 1950s and 1960s, where interpersonal communication was highly valued (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC as the "readiness to enter into

discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 547). This definition portrays WTC as both a personal choice and a situational opportunity influenced by internal and external factors.

Extensive research has examined the various factors affecting WTC in L2 learning. L2 communication is a complex and dynamic process shaped by linguistic, cultural, social, motivational, emotional, and pedagogical variables (MacIntyre, 2020). High levels of WTC are widely accepted as essential for successful L2 acquisition, making the promotion of WTC a key focus in language education (Kang, 2005; Kruk, 2022). The effectiveness of L2 communication largely depends on a learner's WTC, which is influenced by both direct and indirect factors (Clément et al., 2003; Öz et al., 2015).

Studies have identified several key factors influencing WTC, including classroom atmosphere (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng, 2019), motivation (Alrabai, 2024; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020), perceived communicative competence (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Khajavy et al., 2016), self-confidence (Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; Yashima, 2002), and anxiety (Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; Riasati, 2018). Additionally, the role of teachers (Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Lee, 2022), emotions such as enjoyment and boredom, the ideal L2 self, grit, and classroom enjoyment have also been linked to WTC (Alrabai, 2024; Bensalem et al., 2023, 2025; Dewaele, 2019; Kruk, 2022; Lee, 2022). These findings collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of WTC and its critical role in L2 learning and communication.

A positive classroom environment characterized by teacher support, group cohesion, and mutual respect fosters WTC (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng, 2019). For example, Khajavy et al. (2016) found that supportive environments, combined with increased foreign language enjoyment and reduced anxiety, enhanced learners' WTC.

Motivation is a key predictor of WTC, as highly motivated learners are more likely to engage in L2 communication (Alrabai, 2024; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Drajati, 2019). Self-confidence, particularly in communicative competence, also enhances WTC (Lee & Drajati, 2019; Yashima, 2002). For instance, Yashima (2002) found that learners with a stronger international orientation demonstrated increased motivation to use English, resulting in more frequent interaction.

Positive emotions, like enjoyment, enhance WTC, while negative emotions such as anxiety and boredom hinder it (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2016). Dewaele (2019) identified foreign language classroom anxiety as the strongest negative predictor of WTC, whereas foreign language enjoyment and frequent teacher use of the target language were significant positive predictors.

Group size, topic familiarity, interlocutors, and task type also affect WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005). Kang (2005) emphasized the importance of topic, interlocutor, and context, while Cao and Philp (2006) highlighted group size, environment, and cultural background, noting that their findings were limited by a small sample size.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering WTC through their teaching styles and classroom strategies. Research shows that teacher behaviour, personality, and interpersonal qualities—such as support, empathy, enthusiasm, and charisma—significantly impact learner motivation and WTC (Kálmán, 2021, 2023; Lamb, 2017). Engaging teaching methods and teacher support further enhance WTC (Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018). For instance, Bui et al. (2022) found that Vietnamese EFL teachers used various strategies to boost students' WTC, recognizing its importance for successful L2 learning.

Cultural and individual differences, including personality traits and grit, also affect WTC. Cultural norms and educational practices shape learners' readiness to communicate (Bensalem et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021). For example, grit was found to be a stronger predictor of WTC among Moroccan students, while foreign language enjoyment played a larger role for Saudi students (Bensalem et al., 2023).

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped communication patterns in L2 classrooms, intensifying interest in learners' WTC in virtual environments (Kruk, 2022; Reinders & Wattana, 2015). Factors such as topic relevance, interlocutor type, and platform design influence WTC differently in online versus face-to-face contexts, requiring tailored online learning strategies (Kruk, 2022; Lee, 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Weakened peer connections may lead to isolation and reduced relatedness—both critical to WTC (Firmansyah et al., 2023). Altunel (2021) reported that limited peer familiarity and emotional connection during the pandemic led to a decline in students' WTC in online classes. Learners perceived online instruction as less effective due to decreased interaction and household distractions, resulting in fewer opportunities to use English. Similarly, Mayers et al. (2023) noted a slight decline in Japanese medical students' WTC, particularly for public speaking tasks, attributing this to the lack of in-person interaction and reduced confidence.

To enhance WTC in digital contexts, strategies such as fostering supportive teacher-student relationships and incorporating interactive tools (e.g., games, polls, questionnaires) have been effective in boosting motivation (Zohrabi & Bimesl, 2022). Meaningful topics and positive feedback further promote engagement, while limited interaction weakens social presence. Nishimwe et al. (2022) found that Rwandan learners favoured face-to-face classes for their richer social dynamics. Additionally, tools like text chat and asynchronous communication reduce anxiety and provide preparation time (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Satar & Özdener, 2008). Across modalities, pair work

consistently encourages interaction and lowers anxiety (Cao & Philp, 2006; Vongsila & Reinders, 2016).

While research on WTC was conducted in Western settings (Clément et al., 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2001, 2003; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021), significant studies have been carried out in diverse cultural and educational contexts, such as Japan (Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002), China (Chen et al., 2021; Peng, 2014), Iran (Khajavy et al., 2016; Riasati, 2018), and Vietnam (Bui et al., 2022). These studies provide valuable insights into how cultural and contextual factors shape WTC, highlighting the importance of considering local educational practices, cultural norms, and learner backgrounds when examining WTC.

3. Research methods

The following section describes the research design, offering a detailed overview of the methods used for data collection. This includes information on the participants, the setting, the instrument, and the procedures followed, along with the methodology for analysing the data. Drawing from the literature review and in alignment with the study's goal, the research question was formulated as follows:

> RQ: What characterizes non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom in their own view in the context of Hungarian tertiary education?

3.1. Qualitative design

This study used a qualitative, exploratory approach to investigate factors influencing non-English majors' WTC in English within Hungarian higher education. One-on-one qualitative interviews were considered the most suitable approach, as Dörnyei (2007) highlighted that qualitative research delves into the personal perspectives, experiences, and emotions of individuals. Consequently, to capture the participants' viewpoints, attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten non-English majors to address the research question.

3.2. Participants and setting

The study included BA and MA non-English majors studying English as a Foreign Language at a Hungarian university. Ten participants—five Hungarian and five international students—were recruited via purposive sampling, ensuring diverse perspectives (Dörnyei, 2007). Their self-reported English proficiency ranged from B2 to C2, with most starting English in childhood (ages 7–12). Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality, and participant details are in Appendix A. This

diverse sample provided rich insights into factors influencing non-English majors' WTC in English within Hungarian higher education.

3.3. The instrument

The study used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) to explore factors influencing non-English majors' WTC in English within Hungarian higher education. Questions were designed based on the research question, supported by theory, prior studies, and expert feedback, allowing participants to elaborate freely. Following Dörnyei's (2007) guidelines, the guide included an introduction, background questions (e.g., age, nationality, major, English proficiency), core questions on WTC, and a closing question. Participants were briefed on ethical considerations, including anonymity and confidentiality.

3.4. Procedures of instrument validation and data analysis

The interview guide was developed through design, piloting, and refinement, including ten interviews and expert reviews, until data saturation was achieved. Two pilot interviews tested clarity, leading to final adjustments. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Recruitment methods included email invitations distributed by EFL instructors, in-class announcements, and informal outreach on campus. The final sample comprised ten students: seven were enrolled in an English course taught by the researcher, two were colleagues from the researcher's part-time workplace, and one was referred by another instructor. Informal pre-interview conversations helped create a comfortable atmosphere and rapport. Interviews, conducted online or face-to-face, lasted 20–30 minutes. Participants were informed of the study's goals, voluntary nature, and anonymity, with permission obtained for recording. They were assured they could pause or withdraw at any time.

The interviews were conducted from September to October 2024, with three in-person and seven online via MS Teams, based on participants' preferences. English was used exclusively, as the researcher did not speak Hungarian, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, or Bengali. While participants demonstrated sufficient English proficiency (see Appendix A), reliance on a non-native language may be a study limitation. All recordings and transcripts are securely stored, accessible only to the researcher. After each interview, responses were evaluated based on conversation flow and detail richness (Dörnyei, 2007). Revisions to the interview guide, primarily after pilot interviews, included rewording, restructuring, and elaborating on questions. The finalized guide effectively captured insights into participants' WTC in English, requiring no further changes. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic content analysis framework and Creswell's (2009) structured approach, involving data organization, review, coding, theme development, and interpretation. All interviews, except the two

pilot sessions, were fully transcribed and included in the final dataset of ten interviews.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis and discusses the findings, organized into four subsections: (1) Non-English majors' WTC in English in the classroom, (2) Non-English majors' WTC in English in online settings, (3) Non-English majors' WTC in English outside the classroom, and (4) Reasons for not being willing to communicate in English. Each subsection explores what influences WTC in these distinct contexts.

4.1. Non-English majors' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English in the classroom

Non-English majors' WTC in English within classroom settings is influenced by several key circumstances. These include interlocutors (conversation partners), classroom atmosphere, teachers, peers or classmates, confidence levels, personality, emotional and physical state, and attitudes toward making mistakes.

4.1.1. Interlocutors

Learners' WTC in English is strongly influenced by their interactions with different interlocutors in their educational environment. In Hungarian tertiary education, non-English majors reported that their WTC is shaped significantly by the people they communicate with, including peers, teachers, and classmates. These interactions are influenced by factors such as familiarity, language proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and the interpersonal dynamics inside and outside the classroom. Participants reported feeling more willing to communicate in English when interacting with familiar individuals, particularly international peers. Lucia, for example, mentioned, "I use English by default in my daily communication because I live in a dormitory and frequently interact with international students, for whom English is the only common language." The English proficiency level of conversation partners also plays a critical role. Farid explained,

> *I first try to gauge the other person's level of English. If they are less experienced, I simplify my speech to help them understand and express their opinions. If the conversation flows smoothly, I engage more deeply. Otherwise, I keep it simple to maintain clarity or stop speaking altogether.* (Farid)

Group activities and collaborative projects were also highlighted as opportunities to practice English with diverse individuals, fostering inclusivity and improving communication skills.

Interactions with teachers also strongly influence students' WTC in English within the classroom. Their personality, teaching methods, and interactions significantly influence students' comfort levels, confidence, and participation: for instance, Emma noted, "The teacher's personality and teaching methods influence how much I participate," emphasizing how a supportive and encouraging demeanour promotes greater engagement. Engaging, student-centred teaching methods, such as group activities and discussions, create a nonjudgmental and inclusive atmosphere, making students feel more comfortable and confident. Hanan shared, "I feel confident speaking with my teacher because I know they're there to help me improve, not to judge me. It's a safe space to practice and learn." The way teachers interact with students, particularly through encouragement, positive feedback, guidance, and praise, also plays a vital role. Students value being treated with understanding and support, as they seek an environment free from judgment, which enhances their WTC in English.

Finally, peer interactions within the classroom presented both supportive and challenging dimensions for WTC. Participants' WTC in English with classmates is influenced by comfort levels, motivation, admiration for proficient peers, fear of judgment, and group dynamics. Many feel comfortable and motivated to engage, viewing peer interactions as opportunities to learn and improve. However, comfort levels vary depending on the context. Some hesitate if they perceive classmates as judgmental or feel unprepared for the topic. Cemre noted, "It depends on the classmate. If they are judgmental, I don't feel comfortable. But if they are like me, I don't hesitate at all." Despite these concerns, most prioritize learning over worrying about others' opinions.

Advanced speakers are often seen as sources of inspiration rather than intimidation. Many admire their classmates' fluency and use it as motivation to improve. Hanan explained, "Being around more advanced speakers can be motivating because it pushes me to improve. If I were surrounded by people who didn't speak English at all, I might become lazy and not push myself as much." While some occasionally feel self-conscious about skill differences, they generally view these experiences as constructive. Group and pair work also play distinct roles in fostering communication. Group activities promote collective support and inclusivity, while pair work facilitates deeper conversations. Zsuzsa explained, "I prefer pair work because it allows for more focused and meaningful exchanges." These dynamics provide diverse opportunities to practice English, build confidence, and engage with peers in different contexts.

4.1.2. Classroom atmosphere

The classroom atmosphere significantly shapes participants' comfort levels and WTC in English. A supportive and relaxed environment, combined with opportunities for meaningful interactions, facilitates greater engagement. Many participants feel most at ease speaking with teachers, describing these interactions

as supportive and nonjudgmental. Cemre explained, “When I’m talking to the teacher, they always try to understand me and not judge my English level or proficiency. That’s why I feel more confident.” However, some participants feel additional pressure to articulate their thoughts clearly when speaking with teachers. Vera noted, “Speaking with the teacher is fine, but I feel a bit more pressure because I want to use good grammar and sound smart,” highlighting how perceived expectations can create cautiousness.

Group work also provides a comfortable environment, reducing individual pressure and encouraging collective support. Pair work, in particular, emerged as a preferred setting for deeper conversations. Lilla shared, “In groups, I sometimes hesitate because I hear great ideas from others and feel my thoughts might not be as good. But in pair work, I feel more confident and comfortable.” Comfort levels also depend on class size, with smaller classes cultivating greater ease. One participant explained, “I feel comfortable in smaller classes with only five or six people. In larger classes, like my psychology lecture with 150–200 participants, it’s more intimidating. Sometimes I know the answer but don’t raise my hand because speaking fluently in English in front of such a large audience is more challenging.” This underscores how the learning environment significantly influences participants’ willingness to communicate.

4.1.3. Confidence in using English

Participants’ confidence levels in using English significantly influence their WTC in English. While some feel highly confident, others experience fluctuating or low confidence depending on context, preparation, and peer interactions. Half of the participants reported feeling confident, viewing mistakes as part of the learning process. Hanan, for instance, rated her confidence at 8 or 9 out of 10, stating, “I’m not scared to make mistakes because I know I’m here to learn. If I make a mistake, it’s okay—it’s not the end of the world. Someone will correct me, and I’ll pay more attention next time. That’s how I learn.” This growth-oriented mindset encourages active engagement.

For others, confidence fluctuates based on the situation. They feel more at ease in low-pressure settings, such as casual conversations, but less confident in high-stakes scenarios like exams or professional environments. Lucia explained, “I can communicate in English during informal conversations or in university classes. However, in a professional environment, especially when more technical or professional concepts are required, I think I might struggle. I feel less confident in such settings.”

Participants’ approaches to asking teachers questions also reflect their confidence levels. Proactive learners actively seek clarification, viewing it as essential for improvement. Some ask questions during class, while others prefer to approach teachers privately afterwards. However, hesitant learners may initially avoid asking questions due to embarrassment or fear of judgment.

Confidence also depends on who participants are speaking with. Many feel more at ease with peers of similar proficiency levels, as this boosts mutual understanding. Diana noted, “It depends on who I’m speaking with. When I talk to people my age or with a similar level of English, I feel pretty confident because we understand each other. However, when speaking to someone more proficient, I feel less confident.” Marisol added, “I feel intimidated speaking English with native speakers because I fear being judged or making mistakes,” illustrating how perceived language imbalances can create psychological barriers.

4.1.4. Personality

Participants’ self-described personalities, ranging from introversion to extroversion, significantly influence their WTC in English. Among the participants, four identified as introverts, four as ambiverts (people who are both introverted and extroverted depending on the situation), and one, Cemre, as an extrovert, describing herself as “very talkative.” These traits shape their comfort levels and engagement in English communication. A particularly intriguing insight came from Lilla, who noted how her personality shifts depending on the language she uses. She shared, “This might sound strange, but there’s a quote that says, ‘As many languages you speak, as many souls you have.’ I feel that my English personality is different from my Hungarian one.” Lilla explained that she feels more effective expressing herself in English, where she perceives herself as more polished and articulate. In Hungarian, she feels constrained by her rural accent and less common vocabulary, even though she strives to embody kindness, humility, and respect in any language.

4.1.5. Emotional and physical state

Participants’ emotional and physical states significantly influence their WTC in English. Mood, energy levels, and stress levels play a crucial role in shaping their engagement. Diana highlighted this, stating, “When I feel too tired or sad, I don’t want to say anything in English, especially in class,” underscoring how emotional well-being impacts participation. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) also affects some participants’ WTC. Diana described feeling intense nervousness in class, particularly when forgetting words. She shared, “I’m always nervous. Last time, I forgot a very simple word, and I felt terrible because it was such an easy word, and I almost cried.” This anxiety is often fuelled by fear of judgment from peers and teachers, intensifying self-doubt.

Some participants feel nervous when asked questions or corrected by teachers, especially in front of the class. Cemre explained, “I get nervous when my teacher asks me questions, especially in front of the whole class. I worry about saying something wrong or not being able to express myself clearly.” Reactions to corrections vary; many view them as constructive and necessary for improvement, appreciating respectful feedback. However, some feel embarrassed, particularly

if corrections are harsh. Most agree that respectful and encouraging feedback contributes to the establishment of a supportive learning environment, helping students learn without feeling discouraged. Regarding interactions with teachers, many participants feel at ease and confident, viewing teachers as supportive allies. However, others feel anxious, fearing judgment or failure to meet expectations. Vera shared, "I always feel a bit nervous speaking with my teacher because I want to sound smart and use proper grammar. I don't want to disappoint them."

4.1.6. Attitudes toward mistakes

Many participants reported feeling confident and comfortable using English in class, particularly when adopting a growth-oriented mindset. They view mistakes as inevitable and valuable, focusing on improvement rather than perfection. Emma exemplified this attitude, stating,

> *Nowadays, I don't worry about being laughed at or making mistakes. I hope people will understand what I mean, and that helps me relax. I've stopped worrying about making mistakes because it wasn't helpful. Now I focus on improving my phrases and being creative with sentence structures. I've realized that there are many acceptable ways to say things in English.* (Emma)

Participants generally value feedback from teachers and peers as tools for improvement and avoid overanalysing their speech, allowing for more natural and confident expression. As Marisol noted, "If I notice a mistake, I correct it when possible. If not, I simply move on without overthinking. It's all part of learning." This practical mindset helps them focus on progress rather than imperfections.

4.2. Willingness to communicate in online settings

Participants' WTC in online settings varies based on comfort levels, preferences, and context. For example, their choices regarding video use and communication methods depend on personal comfort, practical considerations, and perceived benefits. Opinions on turning video on during online communication are influenced by factors such as familiarity with interlocutors, self-consciousness, and group dynamics. Some feel comfortable using video with familiar people or in smaller groups but avoid it in larger meetings or with unfamiliar individuals. Vera explained,

> *When I was preparing for my language exam with a private teacher, I discovered that I focus better when the video is on. Without it, I would get distracted, check my phone, or even eat snacks during the lesson. Turning on the video helps me stay more attentive and engaged.* (Vera)

Others, however, feel self-conscious or anxious with video on, especially in large groups, finding it less natural than in-person interactions. Practical factors, such as time of day, personal appearance, or environment, also influence their decision. Group dynamics further shape preferences, as participants are more likely to turn on video if others do so, fostering shared participation.

Communication method preferences also vary. Some prefer the chat box for its ability to reduce anxiety and allow time to craft responses, often using tools like translators for accuracy. Others favour video chatting for clearer communication through facial expressions and tone, which enhances understanding and interaction. Many participants choose methods based on context, preferring video chatting with familiar people or in casual conversations, and the chat box in formal or unfamiliar situations. Some use a mix of both, selecting the method that best suits the task, such as the chat box for introducing new words or minor comments, and video chatting for interactive discussions.

4.3. Willingness to communicate outside the classroom

Non-English majors frequently use English outside the classroom, highlighting its practical utility in diverse real-life situations. Participants reported using English in workplaces, daily life, travel, and social interactions, demonstrating its role as a versatile and essential communication tool. These contexts provide meaningful opportunities to enhance English proficiency while navigating real-world scenarios.

In professional environments, many participants use English to interact with international colleagues, clients, or visitors. Vera shared, “I use English to communicate with foreign visitors at my workplace,” emphasizing its importance in her job. During travel or international communication, English serves as a global lingua franca. Marisol described using English to interact with family in England, despite challenges with British accents. Others use it to connect with friends from different countries, reinforcing its role in bridging cultural gaps.

English also plays a significant role in daily activities, such as shopping or navigating public transportation: Farid noted, “Speaking English has become part of my daily routine, especially in my dormitory and during errands like grocery shopping.” In social interactions, English helps express emotions and build connections. Emma explained, “I use English to assist foreign visitors in Budapest with directions,” showcasing its value in fostering social bonds and providing assistance in multicultural settings. These findings underscore English’s integral role in the lives of non-English majors, both practically and socially.

For many, the necessity of English arises from their inability to speak the local language, such as Hungarian. Lucia explained, “Whenever I go outside, I have to speak English... I rely on English to communicate.” Many participants use English to communicate with friends or build new connections, providing relaxed and meaningful opportunities to practice. Travel and cultural adaptation further boost

confidence and willingness to communicate: Zsuzsa noted, "Traveling and interacting with people from different cultures made me more confident in using English." Some participants actively incorporate English into their daily routines for practice. Lilla mentioned speaking English even while running errands at home. Conversely, time constraints can limit English use. Emma explained, "When I'm in a hurry, I prefer using my native language to save time." These findings highlight the multifaceted role of English in participants' lives and the adaptability required to navigate diverse linguistic environments.

4.4. Reasons for not being willing to communicate in English

Participants avoided speaking English due to fear of mistakes or judgment, preference for their native language, emotional and physical factors, and limited vocabulary or preparation. Fear of negative evaluation, especially with respected peers or in high-pressure settings, was a significant barrier. Marisol noted, "A classmate once mocked someone's accent, making me hesitant to speak English. I feel more comfortable with people at my level." Many preferred their native language for its comfort and ease, particularly with close friends or family, and when emotionally or physically drained. Lucia explained, "I avoid speaking English when I lack vocabulary or face complex topics, as it makes me uncomfortable." This lack of confidence often deters communication in demanding contexts.

These results align with previous research findings: fear of judgment inhibits WTC (Dewaele, 2019), while comfort in native languages contrasts with more fluid language-switching in multilingual contexts (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018). Negative emotions and stress reduce WTC (Khajavy et al., 2016), and limited vocabulary or preparation hinders communication, especially in formal settings (Clément et al., 2003).

5. Discussion

This study explored what influences non-English majors' WTC in English in Hungarian tertiary education, focusing on both classroom and non-classroom settings. The findings are discussed in relation to previous research, highlighting similarities, contrasts, and new insights.

5.1. Non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English inside the classroom

The study found that non-English majors' WTC in English inside the classroom is influenced by multiple factors. Interlocutors play a significant role, with familiarity, proficiency levels, shared language, and preferences shaping WTC. Participants felt more comfortable communicating with peers they knew well, aligning with Cao and Philp's (2006) findings on the importance of familiarity. However, interacting with highly proficient peers could sometimes be

intimidating, contrasting with Yashima's (2002) suggestion that proficient interlocutors motivate learners. Preferences for speaking English with certain peers also highlight the role of shared language and cultural background, as noted by Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2017).

The classroom atmosphere significantly impacts WTC, with comfort in the setting, teacher interactions, group work, pair work, and class size being critical factors. Participants felt more willing to communicate in smaller, interactive classes with supportive feedback, aligning with Khajavy et al.'s (2016) emphasis on a positive classroom environment. However, discomfort in larger classes, where participation opportunities are limited, echoes concerns raised by Joe et al. (2017).

Teachers' personality, teaching methods, and interactions are key influences. Participants appreciated engaging methods like group discussions and constructive feedback, consistent with Kálmán's (2021, 2023) and Lamb's (2017) findings on the motivational qualities of teachers. However, overly critical feedback or lack of encouragement could hinder WTC, underscoring the need for supportive practices, as highlighted by Kruk (2022) and Bui et al. (2022).

Comfort, motivation, fear of judgment, and admiration for proficient peers shape classroom interactions. Participants were more willing to communicate when motivated and comfortable, but fear of judgment often reduced WTC, aligning with Dewaele's (2019) identification of foreign language anxiety as a barrier. Group and pair dynamics also play a crucial role, with participants preferring smaller, collaborative settings over large group discussions.

Confidence levels vary, with high-confidence participants more willing to engage and low-confidence participants often avoiding communication. This supports Clément et al.'s (2003) and Yashima's (2002) link between self-perceived competence and WTC. However, confidence can fluctuate based on context, such as the topic or interlocutor, highlighting the dynamic nature of WTC (Kang, 2005).

Personality traits, including introversion, ambiversion, and extroversion, influence WTC. Extroverted participants were more willing to communicate, while introverted participants hesitated, particularly in large groups, aligning with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) identification of personality as a stable predictor. Mood, energy, stress levels, and foreign language anxiety (FLA) also significantly impact WTC. High stress or low energy reduced WTC, while positive emotions like enjoyment increased it, consistent with Dewaele and Pavelescu's (2021) findings on the role of emotions. FLA was a major barrier, particularly during formal assessments, echoing MacIntyre and Doucette's (2010) research findings.

Participants with a growth-oriented mindset were more willing to communicate, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities. Constructive feedback from teachers and peers encouraged WTC, while fear of judgment inhibited it, supporting Lee and Drajati's (2019) emphasis on a supportive environment. These

findings collectively highlight the complex interplay of interpersonal, environmental, and individual factors in shaping WTC inside the classroom.

5.2. Non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English in online settings

Participants' preferences for turning video on or off during online classes were influenced by comfort, familiarity, self-consciousness, and situational factors. Some felt more comfortable with their video off, as it reduced anxiety and self-consciousness, while others preferred having their video on to enhance focus and engagement. This aligns with Reinders and Wattana's (2014) findings on the mixed effects of digital environments on WTC. Preferences for communication methods also varied by context. Some participants favoured the chat box for precision and confidence, while others preferred video chatting for more natural interaction. This reflects the dynamic nature of WTC in online settings, as highlighted by Kruk (2022). These findings underscore the importance of flexibility and personal comfort in shaping WTC in digital learning environments.

5.3. Non-English majors' willingness to communicate in English outside the classroom

Participants reported using English in workplaces, daily life, travel, and social interactions, often motivated by necessity. This aligns with Yashima's (2002) finding that international orientation enhances WTC. Social contexts, friendships, travel experiences, personal habits, and external experiences also influenced WTC. Those with positive experiences in social or professional settings were more willing to communicate, while limited exposure led to hesitation. This supports Cao and Philp's (2006) emphasis on the role of contextual factors in shaping WTC, highlighting the importance of real-world opportunities in fostering English communication.

6. Conclusion, limitations, implications, and future research directions

This section summarizes the main findings of the study, outlines its limitations, discusses practical implications, and suggests directions for future research. This qualitative study explored the circumstances which are perceived to influence non-English majors' WTC in English within Hungarian higher education through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that students' WTC is shaped by comfort with interlocutors, supportive classroom environments, teacher-student and peer interactions, confidence levels, personality traits, emotional and physical states, and attitudes toward mistakes. The findings offer valuable insights for EFL teachers, emphasizing the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships and creating supportive learning

environments. The study also highlights the pivotal role teachers play in students' English language learning journeys.

However, the study has certain limitations. One notable constraint is the linguistic medium of the interviews. Due to the researcher's lack of proficiency in Hungarian, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, and Bengali, interviews were conducted solely in English, which was the only shared language. This language barrier may have limited the depth and nuance of participants' responses, as some students might not have felt fully comfortable expressing themselves in English. As a result, certain ideas may have been misinterpreted or only partially articulated. Additionally, the sample was not gender-balanced, with nine out of ten participants identifying as female. This gender imbalance may have influenced the findings by overrepresenting female perspectives, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results across a more diverse population. One limitation of this study also concerns the researcher's positionality. Seven out of ten participants were students enrolled in an English course taught by the researcher, and two others were colleagues from the researcher's part-time workplace. Only one participant was recruited through another English instructor. However, she was open and communicative, and informal conversations prior to the interview helped establish a comfortable atmosphere. The existing relationship with nine participants may have influenced the data; while familiarity may have increased participants' comfort and willingness to engage, it could also have affected the authenticity of their responses, possibly leading to more positive or socially desirable answers. Throughout the interviews, the researcher maintained a neutral stance and refrained from assuming an observer role. Reflexivity was consistently applied during data analysis to reduce potential bias resulting from these pre-existing relationships.

Despite being conducted in the Hungarian tertiary education context, the findings offer transferable insights into understanding WTC among EFL university students in similar international settings. These insights can inform pedagogy, particularly in online teaching environments, by promoting positive learning atmospheres and more engaging teaching strategies. Additionally, the study contributes empirical data to the field of applied linguistics, particularly in understanding EFL learners' WTC across classrooms, real-life, and digital contexts. The results benefit EFL educators and learners by enhancing language learning practices and addressing gaps in language pedagogy.

To enhance students' WTC, teachers should prioritize building rapport and creating positive, engaging classroom environments that foster dynamic learning. Encouraging students to envision themselves as proficient English speakers and highlighting the personal and professional benefits of mastering the language can be effective strategies. Teachers should set clear, achievable goals and provide regular feedback to align students' efforts with their long-term aspirations.

Additionally, incorporating enjoyable, career-relevant lessons using real-world materials can make learning more meaningful and motivating.

Future research could supplement interview findings with questionnaire data to enhance the robustness of the analysis and ensure the findings are more generalizable. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, researchers can triangulate results and test the emerging themes on a larger sample (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007). Furthermore, comparing the WTC of English majors with that of non-English majors could yield significant insights. While the current study reflects students' perspectives, incorporating teachers' views on their students' WTC would augment the study's comprehensiveness and provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing WTC.

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Appendix A

The participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Age	Self-reported English language proficiency level
1.	Cemre	female	Turkish	25	B2
2.	Hanan	female	Algerian	20	B2
3.	Lucia	female	Columbian	36	B2
4.	Marisol	female	Panamanian	19	B2
5.	Farid	male	Bangladeshi	23	C2
6.	Diana	female	Hungarian	20	B2
7.	Emma	female	Hungarian	23	B2
8.	Lilla	female	Hungarian	22	C1-C2
9.	Vera	female	Hungarian	20	B2
10.	Zsuzsa	female	Hungarian	21	C1

Appendix B
The final draft of the EFL learners' interview guide

Part 1: Introductory questions

1. Gender:
2. How old are you?
3. What is your nationality?
4. What is your mother tongue? (What is your native language?)
5. Which university/college are you currently attending?
6. What is your major?
7. Which year are you in?
8. When did you start learning English?
9. Is English your first, second or third foreign language? (Is English your second or foreign language?)
10. How many years have you been learning English?
11. How would you rate your English proficiency? Do you have a language certificate? If yes, what kind and what level?
12. Do you speak any other foreign languages?

Part 2: Willingness to communicate (WTC) in English of EFL university students

1. What influences how much you speak in English in a given situation? (What factors determine the extent to which you use English in your communication?)
2. How would you describe your personality (quiet or talkative, relaxed or tense)?
3. How confident are you in your ability to communicate in English?
4. In what situation do you feel most comfortable (most willing) to communicate: in pairs, in small groups, with the teacher in a whole class? Why?
   4.1 Who do you find easiest to speak English with?
5. How do you feel when you are speaking English in class?
   5.1 How do you feel when you make a mistake in English?
6. How do you feel when you use English to speak with your teacher in class?
   6.1 How do you feel when your teacher asks you questions? (Do you get nervous when your English teacher asks you a question?)
   6.2 Do you choose to ask your teacher some questions when you don't understand something in class?
   6.3 How do you feel when your teacher corrects your English? (Are you afraid that your English teacher is ready to correct every mistake you make?)
7. How do you feel when you use English with your classmates in class?
   7.1 How do you feel if the other students speak English better than you?
   7.2 Are you afraid of your friends laughing at you?
8. Do you have a preference for speaking English with specific individuals or groups? Could you please tell me about the reasons behind your choice?
9. What or who are the reasons why you don't want to speak English?
10. What do you think about turning off your video when communicating online?
11. In what situation do you feel most comfortable (most willing) to communicate when participating in online learning: video chatting or using a chat box for communication?
12. Where else do you speak English?
13. What influences how much you speak in English in a specific situation, NOT in the classroom? (What factors impact your use of English outside of an educational setting?)

(Is there anything else you would like to add for the entire interview? Is there anything you would like to discuss in more detail?)

Thank you very much for your time and kind help.