

# **Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Communicate in Korean Elementary School EFL Classrooms**

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## **Abstract**

In this teacher-research study I examine factors influencing willingness to communicate (WTC) on 39 students, grades 1-6, enrolled in after-school English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in Korea. Quantitative data from student surveys, was analyzed to identify student perceptions of their comfort when engaged in various types of communicative classroom activities and to identify trends occurring across gender and grade levels. Qualitative data gathered from journals recorded after each day's lessons was coded to identify themes related to classroom WTC. Findings from these data sources were compared with observation records and self-reflection. Factors identified that influence student WTC included: familiarity with speaking tasks, class size and environment, and instruction appropriate for each student's proficiency level. I recommend that EFL teachers hoping to increase student engagement become familiar with their students' educational backgrounds, social interactions within their classroom, and actively take part in the assessment and placement of students.

**Key Words:** willingness to Communicate (WTC), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English Language Learner (ELL)

## **Introduction**

As an EFL teacher in South Korea for the past 17 years I have been tasked with improving the English proficiency of students of all ages in many diverse classroom settings. I have developed a range of teaching materials and strategies that, I hope, have helped to improve my students' understanding of the English language and their ability to use the language in authentic real-world settings. However, I often notice that one of the best predictors of success for students in acquiring English is their comfort and confidence using the language both in and out of the classroom.

In an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment in which the dominate language outside the classroom is not English and communication in English beyond the classroom is not mandatory, but is necessary for students to achieve their desired proficiency levels, my classroom, and those of my colleagues, often provide the only

opportunities for students to practice using English. It is my firm belief that by creating a learning environment in which students feel comfortable speaking and exploring the English language EFL educators can empower students with the confidence and skills necessary to continue developing their English skills in authentic settings and greatly improve their progress towards fluency in English. However, creating this comfortable and inclusive classroom environment is a consistent challenge across ages, proficiency levels and classroom settings. It requires an instructor who is aware of, and attentive to, various factors including, but not limited to; each student's motivation for studying English, each student's language needs, each student's emotional needs, each student's expected and preferred instructional methods and each student's individual learning styles. Also requiring consideration are: the social dynamics of the classroom, the goals of the group and the organization in charge of running the class, and the cultural backgrounds of these groups which affect expectations and interactions in the classroom and beyond. With all of these factors at play it can sometimes seem an overwhelming challenge to get each student engaged in the classroom.

During the course of my graduate studies in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) I have become drawn to the idea of 'Willingness to Communicate' (WTC), defined as; "the probability of speaking when given the opportunity to do so." (Macintyre, 2007, p. 564). After having read several studies about the factors that affect a student's WTC and the benefits of enhanced WTC I have become increasingly interested in learning more about what specific factors influence the WTC of my own students. I believe that by learning how my students experience and react to different communicative tasks and activities in my classrooms I will be better equipped to develop instructional strategies that will provide them with the confidence to take their English learning beyond the classroom and truly interact with English speakers in real-

world settings.

Through experience and observation, I have learned that the factors affecting WTC for my students are numerous and can have a wide range of effects. In the Korean academic classroom, which is pre-dominantly teacher-centered and testing oriented, the very idea of expressing opinions and engaging in open discussion during lessons may be new to students and met with resistance. When we add to this the many emotional and social influences that are affecting students in various ways in any classroom each day, it becomes extremely hard to identify the factors that contribute to a class or student's WTC at any given moment. With all this in mind I formulated the following overarching research question:

1. What are a few of the key factors that influence a student's WTC in English language classrooms for Korean elementary school students (grades 1-6)?

Due to the circumstances in which the current research project took place, discussed in more detail below, it was difficult to reliably identify individual factors, related to each student's personality, and situational factors, which might vary on any given day, that influenced WTC. Therefore, I chose to focus my research on environmental factors such as; class size, task type, students' familiarity with tasks and teachers, and the cultural linguistic background of an EFL teacher, as well as the linguistic factors of perceived and actual English proficiency.

### **Literature Review**

Equipping students with the ability to communicate effectively in real-life settings is a top priority in any English language classroom. It is essential for instructors to actively foster environments and create situations in which students feel comfortable interacting in English so they can gain the competence and confidence necessary to apply these communication skills in real-world settings. This is especially true in a context in

which the dominant language outside the classroom is not English and interactions in English are more a matter of choice than necessity and must often be actively sought out by the English language learner. By attempting to empower my students to seek out and take advantage of these interactional opportunities in the classroom at a young age it is my hope that I am helping them gain learning behaviors that will greatly increase their chances of finally achieving English fluency as they begin to apply these behaviors beyond classroom contexts. However, I am often frustrated as I observe my students' engagement in the classroom fluctuate from month to month, day to day, and sometimes even moment to moment. This is, perhaps, a common experience in a Korean and, perhaps more broadly, in East Asian EFL classrooms where students are likely to be more familiar with more traditional teacher-centered and testing-oriented lessons in which the role of the student is more often that of a passive receptor of knowledge and skills.

Willingness to Communicate has proven a difficult aspect of the EFL learner and classroom to both assess and effectively influence. An individual's WTC at any given moment is composed of a wide range of situational factors, influenced by diverse variables in the context of any given speaking opportunity such as the interlocutors in a conversation as well as the topic and environment in which a conversation takes place, and individual traits, such as outgoingness, perceived English competence and motivation. Peng (2013) found that attempts to measure the WTC of Chinese undergraduate students yielded much higher levels of WTC in the EFL classroom than in real-world settings and proposed examining WTC in each setting separately. In addressing the limitations of his study on intervention measures designed to promote WTC, Mutahar (2019) acknowledges that self-reported data is able to measure trait characteristics, but much less likely to capture the influences of situational WTC. In my own experience teaching I have observed many students who operate on a wide spectrum of WTC depending on the

situation in which they find themselves or their moods on a particular day making it nearly impossible to accurately say what their WTC will be at any given moment. Almost every English instructor I have spoken to is aware of how a few lines of praise or correction might instantly cause a student to transform from a withdrawn reluctant speaker to an outgoing enthusiastic one, or vice versa.

The difficulty in assessing WTC is, perhaps, not surprising given the vast number of factors that contribute to determining an individual's WTC in any given communicative context. In examining WTC in an English for Academic Purpose classroom in New Zealand, Cao (2014) identified nearly a dozen factors which she categorized into three dimensions: environmental, individual and linguistic. The variables influencing these factors as well as the interactions between them created a classroom environment in her study that "revealed flux in situational WTC from task to task within a single lesson, and from moment to moment within a single task" (Cao, 2014, p. 808). A six week study by Macintyre, et al. (2011) on the in- and out-of-class situational WTC of adolescent English speaking students enrolled in French immersion courses in Canada, found that "the situations in which learners are most willing to communicate are not radically different from those in which they are least willing" (p. 93), and again identified subtle differences in trait and situational characteristics that can significantly affect an individual's WTC at any given moment. The results of studies that measure factors affecting WTC holistically seem to indicate the need for more targeted approaches that examine specific factors in isolation. In one such study on the WTC of Korean EFL learners, Lee (2020), examined the role of grit (separated into perseverance of effort and interest) and classroom enjoyment on participant's WTC. Results of this study indicated perseverance of effort and classroom enjoyment to be predictive of second language (L2) learners WTC while perseverance of interest was not. These findings led the author to speculate that, because

of the long-term commitment required to learn English and the extreme challenges associated with initiating English conversation and performing other oral communicative English tasks in the EFL classroom, consistent effort played a much more crucial role than consistent interest in the development of WTC over time.

Given the complex and ever-shifting nature of an individual's WTC it is, once again, unsurprising that efforts to identify comprehensive teaching methods that can significantly increase WTC have encountered limited success. In a four month study examining the effects of form-focused instruction, which relied on the explicit presentation and reinforcement of specific language forms through repetitive tasks such as gap fills or dialogue practice, language directed interaction, which takes a less scripted approach to reinforcing language forms, and strategies directed interaction programs, which focused on the use of English in different situational contexts with less focus on language form, on WTC, self-confidence and enjoyment, Van Batenburg, et al. (2019), actually found slight decreases in WTC for each instructional strategy, leading researchers to speculate that more time is needed for instruction to significantly affect WTC. Mutahar (2019), acknowledging that "Communicative Language Teaching (which emphasizes the student's role in the classroom to produce the language being learned) has not been found to increase WTC in EFL classrooms in several studies...leaving the question of how to enhance WTC unanswered" (p. 135), chose to test the efficacy of more innovative strategies to improve WTC, examining the effects of interventions that included visualization and goal-setting on the WTC of rural high school students in Yemen. His findings indicated moderate, yet significant, gains over a six-week period, and pointed to the importance of ideal L2 selves, imagined communities, goal-setting and self-regulated learning on enhancing an individual's WTC.

Despite the difficulty of assessment and implementation of broad curriculum

changes that can enhance WTC, I believe it is important for teachers to educate themselves on how the multitude of factors that affect WTC play out in their own classrooms so they can develop techniques and make the adjustments necessary to maximize WTC for their students. In a study on L2 English teachers' attitudes and instructional practices towards WTC and classroom interactions, Wang and Tseng (2020), found that teachers who have higher levels of WTC themselves and more positive attitudes towards classroom interactions are more likely to implement specific techniques that have been shown to enhance WTC such as: explicit corrective feedback, wait time, and delayed error correction.

In this teacher-research study, I attempt to examine my students' perceptions of their own WTC, measured by self-reported 'comfort' in various classroom communicative interactions, to identify which techniques and strategies might be most appropriate for improving overall classroom WTC and how these might best be applied. While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in assessing WTC due to the many factors at play as well as the limitations of surveys to accurately measure these factors, it is my hope that by attempting to gain a perspective on my students' emotional response to various classroom situations I am able to identify ways to adapt and improve on strategies that might significantly improve WTC for my students. My purpose is not to propose broad changes to instructional approaches in EFL, but rather, to identify how young Korean students might feel when engaged in various classroom communicative tasks such as: student-centered discussions, making oral presentations and peer review, in the hopes of learning more about the language anxiety students experience in these situations and speculating on adjustments that I might make to alleviate that anxiety.

In the research presented above, qualitative data, gathered through student and teacher interviews, classroom observation and student journals played an important, often

primary role, in assessing WTC. Although a previous design for this research also included student interviews and detailed classroom observation, a last-minute change in my student population and class schedule made it necessary to adjust this plan and focus more on the results of quantitative data gathered from student surveys. This change made it very difficult to identify individual factors that might influence WTC and, as mentioned above, shifted the focus of the research onto a few key environmental and linguistic factors. In future research, it might prove very beneficial to reintroduce these qualitative data sources that might provide richer data on individual factors affecting WTC by giving students the opportunity to expand upon the survey responses they provide and by gathering and presenting more detailed data about how students actually communicate in various classroom settings.

### **Method**

After reviewing a sampling of the existing literature and gaining an appreciation for the difficulty of the task at hand, I was ready to return to my research questions and design a study, although the last minute change in my student population and class schedule, mentioned above, required me to make adjustments to my initial research design and complicated the process. In order to narrow the focus of my research and gain data that could prove more useful in informing my teaching practices I formulated the following research question and subquestions:

1. What are the factors that influence a student's WTC in English language classrooms for Korean elementary school students (grades 1-6)?
  - A. How does time for preparation/instruction before a speaking task affect a student's WTC?
  - B. How do various types of teacher-student interactions affect a student's WTC?
  - C. How do various types of student-student interactions affect a student's WTC?

- D. How does a first language (L1) Korean versus an L1 English EFL teacher affect a student's WTC?
- E. How does WTC change as students progress in their English studies and achieve greater proficiency?

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in an elementary after-school English program at a public elementary school in Seoul, South Korea. Because of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic all classes were conducted online between 1:30 and 5:45 pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Classes were taught in collaboration with an L1 Korean EFL instructor on Mondays and alternating Fridays, and myself, on Wednesdays and alternating Fridays. Each class contained a single course book and a course schedule that each teacher was expected to follow.

There were a total of ten classes in this program in which students were placed, primarily based on their English proficiency levels. Class sizes ranged from two to six students per class and the length of each class ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. As set by the policies of the company organizing and managing the after school program, the length of each class was determined by the number of students enrolled. A minimum of 15 minutes was required for each class and every student above four enrolled in a class added an extra five minutes of class time until a maximum of six students and 30 minutes was reached.

During the course of this research, I taught each class on four separate days. Because the first day of research was also my first encounter with this group of students, I began this project with very little information about each student. As the project progressed, I began to get to know the students better and recognize some of the diverse learning styles I have observed in similar classes I had previously taught, but much more time is required before I

can confidently speak to the unique personalities and learning styles of each student.

### **Participants**

A total of 39 students took part in this study. All students were enrolled in the same public elementary school in Seoul, South Korea and were taking these online after-school English classes. Most students had been taking the classes for at least three months before I was asked to take over the role of foreign EFL instructor due to my predecessor's illness.

Students were from first to sixth grade and their English proficiencies ranged from beginner to upper-intermediate. Although I didn't have specific information about students' ages, students in these grades typically range between 7-12 in Korea. Of the 39 participants enrolled in classes, 32 filled out the student survey. Of these 12 were female and 20 male. By grade level these respondents were: G1 (n=3), G2 (n=11), G3 (n=6), G4 (n=6), G5 (n=1) and G6 (n=3).

### **Data Collection**

The primary source of data for this research was gathered through an online survey that students were asked to complete after my first lesson. The survey contained 20 items, the first three of which were designed to identify variables of gender, grade and proficiency level and the remainder asked students to rank their comfort in various types of speaking situations on a five point Likert Scale. All survey items were translated into cultural and age-appropriate Korean with the help of my wife, an L1 Korean speaker with some experience teaching Korean elementary school children, and filled out on naver.com, a popular portal site in Korea that most students can reasonably be expected to have a high degree of familiarity with. English translations of the survey were submitted to my supervising instructor and Korean translations to my employer for approval prior to their distribution to students. Completing the survey independently and having a great

degree of control in the translation of survey items allowed me to focus on factors that I was particularly interested in gaining insight on, but it is likely that the participation or input of more EFL professionals would have helped to formulate additional questions that might have identified additional factors influencing WTC. Unfortunately, due to the relatively short time frame for this project and situational factors resulting from the COVID pandemic, this collaboration was not possible. English survey items and response choices can be found in Appendix A and their Korean translations in Appendix B.

Thirty-three participants responded to the survey, however one response was discarded due to incomplete data, leaving a total 32 respondents. Survey responses were examined holistically and grouped by gender and grade, although grades were combined to increase sample sizes giving me the following three categories: grades 1-2 (n=14), grades 3-4 (n=12) and grades 5-6 (n=4). It was my hope to also examine the results based on student's English proficiency level, however, I was not given an opportunity to assess the students prior to beginning research so this variable was meant to rely on prior assessment and placement. Unfortunately, as classes progressed it became clear that several students had been placed in classes that did not match their current proficiency, making this an unreliable indicator which was consequentially discarded as a variable when analyzing the results of student surveys.

A secondary source of quantitative data for this project came from observation sheets filled in during lessons. Because I was required to teach students in short classes, which contained little downtime while making observations the amount of data I was able to record on these sheets was limited. In an attempt to maximize the information gathered from observation while avoiding interference with instruction, classes were divided into 3 sections: a warm-up/homework check, which often involved a short free discussion of personal issues, presentation/structured practice, which usually involved more instruction

and coursebook tasks, and activity/free practice, which was generally designed to provide students an opportunity to practice language objectives for the lesson in less structured and more authentic contexts. For each section a tally was kept of students exhibiting high levels of WTC (HWTC) and low levels of WTC (LWTC). A copy of the observation sheet from 6/18/21 can be found in Appendix C. It should be noted that not every class followed the exact same structure and many of the shorter classes did not allow enough time for a three-part lesson to effectively take place.

Qualitative data was gathered from journal entries, completed after all the lessons of the day had finished. This presented another problem because with so many new students and classes strung out over 3.5 hours of teaching, with no break time between classes for reflection, it was difficult to remember specific details that occurred in each class. Journal entries for each day began with general reflection on the overall observations for that day and then specific entries for notable classes. As research progressed and I became more familiar with the students and classes I found that it became easier to recall and record specific observations so that journal entries for later dates contained more data and detail than earlier entries. A copy of the journal entry for 6/18/21 can be found in Appendix D.

A final source of data used was self-reflection gathered through years of experience working in EFL classrooms in Korea, including, but not limited to, over 10 years of experience with elementary after-school programs. This data was used to provide additional detail and insight into both quantitative and qualitative data gathered.

Due to the limited amount of time available to conduct this research as well as potential barriers in communication due to the COVID pandemic, gaining parental consent for each participant would have been an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. For this reason, great effort was put into making data collection methods non-intrusive and to

ensure that no aspect of this research interfered with the quality of instruction that I provided for students. Survey responses were anonymous and no names were recorded in journal entries and, as mentioned above, observation records were specially designed so that they would not interfere with instruction.

### **Data Analysis**

Data gathered from each item on the student survey was grouped into four categories; preparation, teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, and English/Korean language proficiency to provide insight into each of the research subquestions. Responses were examined holistically and grouped by gender and grades to identify what effect, if any, these had. Mean responses and standard deviations were calculated for each survey item.

From observation sheets ratios of students exhibiting HWTC and students exhibiting LWTC were calculated for each day of lessons and cumulatively for the each of the three lesson parts. These ratios were used to identify changes in WTC in different segments of a single lessons and changes from one lesson to the next.

Journals were examined and coded to identify common themes. As journal entries began to accumulate and these themes started to emerge, they were compared to data from surveys, observations and self-reflection to identify where they aligned with and refuted data from these sources.

### **Findings**

I was surprised by the amount of data that I was able to gather despite the time limits, as well as other limitations mentioned above, in conducting this research project. As stated previously, data from student surveys was organized and analyzed to determine possible insight into research subquestions. Results of this analysis indicated that students demonstrated a preference for speaking tasks that were more typical of the traditional

Korean classroom. Speaking opportunities that are more associated with the teacher-centered classroom ranked higher than more typically student-centered tasks. Students also seemed to indicate that preparation and instruction before speaking helped make them feel more comfortable when expressing themselves in English. Unsurprisingly, students expressed a preference for L1 Korean teachers and the opinion that their WTC increased as their proficiency improved.

Data collected and analyzed through observation records, journal entries and self-reflection revealed several themes that help to shed light on student perceptions of their own WTC, as reflected in student surveys, and how these may, or may not, align with actual student behavior in the classroom. Themes that emerged through analysis of journal entries included: a preference for the familiar, but not the monotonous, the importance of class size and the social environment of the classroom, and the need for tasks that are appropriate for the proficiency level of each student.

I will begin my report on the results of data analysis with a look at the results of student surveys and how these shed light on the research subquestions. From there, I will move on to examine the themes that emerged in journal entries and how these relate to data from other sources.

**Subquestion 1: How does time for preparation/instruction before a speaking task affect a student's WTC?**

To determine students' preference for preparation or instruction prior to a speaking task, I examined the results to survey items 4, 5, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Items 4, 11, and 12 were all associated with speaking tasks that typically would contain little preparation or instruction prior to speaking: talking about real-life experiences, assessing prior knowledge and making inferences/predictions, while items 3, 9 and 10 were all related to tasks that would contain varying degrees of preparation or instruction: presenting homework,

demonstrating ability of a skill that is being taught in the lesson, and demonstrating knowledge of information gathered from a text. Results of this analysis can be seen in Figure 1 (note that the data displayed in Figures 1-4 does not include neutral responses to survey items and as a result, actual numbers recorded in each figure may differ).

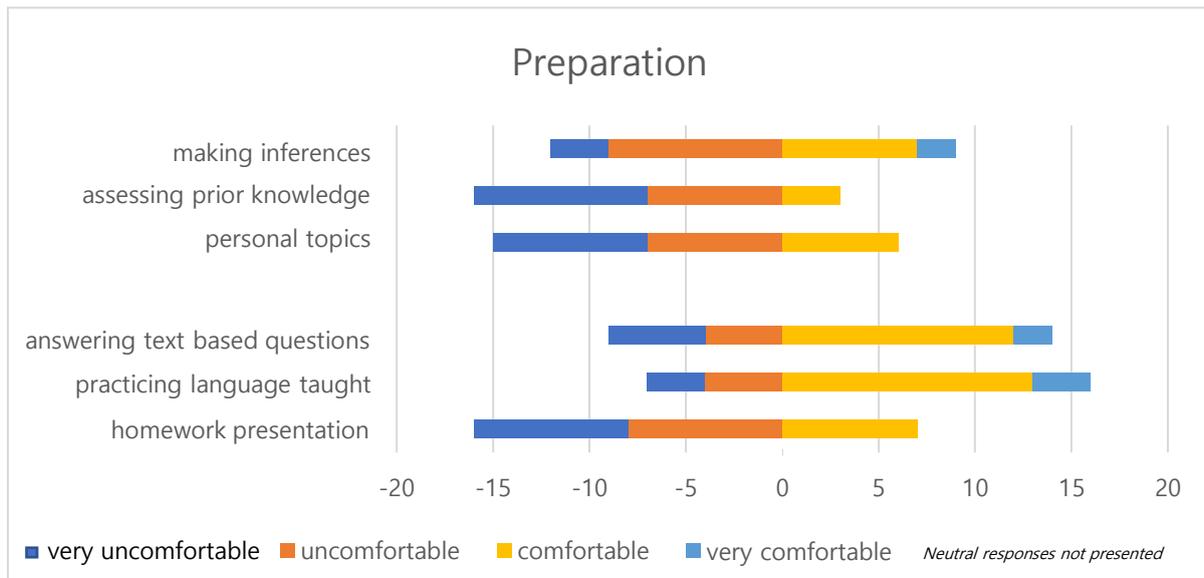


Figure 1: Effects of preparation/instruction on WTC

As can be seen, students reported more comfort when participating in speaking tasks that required them to demonstrate knowledge or ability after receiving information from teacher or text, to tasks that required them to speak before receiving instruction or information. A notable exception to this is seen in students' reported comfort when presenting homework assignments in class. Although this task often includes the most time for preparation and processing instruction, it received one of the lowest responses from students. The average response to this survey item, 3.53 (SD 1.08) was almost identical to students overall response to speaking about personal topics in class, 3.53 (SD 1.11). These results are less surprising when we consider that presenting homework assignments is usually a more lengthy speaking task that often includes other factors that contribute to language anxiety such as standing in front of the classroom.

When examining these results by gender, it seems that girls ranked their comfort on each survey item higher than boys and that increases in grades led to corresponding increases in reported comfort for each survey item.

**Research subquestion 2: How do various types of teacher-student interactions affect a student’s WTC?**

To gain insight into this question I examined survey items 6, 7, 13, and 18. Items 6 and 7 asked students about their comfort in different types of class led discussion, a teacher directing questions to the class as a whole or to students individually. Items 13 and 18 involved different types of teacher feedback, on the spot error correction and 1:1 student- discussion. Results from these survey items can be seen in Figure 2.

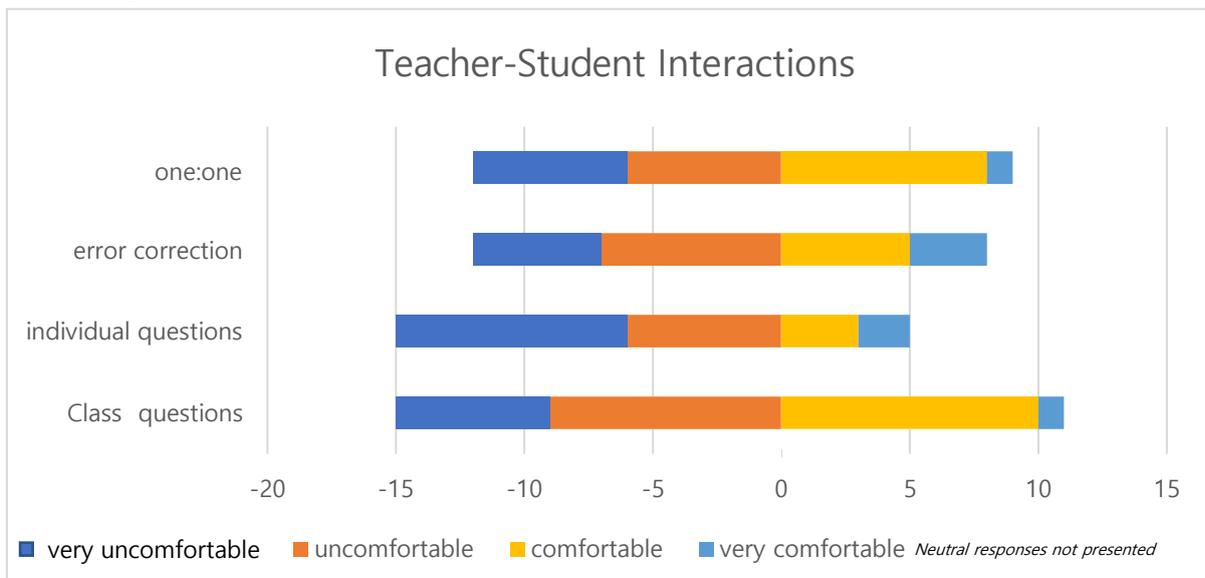


Figure 2: Reaction to teacher-student interaction

In response to each survey question students seemed to indicate moderate discomfort in each speaking situation. Most of the averages; questions directed at class (M 3.28, SD 1.20), on the spot error correction (M 3.19, SD 1.18) and 1:1 student-teacher talk (M 3.25, SD 1.14) were close to neutral. When asked about questions directed at them individually, however, students ranked their discomfort slightly higher (M 3.53, SD 1.19), perhaps indicating a certain level of anxiety in situations in which speaking is more

mandatory than optional. I wondered when looking at these results if students weren't responding more to the 'comfort' aspect of survey items than the 'speaking' portion as it is entirely plausible that a student with low WTC would feel more comfortable when given the decision whether or not to speak simply because they choose not to speak.

The same trends that were noted for the previous subquestion appear when looking at these results across gender and grade. Girls ranked their comfort with each item higher than boys, even indicating a slight comfort with 1:1 student-teacher talks (M 2.83, SD 1.14), and reported comfort increased along with grades for each survey item.

**Research subquestion 3: How do various types of student-student interactions affect a student's WTC?**

Survey items 8, 14, 15 and 16 were used to examine how students felt about different types of student-student interactions in the classroom. Survey items 8 and 14 related to 1:1 student interactions; student questioning and peer correction/review, while items 15 and 16 explored reactions to different types of discussion activities; class discussion and small group discussion. Results from these items can be seen in Figure 3.

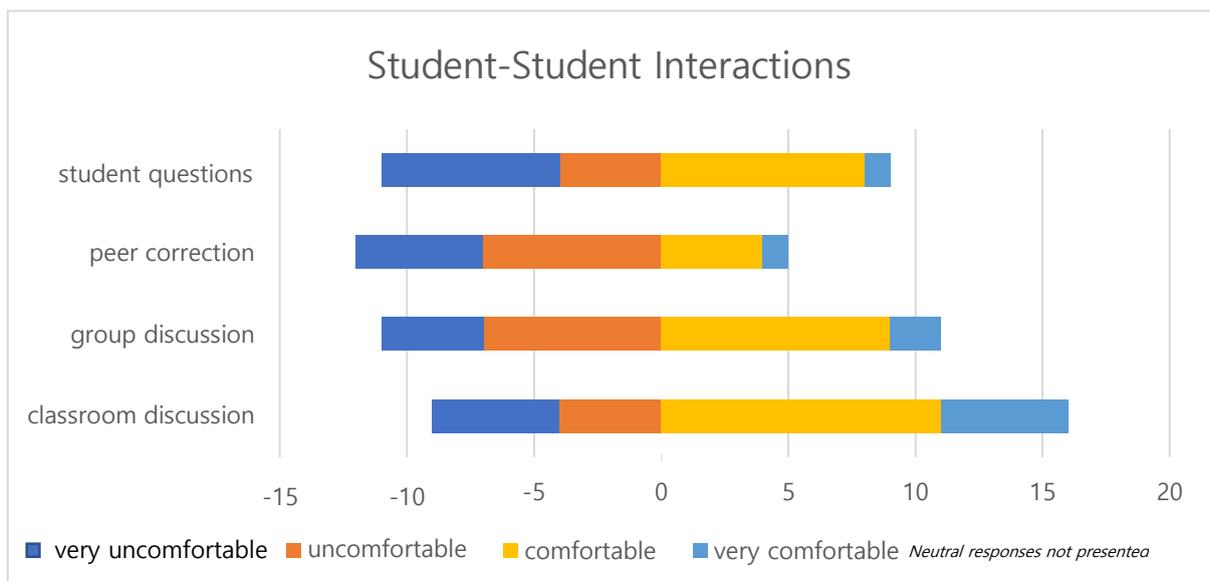


Figure 3: Reaction to student-student interactions

Students reported slight discomfort with 1:1 student interactions and neutral to

slight comfort with discussion tasks. It was interesting to me that students reported higher degrees of comfort with classroom discussion (M 2.78, SD 1.31) than small group discussions (M 3.06, SD 1.13). This may be indicative of a preference for more familiar teacher-centered classroom tasks or, perhaps, situations in which students remain more in control of deciding when, or when not, to speak.

Again when examining these results across gender and grade I found that girls report higher degrees of comfort than boys for each item and that reported comfort seems to increase as students reach higher grade levels.

**Research subquestions 4 and 5: How does an L1 Korean versus an L1 English EFL teacher affect a student’s WTC? How does WTC change as students progress in their English studies and achieve greater proficiency?**

Results from the final two research questions were obtained by examining responses to survey items 18, 19 and 20. These results can be seen in Figure 4.

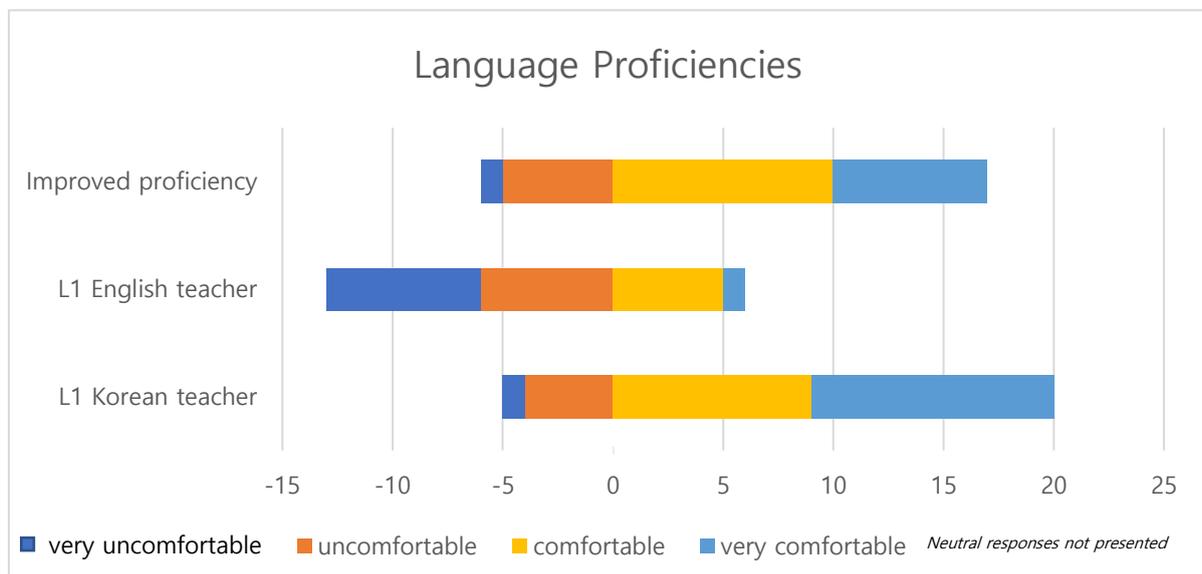


Figure 4: Language/proficiency of teacher/student

Again the same patterns observed in previous research questions can be seen with girls ranking their comfort higher than boys and comfort seeming to increase by grade level. It is unsurprising that students felt more comfortable with a Korean teacher, who

they share a cultural and linguistic background with, than a native-English speaking teacher, but what is perhaps surprising is the degree to which this is so. Having a Korean teacher received the highest ranking among survey items (M 2.22, SD 1.16) while a native-English speaking teacher was among the lowest (M 3.41, SD 1.10). It should be noted here that this survey was conducted after my first class with these students, so it is unlikely that my own teaching and Korean language proficiency had a significant impact on student answers. Also unsurprising is the fact that students perceive their WTC to increase as their English proficiency improves. While this might be a predictable response, data from observation, journals and self-reflection seems to paint another picture which will be discussed in more detail below.

### **Journal/Observation Theme 1: Stick to the familiar, but not the monotonous.**

One of my most frequently noted observations in journal entries was that students' WTC seems to be largely influenced by how familiar they are with the speaking task and the English teacher.

The first day of class was rated lowest for WTC in both the journal entry and observation record (the ratio of HWTC/LWTC was 1.133). The lesson for this day was focused on introductions and several of the speaking tasks, such as making inferences based on a photograph or predictions about the meaning of key vocabulary, were more likely tasks that the students had little or no practice with. As classes progressed WTC seemed to increase steadily on days two and three (D2: 1.714, D3: 2.357) with a slight drop on day four (1.925). There are several possible explanations for the drop on day four, the most likely contributor is that I was having an off day in my teaching as recorded in the journal entry for that day, but another possible contributing factor was that on this day I attempted to introduce student-student questioning in discussions. Uncertainty over instructions, especially in classes with lower proficiency levels, and resistance to the task

seemed to lead to a marked decrease in WTC during those portions of the lessons. Nevertheless, it seems that as students became more familiar with me as a teacher and the tasks I was asking of them their overall WTC increased. Figure 5 illustrates the data gathered from my overall observations on students daily WTC.

When looking at the records from observation sheets for each lesson, it seems that the second part of the lesson generally had the highest rates of WTC. This is perhaps unsurprising as this section of the lesson usually contained more text and language support than the warm-up and final activity for each lesson. One might assume that textbook based activities are more familiar to students as there is probably a much higher degree of consistency among EFL instructors when teaching from the textbook. Cumulative HWTC/LWTC ratios for the first, second and third sections of the lessons were: 1.476, 2.444 and 1.524. Figure 6 illustrates my observations on students' WTC for each segment of a lesson.

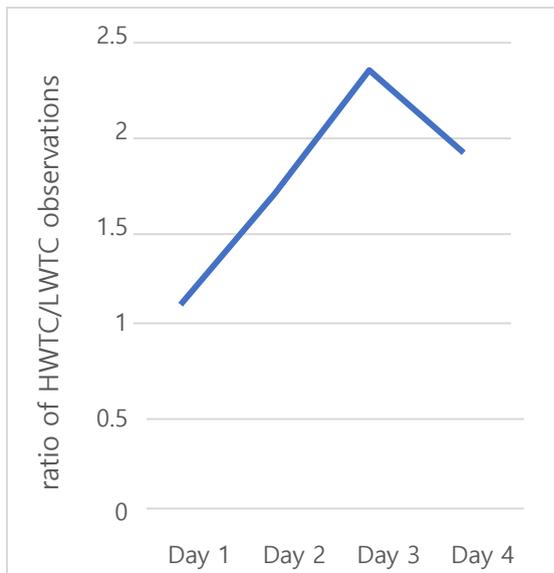


Figure 5: Daily Fluctuation in WTC

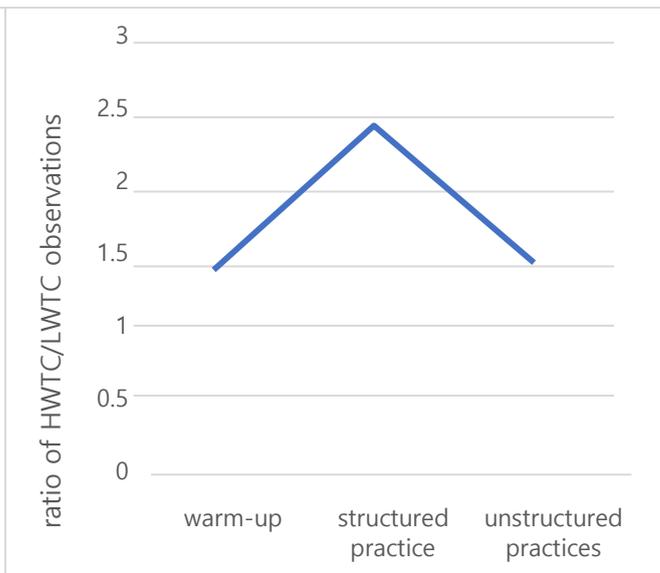


Figure 6: Fluctuation in WTC within a lesson

This theme seems to align closely with the survey results. Students who rank their comfort with L1 Korean teachers, class discussions and teacher-centered tasks are probably indicating comfort in more familiar traditional educational settings in Korea. An important point to make here is that while students might feel more comfortable with speaking tasks that they are familiar with, monotony in tasks and activities can adversely affect WTC. Although the four days of instruction recorded for this research did not provide an opportunity for students to get overly-familiar with the activities that I used in my lessons, self-reflection on previous student populations does tell me that if the same activities are used too frequently students are likely to become disinterested and disengaged in the tasks.

**Journal/Observation Theme 2: Class size and environment matter.**

While it might not have been a determining factor of WTC within the narrow range of class sizes observed in this study, self-reflection, indicates that class size does influence WTC. In short virtual classrooms I have found 3-4 students to be an ideal number and in longer in-person classes this number might be increased to 8-12. These sizes are neither too small, which often causes student anxiety due to the need to constantly be producing language, nor large enough to significantly limit each students' opportunities to participate. Although only two classes observed in this research had four students and none of the classes had 3, journal entries for both larger and smaller classes seems to indicate that anxiety in smaller classes and a lack of opportunities to speak in larger ones both played significant roles in affecting WTC.

Despite the importance of class size, it seems the ability of a few students to set the mood of the class, for better or worse, can overcome the effect of class size on WTC. On day two of classes I was thrilled to witness a more proficient peer providing respectful and unprompted L1 support to a less proficient classmate in a two-student class. This effectively

relieved the language anxiety of the less proficient student and increased the speaking opportunities of the more proficient one. On day four, when these supports were not provided, WTC for both students was noticeable lower. Another positive observation occurred in a low-level second grade five student class in which the enthusiasm of two or three students seemed to infect the WTC of the entire class, making this class consistently one of the most engaged. The opposite effect was observed in an older more proficient four student class in which the reluctance of a few students to participate seemed to affect the attitudes of their classmates and lowered the WTC for the entire class on certain days.

An interesting observation is that, when considering WTC across proficiency levels and comparing these results to students reported comfort as their proficiency increases results do not consistently match. Although students claim to feel more comfortable speaking as they become increasingly proficient, this is not reflected in journal entries, observation reports or self-reflection. The class with the highest levels of reported WTC in both journal entries and observation reports was a lower-level class, while the class with some of the lowest WTC had the most proficient students. This is something that I have often observed in teaching Korean elementary school classes. Young students, who are just beginning their English studies, often have the greatest enthusiasm for exploring the language and exhibit the highest levels of WTC, while older students, who have studied for years and are burdened with heavier workloads from English as well as other subjects, can often be the most reluctant speakers. When reflecting on experiences with adults, it seems that class environment, motivation and personality traits are much greater predictors of a student's WTC than actual English proficiency.

### **Journal/Observation Theme 3: Assess proficiency accurately and adapt accordingly**

Perhaps one of the most important determiners of WTC for any given task is how well the task corresponds with a student's English proficiency and allows them to engage

in the language within their zone of proximal development. On day one of lessons I had little information about the proficiency of individual students in my class and planned lessons based on my expectations of student proficiency as determined by the textbooks each class was using. Multiple cases of students who were not at a proficiency level appropriate for the textbook that they had been assigned quickly became evident and these students struggled to engage in speaking tasks in that first class. As I became more in-tune with my students' actual proficiency levels I became much more adept at adapting texts and tasks to meet students at appropriate levels. I believe that this can account for some of the daily increase in student WTC, seen in Figure 5 above. Several classes, such as the two person class mentioned above, which contains students at mixed proficiencies still present a challenge. Another two-person class, in which both students do not have the language proficiency to meet the demands of the course textbook, is a particular challenge as I struggle to balance the expectations of parents and my employer that I cover course material in class and the needs of my students for more basic language instruction.

Although almost every case of students being placed at inappropriate levels in this research project involved students who were placed above their current proficiency levels, self-reflection informs me that placing students below their proficiency can also have adverse effects on student WTC. Although students in this situation might display high levels of enthusiasm and WTC in initial lessons, I have observed that it is hard to maintain this enthusiasm if a student is consistently unchallenged in class.

### **Discussion**

When looking back at the findings discussed above, I am reminded of the difficulties of assessing and effectively impacting WTC that were identified in the literature review. Although I purposefully narrowed the scope of my research to focus on a few of, what I believe, are key environmental and linguistic factors affecting WTC in my

EFL classrooms the range of and interplay between these factors seems to present a complex and predictable hard to untangle situation in the EFL classroom. It is my belief that similar studies conducted in East Asian countries that have much of the same historic and cultural influences on the attitudes of students and teachers towards appropriate learning behaviors would lead to similar results, but it would be interesting to conduct similar studies in countries where traditional teaching attitudes and practices might vary greatly from those found in Korea.

### **Conclusions**

Familiarity seemed to play an important role in determining the language anxiety that students experienced when speaking in the classroom. This preference for the familiar can be seen in survey responses in which students reported higher levels of comfort with more traditional teacher-centered classroom activities as well as with a teacher that shared their cultural-linguistic background. During observation of lessons students displayed higher levels of WTC during structured and text-based speaking activities that allowed them to focus on specific language skills and vocabulary in a format they were likely more accustomed to.

Although class size seems to play a role in WTC, these effects can often be offset by the classroom environment that the teacher and students create. It has often been my experience in teaching elementary school classes that the behavior and attitude of a few students, especially in classes with mixed ages, can significantly impact the atmosphere of the entire class for better or worse. This is reminiscent of Cao (2014) who identified environment and individual characteristics as two of the three categories of factors influencing WTC and described the interactions between these factors as creating a classroom atmosphere in which WTC is constantly changing. Examples of positive effects that a few students can have were observed in classes that were both above and

below the ideal size, while the negative effect was observed in a class that had been identified as an ideal size. Although I was not able to observe my students long enough in this project to get a sense of the social relationships between them, it has often been my experience that these relationships are significant in determining which students are more likely to influence a classroom atmosphere.

As most experienced EFL teachers are likely aware, it is extremely important to accurately assess students' English proficiency and place them in classes in which they can work towards challenging, yet attainable goals. In for-profit EFL classes in Korea, such as those taught in hagwons (extra-curricular private schools) or at after-school programs like the one in this study, it is often the case that improper assessment or a desire to please parents by accommodating requests to place students in higher level classes than those deemed appropriate can have negative consequences for the class, teacher, and most significantly the student. Students who are misplaced often become frustrated in their English studies and, I believe, attending classes in these circumstances may often cause more harm than good for these students in their long-term English acquisition pursuits.

A final interesting finding was that students' perceptions of their own WTC do not always seem to be entirely in line with the behaviors observed in the classroom, as was the case with students' responses indicating that WTC increases along with proficiency, which was not clearly demonstrated through observation or self-reflection. The findings also indicated that female students perceived their WTC as higher than their male counterparts and, although self-reflection on my own experiences as a teacher leads me to suspect that this might be the case among Korean students, more research is needed to either confirm or refute this. Self-reflection also leads me to suspect that these gender differences could possibly be reversed as students progress in their academic and professional careers, but this is only speculation at this time. I believe it would be

interesting and highly informative to conduct further research to identify the roles that gender and age play in individual factors that affect WTC as students' move through different stages of L2 language acquisition. It is important to listen to students and take their emotions and opinions into account, but one must remember the challenges of assessing WTC (Mutahar, 2019; Peng, 2013). It would seem from this study that these challenges extend to self-assessing WTC as well.

### **Implications for Future Research**

One of my greatest regrets in conducting this research project is that the sudden change in student population restricted my ability to gather qualitative data from the students themselves. A previous design for the project included an optional comment section for each survey item, in which students could elaborate on their feelings towards different types of speaking tasks, and interviews with students I had a good rapport with who had exhibited different habits of participation in my classes. Survey comments were removed due to concerns that this might reduce the response rate and limit the amount of quantitative data gathered and interviews were removed out of fear of the anxiety students might feel while being interviewed by a foreign teacher they are unfamiliar with.

Although Mutahar (2019) identifies the limitations of self-reported data in assessing situational WTC, when exploring a concept as complex and personal as WTC, I believe that it is important for students to be given a voice and an opportunity to express and elaborate on how they feel different factors affect their own WTC. Qualitative data gathered from students played a key role in the majority of studies reviewed above and, I would hope, that future research continues to design a means for students to be given a platform with which to express their views on the topic.

As mentioned above, results to survey items might also have been affected by the phrasing of questions. In particular, asking students to rate their 'comfort' while

‘speaking’ might have led students to focus on their comfort in the classroom while ignoring their likelihood of speaking in any given situation. It would be useful to examine how different ways of phrasing survey items such as; ‘I am more likely to speak when...’ might affect student responses.

Another limitation of the current study is that the time available did not allow for extended observation of students. Four days was not long enough for students to familiarize themselves with and acclimate to my own teaching strategies, so changes in WTC were limited. Because WTC is in constant fluctuation, any attempt to identify trends in WTC and effects of different teaching strategies should take a more longitudinal approach. As seen in the literature review, even in studies in which researchers spent weeks, or even months, observing students and implementing interventions, time restraints were often cited as a reason for inconsistent findings and effects on WTC (Cao, 2014; Macintyre, et al., 2011; Mutahar, 2019; Peng, 2013; Van Batenburg, et al., 2019)

Several interesting questions remain unanswered in this study such as how the instructional strategies of different teachers affect the WTC of students in their classrooms, how WTC may vary in online and in-person classes, and how the number of years spent studying in EFL classrooms might affect WTC. By following different groups of students and teachers in a variety of Korean elementary school EFL classrooms and observing the WTC of the students that they teach it may be possible to identify specific techniques that are highly effective in improving WTC for this specific student population.

### **Implications for Classroom Practice**

I believe that the results of this study suggest several ways that EFL teachers can make adjustments to classroom practice to improve student engagement and enhance WTC. An important first step would be for foreign teachers to familiarize themselves with

the educational environment of Korea. By gaining an awareness of the factors that influence WTC in the EFL classroom, identified in this study as well as previous research (Cao, 2014; Lee, 2020; Macintyre, et al., 2011; Peng, 2013), and attempting to cultivate a positive attitude towards WTC and adapt strategies that have been proven to enhance WTC in their own classroom environments (Wang and Tseng, 2020), a foreign EFL teacher might adjust their instruction in significant ways to reduce language anxiety. This is by no means a suggestion that teachers blindly adhere to the status quo in their instructional approaches or that classroom practices that are believed to enhance WTC should be altered in ways that would significantly reduce their impact simply to make students more comfortable. It is hardly a matter of dispute that learning to communicate in a foreign language can be a stressful experience, and it is unlikely that attempts to shield students from this stress will benefit them in achieving their language goals. However, mitigating the stress to assist students in overcoming affective filters (emotional and psychological barriers to language learning) by gradually introducing new communicative tasks, providing clear instructions and exhibiting patience as students adapt might prove extremely beneficial for students in the long run. Over nearly two decades of teaching in Korea I have observed these gradual changes already taking place in Korean classrooms across multiple academic subjects as a new generation of teachers seems to be embracing a more interactive student-centered approach to education. Perhaps, in time, classrooms that focus on student-centered communicative tasks will become the norm and the need to ease students into these types of activities will not be necessary.

Another thing that can help teachers improve their classroom environment is being aware of the social interactions that are occurring both in and out of their class. Identifying students that might have outsized influence on the atmosphere of a class and finding ways to encourage them to have a positive impact could prove extremely

beneficial to all students in a class. Creating situations for positive and productive student-student interactions could go a long way towards creating an environment in which all students feel more comfortable expressing themselves in English.

A final strategy for teachers wishing to improve their students' educational experiences is to advocate for these students before they are placed in the classroom. It is unlikely that teachers will be able to influence policy regarding class size, but I believe that it is important that they take an active role in the assessment and placement of new students whenever possible. It is often the case that a parent might insist on a student being placed in a class that is likely to be too difficult and an employer, wishing to avoid confrontation, will oblige the parent's request. I believe that it falls on the EFL teacher, as a professional in language education, to explain the potential harm that might result and strongly recommend placing the student in a classroom that is appropriate for the student's language proficiency level.

In my own classrooms I hope to put lessons I have learned as a result of this research into practice in several ways. First collaborating closely with L2 English teachers, who often possess firsthand knowledge of how the strategies that I might consider employing in my classroom will be perceived by my students, I hope to design tasks that are more responsive to students' cultural backgrounds and classroom expectations. I also believe that, when possible, getting to know my students needs and motivations and observing their interactions, will help me develop better classroom management strategies that can be modified to best enhance participation with the many diverse groups of students that I encounter. Although advocating for proper placement has been a role I have long played in my classrooms, perhaps with the findings of this research I will be able to formulate more convincing arguments regarding the importance of this first critical step in language acquisition.

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## Appendix A – Survey Items (English)

1) I am a...

boy

girl

2) I am in grade...

1

2

3

4

5

6

3) I am studying...

Story Wiz 1-4

Story Wiz 2-4

Story Wiz 3-4

Catch Phonics B

Catch Phonics C

High Pop Flyer 2

4) I feel comfortable talking about personal topics (my day, my feelings, my plans) during an English lesson.

strongly agree

agree

neither agree nor

disagree

strongly disagree

*(these answer choices were repeated for all remaining survey items)*

5) I feel comfortable presenting homework assignments out loud in English.

6) I feel comfortable answering a teacher's question directed at the entire class in English.

7) I feel comfortable answering a teacher's questions directed at me individually in English.

8) I feel comfortable answering a classmate's question directed at me individually in English.

- 9) I feel comfortable speaking in English when I have prepared for a class in advance.
- 10) I feel comfortable answering questions in English after receiving language instruction from my teacher.
- 11) I feel comfortable answering questions in English after receiving information from a text or video.
- 12) I feel comfortable answering questions in English even if I am uncertain that my answer is correct.
- 13) I feel comfortable speaking in English in class when the teacher corrects my mistakes.
- 14) I feel comfortable speaking English in class when a classmate corrects my mistakes.
- 15) I feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions in English.
- 16) I feel comfortable participating in pair or small group discussions in English.
- 17) I feel comfortable talking to my English teacher one to one in English.
- 18) I feel comfortable speaking English in class when I have a Korean English teacher.
- 19) I feel comfortable speaking English in class when I have a native-speaking English teacher.
- 20) I feel comfortable speaking in English as my English abilities improve.



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19. 나는 수업 시간 원어민 영어 선생님과 영어로 말하는 데 편안함을 느낍니다.

20. 나는 영어 수업을 오래 받을수록 영어로 말하는 데 더 편안함을 느낍니다.

### Appendix C – Observation Sheet

6/18			Warm-up / homework	Presentation / structured practice	Activity / free practice			
Class 1	HWTC	II	III	III	8			
	LWTC	III	II	II	7			
Class 2	HWTC	I	II		3			
	LWTC	I			1			
Class 3	HWTC	II	IIII	III	9			
	LWTC	III	I	II	6			
Class 4	HWTC	IIII	IIII	IIII	15			
	LWTC				0			
Class 5	HWTC	III	IIII		7			
	LWTC	I			1			
Class 6	HWTC	III	IIII	IIII	11			
	LWTC	I			1			
Class 7	HWTC	I	I	I	3			
	LWTC				0			
Class 8	HWTC	I	IIII		6			
	LWTC	II	I		3			
Class 9	HWTC	I	I		2			
	LWTC	I	I		2			
Class 10	HWTC	I	II	II	5			
	LWTC	III	II	II	7			
			21	15	30	7	17	7

## **Appendix D – Journal Entry**

6/18

Students are getting increasingly engaged, especially at the lower proficiency/grades. Perhaps familiarity with tasks and teacher is partly responsible. Perhaps I am getting to know their capabilities better and plan/adjust more appropriately. Classes that stood out today:

Class 1: These students have been a challenge, but did much better today. I think they are becoming more accustomed to my teaching style and know what to expect better. Students sometimes struggle with the content, but most of the class seems to be making efforts to produce the target language.

Class 4: Remains engaged and enthusiastic, what is it with this group?

Class 5: Did much better today one student was absent (4 present) and perhaps the reduced class size helped?

Class 7: Only the lower proficiency student was present today. He was more engaged and enthusiastic than I have ever seen him and seemed more capable of using the target language than I had anticipated. Perhaps a higher proficiency classmate was making him nervous and he really has higher WTC than I had originally assessed?

Class 8: These students are really getting into the swing of it. They still struggle with the content, but are really making an effort to grasp it. I think that they are beginning to understand and appreciate my approach?

Class 9: Both these students are placed woefully above their level. They seemed to do better today because we stuck to the book. This seems to provide them with some safety and comfort in the familiar, but I don't think it will help them catch up with the level that they are placed at. I've spoken to my colleague about bumping them down. She's aware of the situation but says this is not possible.

Class 10: Seemed a bit less engaged than Wednesday. Friday night fever?