

# The relationship between willingness to communicate and social presence in an online English language course

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*Vietnamese high school students have few opportunities to use English outside class and they are often reluctant to speak in class. This paper describes and explains the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) and relates this to varied perceptions of social presence. Eighteen high school students in Vietnam took a six-week online course using Facebook and Skype. They were interviewed individually before and after the course about their experiences, focusing on their perceptions of their own WTC. The results show that the students were more willing to use English spontaneously in the online environment in contexts where they perceived that they had less social presence. Text and audio chat were felt to be less face threatening than video chat, and consequently, students were more willing to speak in conditions of lower social presence. It can be concluded that the more social presence students felt they had in the online environment, the less their WTC. This was true for both synchronous and asynchronous online environments. Allowing students to control their social presence in online communication can embolden shy students and increase their WTC.*

**Keywords:** Willingness to communicate, social presence, online education, Vietnamese learners of English

## Introduction

In Vietnam, English is a foreign language, so there is little opportunity for students to practice English outside the classroom. In class, teaching tends to be focused on accuracy rather than fluency, with explicit teaching and assessment of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension (Le, 2011; G. V.

Nguyen, 2013). Students have little interaction in English, and so have little opportunity to develop communicative competence, fluency and confidence in English in negotiation for meaning (Long, 1996). In other contexts, technology has been used to give students opportunities for interaction with interlocutors within the class or elsewhere, through telecollaboration of various kinds. This study describes student experiences of an online summer school course, designed and delivered by the first author to give Vietnamese high school students an opportunity to develop their spoken and written English proficiency through interaction on Skype and Facebook. We are particularly interested in seeing whether and how working online, with the disinhibitory effects of limited social presence (Cunningham, 2011), affects the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English, since some researchers have found Asian students to be passive and reticent (Cao, 2011; Shao & Gao, 2016; Zhong, 2013). Specifically, we ask: *How does students' willingness to communicate relate to varying conditions of social presence during an online course?*

The remainder of this introductory section provides some relevant background. First, we discuss the use of social networking sites in learning and teaching languages, before commenting on students' WTC in a foreign language, both in general and in online environments. We discuss how such online environments can lead to increases in WTC, due to disinhibition effects, and we tie this to social presence more widely. Following this introductory section, we introduce the research design and the online course in which the students engaged and we then outline and discuss our findings.

### *Social networking sites in learning and teaching languages*

A social networking site (SNS), such as Facebook, can be used as a learning platform for language learning with asynchronous and synchronous text, voice, and video discussions (Alwi, Adams, & Newton, 2012). Web 2.0 tools provide students with opportunities to practice listening, reading, speaking and writing and foster student autonomy (Pop, 2010). Moreover, technology can be used to ease the effect of time constraints in the class and to complement classroom teaching with online instruction outside the class time (Lai, Yeung, & Hu, 2016). Previous research has examined the use of social media outside the classroom (Al-Hariri & Al-Hattami, 2017; Beckman, Bennett, & Lockyer, 2014; Donlan, 2014; Gosper, McKenzie, Pizzica, Malfroy, & Ashford-Rowe, 2014; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015) for both social and educational purposes. Most of the students in these studies are positive towards learning English online because they can access supplementary resources (Son, 2007) and feel less stressed in a "virtual community" (Goodband, Solomon, Samuels, Lawson, & Bhakta, 2012). Because SNSs allow mass participation, they open up possibilities of diversified pedagogical methods and individualization to improve performance, motivation and autonomy (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Mazman & Usluel, 2010). Specifically, students can learn from their peers on SNSs, for example in the brainstorming phase of the writing process (Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012), learning vocabulary from their friends' comments (Yunus and Salehi 2012) and improving their grammatical ability and attitudes towards learning (Ru-Chu, 2011). Early SNS research found that they facilitate the creation of a collaborative environment, and may increase student interest (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Although many studies have considered the use of SNSs for educational purposes, it is unclear whether or how learning on SNSs affects students' WTC.

### *Willingness to communicate*

WTC was first used in discussing the likelihood of first language (L1) interlocutors taking part in communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990), however, the problem of an apparent lack of WTC has been reported by multiple researchers working with language learners. In language learning, WTC may be important as we assume that interaction in the target language facilitates successful acquisition (Long, 1996), and learners with high WTC are more likely to utilize their L2 in conversation (S.-J. Kang, 2005). MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels (1998, p. 547) define WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2”, giving an example of students raising hands to speak in the L2 class as a way to indicate willingness to communicate. S.-J. Kang (2005) talks about WTC in L2 as readiness to communicate with variation “according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context” (p. 291).

MacIntyre et al. (1998) present a model to explain variables which might affect individual WTC in the L2. The model shows that self-confidence or communication behavior has a direct impact on WTC while psychological aspects of the interlocutor such as motivation, personality or attitudes were more permanent and stable than WTC, which has been described as ‘dynamic’ (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). MacIntyre et al. (1998) point out that WTC is the final level which directly affects language use. High WTC students would be at an advantage in communicative activities (Ellis, 2004) because they interact more frequently in their L2 (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003), and so have more opportunity to practice their L2 (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001). They, therefore, become more active and independent (S.-J. Kang, 2005) and usually achieve higher language competence (MacIntyre et al., 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Several studies have been conducted to investigate factors affecting WTC. Shao and Gao (2016) reviewed ten articles published in the journal *System* from 2000 to 2015. The articles investigated the WTC of learners from different contexts such as Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Poland and Macau. The findings showed that students’ WTC is not culturally rooted and suggested that teachers should encourage students to be more willing to communicate in the class. Two Korean students studying English in New Zealand (Cao, 2011) and Korean students studying English in the USA (S.-J. Kang, 2005) were found to be more willing to communicate when the topics were familiar to them. Lack of speaking experience was reported as limiting Asian students’ WTC (Cheng, 2000; Liu & Littlewood, 1997), while study-abroad experience appeared to increase WTC (D.-M. Kang, 2014). Chinese students’ WTC was found to be affected by the environment, and their motivations, and beliefs (Peng, 2012). However, (Chen, 2003, p. 265) described other Chinese students as preferring to ‘think deeply before talking’, and Chinese and Korean students learning English in New Zealand and Taiwan were found to be more concerned about their language accuracy, self-perceived confidence (Cao, 2011; Zhong, 2013), face-saving and fear of being commented on in speaking English in front of the class (Hsu, 2015; Zhong, 2013). Assessment was found to be an important factor motivating students to speak English in Macau (Eddy-U, 2015) and Taiwan (Hsu, 2015), while the WTC of Korean high school students was found to be affected by the classroom environment (Joe, Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2017).

### *Willingness to communicate in computer-mediated communication*

Several studies (Alwi, 2015; Freiermuth & Huang, 2015; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Ockert, 2014) have investigated students' WTC in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Sheldon (2008) surveyed 172 tertiary students in the USA. She concluded that students who were more willing to communicate in real life tended to be more willing to communicate in online environments. Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) compared the motivation of 36 female students in Japan in face-to-face discussions and online chat. Most preferred online chat to face-to-face communication because they perceived the online environment as more comfortable, which enhanced their willingness to communicate. Reinders and Wattana (2015) found that high school students in Thailand felt more confident and more easily able to speak English while playing computer games because they supposed they were not being assessed by the teacher. Therefore, they produced more words and more turns while playing the computer games. The findings from these studies showed that an online environment is often perceived as 'safer' and less face-threatening, and as a result, students were often more willing to communicate; however, these studies did not identify clearly whether students used text chat asynchronously or synchronously or whether synchronous text chat is less face-threatening than asynchronous and vice versa.

V.L. Nguyen (2011) concluded that both synchronous and asynchronous CMC assisted trainee teachers in Vietnam to generate more ideas and lessen students' anxiety. Freiermuth and Huang (2015) examined telecollaboration between students from Japan and Taiwan and found that that online chat enhanced students' confidence using the target language which led to more willingness to communicate and higher motivation, stimulated more interactions, minimized the language difference among group members and boosted their mutual understanding. Similar findings in a range of contexts were reported by Yanguas and Flores (2014) comparing face-to-face and Skype task-based teaching, Chotipaktanasook and Reinders (2016) using Instagram as a channel for sharing ideas, feelings and thoughts, and Alwi (2015) who found that groups of Malaysian engineering students produced more language in text chat than face-to-face. These studies concluded that online environments were less face threatening than the face-to-face meetings; however, these studies were conducted with only text chat while they did not address whether the online environment with synchronous or asynchronous voice or video chat was less face-threatening than the physical classroom.

### *Online disinhibition*

Online disinhibition effects in CMC have been well documented (Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004). Disinhibition is explained as "any behavior that is characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and judgement of others" (Joinson, 2001, p. 44). Reduced social (visual, auditory and contextual) cues and controllability (being able to review or edit the message) has been attributed to disinhibition effects Casale, Fiovaranti, & Caplan, 2015; Joinson (2007) Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, and Geller (1985) Walther (1996). Suler (2004) discusses how anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and individual difference affect disinhibition. Studies sometimes associate the online environment with reduced social cues and, therefore, greater disinhibition. But online environments can be used in a multitude of ways, and we would not expect uniform disinhibition effects. We would not assume, for

example, the same level of student anonymity and invisibility during synchronous video chat as in asynchronous text chat.

Several studies have compared the level of disclosure in the face-to-face and online environments. Joinson (2001) and Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that participants disclosed more personal information in the computer-mediated environment than in the face-to-face environment. Joinson went on to test students' disclosure with and without video in an online environment and found that students disclosed less when they had the camera on. He concluded that a perception of anonymity results in a higher level of disclosure. However, the study did not address whether video chat in the online environment is less face-threatening than in a face-to-face environment. A few studies found that introvert participants were more nervous in face-to-face conversation than in anonymous text-chat (Caplan, 2006; Rice & Markey, 2009; Weidman et al., 2012), while Lapidot-Leffer and Barak (2015) investigated the effects of three factors: anonymity, invisibility and lack of eye contact on self-disclosure and concluded that anonymity and invisibility significantly affected the disclosure of emotions in what they called a benign disinhibitory effect. Cunningham (2011) argued that students' perceived self-disclosure in synchronous video communication was less than in the face-to-face classroom. Online disinhibition effects may be a positive factor for anxious students and an online course could lever an inverse relationship between social presence and WTC.

### *Social presence*

Short, Williams and Christie (1976) first coined the term "social presence" when they studied human communication via various media. They define social presence as "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) defines that social presence is "the degree to which a person is perceived as "real" in mediated communication" (p. 8). Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) in their community of inquiry model have a similar definition that "social presence is the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby, presenting themselves to others as 'real' people" (p. 94). Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999) characterised social presence as including affective, interactive and cohesive presence. Affective presence is defined as emotional aspects in the exchange, interactive presence indicates the interactive thread of exchanges, while cohesive presence refers to group cohesion. Social presence has been examined in connection with online learning. Hostetter and Busch (2013) investigated evidence of social presence in students' writing and found that students with more social symbols such as affection, interaction or cohesion performed better in their writing assignments. Many studies conducted with social presence in online education have focussed on asynchronous text-based communication. Much online education is still in that paradigm, although synchronous multimodal teaching using online web-conferencing together with text chat offers further student control of the degree of social presence. Cunningham (2011) found that most students who were not required to use video in synchronous online classes did not turn it on. Students preferred voice chat to video chat, and, given the choice, text chat to voice chat.

This paper builds upon Cunningham (2011) and other work to explore more fully the relationship between social presence and WTC. The research is sited in a six-week online course which was designed to provide high school students in Vietnam with an opportunity

to speak and write English in a meaning-focused learning environment. We were particularly interested in whether participation in such a course with different levels of social presence such as synchronous text chat, voice chat and video chat and asynchronous text chat and audio and video recordings increased learners' willingness to communicate in English and whether students felt less inhibited in the online environment than they had reported being in the physical classroom. Our research question was: "*What is the relationship between willingness to communicate and social presence?*" In the following section we outline our approach and the course, before discussing our main findings.

## Research method

Participants were 18 high school students in a provincial city in Vietnam who volunteered to participate in an online course, which lasted for six weeks, in the summer before their important final year in high school. Among these eighteen students, there were four males and fourteen females. The participants were interviewed before the course about their WTC in their regular face to face English class and after the course about their WTC in the online environment.

All the participants were native speakers of Vietnamese. They were 16 years old and from three different high schools. They were recruited through visits to each school where they were informed about the project. Eighteen of them volunteered to participate in the online course. Sixteen of them used technology extensively while two did not use much technology. One of them did not have a Facebook account.

Pre-course interviews investigated students' level of anxiety, their perceived communicative ability and their use of English outside the classroom. The pre-course interviews were face-to-face semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for initial questions), and each interview lasted about 12 minutes. All the interviews were conducted by the first author, in Vietnamese, which is the native language of the students so that they could answer the interview questions easily. After that, these students were added into three closed Facebook groups as the same class that they studied at school. Each group had six students who were classmates and knew each other in 'real life'. Students in the same group could interact with each other but they could not interact with students from other groups. The online course was carried out through Facebook and Skype. Facebook was used as a learning platform where the instructor provided tasks for students to do, asking them to post there. Skype was employed as an online conferencing tool to give feedback to students and have further discussions.

Each week, students were requested to do two asynchronous tasks and upload their work on the closed Facebook groups. These tasks were: to write a paragraph with a given topic relating to generation gaps or relationship, listen to a recording and summarize in writing and post it to the closed Facebook group, or record their speech with a given topic from the two above themes. Students also had to attend two sixty-minute synchronous Skype meetings to receive some feedback and have more discussions, to practise speaking via Skype. During the Skype meeting, voice calls were the most common means of communication; but students could choose to use text-chat, voice chat or video chat to communicate with the teacher. After the online course, students were asked to take part in post-course interviews which examined students' experiences in the online course especially their willingness to communicate when they were online (see Appendix for initial questions). The post-course interviews were conducted in Vietnamese via Skype and each interview took place in about

15 minutes. The pre-course and post-course interviews with the eighteen participants were transcribed and analysed. The transcripts of pre- and post-course interviews were coded using NVivo software. The analysis went forwards and backwards searching, coding, and grouping the information into themes, following instructions for coding data for qualitative research given in Charmaz (2006), starting coding with open nodes which were meaningful. At the beginning many codes were created and as the process continued, the themes and categories emerged and the number of codes decreased. When the nodes had been created, the iterative process was run through the nodes to rename, organize and put into categories. The iterative process continued until key themes were identified.

## Findings and discussions

Two main themes emerged from the interview data, the “**self-consciousness**” of students due to their shyness, perceived face threat and embarrassment and “**affordances of technology**” with the effects of training, having time to think and access to information, perceived anonymity and privacy, multimodality, and interaction, as categories. These will be presented and exemplified in the following sections.

### *Self-consciousness*

In both the pre-course and post-course interviews, students talked about how they felt about speaking English in their regular class. Several mentioned feeling nervous about speaking English in front of the class because they were shy and felt exposed. All the examples below are translations from Vietnamese.

**Example 1** – *I was shy.* (Pre-course interview – student P).

**Example 2** – *Because I was not confident, I didn't speak* (Pre-course interview – student J).

**Example 3** – *There were many people in the class, they looked at me speaking, I felt shy, teacher* (Post-course interview – student E)

**Example 4** – *Speaking face-to-face is easier, but it was unconfident* (Post-course interview – student A).

Others felt unable to speak fluently or were afraid of losing face and being laughed at by other students for their mistakes.

**Example 5:** *Because my English is not enough, I cannot speak well* (Pre-course interview - N).

**Example 6:** *I am afraid that if I speak wrongly, other students will laugh at me* (Pre-course interview – student A)

**Example 7** – *Due to the insufficient linguistic environment, I had not had a chance to practise speaking, therefore, at the beginning when you asked me to speak, I felt a little nervous* (Post-course interview – Student D).

Students were not used to seeing themselves on screen or to hearing their own voices, and were embarrassed, particularly if they thought others might see them.

Others avoided voice chat because they were not in a private environment. One wrote

**Example 8** – I preferred text chat; I didn't like voice chat because my nephews were carrying on around me (Post-course interview – student F).

When students were asked to turn on their cameras, they perceived the same level of anxiety as in face-to-face communication.

**Example 9** – Looking at the others' faces, I felt a bit shy (Post-course interview – student G).

**Example 10** – It was very nervous, teacher (Post-course interview – student O).

Students were even worried about being seen by other people when they were on the video calls in the online interaction.

**Example 11** – If someone passing by saw me, I would not look natural (Post-course interview – student D)

Just as in the synchronous Skype meetings, students were camera shy on Facebook; when asked to make recordings of their speech, they preferred voice recording to video recording. Students felt insecure when they had to show their faces in the video and were unused to seeing their own faces.

**Example 12** – Putting my face in the video was ridiculous (Post-course interview – student N)

**Example 13** – Yes, they spoke English, their mouth pronouncing the sound 's' looked good, but I mispronounced, or did not know how to pronounce, my mouth did not look beautiful (Post-course interview – student D).

To sum up, students reported that they did not feel confident to speak in front of the class because they perceived that their English was not good enough, or that they did not feel comfortable speaking English. This is consistent with the findings reported in previous research (Hsu, 2015; Zhong, 2013) indicating that students were afraid that they did not perform well. Similarly, Cheng (2000) pointed out students feared to speak because they had not had enough practice in productive skills. This high level of anxiety in the classroom which inhibited them speaking in front of the class is in line with the findings of Baran-Łucarz (2014) who found a relationship between willingness to communicate and pronunciation anxiety. The worse students perceived their pronunciation to be, the less willing they were to communicate. In addition, students were afraid of making mistakes and being evaluated in front of the class. These findings were supported by previous studies (Hsu, 2015; Zhong, 2013) that students were uncomfortable receiving feedback on their mistakes in front of the class. Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) also pointed out that immediacy and social rules made face-to-face communication in the classroom much more face-threatening and increased the level of anxiety of the interlocutors. Students' confidence was highly related to their willingness to communicate. This was also found in previous studies (Cao, 2011; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Peng, 2012).



### *Affordances of technology*

At first, when participating in the online class, students still felt a little nervous because they were not trained in the new environment. They did, however get used to this. After the first meeting, some students gained confidence and started to use voice in the Skype meetings to speak English.

**Example 14** – Yes, through Skype, at the beginning I felt unconfident but from the lesson 2, or 3, I felt normal, Teacher (Post-course interview – student G).

The most confident students were unconcerned about using Skype:

**Example 15** – Skype was ok, or in the class it was ok. Either was ok (Post-course interview – student J).

In the first synchronous meeting via Skype the students did not use voice. Instead, they tried to type as much as possible. Students reported that they preferred text chat, the least face-threatening mode of communication. One possible reason to explain this preference for text chat was that it gave students a little more time to think and prepare their answers before sending.

**Example 16** – For synchronous voice chat, sometimes I hadn't figured out what to say, but for text chat I thought, I figured out and wrote down; it was easier (Post-course interview – student F).

**Example 17** – For typing, I thought something and then typed down gradually, but for speaking I babbled. (Post-course interview – student O).

In text only situations, even if they were synchronous, students were able to use the internet before answering and search for the necessary information to answer the questions.

**Example 18** –If I did not know something, I could find the information easily on the Internet, (Post-course interview – student B).

This was easier than it had been in the regular class:

**Example 19** –Yes, on Skype it was comfortable, speaking comfortably but in the class, (I) did not know what to say, Teacher (Post-course interview – student F).

Suler (2004) suggested that another factor contributing to disinhibition effects in the CMC environment is perceived anonymity; in this study, even though the students in each group were from the same classes and knew each other, they still preferred not to use their cameras in synchronous online classes. They wanted to hide their faces to feel more private.

**Example 20** – On Skype, no one knew me, I could speak as much as possible (Post-course interview – student F).

Online video communication with the camera turned on was felt to be no less face-threatening than the physical class. This finding is in line with Cunningham (2011) who pointed out that video synchronous conferencing environment can be more face-threatening than the face-to-face class. Compared to the face-to-face physical class, most of the students reported that they were more confident with text or voice chat online and were more willing to speak in the online class because no one was able to see their face. This is consistent with the

findings mentioned earlier by Sheldon (2008), Rice & Markey (2009) and Joinson (2001). The students' reluctance to turn on their cameras is in line with the findings by Reinders and Wattana (2015) who found that students were more willing to communicate in online games in which they did not see each other's faces. The findings support Chotipaktanasook and Reinders (2016) and Mathieson and Leafman (2014) who found that students were more confident in the online environment.

Early work by Walther (1996) pointed out two important factors that make online participants (using asynchronous text communication) less inhibited about disclosing personal information are the reduced social cues and controllability. In terms of controllability, students in this study reported that they had more time to search for the answer in text communication. With regards to social cues, students were more comfortable with lower levels of social presence: text was felt to be more comfortable than voice, and voice more so than video. The lower the level of social presence in the context, the more willing students appeared to be to communicate. The most comfortable mode of communication was text chat, which explains why at the beginning, students used text chat rather than voice to communicate with each other and with the instructor although they were in voice calls. After students felt comfortable with the environment, they started to use voice to answer the questions. It took time for students to become familiar with the online environment.

However, even if students were reluctant to be seen on Skype, they wanted to see the instructor. The multimodal affordances of Skype allow them to see without being seen, by not turning on their cameras in Skype video calls.

**Example 21** – For example, the sound you said I did not know how to say, but looking at your mouth, I could say it (Post-course interview – student C).

Seeing the instructor has some advantages. As Student C mentions it is an aid to pronunciation. Being able to see the teacher's articulation is also an aid to understanding what is being said or know how to pronounce the word correctly. Cunningham, Beers Fägersten and Holmsten (2010) also found that online students used the multimodal affordances of the conferencing tool to support their comprehension. This supports Richardson and Swan (2003) who found that the more social presence students experienced, the more satisfied they felt with their instructor.

While most of the students in this study were used to using technology, there were exceptions. One student who was not very experienced at using technology reported that she was more willing to communicate in front of the class because it was more convenient than the online environment because her typing skills were not very good and it took her more time to type:

**Example 22** – *Voice chat was more convenient, teacher* (Post-course interview – student M)

This was consistent with the findings by V.L. Nguyen (2011) who found that three out of 30 students did not like a wiki environment. Similarly, Wattana (2013) pointed out that students who were not good at technology were reluctant to participate in online gaming. As well as synchronous Skype meetings, students were asked to post their work in closed Facebook groups in order to receive feedback from their peers. They were quite happy about this affordance of interactivity, hoping that someone would read their posts and assist them to fix some of their grammatical mistakes.

**Example 23** – I think it was good because posting on Facebook, you and other friends could correct my mistakes (Post-course interview – student I).

Students also expressed a preference for uploading in the relative privacy of the closed Facebook groups rather than where their entire Facebook community could see, to avoid the risk of receiving negative comments.

**Example 24** – SNSs should have a closed group to work; posting on my personal status, perhaps some people would think that I was boastful when posting my homework, teacher (Post-course interview – student F).

Again, in this asynchronous communication via Facebook, students expressed that they did not wish to turn on the camera and preferred voice recording. Here too, the more social presence the context involves, the less willing students are to communicate even in asynchronous communication when they do not have to see their audience's reaction to them. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that CMC is less face-threatening than a face-to-face environment. It really depends on the way students communicate. Once a post is uploaded to Facebook, all control is lost as to who might see it. An audio recording, with fewer social cues and lower social presence is less risky. As Suler (2004) pointed out that when students have less control and more social cues, they become less willing to communicate. Green, Wilhelmssen, Wilmots, Dodd, and Quinn (2016) found that public communication online was not perceived as different from face-to-face communication.

## Summary

The students told of different aspects of their fear of losing face: their self-consciousness and lack of confidence before the course; their initial apprehension and preference for contributing in Skype sessions using text only, not least as that gave them time to think or look up things they were unsure of, or because things were happening around them; their growing confidence and willingness to use voice on Skype but reluctance to use the web-camera because they might be seen by people passing by the other participants' screens; their unwillingness to show their faces in Facebook videos as they were unused to seeing themselves. Their eagerness to learn, (they had after all signed up voluntarily for an extra summer course) was apparent as they appreciated being able to see the instructor's face and receiving feedback, but was accompanied by reluctance to seem to be showing off to friends and family.

## Conclusion and implications

Students did not perceive that the online environment was less inhibiting or a safer environment in which to express themselves than face-to-face classroom situations, which is what other studies concluded. Instead, students' WTC varied with the level of social presence of the online context. The more social presence students experienced, the less willing they were to communicate. The online environment was only seen to be safer when students were able to regulate social cues. For example, students would share more information with text chat or voice chat compared to the face-to-face environment while video chat was perceived to be just as face-threatening as the face-to-face classroom. This could explain why students tried to minimize the social presence experienced in communicative situations at

the beginning of the course by avoiding video. From the students' perspective, the kinds of communicative activity they were asked to carry out in the online course were a considerable step up from their regular face-to-face English class with its minimal emphasis on communicative skills due to the washback from the upcoming summative assessment of knowledge of grammar and academic writing.

This study is limited in several ways. Firstly, the instructor of the online course (the first author) is himself Vietnamese. This arguably limits the authenticity of the tasks the course was built around, as there is no real reason why English should be used. Secondly, both the form of the course (online on Skype and Facebook) and the content (communicative activities based on the themes of the text book the students would use in their next class) were new to the participating students, so it is not possible to determine whether it was the nature of the tasks or the affordances of the online environment that improved their WTC.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings of this study suggest that if students are allowed to control the degree of social presence in online teaching situations they may begin cautiously, but increase their exposure from text to voice even if they do not move all the way to using video in synchronous situations. In asynchronous situations, the problem is exacerbated due to the non-transience of the channel and the possibility of the student's video or audio recording being shared beyond the closed group of peers.

This study offers support for the inverse relationship between social presence and WTC suggested in Cunningham (2011). If learners experience foreign language anxiety they will try to avoid face-threatening situations and avoid using the foreign language in public. The more public the situation, the less comfortable it will be for the anxious learner. Reducing social presence and its accompanying perceived exposure to potential criticism or ridicule, by minimizing the social cues given by the learner will lessen their anxiety and can be expected to increase their WTC.

This kind of online communicative course might be offered to complement the focus-on-forms English language teaching that is typically offered in high schools in Vietnam and many other parts of the world, giving students an opportunity to develop communicative competence. If students are allowed to regulate the conditions under which they participate, they can be expected to be more willing to communicate in online and face-to-face learning situations.

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## Appendix

The interviews were carried out in Vietnamese by the first author. The questions below are translations.

### *Pre-course interview for students*

1. Do you have many chances to practice speaking and listening in class?
2. Do you feel confident when you speak English in the class?
3. Do you often use English outside the class?
4. Do you recognize your mistake when you speak or write? Do you correct it?

### *Post-course interview for students*

1. Do you enjoy learning on Skype and Facebook? If yes, what did you enjoy about it? If no, why didn't you enjoy it?
2. How do you feel when being asked to communicate in English in the online course?
3. Which one do you prefer: text chat, voice chat, video chat? Why?
4. When do you record your voice, which one do you prefer: sound recording or video recording?
5. What is the best thing or worst thing of writing on Facebook or uploading recording on Facebook?
6. Do you feel different when writing and uploading recording on Facebook?
7. How do you feel when you upload your recording on Facebook?
8. How do you feel when you interact with other students on Skype?
9. Do you have any other comments about the activities online?