



## **Vibrant voices: empowering students to communicate and participate**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The development of students' communication skills has long been one of the primary goals of education (Mercer, Wegerif and Major, 2020). This focus is particularly relevant for Learning Development practitioners, who support students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in participating in class and various other learning contexts. This presentation highlighted the role of willingness to communicate (WTC), an individual tendency to engage in or avoid communication (McCroskey and Baer, 1985; MacIntyre et al., 1998), and explored its impact on students' communication in classroom settings, especially for those using English as a second or additional language.

The presentation first unpacked the concept of WTC and introduced factors that facilitated or hindered students' readiness to communicate. These factors include confidence, motivation, classroom atmosphere, teacher immediacy, and peer interactions, all of which contributed to individual differences (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng, 2012; Cai, 2021; Ducker, 2022). Next, the presentation outlined ongoing work that examined how curriculum design, specifically focusing on the assessment of class participation, could make WTC non-negotiable and potentially place students who were less ready to engage in conversation in a disadvantaged position (Lin and Forey, 2025).

The presentation concluded by discussing a self-created fictional character, Sprinkle, to explore multimodal contribution (Lin, 2025). For instance, beyond verbal communication, can students' facial expressions, body language, eye contact, nodding, active listening, and multimedia work or demonstrations be considered part of class participation? The presentation invited reflection on how teacher-student dialogue should be initiated to co-create rules and expectations in the classroom. More importantly, it examined what we, as Learning Developers, can do to enhance students' readiness to communicate and

participate. It is hoped that by taking into account students' individual differences, we can create a more equitable and inclusive participative learning environment for and with them.

**Keywords:** willingness to communicate; class participation; dialogic education; inclusivity; higher education.

## ***Community response***

The author discussed a very pertinent topic for international students or those studying in their second or additional language. Class participation, in the form of speaking, can be one of the common ways to assess student engagement. However, as one of the community reflections pointed out, participation in class is less commonly assessed in the UK, as it is usually coupled with other forms of assessment:

Thank you for this interesting presentation. It was great to hear about a different educational context. I think it is less common for class participation to be assessed in the UK than in Hong Kong. I often struggle to get students to participate in class, so it was really interesting to think about the different ways that students might participate apart from speech.

Alternative means of communication and participation in the classroom resonated with most of the community participants, raising questions around willingness to communicate and whether verbal communication should be the only way to consider how students engage with content and retain knowledge. Some participants commented that:

Vienne's presentation arrives at the right time for me, as I am designing a transition course for PGT international students. The motivation for the course was a lack of participation in seminars and group projects, and a distinct attainment gap between home and international students. A major aim for the module is to develop the students' sense of belonging and willingness to communicate (WTC), so that they get the most out of their year in the UK. Acknowledging that communication takes many other channels than verbal is also something I will try to implement.

Many thanks for such a thought-provoking session. Ideas that particularly struck me were:

- Willingness to communicate is relative and relational.
- Silence as a communicative resource.

In this very engaging session, Vienne shared her own experiences to help us as delegates understand the journey the research had taken. A key learning point for me was the distinction between WTC involving the intention to speak, and not the physical act of speaking. This crystalised something for me about the many pieces that need to be in place for a learner to engage vocally in a session, and the process/order of these. I have thought about this since the session! Colleagues in the session offered many suggestions of factors which may affect WTC, and this felt like a useful pooling of thoughts. Questions included those around the possibility of embracing silence in certain circumstances.

The community also responded positively to the idea of co-creating rules on how to engage students in the class: 'One important point that Vienne raised was the co-creation of rules and expectations at the beginning of a session or module, to encourage ownership of the space, and develop a sense of community'.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

Some additional questions raised by the community included how we might unpick the differences between communication and engagement, in which cases silence can be embraced, and how much this reflects our cultural assumptions about communication. For example, participants asked, 'Are we conflating communication with engagement? What are the other ways students can contribute to and demonstrate engagement without speaking?'

Another important question was how we can ensure that such adaptations and changes are embedded consistently across all modules. As participants highlighted, if the module is successful in developing students' WTC, the difficulty might lie in making sure that this is transferrable to other modules, where the environment might feel more challenging for students.

### ***Author's reflection***

In a room full of passionate Learning Developers (LDers), I was elated to present my doctoral project on students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Specifically, I am interested in how we can empower students to translate their WTC into actual communication behaviour, which is often reflected in their class participation. This is a

crucial area of investigation, as educational dialogue has been found to enhance student learning (Howe et al., 2019). However, the interrelationship between WTC, dialogue, and learning outcomes requires future examination (Peng, 2025). In this reflective space, I would like to carry on the engaging conversation and highlight three intriguing points for further discussion.

### **1. Understanding your pedagogical contexts**

During my presentation, I asked what factors might impact students' readiness to communicate. The audience provided many thoughtful answers. Some suggested that factors such as students' confidence, linguistic competence, prior learning experiences, teachers, peers, culture, and the online or offline learning environment could all come into play. We could have continued this discussion for a full afternoon if time had permitted, and we would have generated even more potential factors that may or may not have been researched before. Indeed, it is useful to understand the theoretical framework for WTC (McCroskey and Baer, 1985; MacIntyre et al., 1998) and its evidence of factors that hinder students' readiness to communicate. However, it is also critical to reflect on your own pedagogical contexts. This is because students' WTC inevitably varies depending on the specific groups you teach, who are likely to come from diverse cultural, socio-economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Pedagogical contexts here refer to the broader environment where your teaching takes place, including the type of institution, the curriculum, your teaching strategies, and your learners' characteristics, among others. You might be teaching a postgraduate programme, supporting an undergraduate cohort, or running a university-wide initiative, such as writing consultations for students across disciplines. Since each pedagogical context is unique per se, teachers will have to tailor their approaches to facilitating students' willingness to communicate. In other words, one-size-fits-all strategies rarely work in teaching and learning due to its inherently dynamic nature. As the community remarked, it can be challenging to transfer the same approach to other modules. However, some strategies that have been found useful, either accumulated through LDers' teaching experience or observation, may be applicable to new classes. As teaching practice is highly contextual, it would be beneficial for teachers to analyse their own pedagogical contexts, potentially through pedagogic research, and to co-develop niche strategies based on feedback and responses collected from student surveys or interviews, for example.

## 2. Class participation as a skill learnt

The question, ‘Can I wink at you?’ was compelling. It arose from a response from the audience after I proposed a class participation training session where we imagined students practising raising their hands to articulate their opinions. The idea that students need training in class participation stems from my initial observation that we do not seem to teach our students *how* to communicate or contribute to discussions in higher education settings. It can be intimidating, if not disastrous, to ‘correct’ students by insisting that they should respond in a specific way when they attempt to engage. Despite the common belief that students should have known *how* to participate, this is often not the case. For example, research on willingness to communicate in a second language has found that even when students reported feeling ready to communicate, their actual participation did not correspond to their claims (Liu and Jackson, 2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak, 2014). Various factors, such as classroom environment and confidence, could play a role; however, I propose that the lack of participation literacy is the very aspect that has long been under-explored. Participation literacy suggests the knowledge, skills, competence, and willingness to communicate that enable students to engage effectively. Simply having students present in the classroom does not warrant participation. To put it differently, participation does not come naturally. It is a skill that is learnt and requires practice. Further investigation into this line of inquiry is necessary, as it remains unclear *whether and how* participation literacy can be developed.

## 3. Exploring multimodal communicative resources

The same question, ‘Can I wink at you?’ also resonates with the notion of Sprinkle, which proposes a consideration of alternative and multimodal communicative resources in class participation (Lin, 2025). An attendee remarked that raising a hand (with the whole arm lifted) can feel uncomfortable for some students. Others have raised questions as to whether we are conflating communication with engagement, and how students can contribute to and demonstrate engagement without verbal participation. These comments and questions were all very valid, as they prompted us to rethink what is counted as class participation and what is not, according to whom. They are also linked to the idea of whether students have the free choice to speak or not, particularly when they are situated within a sociocultural framework for teaching and learning (Lin and Forey, 2025).

Consequently, it is pivotal for teachers to be receptive to various forms of contribution. For

instance, if students wink at you, it may indicate their intention to participate. This is certainly a sign of willingness to communicate, albeit a subtle one. Alternatively, if students appear silent, silence can also be a communicative resource. While demonstration or co-construction of knowledge often requires dialogue, silence is, in fact, 'right and healthful' (McCroskey and Richmond, 1991, p.3). This is because silence also 'represents an indispensable layer of interpersonal discourse and is a natural part of conversational skills' (Bao, 2014, p.13). In teaching and learning contexts, silence can reflect a learner's strategy (Liu, 2002) or, in Bao's (2014) terms, serve as a processing tool. It is noteworthy that a teacher's decisions regarding how to interact with students' silence, whether positively or negatively, directly impact students' subsequent communication behaviour (King and Harumi, 2020). When both communication and non-communication aspects are considered in classroom teaching, there is a greater likelihood that we can create a just and supportive learning space for every student.

To conclude, facilitating students' willingness to communicate in class necessitates an open and experimental mindset that embraces trial and error. In particular, pedagogical contexts are notably dynamic and unavoidably impact your teaching approaches. As such, it is vital to take student voice into consideration while acknowledging that there is no panacea for enhancing students' willingness to communicate.

## ***Acknowledgements***

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Hannah Awcock from Edinburgh Napier University, Marion Engrand O'Hara from Royal Holloway, University of London, Beverley Hancock Smith from De Montfort University, and Vic Boyd from City of Glasgow College. The community response was edited by Sarune Savickaite from the University of Exeter, who captured the key themes of the community discussion.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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