

BOOSTING L2 CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE VIRTUAL CAFÉ PROJECT

Izabella Ross-Sokolovsky¹, Sonia Carmen Munteanu², Ewa Hajdasz³, Somali Gupta⁴

¹Braude College of Engineering Karmiel, Israel

²Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania

³Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences, Poland

⁴Govt.V.Y.T.PG. Autonomous College, Durg C.G. India


ORCID iDs: Izabella Ross-Sokolovsky


Sonia Carmen Munteanu


Ewa Hajdasz

Somali Gupta

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1692-7882>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0326-3346>

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1648-9050>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8099-5030>

Abstract. *Language instructors in higher education face the challenge of preparing students for the complex communication needs of the global job market. This article examines the impact of the Virtual Café, an online collaborative project, on students' confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 English in an international and multicultural setting. The participants were students from three higher education institutions in Israel, Poland, and India. All students were enrolled in the EFL course as part of their academic curriculum. The study used a pre-test and post-test research design to capture responses before and after participation in the virtual exchange project. The findings indicate that Virtual Café activities positively influence students' confidence in speaking English and increase their willingness to engage in L2 communication. The study emphasizes the importance of creating supportive environments for language practice and highlights the effectiveness of virtual exchanges in fostering language skills and intercultural communication. However, despite improvements in several areas, concerns about being understood and the need for more encounters that promote speaking emerge as areas for further exploration. The results underscore the potential of virtual interactive activities in enhancing language learning and intercultural communication.*

Key words: *virtual exchange, confidence, L2 willingness to communicate, online learning, multicultural setting*

1. INTRODUCTION

English language instructors in higher education institutions face a persistent challenge in equipping their students with the necessary language skills tailored to the increasingly intricate communication demands of the global job market. With the rapid advancement of digital and communication technologies, educators and learners now have access to resources and environments that extend beyond the limitations of local capabilities. These contemporary approaches promote the acquisition of communicative

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Corresponding author: Izabella Ross-Sokolovsky, Braude College of Engineering Karmiel, Israel

E-mail: izabella@braude.ac.il

competence in internationalised settings and foster an environment conducive to effective language learning. Research indicates that online language exchanges, also known as telecollaborations or virtual exchanges, promote learners' confidence in speaking a target language (Zhou, 2023) as well as increase their willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Zhou, 2023). In addition, telecollaborations and virtual exchanges provide learners with authentic linguistic input and situations, increasing their motivation to engage in second-language conversations (O'Dowd, 2018; 2021).

The present article reports on the research aiming to understand how learners' L2 WTC and confidence in using the English language for international communication developed during a series of online collaborative activities called the Virtual Café. The project's main objective was to help students boost their L2 confidence and willingness to communicate with people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds in L2 English. This is based on the understanding that confidence in L2 communication positively influences learners' willingness to engage in communicative tasks (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), while supportive and immersive learning environments also enhance learners' willingness to communicate in a second language (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). To bring to light the effectiveness of the Virtual Cafe activities for developing confidence and WTC in English in an internationalized context, the following research questions are addressed:

How do activities, such as Virtual Cafe, contribute to developing higher education students' L2 English confidence while communicating with people from various cultural backgrounds?

How do activities, such as Virtual Cafe, contribute to higher education students' willingness to communicate in English as L2 with people from various cultural backgrounds?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Virtual Exchange in Intercultural Language Learning

Virtual exchange, also known as telecollaboration, online exchange, globally networked learning environments, e-tandem, or teletandem, has been used in education since the 1990s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998) with the primary purpose of engaging groups of learners in the distance task-based interaction with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical areas, mostly synchronously (Leone & Telles, 2016; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018).

In language learning and intercultural communication, the opportunity to supplement learning inside the classroom with learning outside of classrooms has spurred the development of collaborative, technology-mediated learning environments, bringing students into international classrooms (Dooly, 2023) where they are exposed to situations of peer-to-peer collaboration that simulate authentic work environments in a globalised society (Stefanova & Gomez Jimenez, 2018). Virtual exchanges have been found to positively impact general foreign language competence (Helm, 2013), the development of oral skills, and students' willingness to communicate while increasing learners' L2 motivation (Zhou, 2023). In a study on Spanish university students learning EFL through a virtual exchange program, O'Dowd (2021) reported that "[t]he experience of online intercultural communication was also seen to help learners gain confidence as communicators in their second language and to reconceptualize English as a tool for communication rather than as an abstract academic activity" (p.11).

The intercultural context of virtual exchanges improves students' verbal and non-verbal communication skills, can surface and challenge their culturally embedded beliefs and practices, and allows them to "develop a sense of cultural competence that enhances their academic and social lives toward their future" (Petropoulou, 2020, p.59). Virtual exchanges are pivotal in developing broader humanistic values, such as intercultural dialogue and understanding (Helm, 2013). The online learning environments where they occur also impact cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects of intercultural communication skills and effectively improve learners' engagement and interactional confidence (Lee & Song, 2019).

2.2. Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in L2

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was first introduced in the context of L1 communication. Factors such as introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension, and cultural diversity have been identified as affecting an individual's predisposition to communicate (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021; McCroskey and Baer, 1985; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). MacIntyre (1994) further contends that communication anxiety and perceived confidence constitute the central pillars of one's willingness to communicate; more substantial perceived confidence positively correlates with higher WTC, and as communication anxiety diminishes, the readiness to communicate generally increases.

Within the L2 context, WTC refers to an individual's inclination and eagerness to communicate with others while using L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Irrespective of one's perceived proficiency level, WTC encompasses the urge to initiate conversations and the openness to sustain interactions in the target language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Based on the conceptual pyramid-shaped model developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), a scope of possible linguistic and psychological variables impacting L2 WTC 2 could be recognized (Khajavy et al., 2018). It is believed that various interconnected intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, such as the degree of familiarity between interlocutors, the number of participants, the formality of the context, a speaker's self-confidence, and a conversation topic, can influence one's willingness to engage in conversation or withdraw from it (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2018). Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015) further argue that learners' WTC might change even throughout the same conversational event while diminishing due to "inability to find the necessary vocabulary on a moment-by-moment basis [which has] led to a loss of focus and growth of anxiety" (p. 8).

Anxiety also plays a significant role in learners' WTC in L2 and readiness to engage in L2 conversation (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2018). Learners with previous negative experiences in L2 communication or those who find the learning environment intimidating might refrain from future L2 communication (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2018).

Additional studies exploring factors affecting L2 WTC have established that foreign language enjoyment (FLE) might positively affect L2 WTC since learners who find L2 conversations enjoyable will be more willing to engage in future L2 interactions. (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2011).

Research in L2 education has shown that L2 WTC holds notable significance in language learning environments, directly shaping learners' engagement, active participation, and overall language mastery (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). L2 WTC is essential for language acquisition and proficiency development (Yashima, 2002), and to become fluent in L2,

learners should be willing to communicate in that language (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). Therefore, comprehending and nurturing WTC among L2 learners becomes essential in establishing adequate language learning settings that cultivate linguistic confidence and mastery (Cao & Philp, 2006).

Research also substantiates that student with high WTC levels, influenced by self-confidence and motivation (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), have a greater chance to enhance their L2 proficiency (Pawlak et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2011). Moreover, learners' increased perceived communicative competence and reduced communication apprehension form the foundation for WTC in L2 (Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre, 1994). Additionally, one's international posture and attitude toward the global community influence one's motivation to acquire L2, further fostering L2 proficiency and self-confidence in L2 communication and resulting in L2 WTC (Yashima, 2002). Notably, findings of a study conducted in a General English programme at a university-based language school in New Zealand reveal that while situational elements, such as time, place, and topic of conversation affect L2 WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006; Cao, 2014), they may not necessarily predict it (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Another study within the New Zealand English for Academic Purposes programme highlights the intricate interplay of individual, situational, social, and linguistic factors as the basis of WTC within foreign language classrooms (Cao, 2014). Also, studies from Thailand produce numerous accounts that highlight the cultural aspect as one of the factors affecting learners' WTC. For instance, Thai students were reticent and thus tended to exhibit more reserved and passive behaviour than learners from other backgrounds (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021).

However, the L2 WTC in a virtual environment can differ from face-to-face contexts in terms of learners' confidence, learning environment, and level of familiarity between interlocutors, factors that have been identified as the most influential ones in virtual settings (Chaisiri, 2023; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006). Research suggests that individuals may perceive online environments as more comfortable and less intimidating than face-to-face encounters, enhancing their willingness to communicate (Chaisiri, 2023; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006).

2.3. Self-confidence in Language Learning

The role of learners' self-confidence in second language acquisition has been a prominent subject of investigation within the field of language education (Edwards & Roger, 2015; Ghafar, 2023; Wu et al., 2011). Self-confidence, defined as low anxious affect and high self-perceptions of L2 competence (Clement et al., 1994), is a significant predictor of academic achievement and is affected by one's personality and cognitive abilities (Burns et al., 2018). It is often considered a crucial factor that impacts various aspects of the language learning processes, including motivation, persistence, and willingness to engage in communicative activities (Ghafar, 2023; Wu et al., 2011). Research indicates that learners with higher levels of self-confidence tend to exhibit increased participation in classroom discussions, a greater willingness to take linguistic risks, and a more favourable attitude toward language learning challenges (Wu et al., 2011; Garcia-Sanchez & Gimeno-Sanz, 2022).

Moreover, findings highlight the complexity of confidence as a construct and its relationship with age, personality traits, and cognitive abilities (Burns et al., 2018). Clement et al. (1994) assert that pleasant and frequent communication with L2 speakers might contribute to fostering L2 learners' confidence, while classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and the establishment of rapport with peers might be seen as potential factors influencing

language anxiety and, consequently, negatively affecting one's self-confidence in the L2 classroom. In a Turkish EFL context, it was found that self-confident students do not usually feel anxious about using English, and positive beliefs about language learning may reduce anxiety and boost one's confidence (Aslan & Thompson, 2021).

Numerous studies suggest a strong correlation between learners' levels of self-confidence and language learning outcomes (Edwards & Roger, 2015; Wu et al., 2011). For instance, individuals with high self-confidence in their English language skills are more likely to learn a second language and speak it well (Ghafar, 2023). The same author argues that self-confident learners typically possess superior vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation skills, which are essential for efficient English communication (Ghafar, 2023).

As educators strive to optimize language learning environments, understanding the nuanced relationship between self-confidence and language proficiency becomes essential for developing effective instructional strategies. While attitudinal factors are key to L2 motivation, direct contact with the L2 community highlights the prominence of a self-confidence process in shaping attitudes and effort in L2 learning (Clement et al., 1994). In multicultural settings, positive attitudes, in addition to extracurricular activities, drive individuals to engage in L2 communication, fostering self-confidence marked by low anxiety and high perceptions of L2 competence (Clement et al., 1994). Wu et al. (2011) also noticed the beneficial effect of video conferencing sessions on learners' confidence among Taiwanese EFL students enrolled in a technical university business school. The authors argue that the positive experience gained during even the shortest interactions in English made students more confident and comfortable in applying their language skills (Wu et al., 2011).

While the existing literature highlights the positive impact of virtual exchanges and telecollaborations on learners' L2 confidence and L2 WTC, the extent to which online collaborative activities can be effective in the case of a limited number of encounters between participants remains unknown. The present study aims to contribute to further understanding of factors affecting learners' L2 confidence and L2 WTC in multicultural online contexts, fully acknowledging these limitations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and Research Context

The study participants enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme arrived from three higher education institutions in Israel, Poland, and India. These students had various educational backgrounds (i.e., life sciences, social sciences, or engineering), were at different stages in their education (i.e., undergraduates and postgraduates), and had mixed abilities (i.e., B1 or a B2 CEFR level of proficiency) when it came to the English language proficiency. The project was conducted for three consecutive academic years. However, only the project's last academic year (2022-2023) was considered for the present study.

The Virtual Café project shares many features with a long tradition of telecollaboration and virtual exchanges for language learning and intercultural communication. However, it also differs in certain aspects. As opposed to the traditional intercultural exchanges, which are "usually short and intensive affairs (usually 6-8 weeks) where students engage in a series of carefully designed pedagogical tasks related to their subject area with a limited number of international partners and with the support of their teachers or facilitators" (O'Dowd, 2021, p.212), each student took part in 3 to 5 sessions overall. Also, as the project was designed to

simulate real-life, theme-based communication scenarios while offering a unique platform for learners to practise their English skills and overcome communication barriers, teachers were not part of the discussion groups. In addition, all students participating in the project were non-native English speakers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The project's main objective was to help students boost their self-confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 English with people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The English language curricula in the three participant institutions differ in content and teaching approach. The common ground teachers identified while sharing their experience was the need for more opportunities for their students to practise using English in multicultural environments on topics of general interest for their generation, which faces globalisation trends in almost all employment areas. The Virtual Café project stemmed from the understanding that virtual collaboration actions could facilitate the creation of the much-needed multicultural environment for language practice and intercultural communication (Helm et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021; Roarty & Hagley, 2021).

The activities designed for the Virtual Café took place in weekly sessions over ten weeks, during the curricular hours for Indian and Polish students and after the curricular hours for the Israeli ones. Each session lasted 45 minutes, during which participants were split into breakout rooms, with 3-4 students per room. Teachers did not participate in students' conversations to ensure a more relaxed environment; they only facilitated the meetings. The international teaching staff prepared a list of topics for discussion in advance. The list comprised such themes as holidays, careers and studying, sightseeing and tourism, books, and films. The week's topic did not strictly bind the loosely structured, student-driven conversations and often included self-introductions and exchange of personal experience with topics or ideas presented. The students could choose to speak or get involved in the discussions as much or as little as they wished, with no pressure other than the dynamics of the conversation. This activity design was conducive to developing WTC and confidence to use English to communicate in a multicultural context.

The following hypotheses were formed to investigate learners' confidence and WTC in L2 English:

(H₀₁): There is no significant difference in the mean confidence scores before and after participating in the Virtual Café project.

(H₀₂): There is no significant difference in the mean WTC scores before and after participating in the Virtual Café project.

3.2. Research Design

The present study utilised a pre-test and post-test research design to investigate the impact of the Virtual Café project on learners' confidence and L2 WTC. Data was collected from English language students utilising a Google survey form, capturing their responses before and after participating in the Virtual Café project. The survey questions were designed using a 5-point Likert scale, allowing participants to rate their confidence levels and willingness to communicate in English. This research design enables the examination of changes in participants' perceptions. It provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of the Virtual Café project in enhancing learners' confidence and L2 WTC.

3.3. Sample Design

The study employs a sampling design that combines stratified and purposive sampling for enhanced representativeness and diverse perspectives. Stratified sampling is used based on respondents' countries, namely Poland, India, and Israel, to ensure proportional representation, while purposive sampling considers criteria like age and gender. Random sampling within each stratum is used for participant selection. A preliminary analysis was conducted to determine an appropriate sample size that ensures sufficient statistical power to detect significant relationships. The pre-activity sample size was 225, of which 11 responses were discarded as they declined to participate in the survey or their responses were illegible, so the final pre-activity sample size was 214. The post-activity sample size was taken as 150, out of which nine responses were discarded as they declined to participate in the survey or their responses were illegible; thus, the final post-activity sample size was 141 (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample Description

Pre/Post Virtual Café Activity		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Pre -Virtual Café Valid Activity	Israel	126	58.9	58.9
	India	28	13.1	72.0
	Poland	53	24.8	96.7
	Others	7	3.3	100.0
	Total	214	100.0	
Post -Virtual Café Valid Activity	Israel	91	64.5	64.5
	India	30	21.3	85.8
	Poland	20	14.2	100.0
	Total	141	100.0	

3.4. Research instruments

The survey instrument (Appendix 1) divided questions into two sections, while the first part caters to confidence (C), and the second one addresses WTC in English as L2 (W). Of these survey questions, two questions (i.e., C3-W3 and C4-W4) cater to confidence and willingness. Each statement was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with response choice ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5) for positive statements (C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C10, C11, and C12). Similarly, response scores were *Strongly Agree* (1) to *Strongly Disagree* (5) for negatively worded statements (C7, C8 and C9). This was done to calculate the *confidence* score as a total sum of C1 to C12, including C3-W3 and C4-W4. For the construct *WTC*, all were positive statements, and their sum was the total score, which included W1, W2, C3-W3, and C4-W4.

3.5. Data collection and procedures

The link to the questionnaires was placed on the course Moodle for Israeli students and emailed to the selected participants from Poland and India during college hours. Participants were given detailed explanations regarding the purpose of the survey. They were also given clear instructions on completing the questionnaire and sufficient time to respond. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were ensured. It was also made

clear that participation in the research is voluntary, and students do not have to complete the survey if they do not want to.

3.6 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were calculated for learners' confidence and L2 WTC using a 5-point Likert scale. Two sample 't' tests were conducted to test hypotheses, given the interval scale nature of the variables. The study ensured internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high reliability. Microsoft Excel facilitated data entry and basic statistics. At the same time, PASW/SPSS handled advanced analyses on the impact of the Virtual Café project, adept at managing large datasets and generating comprehensive output tables for interpretation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The participants' responses regarding their confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 English were assessed through a pre-and post-Virtual Café activity evaluation. The mean scores and standard deviations were compared before and after the Virtual Café activity, shedding light on participant attitudes and perception shifts.

Table 2 Responses on Confidence and Willingness to Communicate in L2 English: Pre-Post Virtual Café Activity

Variables	Pre Virtual Café Activity		Post Virtual Café Activity	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Sub Variable of Confidence and Willingness (Pre-Virtual Café Activity)				
I am willing to ask questions when I don't understand something.	4.05	.82	4.05	.805
I am not afraid of making mistakes while speaking in English.	3.53	1.15	3.89	.934
I feel comfortable sharing my ideas/feelings/opinions with others in English.	3.21	1.01	3.65	.949
I enjoy communicating in English.	3.55	1.11	3.98	.967
I think participating in activities, such as the Virtual Cafe, help me develop my fluency.	3.99	.94	3.84	1.00
I mainly use English to communicate with people from other cultures or countries.	2.72	1.08	3.44	1.11
I find it difficult to communicate in English.	2.91	1.13	2.86	1.11
I am worried that I will not understand what others say in English.	3.11	1.07	2.80	1.04
I feel nervous about using English when I need to speak with people from other cultures.	2.92	1.18	2.98	1.16
I am always able to say what I want to say in English.	3.08	.95	3.69	.87
I think others cannot understand me because of my poor English.	3.27	1.11	3.25	1.16
I know enough words to communicate in English.	3.74	.95	3.44	1.11
I am willing to talk about myself and my interests with other participants	3.75	.86	4.01	.78
I am willing to talk about my culture and my country.	3.81	.93	4.05	.84

Participants maintained a consistent willingness to ask questions ([Pre-Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.82], [Post Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.805]), indicating a sustained engagement in inquiry. Notably, there was an improvement in the fear of making mistakes ([Pre-Mean = 3.53, SD = 1.15], [Post Mean = 3.89, SD = 0.934]), reflecting a reduced apprehension in expressing themselves in English. The increase in comfort in sharing ideas, feelings, and opinions ([Pre-Mean = 3.21, SD = 1.01], [Post Mean = 3.65, SD = 0.949]) suggests a positive impact of the Virtual Café on fostering a supportive environment for open communication. Participants exhibited increased enjoyment in communicating in L2 English ([Pre-Mean = 3.55, SD = 1.11], [Post Mean = 3.98, SD = 0.967]), indicating a more positive and enjoyable language learning experience post-activity. Despite a slight decrease, the perception of fluency development remained relatively high ([Pre-Mean = 3.99, SD = 0.94], [Post Mean = 3.84, SD = 1.00]), suggesting a continued positive outlook on language proficiency. A significant increase in using English while communicating with people from other cultures or countries ([Pre-Mean = 2.72, SD = 1.08], [Post Mean = 3.44, SD = 1.11]) demonstrates a notable shift towards cross-cultural communication. The perceived difficulty in communicating in English showed a marginal decrease ([Pre-Mean = 2.91, SD = 1.13], [Post Mean = 2.86, SD = 1.11]), indicating a subtle improvement in participants' confidence. A decrease in worry about understanding others in English ([Pre-Mean = 3.11, SD = 1.07], [Post Mean = 2.80, SD = 1.04]) suggests reduced anxiety, contributing to a more relaxed language learning environment.

Similarly, a decrease in nervousness about using English with people from other cultures ([Pre-Mean = 2.92, SD = 1.18], [Post Mean = 2.98, SD = 1.16]) reflects a positive impact on participants' comfort levels in cross-cultural communication.

Regarding the ability to express oneself in English, there was a substantial increase in post-activity ([Pre Mean = 3.08, SD = 0.95], [Post Mean = 3.69, SD = 0.87]), highlighting a significant improvement in participants' confidence to articulate thoughts. This highlights the project's positive impact on participants' communicative competence.

The perceived understanding due to poor English remained relatively stable ([Pre Mean = 3.27, SD = 1.11], [Post Mean = 3.25, SD = 1.16]), suggesting a consistent perception of others' comprehension. The knowledge of a sufficient number of words allowing learners to communicate in English showed a nuanced shift with a decrease in mean post-activity ([Pre Mean = 3.74, SD = 0.95], [Post Mean = 3.44, SD = 1.11]). However, the willingness to talk about oneself and interests exhibited a substantial increase ([Pre Mean = 3.75, SD = 0.86], [Post Mean = 4.01, SD = 0.78]), indicating enhanced openness in personal communication. Similarly, a notable increase in the willingness to talk about culture and country ([Pre Mean = 3.81, SD = 0.93], [Post Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.84]) suggests a positive impact on participants' readiness to engage in cross-cultural discussions.

Overall, the decrease in standard deviations across various variables ([Pre SDs] to [Post SDs]) indicates a more consistent and homogenous shift in participants' perceptions post-Virtual Café activity. These findings collectively underscore the positive influence of the Virtual Café project on students' language confidence and willingness to communicate.

Table 3 provides a comprehensive analysis of participants' confidence and willingness in English language learning, both before and after the Virtual Café activities. The descriptive statistics include minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for scores in confidence and willingness to speak in English.

Table 3 Responses on Comprehensive Confidence Score and Comprehensive Willingness in English Language Learning Pre-Post Virtual Café Activity

Pre/Post Virtual Cafe Activity		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Virtual Cafe Activity	Score in Confidence in English Language Speaking	214	16	60	40.8	8.10
	Score in Willingness to Speak in English Language	214	4	20	14.33	3.10
	Valid N	214				
Post Virtual Cafe Activity	Score in Confidence in English Language Speaking	141	18	60	41.87	7.27
	Score in Willingness to Speak in English Language	141	7	20	15.70	2.91
	Valid N	141				

In the pre-activity phase, the mean score for confidence in English language speaking was 40.8 (SD = 8.10), and the WTC in English was 14.33 (SD = 3.10), indicating a moderate level of confidence and willingness among participants. Post-Virtual Café activity, there was a slight increase in the mean L2 confidence score to 41.87 (SD = 7.27), suggesting a positive impact on participants' overall confidence in English language speaking. The WTC in English also experienced an uptick in the mean score, reaching 15.70 (SD = 2.91), indicating an enhanced willingness to engage in English communication. The decrease in standard deviations post-activity suggests a more uniform shift in participants' comprehensive L2 confidence and WTC scores, reflecting a cohesive positive influence of the Virtual Café project on the participants' overall language confidence and WTC in English.

The mean score for confidence in English language speaking increased by approximately 4.35 points after participating in the Virtual Café activity. The mean score for WTC in English increased by approximately 2.23 points after participating in the Virtual Café activity.

These findings indicate that the Virtual Café activity positively affected participants' comprehensive L2 confidence and WTC in L2. Both the confidence and L2 WTC scores showed an increase after the activity.

4.2 Testing of Hypothesis of Difference

Based on the results of the t-tests for the equality of means and considering a significance level of 0.05, the following summary can be provided for the hypotheses (Table 4).

Table 4 Independent Samples 't Test ((Responses on Comprehensive Confidence Score including its sub-variable and Comprehensive WTC including its sub-variable (Pre-Post Virtual Café Activity)

Statements on Comprehensive Confidence	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Score in Confidence in English Language Speaking	-2.109	353	0.036*	-1.781
Score in Willingness to Speak in English Language	-4.165	353	0.000*	-1.368

H01 is rejected with the t-test results (-2.109, $p = 0.036$), indicating a significant decrease in mean confidence scores post-Virtual Café. H02 is rejected with the t-test results (-4.165, $p = 0.000$), suggesting a significant increase in mean willingness scores post-Virtual Café. This underscores the overall positive impact of the project on participants' willingness to engage in English communication.

Creating a supportive and encouraging environment that motivates participants to ask questions, practice fluency, and actively seek understanding might positively impact learners' willingness to ask questions and enhance learners' L2 proficiency. This can be achieved through targeted language practice activities (Belz, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2017), group discussions, and feedback sessions (Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). Group activities, cultural exchange projects, and collaborative tasks can be implemented to promote self-expression and cultural exploration (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Chun, 2015).

Addressing the sub-variables where significant improvements were observed may enhance L2 Confidence and L2 WTC. For example, creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment is crucial for reducing the fear of making mistakes (Ho2: Rejected). Studies, such as Helm's (2015) and Lewis & O'Dowd's (2016), also show that providing peer support and constructive peer feedback can build confidence in speaking English and enhance language uptake.

VC activities proved beneficial for the sub-variables related to the comfort level of sharing ideas, feelings, opinions, and enjoyment of communicating in English. Students involved in the VC project seemed to be able to co-construct their online relationships so that they felt at ease sharing ideas, feelings, and opinions enjoyably, similar to students in other telecollaboration projects for language and intercultural learning (Ware, 2005).

6. CONCLUSION

This research paper focused on the impact of the Virtual Café project on learners' Confidence and WTC in English in a multicultural context of L2 learning. The results indicated significant improvements in several areas, including reduced fear of making mistakes, increased comfort in sharing ideas, and enhanced enjoyment of English communication. Participants also showed greater willingness to talk about themselves, their interests, and their cultures. However, there were no significant differences in the willingness to ask questions, perception of fluency development, and concern about being understood by others. These findings might suggest that the number of speaking-promoting encounters was insufficient. At the same time, to be more willing to ask questions, students must feel more confident regarding their ability to do so.

Moreover, learners remained concerned about being understood by others, which might stem from their lack of self-confidence and/or low perception of their ability to communicate in L2 efficiently. In intercultural contexts, this concern ties in with linguistic and pragmatic competencies pertaining to learners' ability to use contextually appropriate language (Chun, 2011). Asking questions and being understood by others are also aspects of appropriate turn-taking in communication, and these were areas that students did not perceive as improved after the VC activities. Even if moderate interactional opportunities can contribute to improving communicative self-confidence and L2 WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Wu et al., 2011), these results indicate that the

number of encounters between the VC participants was probably not high enough to effect a perceived change.

The findings in this study highlight the effectiveness of virtual interactive activities in facilitating language learning and promoting confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 among learners. Further efforts can focus on addressing specific areas, such as pragmatic competence, where virtual exchanges can create opportunities for language learning and intercultural competence outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge the study's potential limitations, such as the survey's inability to capture hidden feelings, missing values, and inappropriate responses to specific questions. Efforts were made to mitigate these limitations by ensuring the validity and reliability of the measures used and providing a comprehensive interpretation of the results within the study context.

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APPENDIX:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/16Jbq83zoxWBvdSVfT9yyI48V9RboGv11/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103172063640494008534&rtpof=true&sd=true>