A Repeated Cross-Sectional Study of Willingness to Communicate in a University Self-Access Centre Before and After COVID-19

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Abstract

This study investigates patterns in willingness to communicate (WTC), anxiety, and confidence among frequent users of a university self-access centre (SAC) across a ten-year period spanning pre- and post-COVID contexts. Using repeated cross-sectional survey data collected biennially from 2015 to 2025, the analysis compares overall trends and differences between two engagement types: students who participated in SAC classes or events alongside social interaction and those who primarily used the space for informal social interaction. Results showed that mean levels of WTC, anxiety, and confidence remained broadly stable over time, with no statistically significant differences between pre- and post-pandemic cohorts. However, engagement type revealed consistent variation. Students involved in organised SAC activities reported higher WTC than social-only users, but also higher communication-related anxiety, indicating that active participation may involve both motivation and perceived communicative risk. Descriptive patterns further suggested a post-pandemic shift in user composition toward more socially oriented participation. Overall, the findings suggest that frequent SAC users' willingness to communicate, anxiety, and confidence remain fairly stable, but their ways of engaging in the SAC may change in response to wider social and educational disruptions. This highlights the importance of SAC programming that encourages gradual, low-pressure participation.

本研究は、大学のセルフアクセスセンター（SAC）の頻繁利用者を対象に、COVID-19 前後を含む 10 年間（2015 年、2017 年、2019 年、2023 年、2025 年）の意思疎通意欲（WTC）、不安、自信の長期的傾向を検討した。繰り返し横断的調査データを用い、組織的活動にも参加する学生と主に交流目的で利用する学生の利用形態の差異を比較した。結果として、WTC、不安、自信の平均値は経年的に概ね安定しており、パンデミック前後で有意差は見られなかった。一方、組織的活動に参加する学生は WTC が高いが、不安も高い傾向が示された。さらに、パンデミック後にはより社会的志向の利用構成への変化が示唆された。以上より、基盤的なコミュニケーション傾向は安定している一方、参加様式は環境変化に応じて適応する可能性が示された。

Keywords: willingness to communicate, self-access centres, student usage patterns, repeated cross-sectional design

Since the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language acquisition was first introduced by MacIntyre and colleagues in the 1990s, it has been widely conceptualised as a dynamic construct shaped by the interaction of affective, cognitive, and situational factors (MacIntyre et al., 1997; MacIntyre et al., 1998) that influence an individual's readiness to initiate communication. Within educational contexts, research suggests that these dimensions operate in systematic ways: affective factors such as communication anxiety tend to be negatively associated with WTC, whereas confidence is positively related; cognitive factors, particularly perceived communicative competence, are consistently linked to higher WTC; and situational factors, including the affordances of specific learning environments, can either facilitate or constrain opportunities for communication (Le et al., 2018; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). In Japanese higher education settings, research conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that students' WTC varies across interactional contexts, with greater willingness typically observed in small-group or familiar peer interactions than in whole-class or high-stakes speaking situations (Yashima, 2002). These findings point to the potential importance of semi-formal environments such as self-access centres (SACs), which may provide lower-pressure opportunities for participation and thereby support communicative engagement and confidence development.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought rapid shifts in language-learning ecologies, most notably through the transition to emergency online and hybrid instruction. A growing body of research has examined how these changes influenced learners' WTC. Studies during periods of remote instruction frequently reported reduced willingness to speak in synchronous online environments, particularly for spontaneous or interaction-heavy tasks, with technological constraints, reduced social presence, and heightened communication anxiety identified as key factors (Altunel, 2021; Parkin, 2021). However, findings have not been uniformly negative; some learners demonstrated greater willingness to participate in dyadic or text-based interactions (Abulhaija et al., 2024). This pattern is consistent with pre-pandemic research on modality and WTC, which suggests that different interactional modes can differentially shape learners' willingness to communicate (Le et al., 2018).

More recent research comparing pre- and post-pandemic groups suggests that the long-term effects of COVID-19 on communicative dispositions may be complex rather than uniformly detrimental. For instance, studies of Japanese university students report that overall motivation and global WTC remained relatively stable across pre-, mid-, and late-pandemic

groups, although declines were observed in presentation-related communication and interest in international engagement (Mayers et al., 2023). Similarly, Afidawati et al. (2024) found that some learners developed passive communicative behaviour during remote learning that persisted into face-to-face contexts, manifesting as lower confidence and increased anxiety when speaking in front of live audiences. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of examining multiple affective dimensions, such as WTC, confidence, and anxiety, rather than treating WTC as a single, isolated variable.

Despite these developments, research spanning extended pre- and post-COVID timeframes remains limited, particularly in informal or semi-formal learning environments. This gap is important because SACs occupy an intermediate space between formal classroom instruction and autonomous learning. Participation in SACs is typically voluntary, socially situated, and less performance oriented, meaning that communicative behaviour may develop differently from that observed in compulsory classroom settings. Examining patterns in WTC, anxiety, and confidence across multiple SAC user groups, therefore, provides a context-specific perspective on whether communicative dispositions have shifted over time and how these patterns align with, or diverge from, classroom-based findings. Accordingly, the present study compares pre-COVID (2015, 2017, 2019) and post-COVID (2023, 2025) SAC participants using three sections of a WTC questionnaire to explore changes in communicative and affective profiles.

WTC in Self-Access Centre (SAC) Setting

Self-access centres (SACs) represent a shift in language education beyond the traditional classroom by supporting learner autonomy through flexible, learner-driven opportunities for study and social interaction (Benson, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017). While early SACs primarily functioned as resource repositories, contemporary SACs are increasingly conceptualised as social learning spaces in which collaboration, identity formation, and authentic communication play central roles in language development (Murray et al., 2017; Mynard et al., 2023). These environments typically involve reduced performance pressure due to the informal and voluntary nature of participation in SACs. Such conditions may be particularly supportive for learners who are hesitant to speak in formal instructional settings, while also encouraging more confident learners to engage in extended interaction. These conditions may also have implications for SAC practitioners. Learners who participate

actively in SAC activities may still experience relatively high communication anxiety, suggesting that anxiety and active engagement can coexist.

In addition, socially oriented participation may function as a pathway toward greater familiarity and involvement within SAC communities rather than simply representing non-academic use. Qualitative research in Japanese SAC contexts suggests that sustained participation can enhance learners' confidence and reduce fear of making mistakes due to the supportive and collaborative atmosphere characteristic of these spaces (Bibby et al., 2016; Noguchi, 2015).

Environmental design and social affordances also play an important role in shaping communicative behaviour. Jauregi-Ondarra et al. (2022) argue that learners are more willing to speak when environments are perceived as safe, purposeful, and socially meaningful. Similarly, Murray et al. (2017) conceptualise SACs as communities of practice in which participation is invitational rather than compulsory, allowing learners to gradually increase communicative engagement through socially meaningful interaction. Although previous research in Japanese university contexts has examined SACs from perspectives such as motivation, advising practices, and usage patterns (Gillies, 2010; Hooper, 2021; Tweed, 2019), relatively few studies have focused specifically on learners' WTC or tracked changes in communicative dispositions over extended periods.

Moreover, much SAC research remains qualitative, cross-sectional, or focused on specific subgroups such as highly engaged users or student staff. Quantitative research examining patterns in WTC, anxiety, and confidence across time within SAC contexts is therefore limited. This gap is particularly salient in the post-pandemic context, as disruptions to physical learning spaces may have altered patterns of participation and interaction in informal language environments. The present study addresses this need by examining affective variables among frequent SAC users across a ten-year period spanning both pre- and post-pandemic periods.

The Communicative Disruption: The COVID-19 Pandemic and L2 Willingness to Communicate

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered opportunities for spontaneous interaction, a key component of communicative language learning. Beyond broad shifts in participation patterns, research has highlighted how specific features of online environments reshaped the conditions under which WTC emerges. Task design, interactional format, and teacher facilitation played an increasingly central role in shaping learners' willingness to

participate (Altunel, 2021; Liu, 2024). These findings suggest that WTC in online contexts is not uniformly diminished, but highly sensitive to the configuration of interactional conditions. At the same time, learners reported divergent affective responses: some benefited from reduced performance pressure, whereas others experienced increased anxiety related to camera use, technological uncertainty, and the absence of non-verbal cues (Altunel, 2021).

From Physical to Virtual Hubs: SAC Participation During the Pandemic

Disruptions to physical SACs were also substantial during the pandemic. Studies have noted the temporary loss of key environmental affordances, including drop-in culture and spontaneous social encounters that typically characterise self-access spaces (Davies et al., 2020; Ohara & Ishimura, 2020). In response, many SACs transitioned to virtual platforms, offering online advising, digital conversation lounges, and remote support services (Hayashi et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020).

However, participation patterns shifted in important ways. Engagement often became more structured and advisor-mediated, while casual interaction declined among students who primarily valued SACs as low-pressure social environments (Davies et al., 2020; Mynard et al., 2023). Although online advising was positively received in some contexts, comparisons of pre- and post-pandemic preferences suggest that physical SAC spaces remain particularly important for building interactional confidence and fostering a sense of community (Mynard et al., 2023; Sullivan & McAuley, 2023).

Implications for Pre/Post-Pandemic SAC Research

While short-term studies documented immediate pandemic-related shifts in communicative behaviour, research comparing extended pre- and post-pandemic periods within the same institutional SAC context remains scarce. Analyses across multiple time points are therefore needed to determine whether observed changes reflect temporary disruption or more enduring shifts in communicative patterns. By examining WTC, confidence, and anxiety across multiple data collection points spanning a decade, the present study provides a longer-term perspective on how changes in the self-access environment may relate to patterns in learners' communicative orientations.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in a university Self-Access Centre (SAC) in Japan, centrally located on the main campus. The facility is introduced to first-year students during orientation and functions as a multilingual social learning space where students can engage in

informal conversation, peer interaction, independent study, and optional workshops and events. The centre includes areas designed for individual study, collaborative work, and social interaction, allowing students to use the space flexibly according to their personal goals.

Like many SACs worldwide, the centre's operations were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The facility was closed throughout the 2020 academic year and reopened in 2021 under public health restrictions, including reduced operating hours and time limits on student stays. Although these measures were gradually relaxed in 2022, full return to standard operations was not achieved until 2023. By 2025, usage indicators such as footfall and duration of stay suggested a return to pre-pandemic levels.

Nevertheless, observational data from staff indicated that patterns of engagement had shifted. While students returned to the physical space, participation in organised classes and events appeared lower than before the pandemic, while staff observations suggested increased use of the SAC for informal social interaction. Such interaction typically involved students spending time with friends, eating lunch, or engaging in casual conversation within the SAC rather than participating in organised classes, events, or advising sessions This observed change in participation profiles provided the institutional motivation for the present study, which investigates whether psychological constructs, specifically WTC, confidence, and anxiety, differ between pre- and post-pandemic frequent SAC users.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do WTC, Anxiety, and Confidence differ across survey years?

RQ2: Do scores differ between the pre-COVID (2015–2019) and post-COVID (2023–2025) periods?

RQ3: Do these outcomes differ between users who participate in SAC classes/events in addition to social interaction (Group A) and users who use the SAC only for socialising (Group B)?

These questions enable comparison across multiple time points and examination of engagement-related differences within the SAC, where affective variables may strongly influence participation. Unlike classroom settings, SACs rely on self-directed, socially situated interaction, meaning that learners' willingness to communicate, confidence, and anxiety may influence patterns of participation in activities, events, and informal learning opportunities.

Participants and Methodology

The WTC scale was originally developed by McCroskey (1992), and the Japanese version, based on Yashima (2002), was used in this study. It was administered in paper format to frequent SAC users identified through attendance records (see Appendix for Japanese and English translations of the WTC questionnaire). Questionnaires were distributed directly to students upon entry to the SAC, and the majority were completed and returned during the same visit; however, formal response rates were not recorded. The questionnaire was administered in Japanese using a six-point Likert scale and drew on established WTC instruments used in prior research with Japanese learners (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002). While the items reflect general communication situations rather than SAC-specific interactions, they capture learners' willingness to initiate L2 communication, conceptualised as a context-sensitive construct applicable across different interactional settings. In this study, WTC is therefore interpreted as a general communicative disposition that may influence patterns of participation within the SAC, rather than as a direct measure of SAC-specific behaviour.

Participants were asked to indicate their typical SAC usage patterns (multiple responses permitted), including participation in classes/events, private study, and social interaction. In this study, *social interaction* refers to informal, unstructured use of the SAC space (e.g., spending time with friends, chatting in Japanese, eating lunch, or engaging in non-academic activities such as playing games), rather than participation in organised language-learning activities such as conversation tables, advising sessions, or events. The language used during these social interactions was not systematically recorded and may have included both Japanese and English. In practice, language choice likely varied according to the composition of the group, with interactions involving international students often including English, whereas interactions among Japanese students were frequently conducted primarily in Japanese.

Self-reported usage was cross-referenced with participation records to enhance accuracy. For analysis, responses were recoded into two usage categories based on the presence or absence of participation in organised SAC activities. Students were classified as Group A if they participated in at least one organised SAC activity during the semester, while Group B included students who did not participate in any organised activities. In practice, Group A students were regular participants who typically attended SAC classes on a weekly basis and participated in one or more events during the semester. Given the regular availability of organised activities (e.g., multiple classes per week, student-led sessions, and

special events), this threshold distinguishes between students with any engagement in structured SAC programming and those whose use of the space was exclusively informal.

Only students who used the SAC regularly (defined as an average of at least one visit per week across the 15-week semester, based on attendance records) during the autumn semester of each data collection year were asked to participate. Because frequent SAC users are predominantly first- and second-year undergraduates, the survey was conducted biennially (2015, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025) to ensure independent samples rather than repeated responses from the same individuals. Consequently, each dataset represents a distinct sample of frequent users (2015: n = 34; 2017: n = 30; 2019: n = 32; 2023: n = 21; 2025: n = 28). Across all years, participants were primarily first- and second-year students (over 70%) drawn from a range of faculties, with Economics and Education most strongly represented. As the study focuses exclusively on this subgroup, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider student population.

Following data collection, responses were entered into Excel, with reverse-coded items adjusted prior to analysis, and then imported into JASP (an open-source statistical analysis program). Responses were scored by calculating mean scores for three eight-item questionnaire sections: (a) Willingness to Communicate (WTC), (b) Anxiety, and (c) Confidence. Higher values indicated greater WTC, higher anxiety, and higher confidence, respectively. Analyses focused on these subscales, as they represent conceptually distinct constructs. Inter-scale correlations were calculated to examine the relationships among the three subscales. WTC was moderately positively correlated with both anxiety ($r = .48$) and confidence ($r = .48$), while anxiety and confidence also showed a relatively strong positive association ($r = .66$). These results indicate that the constructs are related but not simply oppositional, supporting their treatment as distinct dimensions of learners' communicative experience. The use of parallel situational items may contribute to shared variance across subscales; however, the moderate correlations observed suggest that the constructs are not reducible to a single underlying dimension.

Table 1

Correlations Among WTC, Anxiety, and Confidence

	WTC	Anxiety	Confidence
WTC	—	.48	.48
Anxiety	.48	—	.66
Confidence	.48	.66	—

To address RQ3, participants were classified into two usage groups: (a) users who attended SAC classes and/or events in addition to social interaction (Group A) and (b) users who used the SAC only for socialising (Group B). Independent-samples Welch's t-tests were used because group sizes were unequal and homogeneity of variance could not be assumed. Hedges' g was reported as the effect size measure because it provides a more conservative estimate for small or unequal samples. Comparisons were conducted both within individual years and using pooled pre-COVID (2015–2019) and post-COVID (2023–2025) datasets. Pooling was undertaken to increase statistical power and improve the reliability of comparisons, given the relatively small sample sizes in some individual years.

Results

Across the five data-collection points, only minor numerical fluctuations were observed. WTC ranged from 3.13 to 3.27, Anxiety from 2.82 to 2.95, and Confidence from 2.68 to 2.75 (Table 2). Confidence intervals overlapped substantially across years for all scales, indicating that differences between specific groups were small in magnitude.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and 95% Confidence Intervals by Year for WTC, Anxiety, and Confidence

Scale	2015 (*n*=34)	2017 (*n*=30)	2019 (*n*=32)	2023 (*n*=21)	2025 (*n*=28)
WTC	3.15 (0.49) [2.98, 3.32]	3.18 (0.48) [3.00, 3.36]	3.13 (0.50) [2.95, 3.31]	3.27 (0.45) [3.07, 3.47]	3.21 (0.48) [3.03, 3.39]
Anxiety	2.82 (0.54) [2.63, 3.01]	2.85 (0.54) [2.65, 3.05]	2.82 (0.54) [2.63, 3.01]	2.95 (0.50) [2.73, 3.17]	2.91 (0.53) [2.71, 3.11]
Confidence	2.72 (0.34) [2.60, 2.84]	2.75 (0.34) [2.63, 2.87]	2.73 (0.34) [2.61, 2.85]	2.68 (0.31) [2.55, 2.81]	2.69 (0.35) [2.56, 2.82]

Note. Values are M (SD) [95% CI].

Looking at RQ2, (pre- vs post-COVID comparisons), independent-samples Welch's t-tests comparing pre-COVID (2015–2019) and post-COVID (2023–2025) groups revealed no statistically significant differences for any outcome measure (Table 3). Effect sizes were small ($|d| \leq .25$), with only slight tendencies toward higher anxiety and marginally lower confidence in the post-COVID group. These findings suggest that the communicative orientations of frequent SAC users remained largely stable across the pandemic period.

Table 3

ANOVA and Pre–Post COVID Comparisons with 95% Confidence Intervals

Scale	Test	Statistic	*p*	Effect size	95% CI -mean difference
WTC	ANOVA (Year)	F (4,140)=0.31	.87	η^2=.009	—
	Pre vs Post	t=−1.00	.32	d=0.17	−0.28 to 0.09
Anxiety	ANOVA (Year)	F (4,140)=0.30	.88	η^2=.008	—
	Pre vs Post	t=−1.06	.29	d=0.18	−0.34 to 0.10
Confidence	ANOVA (Year)	F (4,140)=0.21	.93	η^2=.006	—
	Pre vs Post	t=0.87	.39	d=−0.15	−0.08 to 0.20

Note. CIs in the t-test rows represent 95% CIs for the mean difference (Pre − Post). Pre-COVID = 2015–2019; Post-COVID = 2023–2025. Welch t-tests were used where variances differed.

RQ3 examined whether WTC, anxiety, and confidence differed between students who used the SAC for both informal classes/events and social interaction (Group A) and those who used the SAC primarily for socialising (Group B). Year-by-year Welch t-tests (Table 4) indicated that Group A generally reported higher WTC than Group B, although most annual differences did not reach statistical significance, likely due to smaller Group B sample sizes. For Anxiety, Group A also tended to report higher scores, with the largest group difference observed in 2023.

Table 4

Year-by-Year Comparisons of Group A (A) and Group B (B) (Welch t-Tests)

Year	Scale	A n	A M	A SD	B n	B M	B SD	t	df	p	g
2015	WTC	23	3.22	0.47	11	3.01	0.52	1.14	18.03	.270	0.42
	Anxiety		2.92	0.52		2.63	0.54	1.50	19.08	.151	0.54
	Confidence		2.68	0.32		2.81	0.38	−0.92	16.90	.370	−0.35
2017	WTC	24	3.23	0.46	6	2.98	0.53	1.07	7.04	.322	0.51
	Anxiety		2.89	0.53		2.69	0.62	0.74	6.91	.485	0.36
	Confidence		2.70	0.32		2.94	0.39	−1.35	6.79	.220	−0.68
2019	WTC	25	3.24	0.45	7	2.77	0.51	2.19	8.80	.057	0.98
	Anxiety		2.91	0.52		2.50	0.54	1.78	9.44	.107	0.75
	Confidence		2.73	0.33		2.75	0.40	−0.15	8.56	.882	−0.07
2023	WTC	10	3.40	0.46	11	3.15	0.43	1.29	18.52	.212	0.54
	Anxiety		3.18	0.50		2.74	0.42	2.16	17.61	.045	0.91
	Confidence		2.81	0.27		2.56	0.30	2.04	19.00	.056	0.85
2025	WTC	12	3.34	0.44	16	3.12	0.49	1.28	25.06	.214	0.47
	Anxiety		3.09	0.50		2.77	0.53	1.64	24.67	.115	0.60
	Confidence		2.75	0.30		2.64	0.38	0.85	25.94	.401	0.30

Pooled pre- and post-COVID comparisons (Table 5) showed a consistent pattern across eras. In the pre-COVID period, Group A reported higher WTC ($p = .016$, $g = 0.63$) and higher anxiety ($p = .022$, $g = 0.57$) than Group B, while confidence did not differ significantly. In the post-COVID period, the same directional trend remained: Group A showed higher WTC (trend-level, $p = .070$) and higher anxiety ($p = .011$, $g = 0.76$), with a small, non-significant tendency toward higher confidence.

Table 5

Pooled Pre- and Post-COVID Comparisons of Group A and Group B

Era	Scale	A n	A M	A SD	B n	B M	B SD	t	df	p	g
Pre	WTC	72	3.23	0.46	24	2.93	0.51	2.54	36.02	.016	0.63
Pre	Anxiety	72	2.91	0.52	24	2.60	0.54	2.39	37.95	.022	0.57
Pre	Confidence	72	2.70	0.32	24	2.82	0.38	−1.38	34.78	.178	−0.35
Post	WTC	22	3.37	0.44	27	3.13	0.46	1.86	45.75	.070	0.52
Post	Anxiety	22	3.13	0.49	27	2.76	0.48	2.67	44.70	.011	0.76
Post	Confidence	22	2.78	0.28	27	2.61	0.35	1.92	47.00	.062	0.53

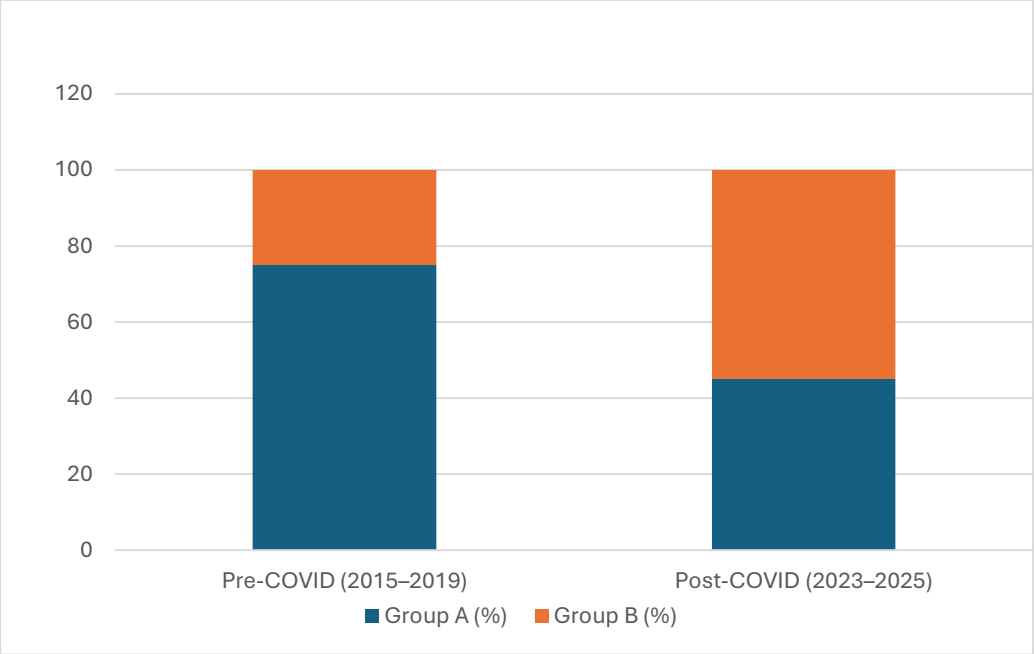
Overall, students who participated in organised SAC activities (Group A) reported higher willingness to communicate but also higher levels of communication-related anxiety than social-only users (Group B). This pattern was consistent across both time periods, suggesting that participation in structured activities may be associated with greater perceived communicative challenge rather than reduced anxiety.

A descriptive comparison of user composition further indicated a substantial shift in participation patterns. In the pre-COVID period (2015–2019), 72 of 96 frequent users (75%) were classified as Group A and 24 (25%) as Group B. In the post-COVID period (2023–2025), this distribution changed to 22 of 49 users (45%) in Group A and 27 (55%) in Group B, indicating a relative increase in social-only users after the pandemic (Figure 1). A chi-square test of independence confirmed that this shift was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1) = 12.98$, $p < .001$.

This change suggests a notable transformation in how students engage with the SAC, with fewer users participating in structured activities and a greater proportion using the space for informal social interaction.

Figure 1

Proportion of Group A and Group B SAC Users (Pre- vs Post-COVID)



Taken together, the results indicate a stable overall profile of WTC, confidence, and anxiety among frequent SAC users across the decade, with no significant pre- to post-COVID shifts at the aggregate level. However, engagement type revealed a more nuanced pattern: activity participants consistently demonstrated higher WTC alongside higher anxiety. Moreover, the post-pandemic period was characterised by a greater proportion of social-only SAC users.

Discussion

Stability of WTC, Anxiety, and Confidence Across Survey Years

A primary finding of this study is the high degree of stability in WTC, anxiety, and confidence among frequent SAC users across the ten-year period. The post-COVID cohorts consist of different students, most of whom were not enrolled at the university during the pandemic. As such, the findings reflect post-pandemic patterns of engagement rather than continuity in the behaviour of the same individuals. Mean scores fluctuated only marginally; notably, overlapping confidence intervals and small effect sizes indicate limited year-to-year variation. This stability across pre- and post-COVID periods suggests that the communicative

dispositions of frequent SAC users remained broadly consistent across cohorts, despite changes in the educational context.

This pattern aligns with theoretical frameworks that conceptualise WTC as shaped by both situational factors and relatively enduring affective tendencies (MacIntyre et al., 1998). While the pandemic fundamentally altered learning ecologies and temporarily reduced opportunities for spontaneous interaction, the affective profiles observed in SAC users did not show a substantial decline. This stability should be interpreted with caution, as the study reflects cohort-level patterns rather than individual continuity and focuses on a self-selected group of frequent SAC users rather than the broader student population. That being said, the voluntary nature of frequent SAC users' participation may provide a useful lens for interpreting these findings. Unlike classroom contexts, where interaction is often mandatory and structured, SAC environments are socially self-selected. Students who frequently use the SAC may therefore represent a subgroup with stronger intrinsic motivation for communication and social engagement. In this sense, the SAC may function as a relatively stable interactional ecology for learners who are inclined to seek communicative opportunities, even when broader educational conditions are disrupted.

Participation Patterns

The stable affective measures contrast with a clear shift in how students utilised the SAC. While dispositional variables remained steady, participation in organised activities (Group A) dropped from 75% pre-COVID to 45% post-COVID, with a corresponding rise in social-only engagement (Group B). This statistically significant transition suggests that the longer-term post-pandemic changes may be more visible in patterns of participation than in broad affective dispositions. Thus, the most significant shift may lie in participation culture rather than in core affective variables such as WTC or confidence.

One possible interpretation is that a greater proportion of students now use the SAC primarily as a low-pressure social environment rather than as a space for structured participation. While the present study does not directly examine the causes of this shift, it may reflect broader post-pandemic changes in student behaviour, including altered social habits, reduced participation in structured activities, or changes in SAC programming and participation opportunities. This interpretation is also consistent with research suggesting that students may conceptualise self-access learning primarily in relation to the SAC as a social or environmental space rather than as participation in specific learning activities (Warrington, 2022). From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of maintaining a

range of engagement pathways within SAC environments, including both structured and low-pressure social interaction opportunities, to accommodate evolving student needs.

Engagement Type and the WTC–Anxiety Relationship

Analysis by engagement type revealed a consistent, albeit nuanced, trend: students involved in both organised SAC activities and social interaction (Group A) reported higher WTC than social-only users (Group B). This is consistent with community-of-practice perspectives (Murray et al., 2017), where deeper participation supports communicative investment.

Interestingly, Group A also reported higher anxiety. This suggests that WTC and anxiety often coexist; for active participants, the perceived value of engagement likely outweighs the discomfort of communicative risk. This finding is consistent with recent SAC research indicating that anxiety remains a significant factor even among learners who actively participate in self-access environments (Suzuki & Hooper, 2024). However, a distinction must be made between the dispositional WTC measured by the questionnaire and the actual participation behaviour recorded in SAC attendance logs. While the survey captures hypothetical willingness across various scenarios, the Group A/B classification provides a behavioural proxy. The fact that those who participated more actively in the SAC (Group A) also reported higher willingness on the survey suggests a possible relationship between communicative disposition and participation patterns, even if the questionnaire itself is decontextualised.

These findings challenge linear assumptions that higher WTC must stem from reduced anxiety. Instead, it supports a dynamic view in which engagement involves navigating emotional challenges. Anxiety may not necessarily inhibit participation; in socially meaningful contexts like the SAC, it may accompany a learner's communicative effort (Suzuki & Hooper, 2024).

Implications for SAC Practice and Design

These findings have implications for SAC practice and design. The relative stability of WTC among frequent users suggests that SACs can function as important sites of continuity during periods of institutional disruption. However, the coexistence of high WTC and high anxiety among active participants indicates that these environments often attract motivated learners who are nevertheless navigating communicative apprehension. This has important implications for SAC programming and pedagogical design.

First, confidence should not be treated as a prerequisite for participation. Instead, SACs can benefit from normalizing anxiety as a standard component of communicative development. Designing tiered participation pathways that begin with low-pressure social interaction and gradually introduce structured activities can help lower psychological barriers to engagement. Informal drop-in interaction can serve as a legitimate entry point, followed by lightly structured formats such as themed conversation tables, peer-led sessions, or short, low-commitment workshops.

Second, the post-pandemic increase in social-only usage suggests that informal interaction has become a central mode of engagement rather than a peripheral one. Rather than viewing this shift as a decline in academic engagement, SACs can integrate micro-language opportunities into these social spaces. Using conversation prompts, rotating discussion themes, or near-peer facilitators helps institutions align with current participation patterns while maintaining the SAC's role as a language-rich environment.

Additionally, framing communication anxiety as a normal part of language use, not a deficit to be cured, helps learners see discomfort as part of the learning process. By explicitly treating the SAC as a space for gradual, socially supported risk-taking, practitioners can better support sustained student investment and identity growth.

For practitioners, the implication is clear: anxious learners are not disengaged. In fact, in this study, they are often the individuals who actively invest the most effort in their communicative development. Offering low-barrier entry points is vital to sustain participation among students who want to communicate despite their anxiety

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The repeated cross-sectional design captures cohort-level patterns rather than change in individuals over time. Additionally, as a single-site study in a specific Japanese university context, the results may be shaped by local demographics and staffing structures, limiting generalizability. The language used during informal social interaction was also not systematically recorded, making it impossible to determine the extent to which Group B participation involved English-language communication.

Most importantly, there is an inherent tension between the static measurement of WTC via the questionnaire and the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of communication in the SAC. While the use of behavioural data (Group A/B classification) helps bridge this gap, the questionnaire remains a measure of self-reported, hypothetical intent. Furthermore,

although participation categories were informed by behavioural records, the study did not incorporate detailed activity logs, duration of participation, or qualitative accounts of learner experience. Future research, using real-time observational methods, participation tracking, or qualitative interviews, would better illuminate how these hypothetical dispositions are enacted within the fluid social landscape of the SAC.

Conclusion

This study examined WTC, anxiety, and confidence among frequent users of a university SAC across ten years, covering both pre- and post-COVID periods. The results revealed a consistent pattern of stability: no significant differences were observed across survey years or between pre- and post-pandemic periods. These findings suggest that the communicative orientations of frequent SAC users may be relatively stable, even in the context of major educational and social disruption.

At the same time, analysis by engagement type revealed a more complex pattern. Students who participated in SAC classes and events in addition to social interaction generally reported higher WTC but also higher anxiety than social-only users. This indicates that active engagement in structured SAC activities may involve increased communicative challenges rather than a straightforward reduction in anxiety. In addition, the post-COVID period was characterised by a greater proportion of social-only users, suggesting that the most significant pandemic-related shift may lie in participation patterns rather than in underlying affective dispositions. These findings highlight the importance of viewing SACs as dynamic social learning spaces situated between formal instruction and autonomous learning. The persistence of stable affective profiles suggests that SACs can provide continuity of communicative engagement and social connection for motivated learners, even when broader learning environments change. At the same time, the observed coexistence of high WTC and high anxiety challenges deficit-oriented models of learner psychology and underscores the need to support “brave” rather than merely “comfortable” communication.

Overall, this study demonstrates that while communicative dispositions among frequent SAC users may remain stable over time, patterns of participation and modes of engagement can shift in meaningful ways. For SAC practitioners and researchers, this underscores the importance of examining not only differences in mean scores but also patterns of engagement in informal learning spaces.

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Appendix

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (English & Japanese translations)

(1) Please choose how willing you are to speak in English in each of the following 8 situations.

Scale: 1 = Always speak; 2 = Usually speak; 3 = Sometimes speak; 4 = Rarely speak; 5 = Seldom speak; 6 = Never speak

1. When you have an opportunity to give a speech in front of a large audience
2. When you are standing in line and someone you know is in front of you
3. During a group discussion in an English class
4. When you have a chance to speak in a group of people you are meeting for the first time
5. When you have an opportunity to speak freely during an English class
6. When you are standing in line and a friend is in front of you
7. When you have an opportunity to speak in front of the class in an English lesson
8. When you take part in a discussion with a group of friends

(2) Please choose how anxious you feel when speaking in English in each of the following 8 situations.

Scale: 1 = Always anxious; 2 = Usually anxious; 3 = Sometimes anxious; 4 = Rarely anxious; 5 = Seldom anxious; 6 = Never anxious

1. When you have an opportunity to give a speech in front of a large audience
2. When you are standing in line, and someone you know is in front of you
3. During a group discussion in an English class
4. When you have a chance to speak in a group of people you are meeting for the first time
5. When you have an opportunity to speak freely during an English class
6. When you are standing in line, and a friend is in front of you
7. When you have an opportunity to speak in front of the class in an English lesson
8. When you take part in a discussion with a group of friends

(3) Please choose how confident you feel speaking in English in each of the following 8 situations.

Scale: 1 = Always confident; 2 = Usually confident; 3 = Sometimes confident; 4 = Not very confident; 5 = Seldom confident; 6 = Not confident at all

1. When you have an opportunity to give a speech in front of a large audience

2. When you are standing in line and someone you know is in front of you
3. During a group discussion in an English class
4. When you have a chance to speak in a group of people you are meeting for the first time
5. When you have an opportunity to speak freely during an English class
6. When you are standing in line, and a friend is in front of you
7. When you have an opportunity to speak in front of the class in an English lesson
8. When you take part in a discussion with a group of friends

2. What do you usually do at the [SAC]? (You may select more than one answer).

a. participate in classes and/or events

b. study privately or with friends

c. socialise with friends

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) 尺度

(1) 以下 8 つの状況下で、自分がどれだけ**英語**で話す**意欲**があるかを選んでください

1	2	3	4	5	6
常に話す	たいてい話す	ときどき話す	あまり話さない	めったに話さない	決して話さない

	英語で					
1. 大勢の前でスピーチをする機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. 列に並んでいて知り合いが前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. 英語の授業中のグループディスカッションのとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. 初めて会う人のグループで話す機会があったとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. 英語の授業中に自由に発言する機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. 列にならんでいて友達が前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. 英語のクラスで前に出て話す機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. 友人のグループで議論するとき	1	2	3	4	5	6

(2) 以下 8 つの状況下で、**英語**で話す際、どれだけ**不安**に感じるかを選んでください

1	2	3	4	5	6

常に不安	たいてい不安	ときどき不安	あまり不安にならない	めったに不安にならない	決して不安にならない

	英語で					
1. 大勢の前でスピーチをする機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. 列に並んでいて知り合いが前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. 英語の授業中のグループディスカッションのとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. 初めて会う人のグループで話す機会があったとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. 英語の授業中に自由に発言する機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. 列に並んでいて友達が前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. 英語のクラスで前に出て話す機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. 友人のグループで議論するとき	1	2	3	4	5	6

(3) 以下 8 つの状況下で、どれだけ**自信**を持って**英語**を話すことができるかを選んでください

1	2	3	4	5	6
常に自信がある	たいてい自信がある	ときどき自信がある	あまり自信がない	めったに自信がない	決して自信がない

	英語で					
1. 大勢の前でスピーチをする機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. 列に並んでいて知り合いが前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. 英語の授業中のグループディスカッションのとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. 初めて会う人のグループで話す機会があったとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. 英語の授業中に自由に発言する機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. 列にならんでいて友達が前にいたとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. 英語のクラスで前に出て話す機会があるとき	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. 友人のグループで議論するとき	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. [SAC]では、普段どのようなことをしていますか？（あてはまるものすべてにチェックを入れてください。）

a. 授業やイベントに参加する

b. 一人、または友人と自習する

c. 友人と交流する（おしゃべりなど）