

Examining the relationships between willingness to communicate in English, communication confidence, and classroom environment

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the Iranian EFL learners' level of willingness to communicate in English, and the relationships between willingness to communicate, communication confidence, and classroom environment. For this purpose, 243 Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. Results of the descriptive statistics indicated that participants were moderately willing to communicate in English inside the language classroom, felt low levels of anxiety, and perceived themselves moderately confident to communicate in English in the classroom. Correlational analyses also indicated that willingness to communicate is positively correlated with classroom environment and perceived communicative competence, and negatively correlated with communication anxiety.

Keywords: willingness to communicate; perceived communicative competence; communication anxiety; classroom environment

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1. Introduction

The importance of communication for developing English proficiency has been emphasized in current approaches toward language teaching. According to MacIntyre & Charos (1996), if language learners do not use language in the classroom, they cannot become proficient. Recently, a new construct called willingness to communicate (WTC) has been proposed to examine the students' tendency toward communication in a second or foreign language (L2). WTC was originally proposed with regard to first language by McCroskey & Baer (1985). In the first language, it is considered as a personality trait which does not change over time. However, when it comes to L2, it is quite different from L1 (MacIntyre, Clement, Dorneyi, & Noels, 1998). The reason is that communication confidence can range from 0% to 100% in an L2, while most people have a high level of communicative competence in L1 (MacIntyre et al, 1998).

L2WTC has been defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse, at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p.547). In their seminal work on L2WTC, MacIntyre et al (1998) proposed a pyramid model of L2 communication in which different variables that affect L2WTC has been described. After proposing this model, many studies have been conducted in different contexts to explore L2WTC (Yashima, 2002; Kim, 2004; Cetinkaya, 2005; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Ghonsooly, Khajavy, & Asadpour, 2012). Recently, the role of classroom environment as an important factor in L2WTC has been proposed by Peng and Woodrow (2010). According to them, in addition to cognitive and affective factors, environment also is a significant predictor of L2WTC. However, very few studies have examined the relationship between classroom environment and L2WTC (e.g. Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships among L2WTC, communication confidence, and classroom environment.

2. Review of the Literature

Willingness to communicate was originally conceptualized for first language communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). It was based on the previous works on unwillingness to communicate (Burgoon, 1976), predisposition toward verbal behavior (Mortensen, Arntson, & Lustig, 1977), and shyness (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). McCroskey and associates considered it as a personality trait. To answer this question that why people differ in their level of WTC, they argued that it is due to its antecedents. These antecedents of WTC include introversion-extraversion, anomie and alienation, communication competence, self-esteem, communication apprehension, and cultural diversity. By identification of these six variables, many studies were done to examine the role of these variables in WTC (MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991).

When WTC is applied to the second/ foreign language, it is quite different. For example, Charos (1994) showed that there is a negative relationship between WTC in L1 and L2. MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a pyramid model of L2 WTC integrating linguistic, communicative and social psychological variables. These variables include state of communicative self-confidence, desire to communicate with a specific person; self-confidence, intergroup and interpersonal motivation; communicative competence, social attitudes, intergroup attitudes; personality and intergroup climate.

Among the different predictors of the L2WTC, communication confidence and classroom environment have been the strongest predictors of it (e.g. Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002; Ghonsooly et al, 2012, Cetinkaya, 2005). Self-confidence construct proposed by Clement (1980, 1986) involves two variables: self-perceived communicative competence and a lack of language anxiety. Clement and his associates (Clement,

1980; Clement & Kruidenier, 1983) showed that in multilingual communities, linguistic self-confidence plays an important role in learning the language of the other community. Perceived communicative competence refers to learners' self-evaluation of their L2 skills (Peng, 2009). Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between perceived communicative competence and actual competence (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997). Also, it has been suggested that perceived communicative competence is a better predictor of L2 performance for two reasons. First, individuals usually choose to communicate based on their self-judgment of their L2 proficiency rather than their actual competence, as they are not aware of their actual competence (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Second, as MacIntyre et al. (1997) mentioned perceived communicative competence can save both time and formal testing expenses.

The other subcomponent of L2 self-confidence is language anxiety. MacIntyre (1999) defines foreign language anxiety as "worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p.27). Two of the most well-known classifications are trait, state, and situation-specific (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) and facilitating-debilitating views of anxiety. Trait anxiety is stable over time, while state anxiety is a transient and moment-to-moment feeling. Situation-specific anxiety is usually engendered by specific situations. Language anxiety is considered to be situation-specific, as it is closely related to L2 learning situations (Horwitz, 1986). Facilitating-debilitating view of language anxiety proposes that anxiety does not necessarily impede learning, and in some cases it could improve language performance and have a positive effect on language learning. In other words, while debilitating anxiety has negative impact on learners' performance, facilitating anxiety can actually enhance it.

Many researchers have examined the relationship between anxiety and L2 learning since early 1970s (e.g. MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Aida, 1994; MacIntyre 1999). Their findings have shown that there is a negative relationship between L2 anxiety and the level of achievement. Foreign language anxiety is common among foreign language learners (Young, 1991) and it is seen as one of the great obstacles of L2 learning and achievement. Lower achievement with higher anxiety is attributed to negative effects of anxiety on language learning (Tóth, 2007; MacIntyre, 1999, 2002; Horwitz, 2001). Mahmoodzadeh (2013) explored the role of gender and anxiety in Iranian EFL context. Results of his study indicated that mixed-gender classrooms are anxiety-provoking, due to the presence of the opposite sex. Research has indicated that there is a positive relationship between perceived communicative competence and L2WTC. Also, it has been found that communication anxiety is negatively related to perceived communicative competence and L2WTC.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of human development (1979), development is a joint function of person and environment. This means that in addition to cognitive and affective factors, environment is another important factor which affects an individual's development. Applied in language learning, the classroom environment is a very important factor in the process of learners' language learning. Three of the most influential factors in the language classroom include teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation (Williams & Burden, 1997; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Teacher support refers to the extent to which the teacher helps, supports, trusts, befriends, and is interested in students (Dorman, Fisher, & Waldrip, 2006). Student cohesiveness refers to the extent to which students know, help and support each other (Dorman et al., 2006). Task orientation refers to the extent to which it is important to complete activities and solve the problems (Dorman et al., 2006). Attractive and useful tasks lead to student engagement. In Peng & Woodrow's (2010) study, a negative correlation was found between communication anxiety with L2WTC, perceived communicative competence, teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. Also, a positive correlation was found between L2WTC with perceived communicative competence, teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation.

The purpose of the present study is to explore students' level of L2WTC, communication confidence, and perceptions of classroom environment. Also, the relationships between L2WTC, communication confidence, and classroom environment are examined. The following research questions are answered in the present study:

- What are the Iranian EFL learners' level of L2WTC, communication confidence, and perceptions of classroom environment?
- What are the relationships between L2WTC, communication confidence, and classroom environment?

3. Methodology

3.1 Settings and participants

A total of 243 undergraduate EFL university students from Ferdowsi University and Imam Reza College participated in this study, including 148 females (60.9%), 84 males (34.6%), and 11 (4.5%) participants who did not write their gender in the questionnaire. All of them were studying English language as an academic major. The range of the age of the participants was between 18 and 42, and the mean age was 21.87 (SD=2.97).

3.2 Instrumentation

WTC in English

Ten items from Peng & Woodrow (2010, adapted from Weaver, 2005) were used in this study to measure WTC in English (Cronbach's $\alpha = .$). Students answered the questions on a seven point Likert scale from "1 = definitely not willing" to "7 = definitely willing".

Communication Confidence in English

Perceived communicative competence in English - Six items from Peng & Woodrow (2010, adapted from Weaver, 2005) were used on an 11 point can-do scale ranging from 0%, 10%, up to 100%. Students should show the percentage of the time they feel competent to communicate in English.

Communication anxiety in English - Ten items from Horwitz et al. (1986) were used for assessing communication anxiety on a seven point Likert scale measuring the extent to which the participants feel anxious in various classroom communication situations from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree).

Classroom environment

Thirteen items from Peng & Woodrow (2010, adapted from Fraser, Fisher, & McRobbie, 1996) were used for assessing classroom environment. These items measured teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation on a seven point scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, skewness, and kurtosis were measured for all the scales. Descriptive statistics for the items of L2WTC are shown in Table 1. The respondents' scores ranged on a seven point scale. All the scores were normally distributed within the range of ± 2.0 . As can be seen in Table 4.1, the highest and lowest mean scores on L2WTC are items 4 and 2, respectively. In other words, Iranian EFL learners were most willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he or she just said in English because they did not understand, while they were least willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English.

Also, the mean score obtained for total L2WTC was 43.52. Following Liu & Jackson (2008) and Peng (2009), to examine the L2WTC level of the learners, it was interpreted from the ratio of the mean L2WTC score to the full score. Considering ten items on a seven point scale, full score for this scale is 70. A total score of more than 80% of the full score, which is 56 (i.e. $70 \times 80\%$) shows strong willingness to communicate; and a total score of 60% to 80% of the full score, which is between 42 and 56, indicates moderate willingness to

communicate. In the present study, the mean score (43.52) was between 42 and 56. It implies that Iranian EFL learners were moderately willing to communicate in English in their classrooms.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for communication anxiety (CA). The respondents' scores ranged on a seven point scale for ten items. All the scores were normally distributed within the range of ± 2.0 . As can be seen in Table 4.2, Iranian EFL learners experience the most communication anxiety when they have to speak English without preparation in class (item CA3), and they feel the least anxiety when they speak English in the classroom (CA8).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for L2WTC items

Items	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
WTC1	1.00	7.00	3.95	1.86	-.01	-.99
WTC2	1.00	7.00	3.47	1.83	.24	-.98
WTC3	1.00	7.00	4.65	1.62	-.48	-.36
WTC4	1.00	7.00	5.19	1.57	-.71	-.12
WTC5	1.00	7.00	4.68	1.83	-.36	-1.00
WTC6	1.00	7.00	4.36	1.73	-.28	-.88
WTC7	1.00	7.00	4.51	1.81	-.32	-.83
WTC8	1.00	7.00	4.58	1.83	-.40	-.80
WTC9	1.00	7.00	4.09	1.90	-.04	-1.07
WTC10	1.00	7.00	4.00	1.98	.00	-1.16
Total WTC	16.00	69.00	43.52	11.76	-.05	-.22

The total mean score of the communication anxiety was 32.63. As there are ten items on a seven point scale, the highest score for this scale is 70. The same rule for interpreting L2WTC was used for communication anxiety. A total score of more than 80% of the full score, which is 56 (i.e. $70 \times 80\%$) shows high level of communication anxiety; and a total score of 60% to 80% of the full score, which is between 42 and 56, indicates moderate communication anxiety. In the present study, the mean score (32.63) was less than 42, which implies that Iranian EFL learners feel low levels of anxiety while communicating inside the classroom.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for communication anxiety items

Items	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
CA1	1.00	7.00	2.73	1.59	.69	-.30
CA 2	1.00	7.00	2.74	1.81	.69	-.62
CA 3	1.00	7.00	3.72	1.91	-.09	-1.20
CA 4	1.00	7.00	3.02	1.84	.41	-1.11
CA 5	1.00	7.00	2.98	1.55	.55	-.12
CA 6	1.00	7.00	3.32	1.86	.26	-.98
CA 7	1.00	7.00	2.41	1.39	-.78	.79
CA 8	1.00	6.00	2.25	1.39	.81	-.38
CA 9	1.00	7.00	3.14	1.89	.53	-.84
CA 10	1.00	7.00	3.38	1.76	.23	-.90
Total CA	12.00	57.00	32.63	9.84	.15	.35

Descriptive statistics for perceived communication competence (PCC) is shown in Table 3. There were six can-do questions ranging from 0% to 100%. All the scores were normally distributed within the range of ± 2.0 . Iranian EFL learners had the highest level of perceived communication competence when giving a short

self-introduction without notes in English to the class (item PCC5), and the least level of perceived communication competence when doing a role-play standing in front of the class in English (Item PCC2).

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for perceived communication competence items

Items	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
PCC1	10.00	100.00	71.12	22.94	-.45	-.54
PCC2	10.00	100.00	64.07	24.87	-.11	-1.12
PCC3	10.00	100.00	65.50	25.83	-.27	-.97
PCC4	10.00	100.00	73.06	24.18	-.66	-.62
PCC5	20.00	100.00	83.92	20.19	-1.11	.08
PCC6	20.00	100.00	75.62	21.71	-.59	-.70
Total PCC	150	600	433.31	117.51	-.74	.35

The total mean score of the perceived communication confidence was 433.31. As there are six items on an eleven can-do scale, the highest score for this scale is 600. A total score of more than 80% of the full score, which is 480 (i.e. $600 \times 80\%$) shows high level of perceived communication confidence; and a total score of 60% to 80% of the full score, which is between 360 and 480, indicates moderate perceived communication confidence. In the present study, the mean score (433.31) was between 360 and 480, suggesting that Iranian EFL learners perceived themselves moderately confident to communicate in English inside the classroom. Pearson product moment correlation formula was also used to examine the correlations between WTC in English, communication confidence, and classroom environment. Results are shown in Table.

Table 4

Correlations between the variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.WTC	1.00					
2.PCC	.21**	1.00				
3.Anxiety	-.16*	-.51**	1.00			
4.Teacher	.15*	.09	-.18*	1.00		
5.Student	.17*	.19**	-.27**	.34**	1.00	
6.Task	.29**	.06	-.15*	.46**	.32**	1.00

As can be seen in Table 4, WTC in English is positively correlated with PCC ($r = .21, p < .01$), teacher support ($r = .15, p < .05$), student cohesiveness ($r = .17, p < .05$), and task orientation ($r = .29, p < .01$), and negatively with communication anxiety ($r = -.16, p < .05$). Also, PCC is positively correlated with student cohesiveness ($r = .19, p < .01$), and negatively with communication anxiety ($r = -.51, p < .01$). Moreover, communication anxiety was negatively correlated with teacher support ($r = -.18, p < .05$), student cohesiveness ($r = -.27, p < .01$), and task orientation ($r = -.15, p < .05$).

5. Discussion

Descriptive statistics indicated that Iranian EFL learners' level of WTC was 43.52 out of 70. Based on the norms represented in section 4.2, Iranian EFL learners are moderately willing to communicate in English classrooms. The reasons for a moderate level of WTC in Iranian context may be due to two facts. First, Iranian English major university students do not need a good command of English speaking proficiency to pass their exams. Except for two courses (conversation and oral reproduction of story courses), students are required to write their answers for their exams. Therefore, academic achievement is not much dependent on good speaking proficiency, and many students may be silent during the class time, because they can pass the exams with good

scores regardless of good English speaking ability. Second, as most of the classes in Iranian context are teacher-based and social communicative needs are not much emphasized, they may find no opportunity to speak in their classes.

Among different classroom opportunities for speaking English, Iranian EFL learners were most willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he or she just said in English because they did not understand and were least willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English. This implies that because passing the courses and obtaining good marks are of great importance for academic achievement of the students, they ask their teachers in English to repeat what they did not understand. Results also suggest that Iranian EFL learners are least willing to engage in role-play activities (either in front of the class or at their desk with their peers). It can also be related to the importance of academic achievement in which exams are mostly in written form, and therefore, role-playing seems irrelevant. This finding is in line with Peng (2009) who found similar results in China.

As mentioned before, communication confidence is composed of perceived communicative competence and lack of anxiety. Iranian EFL learners perceived themselves moderately confident to communicate in English inside the classroom (433.31 out of 600). They had the highest level of perceived communicative competence when giving a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class, and the least level of perceived communication competence when doing a role-play standing in front of the class in English. Giving a brief self-introduction to the class seems the easiest communicative task for Iranian EFL learners. As all of the participants in the resent study had competitively passed the university entrance exam to enter the university for studying English language, it is not strange that they perceived themselves most able to briefly self-introduce themselves. Interestingly enough, they again selected role-paying as the least perceived communicative task. This finding confirms the result of the previous section in which the students were less willing to do a role-play. All of these findings shed light on the nature of role-playing in Iranian EFL context which do not seem to be attractive and interesting for students.

Results of the descriptive statistics indicated that Iranian EFL learners feel low levels of anxiety while communicating inside the classroom (32.63 out of 70). They experienced the most communication anxiety when they have to speak English without preparation in class and they felt the least anxiety when speaking English in the classroom. The second most anxiety provoking situation was "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I have not prepared in advance". These two items indicate the importance of preparation before speaking in English classrooms. If students feel they are not prepared enough to speak English in the classroom, they feel anxious in the classroom. As the results of the descriptive study confirmed, Iranian EFL learners feel low levels of anxiety. This finding was reflected in the least anxiety-provoking situation "speaking English in the classroom" which is a general question asking about feeling anxious in the language classroom.

Correlational analyses also indicated that classroom environment is positively related to WTC in English. It implies that when teachers support the students, tasks are interesting and challenging, and the students help each other in the classroom, students are more willing to communicate in English inside the classroom. This finding is in line with Peng's (2009). Results also indicated that WTC is negatively correlated with communication anxiety, and positively with perceived communicative competence. This finding is also consistent with previous studies in different settings (Ghonsooly et al, 2012; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Kim, 2004; Yashima, 2002).

There are some pedagogical implications in the present study. As classroom environment was positively correlated with WTC in English, it can be said that providing a highly supportive classroom environment would help language learners to be more willing to communicate in their English classrooms. Teachers should provide a relaxing environment in the classroom where students help each other and the tasks are challenging and interesting. Anxiety was also negatively correlated with WTC which implies that by reducing anxiety, teachers can increase students' WTC in English. Moreover, anxiety was negatively correlated with classroom environment. Therefore, if teachers provide students with an encouraging classroom environment, students feel

less anxious to communicate in English inside the classroom. Also, some relaxation techniques can be taught to students in order to decrease their anxiety level.

In the present study, only speaking aspect of WTC was examined. Further research can explore WTC with regard to other three modes of communication. Also, results of this study are generalizable to participants of the current study with certainty; further generalizations should be done with care.

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