EFL Learners’ Willingness to Communicate: The Interplay between Language Learning Anxiety and Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT
Since willingness to communicate (WTC) model integrates psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables to predict L2 communication, and a few number of studies have tested the model with EFL students, the current study is an attempt to shed light on the examination of Iranian EFL university students’ WTC and its interaction with their language anxiety and language proficiency. By helping the students to decrease language anxiety and increase a willingness to use the L2 inside and outside the classroom, we direct the focus of language teaching away from merely linguistic and structural competence to authentic communication. The purpose of this study is to understand whether WTC model could explain the relationships between psychological and linguistic variables in Iranian context to predict students’ WTC. Forty nine university students participated in this study, they took TOEFL first and then filled out two questionnaires of WTC. For data analysis, Repeated Measures ANOVA and Spearman correlation were run and the results have revealed that Iranian university students’ WTC is directly related to their language proficiency but not language anxiety. Therefore, linguistic variables appear to be more predictive of WTC for Iranians, and language instructors should work on their students’ English proficiency.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, Language anxiety, Language proficiency, EFL context, Iranian students

1. INTRODUCTION
Willingness to communicate (WTC) has been proposed as both an individual difference variable affecting L2 acquisition and as a goal of L2 instruction (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998) [20]. To process WTC, the interface between two disparate approaches, linguistic and psychological, in EFL context has been overarching such a sustained commitment to engage in communication. The tendency to communicate with a specific person emanates primarily from affiliation and control motives as potent forces to propel individuals to be involved in interactive discourse. Unlike the previous studies in EFL context (e.g., Kim, 2004 [11]; Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003 [5]; MacDonald, Clement, & MacIntyre, 2003 [13]; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Conrod, 2001 [16]; Peng, 2007 [27]; Peng & Woodrow, 2010 [28]; Yashima, 2002 [30]), the behavioral intention to use the language has been examined among Iranian EFL university students to eliminate the demarcation between language anxiety as a psychological structure and language proficiency as a linguistic structure. Regarding the success of using the second language, the dialectical relation between being able and being willing to successfully communicate and use the L2 requires further investigation. In situations where a proficient learner is unwilling to communicate, high motivation for learning and high anxiety about communicating may appear to have a direct influence on L2 use (MacIntyre, 2007) [15].

1.1. Purpose of the Study
Those who are generally capable of communicating and get high scores in the proficiency test are more willing than those who are not capable communicators and get low scores. The interaction between the influences of language proficiency and language anxiety on WTC in an L2 learning context among Iranian EFL learners has gone rather unnoticed. To this end, the relation between language proficiency and WTC has been subjected to investigation among Iranian EFL learners. Furthermore, it seems to be found that no studies have as yet dealt with the relationship between willingness to communicate and language anxiety in the context of Iran. If effective communication is an important skill for academic success, studies have examined the factors affecting the development of this skill among EFL learners are increasingly become important for fostering the communicative ability of language learners. Hence, communicative effectiveness may have a cumulative impact on language learners’ ability to initiate communication and maintain social interactions.

The resulting affective state might be considered to address the following research questions in the current investigation:

1. Does language proficiency influence Iranian university students’ WTC?
2. Does language anxiety influence Iranian university students’ WTC?
3. Is there any relationship between language proficiency and language anxiety for Iranian university students?
This study examined MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) [20] WTC model and measured L2 WTC with the scale adapted from MacIntyre et al. (2001) [16]. The participants were freshmen university students in the EFL context at Sharif University of Technology in Iran. This study targeted the students’ WTC in English as their foreign language.

2. Method

The participants for this study were 49 engineering freshmen who were taking a three credit General English course which was compulsory at Sharif University of Technology. These students had recently graduated from high school and were 18 years of age or older. There was no opportunity for the simple random selection of the participants and they were intact classes, which were selected by the researchers, and filled out the questionnaires. From among this number, six students who did not participate in all stages of data collection were omitted consequently.

2.1. Participants

Students referred to the credibility and reliability estimates of four language skills: speaking (8 items, α=.58), comprehension (5 items, α=.44), reading (6 items, α=.55), and writing (8 items, α=.58). The reason for the inclusion of the four receptive (like speaking) and which are the more active (like writing) with respect to the questions about whether these people provided them with support for learning the L2: mother, father, teacher, favorite sibling, best friend, and other friends. The items used in this section were not on a scale, but individually given to respondents. Consequently, reliability estimates cannot be estimated for the individual responses.

Social Support: There were 6 yes/no questions and students were to answer these questions with regard to the source of support for their L2 learning. This procedure was similar to Ajzen’s (1988) [2] method for testing subjective norms. The participants were to answer “yes” or “no” to the questions about whether these people provided them with support for learning the L2: mother, father, teacher, favorite sibling, best friend, and other friends. The items used in this section were not on a scale, but individually given to respondents. Consequently, reliability estimates cannot be estimated for the individual responses.

Language Anxiety: It was taken from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) [9] and modified and decreased to 10 items. It enjoyed a good reliability estimate of .80. A 5-point Likert scale was used for this 10-item questionnaire, including 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree. The examples of the items are: “In English classes, I forget how to say things I know” or “In English classes, I tremble when I know I’m going to have to speak in English”. The items tackled general English language anxiety of the learner in an English classroom.

2.2. Instruments

The data collected and used for the further analyses was gathered via TOEFL (2003) with reliability index of .88 and two questionnaires of language anxiety with reliability of .80 and WTC with the total reliability of .85. The latter was a four-part questionnaire which was in English. The different parts of this questionnaire were as follows:

Willingness to Communicate in the Classroom: The first two parts of the questionnaire were adapted from MacIntyre et al. (2001) [16] to measure WTC in each of four skill areas. It contained 27 items to tackle the learners’ willingness to communicate in their EFL class while being assigned the communicative tasks. A 5-point Likert scale was employed to ask the learners to rate their willingness to communicate (with 1=almost never willing, 2=sometimes willing, 3= willing half of the time, 4= usually willing, and 5= almost always willing). The categorization of the items in each section was based on the type of language skill (alpha levels were calculated for the reliability estimates of the items of each skill): speaking (8 items, α=.58), comprehension (5 items, α=.44), reading (6 items, α=.55), and writing (8 items, α=.58). The reason for the inclusion of the four L2 skill areas was to determine which of the skills are the more active (like speaking) and which are the more receptive (like reading) with respect to L2 use. The receptive usage is also related to the concept of WTC because authentic usage of the L2 in form of the receptive skills and tasks may increase the learners’ WTC in other domains of language use. The present study was then an attempt to focus on the correlation between the four skill areas.

Willingness to Communicate outside the Classroom: In this section, a total of 27 items written by a graduate from the immersion program in MacIntyre et al. (2001) [16] were used in the present study; however, these items referred to the willingness to communicate of the student out of the classroom context. The respondents were to rate their WTC with the application of the previously used subscales ranging from 1= almost never willing to 5= almost always willing. So, the rating scale was the same used in the previous section, but with different reliability estimates of four language skills: speaking (8 items, α=.70), comprehension (5 items, α=.57), reading (6 items, α=.74), and writing (8 items, α=.72).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>43.00</td>
<td>28.59</td>
<td>7.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To answer the questions addressed in this study, different statistical procedures were employed.

3.1. Analysis One: Language Proficiency and WTC

To answer the first question of this study as “Does language proficiency influence Iranian university students’ WTC?” data was subjected to Repeated Measures ANOVA. Language proficiency was used as fixed factor in this analysis and WTC inside and outside the classroom as two within-subject variables and skills as four between-subject variables. Firstly, the total score of TOFEL was changed into standardized Z score. Secondly, learners were classified into two groups in terms of language proficiency according to the Z score of their total score in the TOFEL they took. Then those students with negative Z score were considered as lower proficient and those with positive Z score were considered as higher proficient learners. The data, then, was subjected to Repeated Measures ANOVA through SPSS. The result indicates that the interaction between WTC and language proficiency was significant, F (1, 47) = 5.560, P < 0.05. This suggests that learners’ willingness to communicate outside and inside the classroom is different across language proficiency.

Looking at marginal estimates of the measures, we found out that there are mixed results concerning the location of WTC across language proficiency. As is shown in Table 2, those with lower language proficiency have higher willingness to communicate outside the classroom, whereas those with higher language proficiency have higher willingness to communicate in the classroom. This might indicate that language proficiency functions as barrier for Iranian students in this sample. Interestingly, learners with higher language proficiency are more communicative inside the classroom than those with lower language proficiency, whereas they are less communicative than those with lower language proficiency outside the classroom. That is, those learners with lower language proficiency are afraid to get evaluated. Or maybe, those with higher language proficiency get more supports from the teacher inside the classroom and that is why they are more communicative and confident in communication. Pedagogically speaking, this indicates that we need more supportive teachers who encourage learners to be more communicative in class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LG group</th>
<th>WTC</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>79.68</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>86.16</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>87.83</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>77.54</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Willingness to communicate can function as both trait (MacIntyre et al., 1998) [20] and state construct (Cao & Philip, 2006 [3]; Kang, 2005 [10]; MacIntyre, 2007 [15]; Peng, 2007 [27]). In the present sample, it seems that language proficiency has manipulated learners’ state because in different situations learners with different language proficiency showed different amount of willingness (see Table 2 and Figure 1). According to McCroskey and Baer (1985), we have extended the trait-like conceptualization of WTC (cited in McCroskey, 1997) [12]. Following the two underlying constructs proposed by Clement (1986) [4], perceived competence and lack of anxiety are two comprising elements of self-confidence. In particular, it is also probable to draw a distinction between the trait-like and momentary feeling of confidence, which is known as state self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998) [20].

![Figure 1: The interaction between language proficiency and WTC](image)

3.2. Analysis Two: Language Anxiety and WTC

To answer the second question of this study as “Does language anxiety influence Iranian university students’ WTC?” another Repeated Measures ANOVA was run. Language anxiety was used as the main factor in this analysis and WTC location (inside vs. outside) as two within-subject variables. First learners’ Z score of anxiety was estimated, and then learners were classified into two groups in terms of their levels of anxiety; those with positive Z score were grouped as highly anxious and those with negative Z score were grouped as lowly anxious. (Xz = 1.53, SD = 0.50). The result is shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To check the influence of anxiety on learners’ WTC, the data was subjected to Repeated Measures ANOVA. The result indicates that there was no significant within-subject effect (WTC F (1, 47) = 0.237, P = NS) nor any significant effect was
seen for between-subject factors (anxiety $F (1, 47) = 1.115, P = $NS$). Moreover, the interaction between WTC and anxiety did not turn out to be significant ($F (1, 47) = 0.172, p = $NS$). This shows that in the present sample anxiety would not affect the way learners might decide to participate in communication (WTC). This finding is interesting because in previous research, MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2003) [18], Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu (2004) [32] found that there are correlational relationships between perceived competence, language anxiety, and WTC. It should be noted that L2 anxiety has been studied both as a distinct individual factor and as a contributing variable (Papi, 2010) [26]. Considering its interaction with willingness to communicate (e.g., MacIntyre, 1994 [14]; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002 [17]; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996 [19]; Papi, 2010 [26]), a negative association between these two variables has been confirmed.

3.3. Analysis Three: Language Proficiency and Anxiety

To answer the last question of this study as “Is there any relationship between language proficiency and language anxiety for Iranian university students?”, then, Spearman correlation was run between TOEFL score (interval scale by nature) and Anxiety score (ordinal scale by nature). As displayed in the Table 4, anxiety and language proficiency have a negative relationship which means that with higher language proficiency the amount of anxiety decreases. This is not surprising and is fully supported in the literature (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991 [22], 1994 [23]; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997 [24]; Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986 [29]). This is also true for TOEFL components. This finding is revealing that anxious people are generally less communicative in comparison to non-anxious ones. This might be due to the fact that they are not able to communicate well in terms of output quality. In this regard, anxiety affects both what the students say and how they say it (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994 [23]). The close connection between self-perception and self-expression in authentic communication makes a significant departure from the postulation of other academic anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989 [21]; Horwitz et al., 1986 [9]).

Table 4

The relationship between anxiety and language proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOEFL</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOEFL</td>
<td>.88***</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>-.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- .66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>.86**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>- .45**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Willingness to communicate is offered to account for the individuals’ differences in their first and second language communication (Zakahi & McCroskey, 1989) [34]. It is believed that WTC is an indicative factor of whether the individual will turn into an L2 speaker. Then there are a number of factors contributing to the quality and quantity of WTC in the EFL context (Clement, Dornyeci, & Noels, 1994 [6]; Peng, 2007 [27]), naming communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking, learners’ beliefs, classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support, and classroom organization.

Research on WTC is not very old; it has originally developed in first language acquisition (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982; all cited in McCroskey, 1997) [12]. The core issue of WTC is that there is a dialectical relation between being able and being willing to communicate through L1 and L2 language. The factor contributing to WTC is then highlighted when other impeding factors such as anxiety and language proficiency are taken into account. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relation between language proficiency, language anxiety, and WTC among Iranian EFL learners. To this end, the following questions were posited:

1. Does language proficiency influence Iranian university students’ WTC?
2. Does language anxiety influence Iranian university students’ WTC?
3. Is there any relationship between language proficiency and language anxiety for Iranian university students?

As displayed in the current study, there were mixed results concerning the location of WTC across language proficiency. Lower proficient learners indicated to have lower WTC inside the classroom in comparison to those with higher language proficiency who exhibited higher willingness to communicate in the classroom context. Contrary to our expectation, the higher proficient learners showed to be less communicative than those with lower language proficiency outside the classroom. This proves the state-like nature of WTC in the present sample. WTC as one of the necessary components of becoming fluent in L2 inevitably functions in correspondence with the “situated” model which varies over time and across situations. In favor of the proposed model by MacIntyre et al. (1998) [20] to account for individual differences in the willingness to communicate, then, WTC is closely tied to the situational factors that determine one’s intention to engage in communication. The result of this study is supported by Matsuoka and Evans (2005) [25] who, through structural equation modeling, found that language proficiency, along with motivational constructs are indicative factor of WTC. Also, it is supported by Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide’s (2008) [31] research who found that the development of proficiency and frequency of communication are fully entangled with the active participation in the community of practice through content-based approach. This implies that having self-confidence in communication is crucial for affecting how one is willing to be engaged in L2. Moreover, this suggests that success will come to those who are more willing to initiate in L2 communication, likewise, WTC may function as a situated construct or situated model (MacIntyre et al., 1998) [20] where contextual fluctuations and modifications like language proficiency might have different results on learners’ WTC. As Cao and Philip (2006) [3] note, WTC varies in terms of factors associated with the specific situation, topic, interlocutor, and the confidence of learners to accomplish the task.

It was found to be that neither significant within-subject effects nor significant between-subject factors contributed to L2 WTC. Moreover, the interaction between WTC and anxiety did not turn out to be significant. This shows that in the present sample anxiety, the psychological aspect of the original WTC model, would not affect the way learners might decide to
participate in communication. This has not gone along with previous studies where the correlation between perceived competence, language anxiety, and WTC was significantly high (MacIntyre et al., 2003; Yashima et al., 2004 [32]). Then it can be concluded that L2 anxiety has been studied both as a distinct individual factor and as a contributing variable (Papi, 2010 [26]). Considering its interaction with willingness to communicate (e.g., MacIntyre, 1994 [14]; MacIntyre et al., 2002 [17]; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996 [19]; Papi, 2010 [26]), a negative association between these two variables has been confirmed. The non-significant interaction between anxiety and WTC in this study might be due to some reasons. First, the number of participants in this study was not large enough to represent the magnitude of real difference among the variables under the investigation. Second, another moderator variable might be required for anxiety to affect WTC. Clement (1986) [4] and Clement and Kruidenier (1985) [8] proposed self-confidence as intervening variable for both anxiety and perceived competence. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998) [20], L2 anxiety as an enduring personal characteristics results variations in L2 self-confidence; however, based on situations, the fluctuation may still exist in terms of the degree of anxiety and L2 use.

In the current study, the findings revealed that anxiety and language proficiency are negatively correlated. This indicates that, in the present sample, anxiety has a debilitating influence on WTC. This is not surprising and is fully supported in the literature (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991 [22], 1994 [23]; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986 [29]). When applied to L2 use, anxious students communicate less in comparison to those who are non-anxious. In addition, anxious students are not able to communicate well in terms of output quality. In this regard, anxiety affects both what the students say and how they say it (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) [23]. In the specific anxiety-provoking contexts, there is a high degree of negative correlation between L2 anxiety and L2 performance. Typically, a lower level of anxiety and perception of L2 competence lead to a higher level of WTC (Yashima, 2002 [30]). The association between language learning experience and L2 anxiety has been confirmed in the results of the study conducted by Aida (1994) [1] and Young (1991) [33]. The results indicated that negative language learning experience leads to increase in L2 anxiety, while, positive language learning experience contributes to decrease in L2 anxiety. Concerning the location of WTC across language proficiency, the future directions in L2 WTC study and attempts to extend the construct of WTC inside the classroom to bring learners and outside the classroom to bring nations into contact receive considerable attention. Conceptually, according to MacIntyre et al. (1998) [20], generating a WTC lends support to the ultimate goal of language learning, that is, intercultural communication between persons of different language and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the interactions between linguistic variables and WTC are the concluding remarks of the study. This study utilized language proficiency, the linguistic aspect and language anxiety, the psychological aspect of the original WTC model. However, the students’ language proficiency appears to contribute to their participation in communication. To explain why some approach, whereas others avoid, communication then the linguistic variables should be taken into consideration in the EFL context. Therefore, language teachers should increase learners’ language proficiency as a predictive variable of WTC and provide convenience for their learners’ communicative behavior.

5. REFERENCES


