

The Relationship between Language Proficiency and Willingness to Communicate in English in an Iranian EFL Context

Gholamreza Rostami *

PhD Candidate, Department of Islamic Azad University, Miyadoab, Sama, Iran

Vida Kashanian

MA, Department of Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran

Hamideh Gholami

MA, Department of Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran

Abstract

This study intended to find out the relationship between language proficiency and willingness to communicate WTC in English in an Iranian EFL context. To this end, 60 Iranian English learners were selected who were all females and from different age groups and were intermediate and advanced level students, ranging from 15 to 22. They were given a TOEFL proficiency test to see how proficient they were. Then, a WTC questionnaire was given to the participants which was a likert-type questionnaire the participants' choices to each question showed their degree of willingness to communicate. Observation was used to see how willing the participants were in real classroom context. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their WTC. In other words, advanced level learners were more willing to communicate than intermediate level learners. It was also shown that school students and university students did not have any significant difference in terms of their WTC. An interesting point was that no significant differences were found between the age parameter and the participants' WTC.

Keywords: language proficiency, willingness to communicate (WTC), observation, advanced learners, intermediate learners

INTRODUCTION

Willingness To Communicate (WTC) is somehow a recent notion which encompasses psychological, linguistic and communicative variables to predict communication (Alemi et. al. 2011). Willingness to communicate (WTC), which was first conceptualized as the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985), is of special importance in revealing learners' communication psychology and promoting communication engagement in class. According to Kang (2005), "willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual's volitional inclination towards

actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables (p. 291).

It is evident that communicative behavior as a result of the interplay between complex systems of interrelated variables encompasses WTC to seek out communication opportunities and consequently promote individuals' involvement in conversational interactions. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) have suggested that a proper objective for L2 education is to create WTC in the language learning process, in order to produce students who are willing to seek out communication opportunities and actually to communicate in them. Kang (2005) has argued that we can increase L2 learners' WTC by creating opportunities that might create an environment in which learners feel comfortable to initiate communication because learners with a higher WTC are more likely to use L2 in authentic communication, which can contribute to their successful SLA.

In the last two decades, WTC has gained a lot of attention in SLA and there has been a growing amount of research, which has focused on identifying factors affecting L2 WTC. Moreover, it is suggested that language is learned through interactive meaningful communication in a pragmatic setting (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). According to Swain (2000), language use and language learning co-occur, and it is language use that mediates language learning. Thus, it is crucial to determine the factors which both constrain and promote language learners' opportunities to use language to communicate and to acquire language through meaningful interaction and communication. According to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), communication is an important goal in itself, which focus on the authentic use of L2 as an essential part of L2 learning. One of these factors is the learners' proficiency level that can be in close connection with their WTC. Proficiency is a term that suggests variability and it has traditionally been related to measurement and testing in second language teaching and learning. Stern (1983), noted that proficiency can be interpreted from two different perspectives: one based on the establishment of "levels of proficiency", that is "the different degrees of actual or acquired mastery of the second language, or the progression from a basic to a near-native level". According to Stern (1983, p. 341):

Among different learners at different stages of learning second language competence or proficiency ranges from zero to native-like proficiency. The native speaker's "competence", "proficiency", or "knowledge of the language" is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in second language theory.

Despite the rich findings from previous research, most of the previous studies have been conducted in Western countries, in particular, among Canadian Anglophone students learning French as a second language (e.g., Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2002). Until recently, little research (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004) has been conducted in a foreign language learning (EFL) context where there is usually no immediate linguistic need for learners to use English in their daily life.

The use of English in foreign language contexts plays an essential role in achieving communicative purposes. In these contexts, a shift of focus from mastery of structure of the language to communication is visible. But what is questionable is whether the learners are willing to use the language or not and what factors may affect their will.

In case of Iranian English learners, most of them learn English with the objective of speaking it and in so doing they try their best, but most of them cannot achieve this goal, despite their good proficiency level. Of course, the opposite is also possible. That is, they don't have good proficiency, but they are willing to communicate and speak. That is why the main purpose of the study is to see whether any relationship exists between learners' language proficiency and their willingness to communicate in English in an Iranian context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions were proposed.

- **RQ1.** Does language proficiency have any impact on Iranian EFL learners' WTC?
- **RQ2.** Is there a relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency level and their WTC?

Based on the above questions the following hypotheses are formulated:

- **H01.** Language proficiency has a positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' WTC.
- **H02.** There is a direct relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency level and their WTC.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

It is evident that communicative behavior as a result of the interplay between complex systems of interrelated variables encompasses WTC to seek out communication opportunities and consequently promote individuals' involvement in conversational interactions. It was further found that WTC in L1 communication captures both trait (stable) and state (transient) properties (MacIntyre, Babin, & Clement, 1999) which may be radically varied from person to person and situation to situation. McCroskey and associates (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1991; all cited in McCroskey, 1997) primarily capture the notion of WTC in L1 communication, which is a more personality trait, with respect to a number of involving factors of communication apprehension, introversion, reticence, and shyness. Later on, MacIntyre (1994) applied the envisaged path model of perceived communicative competence and communication anxiety to L2 communication in which these two moderating variables both impact WTC in a distinct manner, whereas Clement (1980, 1985) developed a model based on the L2 self-confidence as a higher order construct of L2 competence and L2 apprehension (cited in Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004).

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship which exists between learners' willingness to communicate with other factors such as motivation, attitude, anxiety, gender, etc. some of which are presented here.

WTC studies in communication research originally initiated in the United States and subsequently became a matter of scholarly attention (McCroskey, 1997; Daly & McCroskey, 1984, cited in Yashima et al., 2004). The previous research based on literature on language anxiety and language learning motivation to keep track of choosing to initiate communication with a specific person at a particular moment in time have incorporated the relationship between motivational orientations, communication anxiety, and WTC. Likewise, what remains abreast of recent studies is an investigation of possible ways to generate WTC to promote L2 proficiency and L2 success and to provoke in the EFL students the desire to communicate via interactive techniques, such as online chat that may affect feelings of power inequity, intimacy level, and common knowledge among participants (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006). According to Alemi et al. (2011) those who are generally capable of communicating and get high scores in the proficiency test are more willing than those who are not capable communicator and get low scores.

The studies conducted by Yashima et al., 2004, McCroskey, 1997 and Wen and Clement, 2003 have shown the direct and positive relationship between language learners' proficiency levels and their WTC.

Alemi, Daftarifard, and Pashmforoosh (2011) in an attempt to explore Iranian EFL university students' WTC and its interaction with their language anxiety and language proficiency, showed that Iranian university students' WTC was directly related to their language proficiency. In this study higher proficient learners showed to be less communicative than lower proficient ones outside the classroom indicating the state-like nature of WTC in the present sample. Moreover, no significant interaction between WTC and anxiety was found. The researchers argued that anxiety did not affect the learners' participation in communication (WTC). Finally, it was revealed that anxiety and language proficiency were negatively correlated. That is the association between language learning experience and L2 anxiety was confirmed in the results of this study. Based on the results of the study, linguistic variables seem to be more predictive of Iranian students' WTC, and language instructors should work on their students' English proficiency.

Considering the above mentioned studies conducted in this area, it seems that no clear study has pointed directly to the relationship between learners' proficiency level and their WTC. That is why the main purpose of the current study is to find out whether there is any relationship between language learners proficiency levels and their WTC.

Ghonsooly, Khajavy, and Asadpour (2012) examined willingness to communicate in the second language (L2WTC) construct and its underlying variables among non-English major students in the context of Iran. They used WTC and socio-educational models for examining L2 communication and L2 learning. The results of this study indicated that

L2 self-confidence and attitudes toward international community were two predictors of L2 WTC in Iranian context. The paths from motivation to L2 WTC and openness to experience to L2 self-confidence were not significant and thus were deleted. Their model indicated the potential use of the L2WTC construct for English as a foreign language context.

Barjesteh, Vaseghi, and Neissi (2012) investigated Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of their willingness to initiate communication across four types of context and three types of receiver. Using a questionnaire consisted of 20 situations in which one might choose to communicate or not to communicate, the researchers came to the conclusion that learners were highly willing to communicate in two context-types (Group Discussion, & Meetings) and one receiver-type (Friend). Based on the results obtained from the questioner, EFL learners were not willing to communicate in other situations. The researchers argued that the main reason that majority of Iranians were not willing to communicate in other situation was that they had the experience of communicating in English only in language classrooms in which they could have some group discussion, meetings, and friendly chat. They didn't have an access to a native speaker or possibility to travel to an English speaking country. The researchers concluded that Generally, Iranian EFL learners are willing to initiate communication in situations experienced before (such as group discussion or communicating with their friends). They don't feel confident enough to initiate communication in unfamiliar situations like public speaking. Therefore, context- and receiver-type familiarity is an effective factor for the situation in which a learner initiates communication.

Khazaei, Zadeh, and Ketabi (2012) aimed to investigate the effect of class size on WTC of Iranian EFL students among three different class sizes. The data of this research were collected through observation of three classes in terms of students' turn of talk and talk time. The findings of the study revealed that class size had a substantial effect on the students' willingness to communicate. Students were more willing to communicate in small classes where they had more opportunity to practice oral skills and communicate.

Baghaei (2012) on the relationship between willingness to communicate and success in learning English as a foreign language showed that two out of the three subscales of WTC (willingness to communicate in the school context and willingness to communicate with native speakers of English) were moderately correlated with success in learning English as foreign language. Riasati (2012) also studied Iranian EFL learners' perception of factors that influence their willingness to speak English in language classrooms. The results of semi-structured interviews revealed that a number factors including task type, topic of discussion, interlocutor, teacher, class atmosphere, personality and self-perceived speaking ability contribute to willingness to speak.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 Iranian English learners at Hekmat institute. They were from various age groups ranging from 15 to 22. The students were enrolled in 6 classes, three of which was considered as the control groups and the other three as the experimental groups. Some of them were school children and some of them were university students. Since the students were from different ages and their differences in age might have affected the results of the current study, after data analysis the age factor will be taken into account and the results will be discussed considering two age groups, namely school students and university students. All of the participants were female and were pre-intermediate and intermediate level students in that institute. They were all studying interchange books and all of them had passed the institute proficiency test.

Instrument

The TOEFL proficiency test was used for evaluating the subjects' level of proficiency in English. This test included 40 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension items.

The WTC questionnaire taken from Baghaei and Dourakhshan (2012) and Wang (2004) was a likert scale type test which consisted of 20 questions about learners' degree of willingness to communicate. Classroom observations were another instrument used for collecting data on the participants' actual WTC behavior. A checklist of a number of selected variables relevant to WTC behavior was used as an aid for observation.

Procedure

All the data were collected over a 5-week period from six English classes at Hekmat Institute, three of which acted as the control groups and the other three as the experimental groups. The participants had classes three days a week. One week before the experiment, participants were informed that all details of the procedures would be confidential and were assured that any information that they provide would be used anonymously and their names would remain confidential as well. First, the participants were asked to take the TOEFL proficiency test which consisted of 40 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension items. Then the participants' scores on TOEFL test were calculated and analyzed to see how proficient they are in English. At the next step, during the 5-week period, the WTC questionnaire which was taken from Baghaei and Dourakhshan (2012) and Wang (2004) was given to the participants and they were asked to imagine themselves in the situations posed in the questionnaire and answer the questions. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was a likert-type questionnaire and the participants' choices to each question showed their degree of willingness to communicate. Classroom observations were also done every session during that 5-week period in order to gather live data on how the participants show their WTC in actual setting of the classroom. Then the participants' proficiency test

scores along with their questionnaires' marks which had been changed into scores went under mathematical analysis.

RESULTS

To see whether the proficiency level of advance learners is higher than that of the intermediate level learners, the independent sample t-test was used. As it is shown in table 1, the mean of proficiency scores for intermediate learners was 25.36 and the mean for advance learners was 34.96 and the level of significance was 0.001. Since $0.001 < 0.05$, it can be said that advance level learners were high proficient than intermediate learners. The details are more visible in figure 1.

Table 1. Proficiency level of intermediate and advance learners

Score	Proficiency level		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
		Intermediate		36	25.36	3.305
	Advanced		24	34.96	2.836	.579

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.516	.223	-11.645	58	.000	-9.597	.824	-11.247	-7.948
Equal variances not assumed			-12.011	54.271	.000	-9.597	.799	-11.199	-7.995

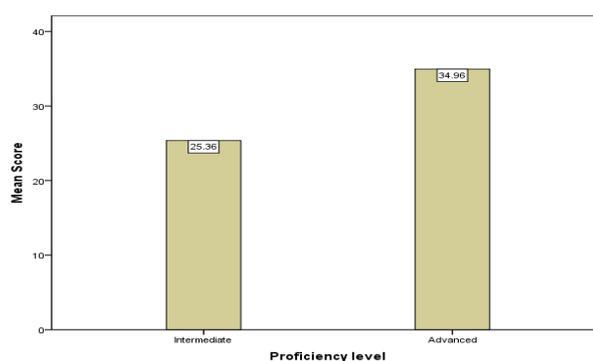


Figure 1. Histogram of proficiency scores

For finding out any relationship between intermediate and advance level learners' proficiencies and their WTC, independent sample t-test was used. The zero hypothesis was that the means of both intermediate and advance levels were the same. If the level of significance were smaller than 0.05, the hypothesis would be rejected. As it is shown

in table 2, the WTC mean in intermediate level learners was 3.11 and in advance learners was 3.66. The level of significance was 0.012 and since it was smaller than 0.05, the zero hypothesis was rejected. In other words, it can be said that the mean of WTC in advance level learners was significantly more than that of intermediate learners. Figure 2 shows the details.

Table 2. WTC scores of intermediate and advance learners

	Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WTC	Intermediate	36	3.1111	.72733	.12122
	Advanced	24	3.6583	.90201	.18412

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.001	.163	-2.592	58	.012	-.54722	.21113	-.96984	-.12460
Equal variances not assumed			-2.482	42.067	.017	-.54722	.22044	-.99208	-.10237

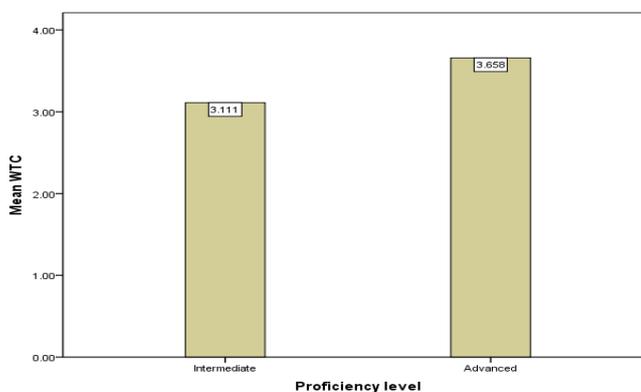


Figure 2. Mean WTC and proficiency level

Since one of the instruments used in the current study was observation, the results of the observation of both the intermediate students and advanced students showed that the mean for advanced students who were more proficient was higher than that of intermediate students (Table 3). The independent sample t-test which was used as the statistical analysis indicated that the level of significance was 0.001 and since this amount was smaller than 0.05, it was concluded that the WTC was more in advanced students than intermediate students. So, the observation results also supported the fact that advanced students who were more proficient were more willing to communicate than intermediate students.

Table 3. Observation results

Proficiency level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Intermediate	5	2.1000	.58896	.26339
Advanced	5	3.9000	.13693	.06124

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
4.647	.063	-6.656	8	.000	-1.80000	.27042	2.42358	-1.17642
		6.656	4.431	.002	-1.80000	.27042	2.52284	-1.07716

Figure 3, also shows how WTC was prominent in advanced students compared to intermediate students.

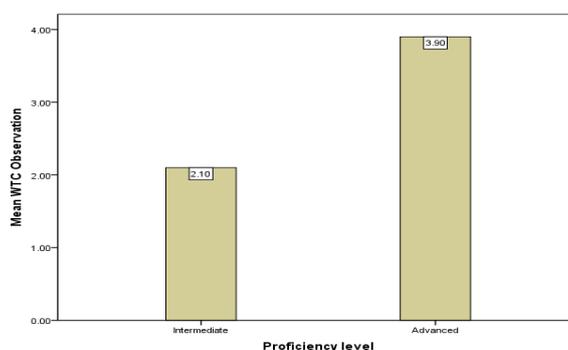


Figure 3. Observation results

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The obtained statistical analyses showed that there was a relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their WTC. In other words, advanced level learners were more willing to communicate than intermediate level learners. This can be justified in terms of the level of significance which was 0.012 and since this significance level was lower than 0.05, so there was a direct relationship between EFL language learners' proficiency levels and their WTC. It can be claimed that the first research question that was "Is there a relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency level and their WTC?" were answered. As the results showed, differences exist between the two groups of learners.

This finding was in accordance with the findings of Alemi et al (2011) who showed that Iranian university students' WTC was directly related to their language proficiency. This finding supports the findings of Alemi et al and is in line with it. The researchers reached the same result but with different data.

The results of the observation also showed that advanced students who were more proficient than intermediate students were more willing to communicate and this was

completely evident in the observations that the researcher did during the experiment, since the advanced level students' mean scores in WTC was higher than that of intermediate level students ($3.90 > 2.1$) when the researcher observed them in classroom context. Based on the observation, from those ten students who were chosen from intermediate and advanced-level classes, those 5 students who were advanced level and more proficient compared to intermediate level students had better actual performance regarding their WTC so it can be claimed that the second research question that was "Is there a difference in willingness to communicate between intermediate and advanced learners?" were answered too.

To summarize, the findings of the current study indicated that the advanced level participants were high proficient than those in the intermediate level and it can be claimed that their high proficiency led to their more WTC compared with intermediate level students. The degree of WTC did not have any direct relationship with the participants' ages and there was no difference between school students and university students in this regard. This finding was in accordance with the findings of Alemi, Daftarifard, and Pashmforoosh (2011) which showed that Iranian university students' WTC was directly related to their language proficiency.

According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), generating WTC appears to be a crucial component of modern L2 pedagogy. In the past, emphasis on grammatical skill produced students with rather high linguistic competence, but did not concentrate on the authentic use of language. Current emphasis on communicative competence may pose a similar problem, producing students who are technically capable of communicating, particularly inside the classroom, but who may not be amenable to doing so outside the classroom. That is why the researcher suggests that a suitable goal of L2/foreign language learning is to increase WTC. By encouraging WTC, language instruction can achieve its goals and objectives. In other words, instructors should be aware of the fact that since such a relationship exists between these two variables, working on any of them can lead to a progress in the other. Therefore, in educational settings, teachers can work on students' proficiency levels which in turn will lead to an increase in their WTC.

As mentioned before, the scope of this research project was to investigate any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency levels with their WTC. This delimitation was due to some factors such as time constraint and the manageability of the research beside measurement problems. As Seliger and Shohamy (1989) suggest, research is cyclical; it is a recurring sequence of events. The nature of research is such that the more answers are obtained, the more questions arise. The current study which was a correlational study, just investigated any probable relationship between EFL learners proficiency levels and their WTC. But it is worth mentioning that there are many factors that can affect learners' WTC, such as their gender, motivation, anxiety, etc. which were out of the scope of the current study to be investigated, but need to be investigated in further research.

Considering the fact that the research area of the present study has been rarely done, it is strongly recommended that those interested people try to work in the area of these large, complex units of knowledge. The last but not the least recommendation is the replication of this study by larger number of EFL learners at different levels of proficiency and their comparison.

REFERENCE

- Alemi, M., Daftarifard, P., & Pashmforoosh, R. (2011). The impact of language anxiety and language proficiency on WTC in EFL context. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 7, 150-166.
- Baghaei, P., & Dourakhshan, A. (2012). The relationship between willingness to communicate and success in learning English as a foreign language. *MJAL*, 4(2), 53-67.
- Baker, S. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2000). The effects of sex and immersion on communication and second language orientations. *Language Learning*, 50, 311-347.
- Kang, S. J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *Elsevier*, 33, 277-292.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Baer, J. E. (1985). *Willingness to communicate and its measurement*. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Denver, CO.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, 545-562.
- MacIntyre, P. D. & Charos, C. (1996). Personality, attitudes, and affect as predictors of second language communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 15, 3-16.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Baker, S. C., Clément, R., & Donovan, L. A. (2002). Sex and age effects on willingness to communicate, anxiety, perceived competence, and L2 motivation among junior high school French immersion students. *Language Learning* 52, 537-564.
- Seliger, H. W. & Shohamy, E. G. (1989). *Second language research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M. (2000). *The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2002). Talking it through: two French immersion learners' response to reformulation. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 285-304.
- Wang, Y. (2004). *The relationship between second language written performance and the level of willingness to communicate in class: a quantitative analysis of a second-year Chinese class 2004 at the Australian National University*. Australia: Canberra.
- Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1), 54-66.
- Yashima, T., Zenuk-Nishide, L., & Shimizu, K. (2004). The influence of attitudes and affect on willingness to communicate and second language communication. *Language learning*, 54(1), 119-152.