



Willingness or Unwillingness? The Investigation of Iranian EFL Learners' Tendency toward Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating willingness to communicate of Iranian EFL learners. A total of 65 students participated in the study. First and foremost, James C. McCroskey's willingness to communicate questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was given to the participants, they were asked to answer the 20 questions about 20 situations in which a person might choose to communicate or not to communicate. Besides, an open-ended questionnaire was given in which in the first question participants were asked to write about situations they have high willingness to communicate while in the second question they were asked to mention in what situations they have low willingness to communicate. Results of questionnaires indicated low willingness to communicate of Iranian EFL students at all (overall: 36.29. Total WTC >82 High Overall WTC, <52 Low Overall WTC). Although participants have showed high willingness to communicate in two context-Types (Group discussion: 58.38, Friend: 75.09), though they have showed low willingness to communicate in all other sub-groups (public speaking 31.52 and stranger 16.25, Meeting: 35.50, Interpersonal: 33.76, Acquaintance: 42.53).

Key words: willingness, unwillingness, communication, questionnaire, Context

INTRODUCTION

There are four significant skills for learning a language, including: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. According to nowadays situation of human beings living in a global village and their crucial need to communicate constantly with others for having and preparing a successful, peaceful, and good life, we find out the SPEAKING skill is more significant than others in which it should be the aim of each language acquisition or language learning. That's why researchers and teachers must plan the teaching programs in a way that help students to achieve this important goal.

Despite years of education most foreign language learners suffer from not being able to communicate appropriately, although this is undeniable part of language learning

process that if you won't talk you are not going to handle communication appropriately in the demanded situation. In fact willingness to communicate plays a key role in second language learning as MacIntyre and his colleagues suggest that a fundamental goal of language instruction should be fostering WTC in the target language (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003).

First sparks on willingness to communicate stem from McCroskey & Richmond (1987) was applied to L2 communication by MacIntyre and Charos (1996). WTC can be generally defined as the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so (McCroskey & Richmond 1987, 1990). Recently, WTC in a second language has been widely studied (e.g., MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998; Yashima, 2002; MacIntyre, 2007; Cao, 2011). With this in mind it is clear how important the willingness to communicate is in nowadays teaching and learning programs. Since the SPEAKING skill and its growth depends on the willingness of someone to communicate or participate in communication situations.

In spite of the fact that nowadays people communicate with each other in order to obtain specific information, for trade, or for communication generally, though some people remain silent especially for the beginning of the communication, when it comes to learn English the problem is much more complicated, in the same situation some students prefer to talk while some others remain silent.

Baran-Lucarz (2014, P. 37) points out that

proficiency in speaking skills constitutes the main aim of most foreign language (FL) learners. At the same time, speaking is considered a necessary condition for acquisition to take place (e.g. Savignon, 2005; Skehan, 1989; Swain, 1985). Consequently, it is important that students be involved in speaking tasks in the FL classroom. This should be one of the basic concerns of the teachers.

MacIntyre et al. (1998, P. 547) emphasize that

the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them. A programme that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed programme.

Yu, Li, and Gou (2011, P. 253) believe that for many second language learners, the main purpose in learning second languages is the use of the target languages. He also points out that communication in the second language depends greatly on a psychological readiness to use the language. Therefore, willingness to communicate is the main cause of second language use.

Hashimoto (2002) claims the use of the target languages is an indicator and a necessary condition for successful second language acquisition. Therefore, the use of the target language plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. It means in order to learn the second language; one must communicate in the target language.

Willingness to communicate can be defined as a learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, P. 547). Within a classroom context willingness to communicate has been defined as "a student's intention to interact with others in the target language, giving the chance to do so" (Oxford, 1997). Willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom concerns a student's intention to communicate with interlocutors when free to do so. This is contrasted to a situation when a student is called upon by the teacher; he or she is obliged to respond without having much choice. According to this importance and value of willingness to communicate in a language learning and acquisition, the present study aims at demonstrating whether or not Iranian EFL students have willingness to communicate.

CONTEXT AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Afghari and Sadeghi (2012) in a study aimed to investigate the difference in WTC between male and female English major students at Khorasgan University, Iran. Firstly, 55 English major students were asked to respond to three questionnaires on WTC, perceived competence, and communication apprehension. The data was analyzed using independent sample t-test. The results showed no significant difference between male and female students in WTC, perceived competence, and communication apprehension. The results related to the effect of language proficiency on WTC, perceived competence, and communication apprehensions were also analyzed using one way ANOVA. The results showed no significant differences between the three different groups of students with different levels of language proficiency in their WTC, perceived competence, and communication apprehension.

Cutrone (2009) in his study considered language anxiety as it affects Japanese EFL learners when performing oral tasks. The reasons Japanese EFL learners experience language anxiety when performing oral tasks were explored. Some of the potential causes of Japanese EFL learners' language anxiety have been identified as communication apprehension, social evaluation, and inter-learner competition. Moreover, Hashimoto (2002) in a study used the socio-educational model and the willingness to communicate (WTC) model as the basis for a conceptual framework, partially replicating a study by Macintyre and Charos (1996). Descriptive statistics, reliability of the subscales, correlation, and construct validity (using principal component analysis) were examined, and a model of L2 communication was tested using structural equation modeling. Using Amos version 4.0, structural equation modeling showed that motivation and WTC affect reported L2 communication frequency in classrooms as hypothesized. Variables underlying WTC were also examined. Perceived competence and L2 anxiety were found to be causes of WTC, which led to more L2 use, and L2 anxiety was found to negatively influence perceived competence.

Knell and Chi (2012) in their study examined the roles of motivation, attitudes towards learning English, willingness to communicate, perceived competence, language anxiety, and parental support among upper primary immersion and non-immersion students.

Results indicated that immersion students used in the study had significantly higher levels of willingness to communicate and perceived competence and exhibited less language anxiety than their non-immersion peers. In addition, willingness to communicate and perceived competence were the strongest predictors of English reading and oral proficiency for the combined sample. Lucarz (2014) in a study verified Pronunciation Anxiety (PA) as an important determinant of students' WTC in a FL classroom – the first part of a two-fold project on the relation between PA and WTC inside and outside of the classroom, He provided a brief theoretical introduction of the two variables in question and a description of the research design.

In addition, Peng (2007) in the study examined the relationship between L2 WTC and integrative motivation among 174 college students attending an intensive English language program in China. The study was based on a hybrid framework of the WTC model and the socio-educational model. Correlational analysis and multiple regressions were used to explore the predictive effect of integrative motivation on L2 WTC. It was found that integrative motivation accounted for a small proportion of variation in L2 WTC. Motivation was the strongest predictor of L2 WTC, while attitudes towards the learning situation did not predict L2 WTC. Shahsavani, Shahsavar, and Sahragard (2014) through study demonstrated the relationship between WTC and identity processing styles among advanced English as foreign language (EFL) Iranian learners. They assessed the WTC and identity processing styles of 345 advanced EFL Iranian learners by using the questionnaires. The results indicated that the best identity type that can act as a predictor of WTC among Advanced Iranian EFL learners was the informational identity processing style. Additionally, the result of multiple regressions indicated that identity style subscales explained 77% of variance in WTC.

Yashima (2002) in his study examined relations among L2 learning and L2 communication variables in the Japanese English as a foreign language context using the WTC model and the socioeducational model as a framework. A L2 communication model was constructed and tested using AMOS version 4.0, with a sample of 297 Japanese university students. In the model, a latent variable, international posture, was hypothesized to capture the general attitude toward the international community and foreign language learning in Japan. From structural equation modeling, it appeared that international posture influences motivation, which, in turn, influences proficiency in English. Motivation affected self-confidence in L2 communication which led to willingness to communicate in a L2. In addition to this indirect path, a direct path from international posture to WTC in a L2 was significant. The model's fitness to the data was good, which indicated the potential for using the WTC and other constructs to account for L2 communication. Also, Yu, Li, and Gou (2011) in their study demonstrated the importance of willingness to communicate and personality-based variables underlying willingness to communicate. Then the correlation of the personality-based variables has been illustrated. In the continuation of this process of willingness to communicate this study wants to investigate whether or not Iranian students have tendency toward communication.

Research questions

- 1) Do Iranian EFL learners have willingness to communicate in demanded situations?
- 2) In what context Iranian EFL learners have willingness to communicate?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 65 English learners from EFL institutes, Pouyesh and Bayan, in Ardabil, Iran, participated in this study. Participants were 12–16 years old, bilingual in Azeri–Turkish and Persian. Participants were mixed in gender (30 females and 35 males).

Materials

James C. McCroskey's willingness to communicate questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was given to the participants. This instrument measures a person's willingness to initiate communication. The face validity of the instrument is strong, and results of extensive research indicated the predictive validity of the instrument. Alpha reliability estimates for this instrument have ranged from .85 to well above .90. Of the 20 items on the instrument, 8 are used to distract attention from the scored items. The twelve remain items generate a total score, 4 context-type scores, and 3 receiver-type scores. The sub-scores generate lower reliability estimates, but generally high enough to be used in research studies.

Procedures

A total of 65 students participated in the main study. Participants were asked to answer the 20 questions about 20 situations in which a person might choose to communicate or not to communicate. They were supposed to answer the questions by indicating the percentage of times they would choose to communicate in each type of situation. Besides, an open-ended questionnaire was given in which in the first question participants were asked to write about situations they have high willingness to communicate while in the second question they were asked to mention in what situations they have low willingness to communicate.

FINDINGS

Results of questionnaires indicated low willingness to communicate of Iranian EFL students at all (overall: 36.29. Total WTC >82 High Overall WTC, <52 Low Overall WTC). Despite the fact that participants have showed high willingness to communicate in two context-Types (Group discussion: 58.38, Friend: 75.09), though in other sub-groups the learners willingness to communicate was low (public speaking 31.52 and stranger 16.25, Meeting: 35.50, Interpersonal: 33.76, Acquaintance: 42.53).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In response to the research question one which is: Do Iranian EFL learners have willingness to communicate in demanded situations? The results indicated that participants are unwilling to communicate at all (overall: 36.29. Total WTC >82 High Overall WTC, <52 Low Overall WTC). Finding is consistent with the study of Barjeste, Vaseghi, and Neissi (2012) where participants had high willingness to communicate in two contexts-types (group discussion and Meeting) and one receiver-type (friend). It is also consistent with Liu and Jackson (2009) whose investigation indicated that students remain unwilling to communicate in oral classrooms.

The reasons that participants showed unwillingness to initiate a conversation lies in the fact that they are unaware of the importance of initiation and willingness to have conversation at all, as none of the participants did not mention that, although the open-ended questionnaire revealed the answer to this question as participants were asked in what situation they have high willingness to communication and in what situation they have low willingness to communication. In the former situation almost all of the participants stated that they have great enthusiasm in speaking with their parents and families, it seems that they want to speak in a safe and secure situation where learning can occur without stress. We cannot learn in stressful situation, considering a participant experience in learning which he demonstrates: I would like to speak to intimates those who can speak English, though they don't make fun of me during speaking, this statement indicates that for communication in such a situation participants need to be prepared psychologically before having competence to speak in given language. They want to use language for communication rather than being corrected by others.

In response to the second research question which is: In what context Iranian EFL learners have willingness to communicate? Participants have showed high willingness to communicate in two context-Types (Group discussion: 58.38, Friend: 75.09). Mostly participants didn't want to speak to strangers, while some of them mentioned less willingness to speak in public at all. It seems participants wants to use English for communication rather than being judged by others especially who make fun of them.

When it comes to group discussion since participants have conversation in classroom situation and under some specific circumstances, they have tendency to have communication. Since students believe that making mistake or having error is indispensable part of learning process which should be corrected by teachers. This is why most of the participants want to speak to their teachers.

As the results of open-ended questionnaires showed, speaking with teachers and family encompasses quite a few students' willingness to communicate, it seems anxiety and motivation play crucial rule in Iranian students' willingness to communicate as they have fear of being mistaken or judged by others. The easiest way to overcome ongoing problem could be motivation enhancement, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state the cognitive theory tells us learners will learn when they actively think about what they

are learning. But this cognitive factor presupposes the affective factor of motivation. Before learners can actively think about something, they must want to think about it. So how could students think actively in stressful situation? From the open-ended questionnaire point of view they can't think unless the barriers could remove. Some students were mentioned about their experience of their language learning they stated that even though we have been studying English for years we still feel some gap in our ability especially in speaking skill and we get much more dejected when come across a person who can speak English well and they ignore our years of studying may be they don't know how much we have been studying.

CONCLUSION

According to the results and discussions we can conclude that not only Iranian EFL students have no tendency toward beginning conversation but also they are reluctant to continue conversation on most demanded situations. The reason of this conclusion may come back to our learning process, our learning way, and our learning situation. Because our leaning situation must be such a situation that by preparing authentic and stress less environment for students, invites them to understand the fact that the only way of learning a foreign language is using it and communicating with it.

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