

The Relationship between EFL Students' Gender and their Willingness to Communicate in Same-Sex Classrooms

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to examine the relationship between EFL students' gender and their willingness to communicate in same-sex classrooms including their peers and teacher. To that end, 67 English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students, 33 males and 34 females, attending in 8 classes in a language institute in Hamedan, Iran were conveniently sampled to take part in the study. Then a questionnaire regarding the students' willingness to communicate, prepared by the researcher, was validated and administered to the participating students. Moreover, to increase the validity of data all the classes were observed and an observation checklist was filled. Analysis of the data obtained from the self-report questionnaire indicated no significant difference between male and female students' willingness to communicate (WTC). However, based on data obtained from observation, there appeared to be a significant difference between male and female students' WTC.

Keywords: gender, willingness to communicate (WTC).

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently the notion of willingness to communicate (WTC) which is defined by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels (1998) as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a L2” (p.2), has received great emphasis. Learners' willingness to use language to communicate plays a very important role in second language learning. (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, 1994, as cited in Yu, Li, & Gou, 2011) According to Howatt (1984, as cited in Mohammadzadeh & Jafarigohar, 2012) “no matter how proficient a person is in using a foreign language, his attempts at establishing sound communication will be less than desirable if he or she is not fully willing to communicate” (p. 25). Therefore, learners' willingness to use language to communicate is crucial to their second language acquisition.

According to Duffy (2001, as cited in Shomoossi, Amouzadeh, & Ketabi, 2008) little research has been carried out regarding the effect of students' gender on teacher-student interaction in EFL classrooms whereas the gender of both students and teachers has a marked effect on the quality and quantity of classroom interaction. (Rashidi & Naderi, 2012) "There is little doubt that gender differences pervade the whole class context." (Howe, 1997, p.9)

The research conducted into the subject of gender differences in classroom communication particularly in mixed-class environment (Howe, 1997; Krupnick, 1985; Einarsson & Granström, 2002; Shomoossi, Amouzadeh, & Ketabi, 2008) outnumbers the ones done about same-sex classes. Therefore, the present study puts effort into investigating the willingness to communicate in same-sex classes where the students and their teacher are all female or male.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Willingness to Communicate

It is very strange that some students with high competency in second language are still reluctant to communicate in language classroom and it is also surprising that there are some other students with lower language competency who are much more willing to communicate in the same situation and as MacIntyre et al. (1998) pointed out "Despite excellent communicative competence, spontaneous and sustained use of the L2 is not ensured" (p. 545). They also stated that some learners' Willingness to Communicate changes regarding different situation and times; therefore, encouraging learners to use language for a meaningful and effective communication is supposed to be the goal of modern language learning and teaching (Riasati & Noordin, 2011).

"WTC as a goal of second language learning and facilitation of second language communication has drawn the attention of language researchers in recent years" (see, for example, Cao & Philip, 2006; Dornyei, 2005; Kang, 2005 as cited in Nazari & Allahyar, 2012, p. 18), and according to Nazari and Allahyar (2012) "much has been documented on the effect of WTC on second language learning (p. 19). Richmond and Roach (1992, cited in Yu, Li, & Gou, 2011) noted that "Willingness to Communicate is the one, overwhelming communication personality construct which permeates every facet of an individual's life and contributes significantly to the social, educational, and organizational achievements of the individual" (p. 254). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is defined as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547).

B. Gender and Classroom Interaction

Gender is a universal frame factor that is inevitable in classroom interactions. (Einarsson & Granström, 2002) According to Tannen (1994, as cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013) the preference for interacting with fellows of the same gender is proved by Macoby and it begins in early childhood. In a study done by Krupnick (1985), it is said that

men students' length of talking in coeducational classrooms is more than that of their female counterparts where their teacher is also male and the majority of students have the same gender.

According to Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill (1977) and Ridgeway (1978) "Gender differences in positive social behavior have also been linked to status. It has been suggested that women may try to gain acceptance from other group members by engaging in high amounts of positive social behavior; such behavior may communicate to others that female members are not competing for status but are simply trying to help the group achieve its goals." (cited in Carli, 1989, 565)

Several studies (Mabry, 1985; Piliavin & Martin, 1978; Stake, 1981) suggest that "women generally exhibit a greater amount of agreement and other positive social behaviors such as relieving group tension and showing group solidarity, whereas men engage in a greater amount of disagreements." (cited in Carli, 1989, 565) As Tannen (1990, cited in Khosravizadeh & Pakzadian, 2013) put it, men look at community relationships as a 'hierarchy' and that's why they show more competitive behavior and try to be more independent. On the other hand women don't perceive such relationship as winning or losing instead they make an attempt to share their feelings with other members of the group and seek their ideas and supports.

The present study raises the following question: Is there a significant difference between male and female students' degree of Willingness to Communicate in same-sex EFL classrooms?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The sample of learners participating in this study included 67 EFL students between 13 and 30 years old who were attending the classes of 4 male and 4 female teachers. Among participating students 33 were male and 34 were females. These students were involved in the study, based upon a convenience sampling procedure due to availability reasons.

B. Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire. In the present study, a self-report questionnaire was adopted and adapted by the researchers and an attempt was made to implement any changes necessary to the items by giving them to a small sample of the students with similar characteristics to those participating in the study. This was done according to the rules for developing questionnaires spelled out by Dornyei (2003, as cited in Sepehrinia, 2011). Furthermore, three experts' (holding PHD degrees) views were sought to improve the wording of the items for better understanding and fluency.

WTC Questionnaire. Despite the availability of the same WTC measure such as the one developed by McCroskey and Richmond (1996), as a more classroom specific

questionnaire was needed, attempts were made to prepare a classroom specific WTC questionnaire based on the theory developed by McIntyre et al. (1998) which was translated into participants' mother tongue, Persian, in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

This questionnaire consisted of 10 statements about students' communication tendencies. These items were arranged in a five-point Likert scale, ranging from never to always (see Appendix A) and the students were asked to choose the one that best described them. The Cronbach alpha coefficient calculated for this questionnaire was .75 and because this value is above .7, so it can be considered as reliable.

Observation Checklist. As described below, an observation checklist was prepared to investigate students' WTC during a 90-minute class period.

Students' WTC. This observation checklist was designed on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree (see Appendix B). This checklist consisted of nine items prepared to capture the students' degree of Willingness to Communicate with their teacher in classroom, which was designed based on WTC theory developed by McIntyre et al. (1998). The Cronbach Alpha coefficient calculated for this checklist was .94 which indicates a strong internal consistency among the item *C. Selecting a Template*

C. Data Collection Procedures

The preliminary stage of the study involved a pilot study of the questionnaires. At first, the WTC questionnaire was distributed among 20 students of 2 teachers of the same institute. Afterwards, the questionnaire was reworded and revised based on experts' comments and its finalized version was administered to the total number of 67 students who participated in the eight teachers' classes.

Later each of the 8 teachers' classes was observed during a period of two weeks. It should be mentioned here that the teachers' consents for class observation were obtained and they were all informed beforehand and they were given sufficient time to prepare themselves for these procedures so that they would feel less nervous and more comfortable in their teaching process. Afterwards, the observation checklist prepared to check the students' WTC was completed by the researchers.

IV. RESULTS

The research question regarding whether there is a significant difference between male and female students in terms of their Willingness to Communicate, was investigated by using One-Sample t-test.

Table 1: Male and Female Students' WTC

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Students' WTC Total	1	34	41.82	4.89	.83
	2	33	41.03	5.46	.95
Observed Students' WTC in the whole class	1	34	20.79	3.96	.67
	2	33	21.69	3.33	.58

In order to find out whether the difference between male and female students' WTC is due to sampling error and chance or it is due to real difference between these two variables, a One-Sample t-test was used. The results are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: One-Sample t-Test: Male and Female Students' WTC

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Students' WTC Total	.626	65	.533	.79
Observed Students' WTC in the whole class	-4.841	65	.000	-7.99

Based on the results of this test obtained from questionnaires, there is no significant difference between male and female students' WTC ($p > 0.05$). However, the results obtained from observations reflect a significant difference between male and female students' WTC ($p < 0.05$).

Therefore, based on the observations, it could be agreed that students' gender seem to have a significant bearing on their Willingness to Communicate and in this study female students are more willing to communicate than the male ones.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has cast light on the importance of gender in students' Willingness to Communicate. The concern of the present study was the difference between male and female students' WTC and the results obtained from questionnaires indicated no significant relationship between them. However, based on the observations, it could be agreed that students' gender seem to have a significant bearing on their Willingness to Communicate and

in this study female students are more willing to communicate than the male ones. This result is in line with the research done by Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) in which junior high school females are generally more willing to communicate than their male counterparts.

The results obtained from observation of the classes make us speculate on the importance of same-sex peers and teachers in EFL classroom setting and based on this results it can be concluded that female students have more tendency to communicate with their peers and teachers who have the same gender as them. This is something which should be taken into consideration by educators and administrators.

A. Suggestions for Further Studies

Although the present study attempted to consider WTC more specifically in EFL classes, this concept has been studied more in its general term in literature that is, it was not based on a specific situation like English classrooms and very few studies have dealt with this issue. Therefore, WTC in EFL classes can be considered as an interesting topic for investigation.

Moreover, as Riasati and Noordin (2011) quite aptly put it “too much reliance on one single instrument and the overuse of this rather old instrument can be a cause for concern among those working in this area of research”. McCroskey and Richmond’s (1996) original WTC measure has been applied a lot by researchers but in the present study an attempt was made to design a more classroom specific WTC questionnaire. Therefore, this issue can be taken into account in future studies.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire 1: Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Questionnaire

Age: Gender:

Proficiency Level:

For each of the statements below, tick the answer that best describes you.

Statements	Strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I feel free to speak up in the classroom.					
2. I am willing to raise my hand to answer the teacher's questions					
3. I am willing to communicate with my teacher as a specific person.					
4. I feel I am able to effectively communicate in L2 at a particular moment in a specific situation.					
5. I have a sense of belonging to the L2 community.					
6. I feel confident enough in class communication.					
7. I have a specific feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction while learning.					
8. I have positive attitudes towards the L2 community.					
9. I try to reduce the distance between L1 and L2 communities.					
10. I have the desire to affiliate and identify with the other students and the teacher.					

Appendix B

Observation Checklist 2: Students' observed willingness to communicate

Students' observed willingness to communicate	1 Strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 undecided	4 agree	5 Strongly agree
1. Students feel free to speak up in the classroom.					
2. Students are willing to raise their hands to answer the teacher's questions.					
3. Students are willing to communicate with their teacher as a specific person.					
4. Students feel they are able to effectively communicate in L2 at a particular moment in a specific situation.					
5. Students have a sense of belonging to L2 community. For instance, do the students ever say I love language learning and I want to be like those?					
6. Students feel confident enough in class communication.					
7. Students have a specific feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction while learning or communicating.					
8. Students have positive attitudes towards the L2 community. For instance they mention they like it, they enjoy learning, they talk about movies, songs, and books they watched, listened to, and read and they liked it.					
9. Students try to reduce the distance between L1 and L2 communities. For instance, they talk about similarities and differences between their community and that of the target language.					