

## Willingness to Communicate: Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

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**Abstract**– Using data from a qualitative study into the reasons for willingness /unwillingness to communicate in the classroom, this paper looks at the perspectives of 116 students in an Iranian university to find a pattern out of the offered responses. Through the data collected via a semi-structured researcher-made questionnaire for the students, the study explores the existing pattern and concludes that willingness to communicate (WTC) is preferably a **trait-based** feature for the *more interested learners* whereas it is mostly **situation-based** for the *less interested group*. Also to ameliorate the problem of students' dissatisfaction to communicate, the question after being posed at a website named 'English Teachers Anonymous' and the data collected out of the perspectives of 37 English teachers responding around the world reveals that providing a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere so that students feel safe to participate in communicative activities is what the teachers generally accentuate. The study finally suggests some new and interesting areas of research which are lacking and thus needed to fill the gap in WTC.

**Keywords:** willingness to communicate (WTC), trait-based feature, situation-based feature

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### I. INTRODUCTION

People show different levels of propensity to communicate. This has been stated as willingness to communicate (WTC) or in Ellis's (2008) terms "...the extent to which learners are prepared to initiate communication when they have a choice" (p. 983). Also in Brown's (2007) terms, a learner might say, "I want to reach out to others and communicate" (p. 213). This further implies that some learners may be inhibited in their attempts to tap this tendency for several reasons: linguistic (Long, 1985; Swain, 1995), cognitive (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), and affective (Krashen, 1985; Young, 1998). Brown (2007), for example, has expertly enumerated 12 principles which are presumed to be taken into consideration while teaching a second or foreign language. Six of them are categorized into *cognitive principles* (automaticity, meaningful learning, anticipation of reward, intrinsic motivation, strategic investment, and autonomy), the next three are placed into *linguistic principles* (the native language effect, interlanguage, and communicative competence) whereas the last three are incorporated into the *socioaffective principles* (language ego, the language-culture connection, and **willingness to communicate**). Comparing Brown's perspective in this edition

(i.e., 2007) with that of the previous ones, a slight difference can be observed one of which is the addition of 'autonomy' as a new principle and the second one the introduction of 'willingness to communicate' as a substitute for "Self-confidence and Risk-taking since the latter are, in recent research, well accounted for in the concept of WTC" (p. 63).

To Brown [ibid], the concept of WTC which is closely linked to the Language Ego (or 'a sense of fragility, a defensiveness, and a raising of inhibitions' within the learner) combines concepts such as **self-confidence**, **risk-taking** with two other related constructs such as **anxiety** and **self-efficacy**, and is comparable with individual difference factors which, according to Ellis (2008), influence the complex construct of WTC; these are, 'communication anxiety', 'perceived communication competence' and 'perceived behavioral control' (see the same closely-related discussion in Mitchell et al., 2013).

In this regard Ortega also (2011, p. 202) maintains:

Adopting a more recent social psychological tradition, anxiety has begun to be studied under the wider construct of willingness to communicate (WTC), which was developed in the field of communication in the 1980s and was imported into SLA a decade later by Canadian researchers Richard Clement, Peter MacIntyre and their associates. In the first language, WTC is associated to a complex of personality subtraits such as introversion, shyness, apprehension of communication and reticence. [...] In the L2 literature WTC has been called 'the most immediate determinant of L2 use' (Clement et al., 2003, p.191), and its independence from WTC in the L1 has been firmly established by Baker and MacIntyre (2000).

### A. WTC as a Situational Construct

It has been argued that the precise pattern of WTC is more situation-dependent and context-related than being fixed (Ellis, 2008; Kang, 2004). This perspective is perhaps arisen from the discussion of individual differences (IDs) out of which the issue of WTC does usually emerge. It was once thought that IDs are trait-like attributes that are rather enduring and thus differentiate individuals each as a unique human being. Ostensibly, people differ from each other in a number of traits. However, as Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) state, "we cannot fail to realize that the various learner attributes display a considerable amount of variation from time to time and from situation to situation [...]. The fact that the IDs are not independent of contextual and temporal variation considerably undermines the traditional view of IDs as being robust attributes that can be generalized across situations and time" (p. 90). These scholars further referring to the work of Kosslyn and Smith (2000) point out that most human traits are higher-order mental characteristics which comprise dynamic interaction of several lower-layer constituents. Motivation, for example, might enjoy some cognitive or affective constructs which can create *hybrid attributes*. Anyway, it follows that the concept of WTC must not be an exception to the rule as MacIntyre & Legatto (2011) have stated: "Although we believe that an individual differences approach retains its value, perhaps it is time to widen the scope of WTC concept to more explicitly take into account moment-to-

moment dynamics within the social situation and the key role played by the communication partner(s)" (p. 90).

Referring to the study conducted by Yashima (2002), Brown (2007) explains that the concept of WTC is possibly applicable across many cultures. For example, the important principle of *risk-taking and guessing* which seems to be a feature of many instructional contexts might be less practicable in the educational milieu in which correctness and thus withholding guess appears to be a preferable norm.

It is also important to note that the significance of WTC originally arose out of an interest to communicative language teaching (CLT) and the crucial role of interaction in language development. It was observed that the learners who enjoy a strong willingness to communicate would likely benefit more from CLT while the unwilling might learn better from a more traditional approach.

## II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To provide pedagogical implications and thus fill the gap in the literature, this qualitative study has made an effort to answer the following research questions in the hope of deepening our understanding of WTC:

1. What are the most dominant perspectives of the university students on the reasons for unwillingness to communicate?
2. What are the most dominant perspectives of the teachers on the amelioration of the students' unwillingness to communicate?

## III. METHOD

The data were collected through a questionnaire and a website. Those related to students were garnered through a researcher-made semi-structured questionnaire at Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences and Health services in Yazd. The study population consisted of 116 medicine and pharmacy students (80 & 36, respectively) passing EAP courses as part of their academic requirement.

For teachers, however, the question was posed at a website named 'English Teachers Anonymous' through which 37 teachers (an Iranian teacher and 36 teachers from other countries) participated and responded the question in the year 2014.

## IV. RESULTS

Out of 116 students who answered the three-point Likert scale question of "Do you participate in the L2 class discussions?", 18 (15.5% ) students responded YES, 53 (45.7%) responded TO SOME EXTENT, and 45 (38.8%) NO. The YES group who were inclined to speak in L2 classroom enumerated the following reasons for their responses ordered in the

following from the most frequent to the least frequent respectively (note that most of the students had posed several reasons):

1. tapping my own interest in English,
2. trying to overcome my pronunciation problems to gain confidence for better communication (Note that the teacher took down the students' mispronounced words each session and informed them before the class was dismissed),
3. trying to break the ice and make a friendly atmosphere; I don't like to be too silent,
4. tapping my motivation for progress,
5. trying to improve my self-confidence
6. believing that English language is important for my career,
7. improving my grade!

And out of those who chose "TO SOME EXTENT" (n=53 or 45.7%) as their response, the following viewpoints were posed (from the most to the least frequent) indicating the reason(s) why they were not eager to participate that much:

1. lack of adequate self-confidence and hence having tension and stress (some noted not being sure of correct pronunciation as the reason for impacting on their self-confidence),
2. lack of ability to speak well enough (Note that this perspective closely relates to the first one),
3. presence of some mischievous students as well as that of the opposite sex,
4. lack of force—if there were force from the teacher, I would participate!
5. being rather introvert in character,
6. no appeal of the textbook.

As to teachers, however, there was no one response being much different infrequency than another. In the following, the teachers' (n=37) responses on how to improve the condition are introduced (some perspectives are overlapping though):

- ask questions that students can respond to,
- ask them mostly knowledge (and NOT comprehension / application / analysis / synthesis / evaluation) questions primarily,
- ask them in a way to examine their learning and not to test them,
- teach them how to ask questions; some are willing to ask but they are not sure of the way to ask (the use of SHALL for example),
- as a warm-up moment, ask what has happened to them during the week (When this recurs each week, reticent students already find a way to treat it.),

- ask them to respond from within a group but take turns in the process,
- give the more silent students time to write their questions / points and then speak,
- demand talking on their capabilities,
- first ask a few general questions so that each student can have a response for and thus be encouraged to talk,
- encourage the active students in a friendly and motivating way so as to orient the inactive or less active participants to take responsibility as well, and
- look for their preferable learning style and try to make advantage of it.

***Other responses:***

- teachers themselves must be adequately motivated, and
- some students get things without asking any questions!

## V. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Previous research has devoted a great deal of attention to describing the long-term patterns and relationships among trait-level or situation-specific variables (MacIntyre, 2007; Riasati, 2012). From the viewpoints of the participants of this study, however, it can be argued that WTC is preferably a **trait-based feature** for the *more interested learners*. The results indicated that those who responded YES for their willingness to communicate (WTC) were ostensibly *internally* oriented as if WTC was part of their established trait as most of the responses evidenced this fact. (for example, their interest, motivation for progress, considering the importance of English in their life, significance of correct pronunciation, ...) Only the last response (i.e., the importance of improving their final grade) referred to their **situation-specific characteristic** and externally-oriented motivation which was actually the least frequent of the responses.

MacIntyre (2007) explains that methodologies must be adapted to focus upon the dynamic process of choosing to initiate or avoid second language communication when the opportunity arises. Interestingly enough in this study, the group who responded TO SOME EXTENT to the question on WTC can be viewed as the group whose answers (that is, lacking the ability to speak well enough, presence of some naughty students as well as that of the opposite sex, lack of force, no appeal of the textbook) were **mostly situation-based** although this group had also referred to the problem of self-confidence and being rather introvert. MacIntyre et al (2001) discuss that motivation can affect self-confidence in L2 communication thus leading to WTC in a second language. Yashima et al, (2004) in a study found that frequency of the communication correlates with **satisfaction** of interpersonal relationships thus being consonant with our participants' perspectives on attractiveness of the textbook, and the final grade!

Also to put what the teachers maintained in a nutshell, that is, taking heed of providing a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere so that students feel safe to participate in communicative activities, which is in line with what Holmes and Moulton (1995) conclude

from their study, these researchers further pose *dialogue journal* writing as an activity suggested by some teachers which can enjoy the capacity to add fuel to the fire of WTC. Holmes and Moulton (1995) add that future studies can explore the efficacy of this practice even from the students' perspective.

Furthermore, no studies to date have examined the relationship between WTC and learning styles. Perceptual learning styles, also referred to as "modality preferences" or "sensory preferences," are interesting to study for a number of reasons. First of all, they represent a crucially important part of the learning process. Secondly, they are very intuitive. That is to say, most people can agree that some people are more visual, for example, while others tend to be more "hands-on" (i.e., they do something rather than just talk about it). Finally, perceptual preferences may be more easily recognized in oneself and by one's teacher than other learning style variables such as classroom design preference, sensitivity to light, preferred time of day to learn, and whether a person thinks in words or in pictures. Also, we need to know how much WTC is culture-bound. Exploring the relationship between well-motivated teachers and students' willingness to communicate is still another interesting area of research that the upcoming studies might tap into and thus enrich the scarcity of literature on WTC.

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