



The relationship between willingness to communicate and success in learning English as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is one of the affective factors assumed to influence success in second and foreign language learning. Although the nature of the construct of WTC has been thoroughly investigated in both first and second language its relationship with different modalities of communication in a foreign language has not been studied. The present study explores the possible relationship between WTC and its components and success in foreign language learning. For the purposes of this study a willingness to communicate scale was correlated with a C-Test, which is a measure of general language proficiency. Results show that two out of the three subscales of WTC, namely, 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 as measured by C-Test. The other subscale of WTC, i.e., willingness to communicate with non-native speakers of English was not correlated with success in foreign language learning. Implications of the study are discussed.

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Introduction

Variability in human behaviour is a factor which distinguishes social sciences from natural sciences. General theories in social sciences do not apply to all human beings even when all the environmental factors have been identical. *Individual differences* (IDs) among people play an important role beyond general theories which are advanced by social scientists. IDs are defined as “characteristics or traits in respect of which individuals may be shown to differ from each other” (Dörnyei, 2005, p.1). IDs seem to be nuisances which prevent formulation of general principles to account for human behaviour in psychology (Dörnyei, 2005).

In order to account for the differences in learners’ rate and degree of success in learning a second or foreign language, second language acquisition researchers have also come up with a series of ID variables.

One of the ID variables which has recently been introduced in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is *willingness to communicate* (WTC). MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan (2003) define WTC as “...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice” (p.538).

Supposing that many factors influence a person’s willingness to communicate, such as fear of speaking, lack of self-esteem and the issue of introversion and extroversion (McCroskey, 1992), the importance of evaluating the degree of the effect of WTC in success in SLA becomes clear.

In order to estimate the level of WTC in communicating in second language (L2) it is necessary to identify the people’s reactions to speaking situations. When presented with an opportunity to use their L2, some people choose to speak up and others choose to remain silent. WTC represents the psychological preparedness to use the L2 when the opportunity

arises (MacIntyre, 2007). It is assumed that the degree of WTC is a factor in learning a second language and the ability to communicate in that language. The higher WTC a speaker has the more likely he is to succeed in second language (L2) acquisition. High WTC is associated with increased frequency and amount of communication (Richmond & Roach, 1992). The choice to speak or to remain silent seems to be a factor in the success of a second language learner. When the opportunity to use the L2 arises, it is not unusual to be ‘of two minds’; one mind wishes to approach the opportunity and the other wishes to withdraw from it (MacIntyre & MacKinnon, 2007). So if we can determine the contributing factors in the learner’s choice of the first alternative: i.e. to approach the use of the L2, we have in fact created a successful learning situation. According to MacIntyre (2007), we can identify both individual factors (anxiety, motivation, attitudes, interpersonal attraction, etc.) and social contextual factors (ethno linguistic vitality, language contact, etc.) that either enhance or reduce WTC. These factors interact at the moment a person chooses to speak in L2.

WTC model of communication as a new trend of the study of second language acquisition (SLA) has brought about a lot of controversy in the field (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Conrod, 2001; Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2002). If we take it for granted that WTC plays an important role in L2 acquisition, we have to go a step further and determine the factors that contribute to the enhancement of it. One of these factors is the learner’s motivation. It has been recognized that students’ motivation is directly (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Donovan, 2002; Yashima, 2002; Baker, MacIntyre,

2000) or indirectly (MacIntyre, Charos, 1996) related to their WTC. However, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) viewed L2 WTC as an extension of the motivation construct. Therefore the relationship between the two concepts becomes an important issue to the extent that a path has been perceived between L2 WTC and motivation. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) inferred a path leading from L2 WTC to motivation. The other way around was proposed by Yashima (2002). He hypothesized a direct path from motivation to L2 WTC, based on MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model.

The other important contributing factor to the enhancement of WTC is the learner's attitude. It has been suggested that, if a person has a positive attitude toward learning the second language, they may be more willing to use it in the future (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Studies have illustrated a direct and/or indirect relationship between WTC and attitude. While Yashima (2002) indicates a direct relation between students' WTC and their attitude toward international community in the EFL (English as a Foreign language) context, in the ESL (English as a Second Language) context, Clement et al. (2003) show an indirect relation through linguistic self-confidence between WTC and attitude toward the other language group.

Some studies have focused on the role of personality traits on the degree of WTC. MacIntyre et al. (1999) have illustrated that personality traits of introversion/extraversion and emotional stability are related to WTC through communication apprehension and perceived language competence. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) have demonstrated that while personality traits of intellect, extraversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are related to WTC through perceived language competence, communication apprehension, and motivation, the personality trait of agreeableness is directly related to WTC.

However, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) treat WTC as a personality trait and define it as "variability in talking behavior". They argue that even though situational variables might affect one's willingness to communicate, individuals display similar WTC tendencies in various situations. Moreover, they identified introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension and cultural diversity as antecedents that lead to differences in WTC. Therefore, the study of the contributing factors in WTC leads to a sort of integrative motivation which includes all of the factors in a unified whole. In 1998, MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels developed a comprehensive model of willingness to communicate in L2. They integrated linguistic, communicative and social psychological variables to explain one's WTC in her second language. By following McCroskey and his colleagues, MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC as "the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so" (p. 546). However, MacIntyre et al. (1998) did not treat WTC in L2 as a personality trait but as a situational variable that has both transient and enduring influences. Moreover, they theorized that WTC influence not only speaking mode but also listening, writing and reading modes.

Consequently, the study of the role of WTC in L2 learning necessitates a close examination of it in the real language use environment. Hashimoto (2002) conducted a study with Japanese ESL students to investigate the effects of WTC and motivation on actual L2 use.

Another controversy is the investigation of the components which are more important in WTC in L2 learning.

In their WTC in L2 model, MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) propose that personality has an influence on

one's willingness to communicate in second/foreign language. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (1998) maintain that certain personality types may predict one's reaction to a member of second/foreign language group. MacIntyre et al. (1998) hypothesized that authoritarian personality types would not be willing to communicate with a member of an ethnic group who is believed to be inferior. Similarly, they argue that an ethnocentric person, who believes that her ethnic group is superior to other ethnic groups, would not be willing to communicate in a foreign language.

These factors help explain why some learners who achieve high levels of L2 linguistic competence remain reticent L2 speakers, as well as those with limited competence who speak incessantly. Theoretically, levels of anxiety and perceived competence coalesce to create a state of L2 self-confidence that, when combined with the desire to speak to a particular person result in WTC in a given situation (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Clement (1986) considers L2 self-confidence to be a motivational process, one that links WTC to a broad literature on motivation. Therefore, "WTC is a composite ID variable that draws together a host of learner variables that have been well established as influences on second language acquisition and use, resulting in a construct in which psychological and linguistic factors are integrated in an organic manner" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 210).

Method

Participants and instruments

For the purposes of this study a sample of 148 undergraduate English students were selected. The Willingness to Communicate in a Foreign Language Scale (WTC-FLS) developed by Baghaei (2011) was given to the participants along with a C-Test battery. WTC-FLS is a questionnaire with 20 statements about respondents readiness to initiate communication under different circumstances, different contexts and with different people (Appendix). Respondents endorse their levels of agreeability with the statements on a 2-point agree/disagree scale. "Agrees" are scored 1 and "disagrees" are scored 0. Higher scores mean higher levels of WTC. None of the statements needs reverse scoring. The WTC-FLS is written to measure WTC in English as a foreign language. However, it can easily be adapted to be used for other languages.

The instrument is composed of three subscales measuring, a. willingness to communicate with native speakers of English (WTC-NS; statements 1-6), b. willingness to communicate with foreigners who are not native speakers of English (WTC-NN; statements 7-12), and c. willingness to communicate in the school context (WTC-SC; statements 13-20). The author recommends computing three separate scores for the respondents, one for each subscale. Aggregating scores on all the 20 items is not recommended due to the multidimensional nature of the construct (Baghaei, 2011).

The reliability of the entire WTC-FLS with 20 items for the sample used in the present study was 0.78. Table 1 shows the reliabilities for the subscales.

Table 1: Reliability for the WTC-FLS and its subscales

Scale	# of items	Reliability
WTC-NS	6	0.66
WTC-NN	6	0.79
WTC-SC	8	0.68
WTC-FLS	20	0.78

The C-Test, which was used as a measure of general language proficiency, contained four short passages each having 20 blanks. C-Test has been suggested and used by many researchers to test overall language proficiency in second language studies

(Coleman, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Grotjahn, 1987; Hopp, 2006; Hughes, 2003; Krekeler, 2006; Lee-Ellis, 2009; Schmid & Dusseldorp, 2010). The Chronbach's alpha reliability of the C-Test considering each passage as a testlet was .79. The two instruments were given to the participants during their regular class periods. The time allotted for the C-Test and the WTC questionnaire were 45 and 5 minutes, respectively.

Results

Participants' scores on the C-Test and the WTC-FLS were correlated using SPSS (version 15). Table 1 shows the coefficients of correlation between the C-Test and WTC-FLS and its subscales.

Table 2: Coefficients of correlation among C-Test, WTC-FLS and its subscales

	C-Test	WTC-FLS	WTC-NS	WTC-NNS	WTC-SC
C-Test		.39*	.35*	.08	.48*
WTC-FLS			.85*	.76*	.76*
WTC-NS				.57*	.49*
WTC-NNS					.27*

*Correlation significant at .01 (two-tailed)

Table 2 shows that there is a moderate correlation between WTC and success in learning English as a foreign language as measured by C-Test ($r=.39$, $n=148$, $p<.01$). Willingness to communicate in the school context has the highest correlation with the C-Test ($r=.48$, $n=148$, $p<.01$) and willingness to communicate with native speakers of English has the second highest correlation ($r=.35$, $n=148$, $p<.01$). Willingness to communicate with non-native speakers has almost no correlation with success in foreign language learning as measured by C-Test ($r=.08$).

The finding of this study is in line with that of Wang (2004) who found a correlation of .50 between WTC and writing performance of a group of Australian learners of Chinese as a second language. A close look at the contents of the researcher-made WTC questionnaire used by Wang shows that most of its statements pertain to WTC in the classroom.

It is worth mentioning that the small and moderate correlations among the subscales of WTC-FLS are indications of the distinctness of the three subscales assumed to form willingness to communicate in a foreign language. The high correlations between WTC-FLS and its three subscales are only an artifact and are because of the partial overlap between WTC-FLS and the subscales.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study the scores of a group of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language on an English proficiency test was correlated with their scores on a WTC in a foreign language scale. Results showed that there is a moderate correlation between learners' WTC and their proficiency in English as measured by C-Test. More detailed analyses revealed that willingness to communicate in the classroom and school context has the highest correlation with C-Test and willingness to communicate with native speakers of English has the second highest correlation. Willingness to communicate with non-native speakers had almost no correlation with proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Although the coefficients of correlation between WTC-SC and WTC-NS scales and C-Test were statistically significant they were small or moderate. This indicates that WTC in a foreign language is not strongly related to success in foreign language learning. However, one cannot argue that WTC and success in foreign language learning are totally unrelated either.

Results clearly show that foreign language learners' levels of readiness to use opportunities to communicate in a foreign language account for their success in mastering the foreign language to a certain degree.

The interesting finding of this study is that learners' WTC in the school context is the best predictor of their success in language learning which seems quite reasonable. Communication opportunities arisen at school and in language learning classes are much closer to formal aspects of language measured by proficiency tests such as C-Test. The coefficient of determination for the correlation between WTC in the classroom and C-Test is .23, i.e., 23 % of the variance on the C-Test can be accounted for by the learners' willingness to communicate in the classroom.

Using structural equation modeling Hashimoto (2002) found that WTC affects the frequency of L2 use in the classroom. In other words, it seems that the frequency of L2 use is the cause of higher proficiency.

The other reason why C-Test correlates higher with WTC in the school context is probably because the context of the study was foreign language (FL). Since learners in FL contexts do not have many chances of communicating with native speakers their WTC with them is a weaker predictor of their success in foreign language learning. The only opportunity for foreign language learners to use their ability to communicate is in the classroom. So it seems reasonable that their readiness to use those opportunities which arise in the classroom and school are related to their success in learning a foreign language.

Learners' WTC with non-native speakers of English turned out to be unrelated to their success in foreign language learning. In other words, higher levels of WTC with non-native foreigners do not correspond with higher levels of proficiency in English. Apparently learners' WTC with non-native speakers of English is not a good motive for them to improve their English language skills. Probably because learners believe they can get by even with a minimum proficiency in English when communicating with non-native foreigners. WTC-NNS does not give them a good incentive for improvement and L2 use.

Proficient communicators do not see any point in communicating with non-native speakers; perhaps they think they cannot learn much from them. Those who are willing to communicate with them believe they can survive even with a minimum proficiency in English when communicating with non-native foreigners. So WTC-NNS does not give them a good incentive for improvement. Further investigation on the issue can be directed to the subscales and the components of WTC to measure the influence of each construct on the improvement of L2 learning. Therefore it is suggested that the components of WTC be precisely identified and isolated so that the degree of their influence can be measured more accurately.

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Appendix

Willingness To Communicate in a Foreign Language Scale (WTC-FLS)

1. If I encountered some native speakers of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian) in the street, restaurant, hotel etc., I hope an opportunity would arise and they would talk to me.
2. If I encountered some native speakers of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian) in the street, restaurant, hotel etc., I would find an excuse and would talk to them.
3. If I encountered some native speakers of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian) who are facing problems in my country because of not knowing our language I take advantage of this opportunity and would talk to them.
4. I am willing to accompany some native speakers of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian) and be their tour guide for a day free of charge.
5. I am willing to talk with native speakers of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian).
6. If someone introduced me to a native-speaker of English (British, American, Canadian, Australian) I would like to try my abilities in communicating with him/her in English.
7. If I encountered some nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.) in the street, restaurant, hotel etc., I hope an opportunity would arise and they would talk to me

8. If I encountered some nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.) in the street, restaurant, hotel etc.. I would find an excuse and would talk to them.
9. If I encountered some nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.) who are facing problems in my country because of not knowing our language I take advantage of this opportunity and would talk to them.
10. I am willing to accompany some nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.) and be their tour guide for a day free of charge.
11. I am willing to talk with nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.).
12. Nonnative speakers of English (Japanese, Pakistani, French, etc.) have interesting experiences that I would like to share*.
13. In order to practice my English I am willing to talk in English with my classmates outside the class.
14. I am willing to ask questions in English in the classes at the university.
15. I am willing to talk and express my opinions in English in the class when all my classmates are listening to me.
16. I am willing to have pair and group activities in the class so that I can talk in English with my classmates.
17. In order to practice my English I am willing to talk in English with my professors outside the class.
18. I am willing to give a presentation in English in front of my classmates.
19. In group work activities in the class when the group is composed of my friends I am willing to speak in English.
20. In group work activities in the class when the group is NOT composed of my friends I am willing to speak in English.