

## **The Effect of EFL Learners' Gender and Second Language Proficiency on Willingness to Communicate**

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### **Abstract**

With day-increasing emphasis on communication as the chief objective of second language learning, willingness to communicate (hereafter WTC) has come into focus by many researchers, teachers, and foreign language institutes. Previous studies show that WTC is highly correlated with the two variables of perceived competence and communication apprehension. This 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

**Key words:** willingness to communicate, perceived competence, communication apprehension

### **Introduction**

Given the potential benefits of participating in communicative interaction, some researchers argue (see for example MacIntyre et al., 1998, 2003) that a fundamental goal of second language education should be the creation of WTC in the language learning process; i.e., to encourage learners to be willing to seek out communication opportunities and to use the language for authentic communication. Research suggests that higher WTC among learners translates

into increased opportunity for practice in an L2 and authentic L2 usage (MacIntyre, Baker, Clemente, Conrad, 2001).

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a relatively new dimension in the exploration of language teaching and learning, part of the wider conceptualization of motivation proposed by Dörnyei (2003, 2005), and defined as the probability that an individual will choose to initiate communication when free to do so (McCroskey, 1992). MacIntyre and his colleagues suggest that a fundamental goal of language instruction should be to foster WTC in the target language (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002, 2003), which may assist in language learning by acting upon what Skehan (1989) calls willingness to “talk in order to learn” (p. 48).

MacIntyre (1994) found that the two variables most closely related to L1 trait-level WTC are communication apprehension and perceived competence. Communication apprehension, defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others and seen as having a trait-like quality (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), is considered to be one of the best predictors of WTC in L1 (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987).

Kang (2005) claims security, excitement and responsibility as antecedents to WTC. A number of other factors have been identified as directly or indirectly predictive of WTC, including motivation (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2001; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), social support (MacIntyre et al., 2001), attitude (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004), perceived communicative competence (Hashimoto, 2002) and communication anxiety (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002). However, the relationship between WTC and these factors also depends on context (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, 2003; Clément et al., 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2003).

The most important variables to affect WTC are said to be motivation, anxiety, and gender.

### **Motivation**

As McDonough (2007) states, motivation is what moves us to act, in this context to learn English, to learn to teach English, or to teach it. According to McDonough (2007) this deceptively simple statement reveals, however, the four elements it involves:

- the reasons why we want to learn
- the strength of our desire to learn
- the kind of person we are, and
- the task, and our estimation of what it requires of us.

The conceptualization of motivation to learn the target language (TL), originally coined by Gardner and Lambert (1972), has been adopted in numerous studies. Generally, it refers to two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is described as a positive orientation toward the TL group and a desire to interact with members of that community, whereas instrumental motivation concerns the pragmatic gains of learning the TL, such as academic achievement. Dörnyei (1990) claims that integrative motivation is less relevant in a FL context because FL learners tend to have very little contact with the TL group and may therefore feel less need to integrate. Research findings are contradictory, failing to show clearly if any type of motivation is superior in terms of achievements (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1997; Petrides, 2006), and there are also reservations as to whether and how these dimensions are distinct (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005).

Furthermore, self-determination theory asserts that humans have an innate need to feel autonomous, competent, and a sense of belongingness. The process of self-determination is intrinsically motivating, and this motivation is satisfied when a person is able to meet the three needs listed above. Much of the literature on intrinsic motivation focuses on the factors that help bring forth and sustain this tendency, assuming that once students are intrinsically motivated, adaptive learning outcomes will follow; however, limited research has been done on whether and how intrinsic motivation predict students' use of various learning strategies, and the effects of intrinsic motivation on other academic outcomes (Dörnyei, 2000). This is surprising given that theories of learning motivation emphasize that learning motivation is not a direct cause of academic achievement. It rather makes it more likely that a student invests time and effort in learning behavior which, in turn, improves the student's knowledge. However, not all learning activities are equally efficient and a high learning motivation can be expected to have a substantial impact on learning gains only if it leads a student to engage in efficient learning strategies.

## **Anxiety**

The construct of anxiety plays an important affective role in second language acquisition. In fact, anxiety is not easy to define in a simple sentence. According to Scovel (1978) it is associated with the feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. The research on anxiety suggests that it can be experienced at various levels (Oxford, 1999).

Three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified (Horwitz , Horwitz & Cope, 1986) in order to break down the construct into researchable issues: (Horwitz & Horwitz, 1986)

1. communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas;
2. fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social immersion on others; and
3. test anxiety, or apprehension over academic evaluation.

Regarding gender, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) found that boys prefer L2 communication outside of class, whereas girls prefer in-class communication, and effect sizes for sex and for interactions involving sex as an independent variable are small. Moreover, Canary and Hause's (1993) found that sex differences in communication variables tend to be small.

Previous research findings indicating that men engage in more interruptive behavior than women (e.g., Zimmerman & West, 1975; Case, 1988; Craig and Pitts, 1990) may not be purely a function of gender but rather a combination of gender, proportional representation, and perceived competence in a given situation. Although much research has attempted to uncover gender differences in conversational power displays, the findings have been somewhat contradictory (Anderson & Leaper, 1998).

Targeting Iranian setting, this study aimed to investigate the language proficiency in willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and perceived competence.

Regarding the aim of the study, three research questions were raised:

- 1) Does gender have any effect on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)?
- 2) Does gender have any effect on perceived competence?
- 3) Does gender have any effect on communication apprehension?

Related to the above mentioned research questions, three null hypotheses have been formulated:

- 1) There is no difference between male and female English learners in Willingness to Communicate (WTC) related to their first and second language.
- 2) There is no difference between males and females in communication apprehension regarding their first and second language.
- 3) There is no difference between males and females in perceived competence related to their first and second language.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

One hundred English major junior students of the two universities of Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan and Isfahan University participated in this study. Since the study focused on the gender differences in WTC, perceived competence and communication apprehension, selecting at least 20 male and 20 female students was necessary. Method of sampling was based on accessible and clustering design.

### **Instruments**

#### **• Questionnaires:**

All the questionnaires used in this research study were adopted from McCroskey (1992). They were translated into Persian and validated. Before administering the questionnaires, the students were informed how to fill out and for ease of scoring, they were asked to write their code number and gender, not their names, so that their identifications remained a secret. All the questionnaires were administered in one session and in total, they took an hour to be responded.

- 1) **The willingness to communicate (WTC) questionnaire** consisting of 20 items on a Likert scale was administered to the students, who were to respond the items in twenty minutes. They were asked to state how willing they are to initiate and continue a conversation in each situation (from 0 to 100%). In order to compare the students' willingness to communicate in Persian and English, the questionnaire was designed to assess WTC in both languages. As stated in its recipe, eight items were to be deleted (guidelines from Gardner' website). After collecting the data, they were analyzed and the  $\alpha$  Cronbach reliability was computed. This questionnaire enjoyed a reliability coefficient of .92.

- 2) **The communication apprehension questionnaire.** This questionnaire consisted of 24 items concerning feelings about communicating with others. The students were asked to indicate the degree to which each statement applies to them by marking whether they: Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; are Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; and Strongly Agree = 5. It took students about 20 minutes to respond to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was reliable due to its high alpha Cronbach of .92.
- 3) **The self-perceived communication competence scale** was developed to obtain information concerning how competent people feel they are in a variety of communication contexts and with a variety of types of receivers. This scale is intended to let the respondent define communication competence. Since people make decisions with regard to communication (for example, whether they will even do it), it is their perception which is important, not that of an outside observer. It is important that users of this measure recognize that this is NOT a measure of actual communication competence; it is a measure of PERCEIVED competence.

This questionnaire consisted of 12 items on the Likert scale and the students were asked to respond to 12 different situations and say how competent they believed they were from 0 to 100 percent (from completely incompetent to completely competent). The items took about 15 minutes to be answered.

In order for the researcher to compare English and Persian perceived competence, the questionnaire was designed in both languages and the reliability was computed. The computed alpha Cronbach reliability of this questionnaire was .95.

## **Procedure**

One hundred junior students studying English as their major in Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan branch and Esfahan University, participated in this study. As it was the first time that these questionnaires were used in Iran, the researcher decided to investigate the probable problems that might be encountered during data collection. Thus, the questionnaires were first run as a pilot study in two classes at Khorasgan University. The refined questionnaires were then administered in one session for four classes consisting of 20 male and 80 female students. These questionnaires took participants about an hour to be respond. As the number of female students was at least twice more than males, the researcher had to select one female class and all the male students in all the classes.

**Data analysis**

Using SPSS software, the scores on OPT were categorized so that the three groups of low, intermediate, and highly proficient students were selected. The data obtained from the questionnaires were scored on the basis of guidelines available on Gardner’s website. Firstly, the alpha Cronbach for the questionnaires was computed and then a comparison was made and the relations between the variables were identified using t-test and ANOVA.

**Results and Discussion**

**Gender**

First, the role of gender in willingness to communicate, communication apprehension and perceived competence was determined. Levene’s test for the equality of variances showed no difference between the two groups of male and female learners, thus applying independent sample t-test was considered appropriate.

Table 3.2.1. tabulates the descriptive data for willingness to communicate.

**Table 3.2.1.**

Group Statistics for English Willingness to Communicate (English WTC)

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English WTC	FEMALE	35	53.87	24.316	4.110
	MALE	20	48.79	23.857	5.334

Table 3.2.2. shows that no significant difference was found between male and female English learners in willingness to communicate.

**Table 3.2.2.**

Independent Samples Test for English Willingness to Communicate (English WTC)

		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
English WTC	Equal variances assumed	.045	.833	.752	53	.456	5.09	6.770	-8.491	18.667
	Equal variances not assumed			.756	40.314	.454	5.09	6.734	-8.519	18.695

Table 3.2.3. represents the descriptive data for Persian willingness to communicate for male and female English learners.

**Table 3.2.3.**

Group Statistics for Persian Willingness to Communicate (Persian WTC)

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Persian WTC	FEMALE	35	63.79	21.985	3.716
	MALE(MARD)	20	65.17	26.501	5.926

As table 3.2.4. indicates, no significant difference was found between male and female English learners in the rate of Persian willingness to communicate.

**Table 3.2.4.**

Independent Samples Test for Persian Willingness to communicate (Persian WTC)

		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
Persian WTC	Equal variances assumed	1.711	.197	-.209	53	.835	-1.39	6.644	-14.714	11.939
	Equal variances not assumed			-.198	33.949	.844	-1.39	6.995	-15.603	12.828

Table 3.2.5. represents the descriptive data for English perceived competence for male and female learners in detail.

**Table 3.2.5.**

Group Statistics for English Perceived Competence (English PC)

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English PC	FEMALE	35	52.64	24.818	4.195
	MALE(MARD)	20	52.91	26.082	5.832

Table 3.2.6. shows no significant difference between male and female English learners in the rate of English perceived competence.

**Table 3.2.6.**

Independent Samples Test for English Perceived Competence (English PC)

		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
English PC	Equal variances assumed	.024	.877	-.039	53	.969	-.28	7.086	-14.488	13.936
	Equal variances not assumed			-.038	38.053	.970	-.28	7.184	-14.819	14.267

Table 3.2.7. briefs the descriptive data for Persian Perceived Competence for two groups of male and female English learners.

**Table 3.2.7.**

Group Statistics for Persian Perceived Competence (Persian PC)

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Persian PC	FEMALE	35	72.45	24.324	4.112
	MALE(MARD)	20	73.23	23.199	5.187

As table 3.2.8. shows no significant difference was found between male and female English learners in the level of Persian perceived competence.

**Table 3.2.8.**

**Independent Samples Test for Persian Perceived Competence (Persian PC)**

		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
Persian PC	Equal variances assumed	.019	.890	-.116	53	.908	-.78	6.707	-14.230	12.674
	Equal variances not assumed			-.118	41.269	.907	-.78	6.619	-14.143	12.587

Descriptive statistics for English communication apprehension is summarized in table 3.2.9.

**Table 3.2.9.**

**Group Statistics for English Communication Apprehension**

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English communication apprehension	FEMALE	35	62.91	20.392	3.447
	MALE(MARD)	20	64.85	13.929	3.115

As table 3.2.10. shows, no significant difference was found between male and female English learners in English communication apprehension.

**Table 3.2.10.**

Independent Samples Test for English Communication Apprehension

		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
English communication apprehension	Equal variances assumed	1.692	.199	-.377	53	.708	-1.94	5.141	-12.246	8.375
	Equal variances not assumed			-.417	51.158	.679	-1.94	4.646	-11.262	7.390

Regarding the first null hypothesis; namely, there is no difference between male and female English major learners in WTC, no significant difference was found between male and female learners in their WTC. Therefore, the first null hypothesis was not rejected.

The results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference between male and female learners in their rate of communication apprehension. Thus, the second null hypothesis was not rejected as well.

Regarding the third null hypothesis proposing that there is no difference between males and females in their perceived competence, the results showed no significant difference between male and female students in their English and Persian perceived competence. Therefore, the third null hypothesis was not rejected, either.

**Discussion**

While previous studies by McCroskey and Charos (1996) showed high correlation between L2 WTC on the one hand and communication apprehension and perceived competence on the other, the results of this study

indicated high correlation between English WTC and perceived competence. The correlation was statistically significant. However, there was no significant correlation between English WTC and English communication apprehension.

Contrary to the findings of the study by Aida (1994), Kitano (2001), and Horwitz et al. (1986) which revealed that the students with high anxiety were afraid of speaking in the target language and became nervous when speaking it, the current study showed no significant correlation between willingness to communicate and the rate of communication apprehension.

Moreover, regarding the study by Kitano (2001) which showed correlation between anxiety and self-perception in male students, the results of this study showed no significant correlation between communication apprehension and self perceived competence in both male and female learners.

Furthermore, despite Brewer's findings (2008) which indicate that females are significantly more prone to experiencing anxiety than young men, the findings of this study showed no significant difference between male and female learners in their rate of communication apprehension.

### **Conclusion**

Since some of the obtained results are inconsistent with what has been achieved in other situations, it can be concluded that there are many psychological, social, and cultural factors affecting willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and perceived competence. As perceived competence is a strong correlate for willingness to communicate, second language teachers are to provoke the matter of self-confidence in their classes and make a relaxed setting for learners, so that the learners can perform well and can participate more eagerly in classes.

The findings of this study do not support the results obtained in other studies in this field. Obviously, many variances are at work in the issue of language learning. The combination of these variances and the magnitude of their effects are of prime importance in research in the area of EFL. Certainly numerous research studies should be carried out, each of which contribute to the clarification of the role of each factor. This study is no exception and has its own contribution.

As Brown puts it, language learning is a jigsaw puzzle, thousands of pieces of which are to be assembled in order to come up with an eventual shape. Studies, though in contrast, help us have a more crystallized and scientific

picture of the phenomenon and will certainly lead to the formulation of a theory of language learning and acquisition, something which is vital in this discipline.

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