

The Willingness of Preparatory Year Students to Communicate in English

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Received: February 7, 2022

Accepted: June 8, 2022

Published: June 20, 2022

doi:10.5296/elr.v8i1.19987

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/elr.v8i1.19987>

Abstract

Willing to communicate (WTC) has been the focus of researchers in the field of second language acquisition SLA. Therefore, this study focuses on the learners' WTC in the Saudi context. The participants were 23 female preparatory year students who studied English courses at King Abdul-Aziz University. The study's instrument is a questionnaire adopted by Mahmoodi and Moazam (2014) to measure the WTC of Iranian learners and modified it to be suitable for Saudi learners. The findings indicated that the participants are WTC in English inside the classrooms; however, they are more willing to communicate outside the classrooms. The findings also showed a significant positive correlation between WTC inside and outside EFL classrooms. Finally, the study's findings encourage the teachers and instructors to involve the learners in more interesting communicative activities that increase their WTC inside the classrooms.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, communication, autonomy learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Communication is one of the salient factors in recent approaches to learning, including communicative language teaching (CLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and cooperative language learning. As Richard and Rodgers (1986) discussed in their book *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. These three methods focus on the competence of communication instead of structure. However, what precedes communication is one of the most important constructs in the second language acquisition (SLA) field: willingness to communicate (WTC). In her book, Ortega (2009) defined the term willingness to communicate in the SLA field as the willingness to begin conversations in L2 with different speakers in various situations. According to Rubin (1975; cited in Richard & Rodgers, 1986), WTC is an important characteristic of the best language learners, highlighting the importance of WTC in language learning. This study investigates the willingness of preparatory year students to communicate in L2 in their classes and beyond.

1.2 The Importance of the Study

According to the literature, existing studies on WTC in a Saudi context have not chosen preparatory year students as their participants, so it is hoped that this study will be a significant in this field and it will address this gap in literature.

- Are female preparatory year students willing to communicate inside and outside of EFL classrooms?
- Can their WTC in L1 predict their WTC in L2?
- Is there a relationship between the WTC in English inside and outside of the classroom?

Based on the research questions, this paper aims to:

- Examine the preparatory students' thoughts about communicating inside and outside of EFL classrooms.
- Determine the correlation between the three variables: WTC inside EFL classrooms, WTC outside EFL classrooms, and WTC in Arabic.

Since communication is a vital factor in language learning classes, investigating the learners' willingness to communicate will help us to better understand their perspectives and encourage them to communicate in their language classes.

1.3 Literature Review

According to Ortega (2009), WTC in L1 has been investigated in the communication field before its inception in the SLA field. In this context, the main focus has been on the personality of individuals. However, with WTC in L2, several additional factors arise, including anxiety, self-perceived competence, and communicative confidence (Ortega, 2009). Ortega (2009) also mentioned that there is a strong correlation between the personality of

learners and their WTC. For example, extrovert learners are more willing to communicate in L2 than introverts. In their study, MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Donovan (2002) investigated the influence of anxiety and self-perceived competence on the WTC of 268 French EFL intermediate students and found a strong correlation between communication anxiety and WTC. Learners who were anxious about communicating in English were less willing to initiate speech. They also saw that learners who were less willing to communicate in L2 perceived themselves as less competent at communication.

In addition to the previously listed factors, motivation was also included in investigating WTC in L2. In their study, Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) evaluated the WTC of 160 Japanese EFL learners and found that motivation played a significant role. Learners who were interested in American culture were more willing to communicate and dedicate effort to learning English than those who were unmotivated or forced to learn. Thus, these factors can be strong predictors and should be considered when investigating language learners' WTC.

1.4 WTC and L2 Achievement

The validity of learning languages through communication is supported by several theories, including the functional model, interactional theory, constructivism, and sociocultural learning theory (Richard & Rodgers, 1986). Thus, this emphasized the importance of fostering communication and WTC. In the literature, there are a considerable number of studies that prove the effectiveness of WTC in improving EFL learners. For example, Kim (2004) conducted a study on 191 Korean university students to investigate the relationship between WTC and language learning success. The findings revealed that WTC is a strong predictor of success in learning English.

Nematizadeh and Wood (2019) also conducted a mixed-method study on 4 French EFL learners to evaluate the relationship between their speech fluency in English and their WTC. The instruments in the study were a picture description task, an interview, and a questionnaire that measured WTC. The results showed that there was a mutual influence between the participants' fluency and their WTC. Additionally, the participants who were less willing to communicate were also less fluent, and lower fluency led to decreased WTC.

Another study that demonstrated the influence of WTC on L2 competence was conducted by Heidari (2019), who examined the influence of WTC on vocabulary knowledge. The participants were 104 Iranian EFL learners and the instruments of the study were a questionnaire that tested the participants' WTC and a vocabulary test that examined their receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary. The findings revealed that WTC did not significantly impact receptive knowledge of vocabulary. However, the participants who were willing to communicate had a higher productive knowledge of vocabulary than those who were unwilling to communicate.

1.5 WTC and Autonomy Learning

In their book, Richard and Rodgers (1986) emphasized that the approaches focusing on communication, such as CLT, CLIL, and cooperative language learning, required the

implementation of one of the most recent concepts in language learning: autonomy learning. According to Holec (1981; cited in Najeeb, 2013), autonomous learners are able to take responsibility for their learning. Thus, communication is one of their characteristics. WTC plays a crucial role in adopting autonomy learning, as has been proved by several researchers. In their study, Mohammadi and Mahdivand (2019) showed a strong correlation between WTC and autonomy learning. They used two questionnaires to measure WTC and the adoption of autonomy learning in 142 upper-intermediate and advanced EFL learners. The findings revealed that learners with a high WTC were also more inclined to adopt autonomy learning. Khaki (2013) also demonstrated this correlation in his study on WTC and autonomy learning in 77 Iranian EFL learners. The study showed that autonomous learners were willing to communicate in English.

1.6 WTC in the Saudi Context

In his study, Mahdi (2014) investigated WTC in 107 Saudi English-major university students. The findings of his study demonstrated that Saudi students are less willing to communicate in English, especially when the interlocutors are strangers. In a Saudi context, EFL learners have few opportunities to use English in their classes. According to Khaki (2013), Saudi EFL classes are teacher-centered, and Arabic is used as the medium of instruction. Communication is avoided, and learners have fewer opportunities to use English. Khaki (2013) also mentioned that the majority of Saudi teachers still favor the Grammar-Translation Method to teach English. These reasons could explain why Saudi learners are less willing to communicate in English.

Several additional studies have also examined this concept. In her study that investigated the WTC of Saudi learners, Turjoman (2015) compared the willingness of two groups of female English majors. The first group consisted of learners who received education in private schools and the second group received education in public schools. The findings revealed that learners in private schools were more willing to communicate in English than those who studied in public schools. In general, private schools provide a classroom environment that encourages learners to communicate with each other. The number of students in private schools is less than that of public schools. Thus, learners in private schools have more opportunities to communicate in English with peers and teachers. Additionally, Kamdideh and Barjesteh (2019) conducted an experimental study to measure the influence of increased waiting time on WTC. The results showed that the experimental group that had more waiting time in their classes was more willing to communicate than the control group. This could explain why Saudi learners who study in private schools are more willing to communicate than those who study in public schools.

Despite these important contributions to the literature, the amount of studies that have investigated WTC in Saudi learners is limited, and the majority of them have focused on English majors. This study will examine WTC in another group of participants: preparatory year students. Understanding their perception of WTC will help providing them with suitable classroom activities that encourage communication.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Time Plan

The participants in this study were 23 female preparatory year students who studied different levels of English courses at the English language institute at King Abdul-Aziz University. The university divided the students into four groups according to their proficiency levels determined by a placement test. These levels were introductory, beginner, pre-intermediate, and intermediate. The participants were between 18–23 years old and were chosen using a convenience sampling strategy.

Table 1. Time plan

| The plan | Amount of time needed |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Data collection | 1 week |
| Data analysis | 3 days |
| Writing up results | 1 week |
| Editing and proofreading | 1 week |

2.2 Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire adopted by Mahmoodi and Moazam (2014) to measure the WTC of Iranian learners who study Arabic as a second language. The questionnaire includes items that measure the learners' WTC inside and outside of the classroom. For this study, we modified the questionnaire to be suitable for Saudi EFL learners. Additionally, another scale from the questionnaire adopted by Fulmer (2010) was added to measure WTC in L1 in daily life. The total number of items in this questionnaire is 26. A Likert scale was used to measure the participants' WTC (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree). The questionnaire begins with demographical questions, including age and level of English language.

2.3 Procedures

The items on the questionnaire were translated into Arabic to avoid any misunderstanding. The participants' answers were obtained using Google Forms. A link to the questionnaire was sent to a WhatsApp group of King Abdul-Aziz University preparatory year students. The participants were informed about the privacy of their answers and their right to not participate in this questionnaire. Excel and SPSS were used to analyze the data.

3. Results

The analysis began with a test to ensure the reliability of each scale in the questionnaire. According to Dornyei (2007), if the Cronbach's Alpha is greater than .6, then the scale is reliable. The Cronbach's Alphas for all the scales in the questionnaire were greater than .6; thus, this questionnaire is reliable.

3.1 Recruitment

Provide dates defining the periods of recruitment and follow-up and the primary sources of the potential subjects, where appropriate. If these dates differ by group, provide the values for each group.

3.2 Statistics and Data Analysis

Table 2. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha test of WTC outside the classroom scale

| Reliability Statistics | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
| .823 | 6 |

Table 3. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha test of WTC inside the classroom scale

| Reliability Statistics | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
| .855 | 6 |

Table 4. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha test of WTC in Arabic

| Reliability Statistics | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
| .650 | 14 |

A Likert scale was used to measure the participants' responses to the questionnaire (from 5= strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree). Negatively worded items were reverse coded. Thus, larger numbers mean higher WTC and vice versa, except for the negatively worded items.

Table 5. Results of WTC inside the classroom scale

| Item | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| If I encountered some native speakers of English on the street, in a restaurant, in a hotel, etc., I hope an opportunity would arise and they would talk to me. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.6 | 1.04489 |
| If I encountered some native speakers of English who were facing problems in my country because of not knowing our language, I would take advantage of this opportunity and talk to them. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.9 | 1.11104 |
| I am willing to accompany some native speakers of English and be their tour guide for a day free of charge. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.9 | 1.21525 |
| I am willing to talk with native speakers of English. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.1 | 1.19267 |
| If someone introduced me to a native speaker of English, I would like to try my abilities in communicating with him/her in English. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 4.1 | .87956 |
| Native speakers of English have interesting experiences that I would like to share. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.5 | .98835 |

Table 5. Results of WTC inside the classroom scale

| Item | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| I am willing to ask questions in English in the classes at the university. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.9 | 1.17914 |
| I am willing to talk and express my opinions in English in the class when all my classmates are listening to me. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1.32574 |
| I am willing to have pair and group activities in the class so that I can talk in English with my classmates. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | 1.17498 |
| I am willing to give a presentation in English in front of my classmates. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1.37069 |
| In group work activities in the class when the group is composed of my friends, I am willing to speak in English. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.3 | 1.12855 |
| In group work activities in the class when the group is not composed of my friends, I am willing to speak in English. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1.16737 |

Table 6. Results of WTC in Arabic

| Item | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.1 | 1.31358 |
| Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.4 | 1.05000 |
| I am afraid to express myself in meetings. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.4 | 1.07640 |
| Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | .99911 |
| I am very relaxed when answering questions at meetings management. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.7 | 1.05339 |
| While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.1 | 1.12181 |
| Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.3 | 1.36025 |
| While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.6 | 1.51787 |
| I enjoy talking in a large meeting of friends. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.4 | 1.10420 |
| I enjoy talking in a small group of strangers. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.2 | 1.17498 |
| I like talking with a stranger while standing in line. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 3.5 | .99195 |
| I enjoy talking in a large meeting of strangers. | 34 | 2 | 5 | 3.2 | 1.10258 |
| I enjoy talking in a small group of friends. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.5 | 1.18555 |
| I like to present a talk to a group of strangers. | 34 | 1 | 5 | 2.8 | 1.08629 |

4. Discussion

The first scale, which measured WTC outside the EFL classrooms, revealed that the participants were willing to communicate with English native speakers outside the classroom. Additionally, the participants were willing to speak with English speakers especially when they faced difficulty in Saudi Arabia. However, half of the participants were not willing to guide English-speaking tourists. This is likely because guiding tourists is a new concept in Saudi Arabia. The majority of participants were willing to test their abilities by talking with English speakers, and this was the most prominent reason that encouraged them to communicate with English speakers. The majority of participants also believed that native English speakers have interesting experiences, giving them reason to communicate with them.

The results of the second scale, which measured WTC inside EFL classrooms, showed that the participants were also willing to communicate inside EFL classrooms. However, they were more willing to communicate in English outside the classroom than inside. Additionally, they were more willing to communicate in English during group activities than use English in front of the whole class. The results also revealed that the participants were more encouraged to use English with their friends. However, not having their friends in the group activities did not prevent them from using English.

The results of the third scale generally demonstrated that the participants did not express difficulty in presenting a speech or communicating in Arabic. However, they preferred talking in small groups over large groups, similar to how they favored using English in group activities over speaking in front of the whole class. Additionally, the results show that the majority of the participants were not anxious about talking in meetings or presenting in Arabic. The responses to the items that measured WTC with friends revealed that the participants were highly willing to communicate with their friends. However, they were more willing to communicate with small groups of friends. In his study, Mahdi (2014) found similar results, which indicated that King Khalid University students were more willing to communicate with their friends than other types of interlocutors. The participants of the current study revealed that they felt comfortable speaking with small groups of strangers, which emphasizes their higher WTC in smaller groups. The responses from the last two items demonstrated that although the participants were not anxious about communicating in meetings with strangers, they did not enjoy these meetings. Thus, we can induce that the majority of participants were introverts.

The aim of this research was to investigate WTC in English for preparatory year students. The first research question focused on the students' WTC inside and outside of the classrooms. The findings revealed that they were willing to communicate on both occasions, but more so outside the classroom. This might mean that the classrooms' communicative activities did not meet the learners' interests and needs. The participants favored group discussion over other types of communication in English. This corresponds with the findings of Mahdi (2014), who revealed that EFL students at King Khalid University were more willing to communicate in group discussions than in public situations.

A Spearman correlation test was conducted to answer the second question, which focused on the influence of WTC in Arabic on the participants' WTC in English. The findings revealed that there was not a significant correlation between the participants' WTC in Arabic and their WTC inside and outside the EFL classrooms. This coincides with the findings of Alemi, Tajeddin and Mesbah (2013), who proved that the personality of the participants did not influence their WTC in L2.

To answer the third research question, a Spearman correlation test was conducted to reveal the relationship between the WTC in L2 inside and outside of the classroom. The results showed that there was a significant, positive correlation between the two variables ($\rho = .472$, $P = .005$). The participants who were willing to communicate in English outside the classroom were also willing to communicate inside the classroom.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

This study examined preparatory year students' WTC inside and outside EFL classrooms. The findings indicate that the students were willing to communicate in both circumstances, but were more willing to communicate outside the classroom. Thus, instructors and teachers should encourage and motivate the students to communicate inside EFL classrooms by engaging them in more communicative activities and reducing their anxiety about speaking in front of the class.

Despite the promising results of this study, it only included a limited number of participants. Conducting a study with more participants will lead to more accurate findings that can be generalized to all preparatory year students. Further research may use qualitative methods and include the teachers' and instructors' perspectives about the learners' WTC and the reasons that prevented them from being as willing to communicate inside the classroom as outside.

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