Foreign Language Anxiety and Learner's Willingness to Communicate in the L2 Classroom

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Abstract
Learning English in a foreign context and communicating in English can be an anxious experience for learners, which is primarily related to their willingness to communicate (WTC) in that language. The tendency of a learner's communication defines the notion of WTC. One factor that is directly related to WTC is Communication apprehension that is one type of foreign language anxiety related to communication situations. With reference to the "heuristic model of L2 WTC, there are twelve variables that are explained to have an affective impact on one's communication level in L2. This paper reflects those variables on the preparatory year students' willingness to communicate in the L2 classroom at King Saud University and whether or not foreign language anxiety affects their degree of L2 communication. The paper also presents the Saudi learner's perceptions toward communicating in the L2 classroom in comparison to communicating in L1. This reflection is approached through understanding cryptic aspects of students' attitudes and investigating affecting situational variables through L1 and L2 classroom observations, student questionnaires, and teachers' evaluation scales. Results gave both implementations and suggestions for ESL and EFL educators in creating a better willingness to communicate environment.

Keywords: language learning, willingness to communicate, foreign language anxiety, L2 classroom.

1.Introduction

Learning occurs within a social context where communication with others constructs our understanding of the world (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). In the context of the second and foreign language classroom, language learners are assisted to acquire and develop language skills. It is through communication and interaction with classroom peers and the teacher that helps learners acquire the language. Meyer & Turner (2002) suggest that interaction inside the classroom provides opportunities for not only integrating students in thinking but also helps them to create a positive perspective towards thinking and speaking.

Contemporary second and foreign language teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching CLT emphasis the importance of interaction and communication in achieving L2 competence (Richards 2005). However, interaction of students in the second and foreign language classroom will not be attained until the learner is willing to communicate.

1.1 Willingness to communicate (WTC) in the L2

WTC is defined by MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) as: "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person, or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). Many researchers have discussed that an ultimate goal of Second Language learning classrooms should be to encourage students' WTC since it is anticipated to assist L2 learning and development (Cao 2012; MacIntyre et al. 1998; MacIntyre 2007)

McCroskey and Richmond, (1987) propose this orientation of WTC as personality-based. Many variables affect individuals' WTC such as attitudes, motivation and language anxiety. These affective variables also represent critical factors in second and foreign language acquisition. From this fact, it was essential to investigate the variables affecting Saudi students' WTC within the foreign language context to interpret EFL learners' perceptions of L2 communication and improve pedagogical classroom practices.

MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) conceptualized bilingual L2 WTC into a pyramid model known as the heuristic model (Figure 1).

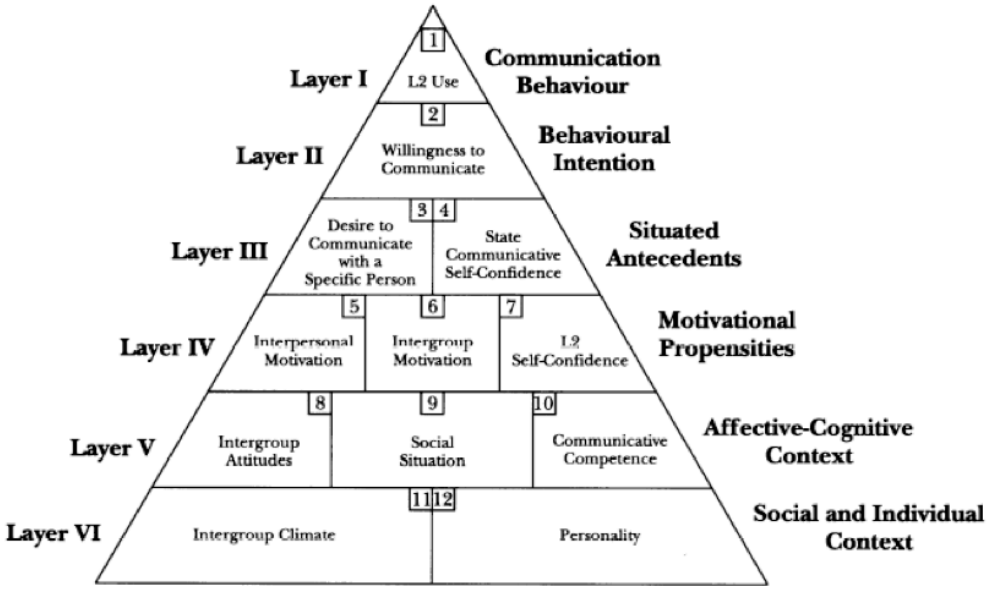


Figure1: The Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC, (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998, p. 547)

This model integrates psychological, linguistic and communicative variables to describe, clarify, and predict second language communication. In this model, MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) hypothesize that all affective, social, situational, and cognitive variables influence one's WTC in the second or foreign language, consequently predicting one's actual use of that particular language.

1.2 Foreign language anxiety (FLa)

Studies have shown that anxiety exists in most aspects of second and foreign language learning classrooms and that a great level of anxiety is associated with understanding and speaking the target language. Speaking in public in the second language particularly provokes anxiety for many students, even for those who experience minimum levels of anxiety in other aspects of language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986).

They define FLa as: "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (1986, p.128). Furthermore, studies have stated that FLa is mostly associated with the speaking skill of the foreign language more than the other skills (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990)

Among the individual difference variables of WTC in the classroom are two key antecedents affecting WTC: communication apprehension and self-perceived competence (MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Baker, 2002).

To briefly explain these two variables, McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) propose that communication apprehension is the anxiety related to communication situations, and self-perceived competence is self-evaluation of one's communication ability. The understanding of WTC is incomplete without considering these variables and how they strongly affect one's WTC in the classroom context specifically.

2.Significance of the study and research questions

English is taught from the age of ten as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, yet classroom interaction is still neglected because students regard their teacher as their only source of communication.

Nonetheless, the Educational System in Saudi is implementing a more communicative approach (Alamin & Ahmed, 2012). Many institutions have shifted to implementing the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) in the last five years or so. One of which is the Preparatory Year College at King Saud University. The Preparatory Year College was designed to link the gap between students' high school English education and the English proficiency level required for the university's academic programs that are taught in English.

Accordingly, foreign language teaching classrooms focused on using the language for communicative purposes as a modification to the traditional grammar-based teaching method. As a result, the issue of whether students are willing to communicate in English when they have the opportunity to has become prominent.

2.1 Research Questions

This research seeks to address the following questions:

1. To what extent is foreign language anxiety related to Saudi college students' willingness to communicate in the L2 classroom?
2. How do Saudi college students perceive their willingness to communicate in L2?

3.Methodology

To accomplish the investigative nature of this study, classroom observations were combined along with questionnaires. The main purpose of applying classroom observations was to monitor the attitude of students in both L2 and L1 classrooms, considering the other context factors affecting students' WTC. A third instrument that was implemented to reflect each student's communication inside the class is the teacher's scale that evaluates students' participation level.

In this study, it was discussed that if a link could be made between the three perspectives of questionnaires, classroom observations, and teachers' scale then the study would grasp, or come close to grasping, the real and the expected relation between FLa and students' level of WTC. The implementation of teachers' scale of students' participation in class revealed the conscious and unconscious levels of students' WTC. The triangulation of instruments provided depth to analyzing the students' attitudes and perception towards WTC in the classroom.

3.1 Participants

This study observed four classrooms of 80 intermediate and advance level students at the Preparatory year college, King Saud University. Participants' ages ranged between 18-22 years old.

Additionally, all participants have had the same exposure to English before enrolling into the Preparatory Year College through formal classes in intermediate and secondary schools. Correspondingly, since they all come from the same country that is Saudi Arabia, it is reasonable to assume that they all share a homogeneous EFL background.

3.2 Study instruments

The first instrument is a questionnaire which is divided into three sections: the first pertains to the personal background of the students; place of learning English and whether they have learned abroad or not followed by five multiple choice questions of their personality, favorite subject at the preparatory year college, and motive of learning English. The second section of the questionnaire is a Likert-scale of 16 statements adapted from the FLCAS ranging between (strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree). Scale items cover aspects of communicating in certain circumstances through L1 and L2 and measure the trait-like and situational variables of the heuristic model influencing students' WTC. The third and last section is an open-ended question that is designed for understanding students' perspective towards the difference between communicating in L2 and L1.

The second instrument is a structured observation. The observation scale was categorized to five main classifications: "educational climate for learning, opportunities for student participation, frequency of communication, responsiveness to student feedback, and L2 learning difficulties". Each classification contained statements that were observed in the classroom and rated along with supplementary reflective notes on the general classroom context.

An additional instrument to look at students' communication in the classroom from the teacher's perspective was the evaluation form. This form was given to the teacher at the end of the classroom observation session to rate the participation of students on a scale of 3 (1= low participation, 2= average participation, 3 = High participation).

4.Findings

The design of reporting data divided the results into quantitative and qualitative in which mixing the manner pertained to the discussion section of the study.

4.1 Quantitative findings

Out of the 16 statements in the questionnaire , 6 were negative statements such as "I feel afraid when I don't understand what the teacher is saying", 8 were positive reverse-scored statements such as "I believe that my English level is excellent and I can speak fluently", while 2 statements reflected communicating in L1 (Arabic).
The overall mean value of all students' response was (2.89 of 4) which represents the option "Agree", that indicates that participants agree on both negative and positive views of FLa statements. Results also showed variance responses of agreement to statements ranging between a mean value of (1.96 to 3.35) which represent the option "don't agree" and "strongly agree".

Looking at (Table 1) the mean value was calculated for each statement to know the rate of increase or decrease of responses on the likert-scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree). The standard deviation value is also calculated to show the level of deviance for each statement, that is to say, the closer the value to zero, the more concentrate the answers and less distributed. To clarify results, positive reverse-scored statements are presented separately in (Table1) according to the highest mean value.

Table 1: Results of the reverse-scored statements of foreign language anxiety

	Statement	Degree of Agreement				Mean	Standard Deviation	Array
		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree			
16	*I have a great motive for learning in the English classroom*	35	39	5	1	3.35	0.658	1
		43.80%	48.80%	6.30%	1.30%			
9	*I prefer learning English together with my classmates*	29	43	7	1	3.25	0.666	5
		36.30%	53.80%	8.80%	1.30%			
5	*I would probably feel more comfortable speaking with/around native speakers of English*	24	45	9	2	3.14	0.707	7
		30%	56.30%	11.30%	2.50%			
8	*I prefer participating within groups and pairs to individual participation in the class*	27	38	11	4	3.1	0.821	8
		33.80%	47.50%	13.80%	5%			
14	*I feel confident when speaking in English and that does not embarrass me at all in front of my classmates*	25	38	16	1	3.09	0.75	9
		31.30%	47.50%	20%	1.30%			
13	*I enjoy communicating in English with my friends and family*	18	41	19	2	2.94	0.752	10
		22.50%	51.30%	23.80%	2.50%			
10	*I believe that my English level is excellent and I can speak fluently*	15	47	16	2	2.94	0.7	11
		18.80%	58.80%	20%	2.50%			
11	*I do not feel embarrassed about making language mistakes in the English skills class*	16	44	18	2	2.93	0.725	12
		20%	55%	22.50%	2.50%			

Turning to statements representing a negative attitude of foreign language anxiety, 6 items in (Table 2) are presented in a descending order according to the mean value as following:

Table 2: Results of the negative statements of foreign language anxiety

	Statement	Degree of Agreement				Mean	Standard Deviation	Array
		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree			
6	*I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students*	29	46	4	1	3.29	0.62	2
		36.30%	57.50%	5%	1.30%			
7	*The verbal behavior of the teacher affects my desire to communicate in English*	35	31	13	1	3.25	0.771	3
		43.80%	38.80%	16.30%	1.30%			
3	*I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting*	7	35	33	5	2.55	0.745	13
		8.80%	43.80%	41.30%	6.30%			
1	*I feel more tense and nervous in the English language class compared to the other classes such as the communication skills class*	6	12	40	22	2.03	0.856	14
		7.50%	15%	50%	27.50%			
4	*I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English inside the classroom*	3	20	30	27	1.99	0.864	15
		3.80%	25%	37.50%	33.80%			
2	*I feel afraid when I don't understand what the teacher is saying*	1	19	36	24	1.96	0.77	16
		1.30%	23.80%	45%	30%			

Items 1 and 2 "I feel more tense and nervous in the English language class compared to the other classes such as the communication skills class" and "I feel afraid when I don't understand what the teacher is saying" indicate a high percentage of disagreement. 50% of students disagree on statement 1 implying that they do not feel tense or nervous in the Foreign English classroom, and 27.50% strongly disagree. While only 15% agree. Referring to item 2, almost half of the students disagree on feeling afraid when they don't understand what the teacher is saying and only 23.80% agree.

Table 3: The relation between students' level of FLa and WTC in L2

	B	*Beta*	*T-test*	*Sig.*
Constant	*3.178*		*14.684*	*0*
FLA	*-0.119*	*-0.135*	*-1.204*	*0.232*
R square 0.018				

Table 3 found weak correlation relation between WTC and foreign language anxiety. The correlation coefficient (-0.119) conformed a negative correlation between students' being anxious in the foreign language classroom and their WTC.
Furthermore, the R square value (0.018) explains only 1.8% of students' anxiety level that is related to their willingness to communicate. This means that there is almost no influence of FLa on students' desire to communicate in the L2 classroom.

The results from the teacher evaluation form supported students' questionnaires. The form was given to the classroom teacher at the end of the lesson where she evaluated each student's participation on a scale of 3: (1= low participation, 2= average participation, 3 = High participation) .Findings are quantitatively presented in (Table 4) calculating the percent of each rate in the four classrooms.

Table 4: Results of teachers' evaluation forms of students' participation reflecting the four observed classrooms.

Participation Rate	Classroom1 (Arabic) morning Session	Classroom 2 (English) afternoon session	Classroom 3 (English) morning session	Classroom4 (Arabic) afternoon session
1	1 7%	5 19%	6 27%	1 6%
2	6 40%	10 39%	7 32%	5 29%
3	8 53%	11 42%	9 41%	11 65%
Total Students	**15**	**26**	**22**	**17**

4.2 Qualitative findings

The quantitative results showed variant degrees of agreement and disagreement to the FLa scale, where the majority rejected the influence of FLa on their WTC. However, results from the structured classroom observation scale and teachers' scale of students' participation showed conflicting findings.

The researcher observed two L2 classrooms in the morning and afternoon session. Both of which had different number of students and lesson topics. The first morning classroom consisted of 22 Saudi students guided by a native British teacher. The lesson lasted ninety minutes covering different activities and tasks about the planet and weather topic. This particular classroom is considered large in relation to the other English language classrooms at the Preparatory Year College. Yet, students were sensibly seated in groups of four and were acquainted to the lesson process.

It is important to state that the classroom observation took place during the eleventh week, which may be attributed to how students are familiar and comfortable with their peers, and show high levels of enthusiasm and enjoyment. Students are given different opportunities to participate through pair, group and individual work. Almost all of the students appeared motivated to communicate, therefore the teacher did not need to encourage participation. There was however a group of five students who were using L1 in their side talks and these were rated by the teacher in the participation scale as low level participants. On the contrary, the majority of students were noted on the scale as high and great input students, which was clearly reflected from the classroom observation. Student (59) having learned English at Private Schools for example, was very actively participating in the classroom where she strongly agreed in the questionnaire to statements 5 and 11:

"I feel more comfortable speaking around native speakers of English"
And *"I do not feel embarrassed about making language mistakes in the English skills class"*

The afternoon classroom observation took place during the same week. The classroom consisted of 26 students and were tutored by a Turkish teacher who's English was her second language. Although the classroom size is considerably large, students were very comfortable sitting in groups that one group was sitting on the floor while the remaining sat on their chairs. This fact indicates a very comfortable atmosphere for learning where students are familiar and relaxed with their peers. This classroom was different from the morning classroom with regards to how students are less enthusiastic and the teacher does not pay attention to how bored students become. Groups of students were dominating participation therefore turn-taking was not well managed and students were not all given opportunities to communicate individually. It was also observed that students tend to use L1 a lot to translate for their peers.

Overall, the two L2 classroom implemented CLT methods and different activities promoting communication were vivid. Both classroom atmospheres were very relaxed and comfortable thus, FLa was least anticipated.

5. Discussion

The first theme resulting from the findings of this study is students' inconsistent views to linking FLa and WTC in the FLCAS scale from the questionnaire. One statement that recorded the highest (mean value) among the other statements is:

"I have a great motive for learning in the English classroom"

Almost all participants agreed on having a motive for learning the foreign language. Comparing the results of students' answer to the question "Does my desire to learn English increase with a strong motive?", 96% have answered, "yes" to this question. Having a motive for learning is an enduring variable that influences one's WTC situated at the base of MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels's (1998) heuristic model. Looking at previous studies, Hashimoto (2002) and Yashima (2002) specifically investigated how motivation influences WTC and one's self-confidence. Positive correlations of their studies are aligned with the current study. Results from the observation data also supported this view as teachers' role in motivating and encouraging participation was vivid.

Findings are consistent with Alshehri's (2012) study, where she emphasized the motivational approaches used by teachers to promote students' participation.

Other statements of the FLCAS scale that recorded high "mean values" are "*I feel confident when speaking in English and that does not embarrass me at all in front of my classmates", "I enjoy communicating in English with my friends and family", "I do not feel embarrassed about making language mistakes in the English skills class" and "I believe that my English level is excellent and I can speak fluently".*

These statements can be directly related to WTC through the affective-cognitive context layer of the heuristic model. Variables in this layer include: intergroup attitudes, social situation, and communicative competence. The Intergroup attitudes variable indicates students' aspiration and enjoyment of learning the L2 and relating to the L2 community.

The second variable of this level is the social situation that includes: participants, setting, purpose, proficiency level of the speaker and topic. MacIntyre et al., (1998) argue that such variables influence one's degree of self-confidence, and consequently affect their willingness to communicate.

The two statements "*I feel confident when speaking in English and that does not embarrass me at all in front of my classmates",* and *"I do not feel embarrassed about making language mistakes in the English skills class"* were agreed upon from the majority of students as the results have found.

This suggests that students' confidence level is high and hence they would be more willing to communicate. Drawing on the classroom observation results, it was observed that students showed high level of confidence when participating. This may also be a result of the relaxing social atmosphere that the teacher created in the EFL classroom.

The third variable of the affective-cognitive context level of WTC is communicative competence. MacIntyre et al., (1998) have proposed in their heuristic model different dimensions to competence; they include linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociocultural, and strategic competence.

58.8% of the total students have agreed to the statement: *"I believe that my English level is excellent and I can speak fluently"* and 18.8% have strongly agreed thus proposing a high level of their perceived communicative competence.

On the contrary, a number of 18 students out of 72 have stated in their answer to the open-ended question that they are willing to speak in Arabic more because of their low English competence and culture knowledge.

This view supports MacIntyre & Baker's (2002), which asserts the existence of communication apprehension impact in most classrooms as having a negative effect on students' L2 performance.

Findings have also demonstrated a very high number of disagreements to the statement: "*I feel more tense and nervous in the English language class compared to the other classes such as the communication skills class".* More than half of the total numbers of participants have disagreed on this statement.

The other statements in the FLCAS scale that were found to have significantly high level of disagreement are "*I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English inside the classroom",* and "*I feel afraid when I don't understand what the teacher is saying".* The two statements complement the previous statement discussed of not feeling anxious and stressed in the L2 classroom.

Another critical statement of the FLCAS scale that students have strongly agreed on is: "*The verbal behavior of the teacher affects my desire to communicate in English*". This factor pertains to the variable "desire to communicate with a specific person" which is a situational antecedent in the heuristic model of WTC. With reference to that, students' desire to communicate in the classroom may be related to the situational influence of the teacher. In a corresponding study conducted by (Aydin, 1999) looking at student's perceptions of anxiety in the Turkish EFL context, results attributed teachers' manner as a major source influencing students' anxiety level along with specific classroom activities.

Classroom observation findings also supported this statement, where all items in the structured observation scale indicated that teachers' role was supportive, encouraging, and positive. This fact created a comfortable environment reducing the level of students' FLa which in turn reflected the high level of students' WTC.

Léger & Storch (2009) have discussed in their study of learners perceptions and attitudes towards WTC in the L2 classroom, that small group discussions are often seen as a method for reducing students' language anxiety thus providing greater opportunities for communication. This is actually consistent with the high percentage of agreement that the students have expressed towards the statement: *"I prefer participating within groups and pairs to individual participation in the class".*

5. Conclusion

Understanding the social context and background of students in this study was important for understanding the foreign context of learning English and hence interpret the relation between FLa and students' WTC level in comparison to their desire to communicate in Arabic.

Findings of this study suggest that considering FLa and WTC as complementary tools was possibly useful for understanding students' attitudes and perceptions of communicating in the language classroom. State, social, situational and cognitive variables all interactively influence students' WTC.

The inclusive findings from the FLCAS scale found that the majority of students have disagreed with statements advocating FLa in the L2 classroom thus, confirming that there is no correlation between FLa and WTC. Students have disagreed on feeling more tense and nervous in the English classroom in comparison to the Arabic classrooms, and feeling afraid from other students laughing at them in the classroom and when they do not understand what the teacher is saying.

They have also strongly supported that they are greatly motivated to learn English, feel confident about their language competence and enjoy communicating in the English classroom. Yet, they have endorsed the influence of teacher's verbal behavior on their level of WTC, as well as the comfortableness of communicating with native speakers and also the preference of participating through groups and pairs to individual participation.

6.Limitations and recommendations:

It is important to confirm that this study was not a causal relation study of testing the cause of FLa on students' communication. It however, investigated the relations of situational and enduring variables of WTC within the framework of the foreign language context. Therefore, findings do not indicate cause and effect relations and further studies are needed to investigate that.

While this study examined a considerable number of participants at the Preparatory Year College at King Saud University, findings remain exclusive to the context of first college year students. One limitation that appeared to be most problematic was the fact that this study covered only one week of observation that took place on the eleventh week of the semester due to the restriction of time. If data collection was conducted during the beginning of the semester for example, results in relation to the level of students' anxiety level might have been different.

Pedagogic and research recommendations include:

1- Communicative aspect of language teaching needs to be emphasized at college and school levels in Saudi Arabia. Students should be aware of the importance of communicating in English efficiently with both native and nonnative speakers inside and outside the classroom context to enhance their language learning.

2- Students should be given more opportunities to discover the cultural knowledge of English to form realistic attitudes and reduce their FLa. Extending students' cultural knowledge in the classroom broadens their linguistic and discourse competence that contributes to raising the level of their WTC.

3- Communicative competence was an important variable that affected the level of self-perceived language anxiety and WTC. It would be interesting to investigate the gap between students self-perception as highly competent, confident and comfortable in the EFL classroom with their attitude of being more willing to communicate in the L1 classroom.

4- Another approach of looking at the findings of this study is to identify the reasons behind the reported low level of FLa in the classrooms of the Preparatory Year College. The circumstances of the current study's context could be applied to benefit high-anxiety contexts. Future research could draw comparisons between different contexts to find solutions for reducing FLa.

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