

***The Relationship Between Willingness to Communicate and Language Learning  
Anxiety Among Iranian College Students***

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**Abstract**

General language communication has attracted researchers' attention for over fifty years (McCroskey, 1992). Therefore, teachers try to improve learners' communication abilities as far as possible, but on the contrary, although learners are given the opportunity to speak up in classroom or elsewhere some prefer to avoid speaking. Since one of the reasons of language difficulty has been considered to be anxiety (Tran, 2012), therefore, the present study tries to find out if there is a correlation between willingness to communicate and anxiety. Thirty three third year university students participated in the study. The study showed that there was a negative correlation found between level of anxiety and willingness to communicate, indicating that with the increase of anxiety willingness to communicate decreases. Therefore, the result of the study indicates that if the instructor decreases the anxiety of the learner, the willingness to communicate on the part of the learner will improve.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, anxiety, instructor, Iran

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## **Introduction**

Research into general language communication has attracted the attention for over half a century (McCroskey, 1992). Being confronted with the opportunity to use a foreign language, some students choose to speak up while others choose to avoid speaking. Even after having studied English for many years, many L2 learners will not change into language speakers. The reason why some learners try to remain silent is not very straight forward. According to MacIntyre (2007) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) relates to the preparedness to use the language whenever there is an opportunity. The concept of WTC is also defined as the probability of speaking when free to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998). In order to understand this aspect it is important to pay attention to the moment when the learner chooses to communicate.

## **Anxiety**

Foreign language anxiety research during the 1970s, however, was relatively scanty and they also presented mixed results. Krashen (1982) demonstrated that classroom environments which experience stress activate a "filter" blocking easy acquisition. During the 1980s, foreign language anxiety research continued to grow (e.g., Horwitz, 1986; Lucas, 1984).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) obviously mention that research has neither completely defined foreign language anxiety nor explained its specific effects on foreign language learning. They also mention that foreign language anxiety can be best defined as "specific anxiety reactions".

Kumaravadivelu (2006) defines anxiety as " an emotional state of apprehension, tension, nervousness, and worry mediated by the arousal of the automatic nervous system." In an L2 situation, anxiety is referred to the feelings of "self-consciousness, fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers, and fear of failure to live up to one's own personal standards and goals" (p. 33).

Tran (2012) mentions that anxiety is probably both the cause and effect of language difficulty. Besides, anxiety also seems to have different effects at different stages of L2 development, depending on its effect on both intake factors and intake processes (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Overall, the quantity of target language use overall has a negative relation with target language use anxiety about it (Levine, 2003).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) argued that foreign language anxiety is a specific symptom that may be related to three well known anxieties related with first language use and everyday life. These are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension relates to discourse of an individual in talking in front of others.

It mentions that language anxiety and perfectionism may have similar symptoms in anxious language learners', a discovery that proposes that the techniques which can be used in helping individuals overcome their perfectionism can also be used in helping anxious foreign language learners' (Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002).

## **Willingness to Communicate**

One of the learner characteristics that Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) recognize as having a relationship with learning success is language anxiety. It is represented by self-disparaging, feelings of fear, and even physical manifestations such as a faster heartbeat! The anxious learner will also be not willing to speak in class, or to engage in informal interaction with target language speakers. Gardner and MacIntyre have cited many studies regarding the negative impact of language anxiety on learning success, and also some other studies which mention the controversy, for learner self-confidence. Lately, a very broad construct named "willingness to communicate" has been suggested as a mediating factor in second-language use and second language learning (MacIntyre et al., 2002). This construct includes variables which together produce "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" one of which is anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547).

WTC was at first developed to explain the existing individual differences in L1 communication. Burgoon (1976, cited in MacIntyre & Baker, Clement, & Conrad, 2001) described "unwillingness to communicate" as the state of avoidance of speaking due to elements such as introversion, lack of communication competence, and communication apprehension. Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig (1977; cited in Chu, 2008) worked on predispositions toward verbal behavior. McCroskey and Richmond (1982) used the term "shyness" to explore the willingness to talk less.

The degree of WTC is assumed to be a factor in learning a second language and the ability to communicate in that language. The higher a speaker's WTC the more likely he is to be successful in second language (L2) acquisition. High WTC is related with increased frequency and quantity of communication (Richmond & Roach, 1992).

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has been proposed as both an individual difference variable affecting L2 acquisition and as a goal of L2 instruction (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998).

MacIntyre and Charos (1996, cited in Matsuoka, & Evans, 2005) modified MacIntyre's (1994) model and designed a path model of L2 WTC. To this model integrativeness, attitude, and motivation were added. The relationship between affective variables distinguished anxiety, attitude, competence, and their effect on WTC and the actual use estimated by the frequency of L2 communication were investigated. According to the model anxiety indirectly influences WTC.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) adjusted the previous model and mentioned a pyramid model which takes twelve variables into account and also considers individual differences which are responsible for initiating L2 communication. The top of the pyramid is proposed as the final stage or the purpose of communicate with special people at a specific time which is recognized as the final step before one starts to talk in L2. The rest of the pyramid takes into account the specific situation and the influences which affect this willingness.

The pyramid model takes a group of motivational and attitudinal factors into account, those that can determine WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Motivation is defined as the driving force or attempt plus will that leads to achievement of the goal of learning the

language (Richards, & Schmidt, 1985; Gardner, 1985, as cited in Noel, 2001), and can be divided into positive and negative. "Positive motivation is often demonstrated by a person's willingness to communicate", the individual's desire to start communication (Moreale, 2007, p.7), and it is proposed that if positive motivation is taken by the student will tend to increase WTC. On the other hand, "negative motivation is the experience of anxiety or apprehension about communication", and it prohibits one from complete communication (Moreale, 2007, p.7).

Few studies have shown significant high correlation between language proficiency, anxiety, and WTC (MacIntyre et al., 2003; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004) but Alemi and Pashmforoosh (2011) mentioned that Iranian university students' WTC is directly related to their language proficiency but not language anxiety.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The relationship between language anxiety and WTC in an L2 learning context among Iranian EFL learners has not been clearly noticed. Furthermore, it seems to be found that few studies have dealt with the relationship between willingness to engage in communication and language anxiety in the context of Iran. Since effective communication is considered as an important skill for academic success, studies that examine the factors affecting the development of this skill among EFL learners are increasingly becoming important for learners. The resulting affective state might be considered to address the following research question in the current investigation: Is there a correlation between language anxiety and Iranian university students' WTC?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

A total of thirty three (33) third-year students of a four-year biology college in Islamic Azad University, Tehran Medical Branch participated in the study. All of the students were enrolled in a semester of English for academic purposes course starting from September 2012 to January 2013 school year. Aged between 21 to 25; student participants have already received an average of 8 years of formal education in learning the English language, prior to their participation in this study. All of the 33 students participated in the quantitative part of the study, which is to fill up the Anxiety questionnaire of Anxiety survey designed in 1988, and the Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire Scale.

#### ***Materials***

To measure the anxiety of the student participants, the study uses the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) Personal Report of Anxiety survey designed at 1988. The questionnaire consisted of 21 items, which each present a symptom of a person who is anxious or has been anxious in a situation. The questionnaire was translated into Persian and the validity and reliability of this questionnaire was measured by Kaviani and Mousavi (2008). As measured by them the reliability was shown to be 0.83 and the validity 0.72 with the correlation coefficient of 0.92. With having four boxes in front of each of the feelings, participants are asked to put a tick beside the strength of

the feeling they have experienced. The four boxes are calculated according to the following formulae: four (4) scales (*Not at all* = 0, *A little (it didn't bother me much)* = 1, *Moderate (It was really bad, but bearable)* = 2, *Strong (It was unbearable)* = 3; on various statements regarding anxiety symptoms. The total score which each student receives represents the amount of anxiety he experiences in the language classroom. Furthermore, the total score should fall between 0 and 63. According to Kaviani and Mousavi (2008), the anxiety is considered extremely high if the score falls between 37-63, high between 27-36, moderate between 19-26, low between 12-18, and it does not exist at all if it falls under 11. (*Please see appendix for a copy of the BAI questionnaire*).

In order to measure the students' willingness to communicate a self report instrument, known as the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale which seems to be a valid operationalization of the construct (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987; Richmond & McCroskey, 1989) was used.

The WTC scale includes items related to four communication contexts- public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads-and three types of receivers-strangers, acquaintances, and friends. The scale includes twelve scored items and eight filler items (those marked with an asterisk in Figure 1 are filler items). In addition to an overall WTC score, presumably representing the general personality orientation of WTC, seven subscores may be generated. These represent the four types of communication contexts and three types of receiver. In the study only the three types of receivers were measured. The internal reliability of the total WTC score is .92. The test has been also shown to be valid (McCroskey, & Richmond, 1990).

## Procedure

The study took place in the educational year 2012-2013 during the first semester. Student participants are thirty three (33) third-year students of a four-year biology college in Islamic Azad University, Tehran Medical Branch. All of the students were enrolled in a semester long English for academic purposes course. All students took the anxiety questionnaire along with the Willingness to Communicate questionnaire, and they were given time as long as they needed.

## Results

The mean, standard deviation, and reliability of the questionnaires were calculated and are mentioned in Table 1. The reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for WTC and Anxiety

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability
Stranger	33	27.45	19.8	0.68
Acquaintance	33	61.94	20.7	0.55
Friend	33	68.89	19.3	0.64
Total WTC Score	33	53.16	16.3	0.82
Total Anxiety	33	22.57	12.1	0.91

Therefore, the reliability of the Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire seems to be acceptable regarding the three receiver factors which are communicating with stranger, acquaintance, and friend. The reliability of the anxiety questionnaire is also acceptable, and it even shows a high reliability. As shown in the table willingness to communicate with an acquaintance shows the highest mean ( $m=68.89$ ). Willingness to communicate including three factors and a total score was measured or related to different levels of anxiety as table 2 shows.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for WTC and Anxiety

WTC	Anxiety	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Stranger	No anxiety	50.96	13.9	4
	Low anxiety	18.14	17.1	11
	Moderate anxiety	27.36	22.2	9
	High anxiety	23.75	16.3	4
	Extremely high anxiety	32.55	16.3	5
	total	27.45	19.8	33
Acquaintance	No anxiety	68.75	17.1	4
	Low anxiety	57.52	20.7	11
	Moderate anxiety	59.33	20.7	9
	High anxiety	59.37	33.9	4
	Extremely high anxiety	73	11.9	5
	total	61.94	20.7	33
Friend	No anxiety	75.62	24.01	4
	Low anxiety	70.52	15.6	11
	Moderate anxiety	61.02	23.0	9
	High anxiety	64.37	22.7	4
	Extremely high anxiety	77.67	14.2	5
	total	68.89	19.3	33
Total WTC Score	No anxiety	64.99	15.3	4
	Low anxiety	49.52	14.6	11
	Moderate anxiety	49.23	16.3	9
	High anxiety	49.16	22.7	4
	Extremely high anxiety	61.99	13.01	5
	total	53.16	16.3	33

As shown in table 2 the highest mean belongs to communication with a stranger and the total score, in subjects who did not experience any anxiety. After this group the next group which has the highest mean is the group who experience an extremely high anxiety in the same factors. In order to answer the research question Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated. The results are as follows.

Table 3 Pearson Correlation between WTC and Anxiety

Variable	N	correlation coefficient	Sig
Anxiety	33	-0.005	0.9
WTC	33		

P < 0/05\*

According to table 3 there is a negative relationship between anxiety and willingness to communicate.

### Conclusion

The present study compared the results of English ESP learners' performance on two questionnaires one anxiety and the other Willingness to Communicate. According to the results there is a negative correlation between willingness to communicate and anxiety, i.e. with the increase of anxiety willingness to communicate decreases. Therefore, the results of the present study confirm the findings of MacIntyre et al., (2003), Yashima, Zenk-Nishide, & Shimizu, (2004) that there is a relationship between willingness to communicate and anxiety, but rejects the findings of Alemi and Pashmforoosh (2011) indicating that Iranian university students' WTC is not directly related to their anxiety.

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