

Willingness to Communicate in English as a Second Language: A Case Study of Pakistani Undergraduates

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate (WTC) construct plays an important role in second language (L2) teaching and learning. Almost any second language learner is likely to respond to a direct question, but many will not continue or initiate communication. The present study investigates Pakistani undergraduate students' perception of their willingness to initiate communication in English across four types of contexts and three types of receivers. 170 Pakistani undergraduate students participated in this quantitative study. The results reveal that Pakistani college students' WTC is relatively high. They preferred to initiate talk in English with friends and acquaintances rather than with strangers. Furthermore, they seemed to prefer to initiate communication in private, rather than communicating in front of a large group and public speaking. Pakistani participants were found most willing to communicate in English to a small group of friends, while least willing to give a presentation in English in front of a large group of strangers.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, context- type, receiver- type, Pakistani undergraduates

1. Introduction

“With increasing emphasis on authentic communication as an essential part of L2 learning and instruction, WTC has also been proposed as one of the key concepts in L2 learning and instruction.” (Kang, 2005) Willingness to communicate is defined as “a learner’s readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a L2.” (McIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels, 1998)). In the past, WTC was regarded as an enduring trait like disposition, but more recently it has been recognized as dynamic with both transient and enduring characteristics. (Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre & Legato, 2011 cited by Cameron, 2013). Dornyei (2003) noticed that many L2 learners tend to avoid second language communication. In 2005, Kang noted how situational willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language could dynamically emerge and fluctuate during a conversation situation. As a result, another definition of WTC, as a situational variable, has been emerged: “Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual’s volitional inclination toward actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables”. (Kang, 2005)

1.1 English language teaching in Pakistan

Pakistani researchers believed that English is taught as a subject not as a language in Pakistan. Pakistan is linguistically very rich country with almost 70 languages. (Ahmed & Rao, 2013) English, also the official language, though not spoken as first language, is the primary second language to learn for education, business, traveling abroad or other needs. The traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is still being used in Pakistan to teach English. In this modern era, the goal or objective of teaching English or any other language has been shifted from the mastery of the grammatical structure to the effective use of the language for a purposeful communication. However, Pakistani learners lack in English language communication skills, and the use of old GTM is one, among the other, cause for this shortcoming. Students study English as a compulsory subject from grades one through twelve, yet they cannot communicate well in English. (Ahmed & Rao, 2013) Linguists are concerned about teaching English in Pakistan. “English in Pakistan should be taught from an applied linguistics point of view” (Warsi, 2004). There should be a link in what the students learn in the classroom and in their real life situations. Keeping this in mind, there is a need to explore how willing are the Pakistani students to communicate in English in Pakistan and what affect their communication.

1.2 Literature review

The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) was based on Burgoon’s (1976) notion of “unwillingness to communicate”. McCroskey and Baer (1985) developed the WTC construct in L1 for the first time. They

mentioned communication competence, communication apprehension, self-esteem, and cultural diversity as antecedents of WTC. Moreover, they argued that any kind of generalization should be done with reference to culture. Later, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) applied the WTC model to second language setting and showed that personality and social context among other factors had an effect on WTC in L2.

1.3 MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Heuristic Model of WTC in English

To explain the construct of WTC in L2, MacIntyre et al.'s model of WTC which integrates psychological, linguistic and communicative variables to describe, explain, and predict second language communication, is predominant and significant. This model is constituted of twelve variables in a layered pyramid (see Figure 1).

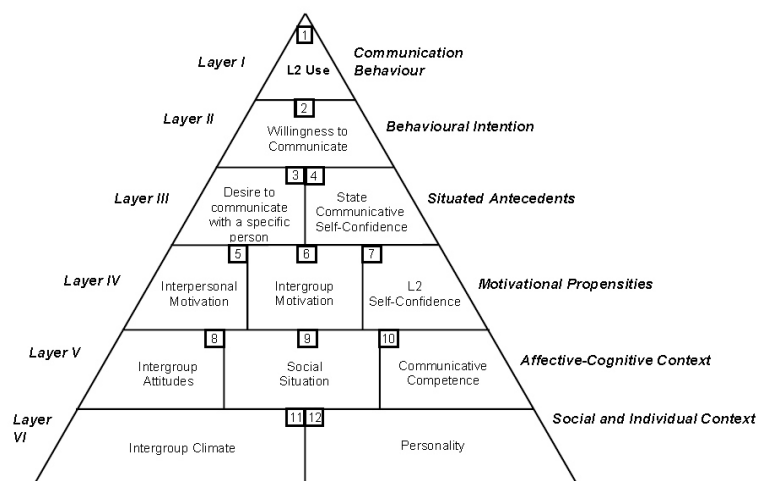


Figure 1: MacIntyre et al.'s model of WTC (1998)

As can be seen in the figure above, the pyramid-like model with six categories or variables called layers, describes the construct of WTC in L2 and the complex interrelationship among variables affecting WTC in L2. According to this model, the factors contributing to WTC are divided into two groups: enduring influences and situational influences. The first three layers, in this model, are believed to have transient influences and can be treated as situation-specific variables. Whereas, the remaining three layers are seen to have enduring influences on WTC in L2. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model describes the complexity of the concept of L2 use and explains WTC as cognitive affective variables interacting with social factors. According to this model, variables such as personality, attitude, and L2 competence have an indirect influence on WTC, while motivation and self-confidence have direct effects on WTC in a L2.

1.4 Empirical research on WTC Construct

For past few decades, WTC construct has been a hot topic of research among the researchers from different fields e.g. Linguistics, Psychology, and Sociology etc. Different researchers have employed different ways to explore the construct of WTC. Using questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, class observation etc, researchers have managed to explain why some language learners seek, while others avoid second language communication. A number of factors have been identified in the literature as directly or indirectly influencing WTC including perceived communication competence, anxiety, attitude, motivation, social support, personality and content and context. In the EFL context, there have been empirical studies, which tested MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic WTC model. For example, in the Korean EFL context, Kang (2005) claimed that learners felt more secure when talking to somebody whom they were familiar with. Kim (2004) carried out a study to examine the reliability of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model in explaining WTC among Korean students and its application to the Korean EFL context. According to Kim, Korean students' WTC in L2 was directly affected by their perceived self-confidence and indirectly influenced by motivation through self-confidence. The results demonstrated that the Korean students appeared to have low levels of WTC in English. The study also showed that WTC in L2 was more likely to be a personality-based predisposition than situational, and that heuristic model of WTC in L2 was reliable in the Korean EFL context. In the Turkish EFL context, Cetinkaya (2005) investigated the interrelations among students' WTC in L2, motivation, communication anxiety, perceived communication competence, attitude toward the international community, and personality. Similar to Kim's

(2004) study, Turkish students' WTC was found to be directly affected by their perceived self-confidence and indirectly influenced by their motivation through self-confidence. Hashimoto (2002) focused on WTC in Japan. Whereas, in China, Wen and Clément (2003) argued that MacIntyre et al. (1998) model might not explain Chinese EFL learners' WTC. They claimed that the development of the heuristic model was based on research studies mainly conducted in the western context, which was quite different from that of China. Barjesteh, Vaseghi and Neissi (2012) found that Iranian EFL learners were not willing to initiate communication in unfamiliar situations. They claimed that context- and receiver-type familiarity was an effective factor for the situation in which a learner initiates communication.

1.4 Objectives and Research Questions

It is clear from the literature review that there is plenty of research on WTC in Asia e.g. China, Japan, Korea and Iran but only one has been done in Pakistan. Therefore, there is need to explore Pakistani English language learners' WTC. The objective of the study was to understand whether students who were learning English as a foreign language in the Pakistani context, willing to communicate in English when they had an opportunity and what affect their WTC in English in Pakistan. The purpose of the present study was to investigate Pakistani learners' willingness to initiate communication across different context- and receiver-types. The research questions guiding this study are:

Q1-How willing are the Pakistani students to communicate in English in Pakistan?

Q2 What are their perceptions regarding willingness communicate in English across different context-types?

Q3 What are their perceptions regarding willingness to communicate in English across different receiver-types?

2. Method

The present study was quantitative in design which involved the statistical analysis of questionnaire results to describe students' perception of their willingness to communicate in English across 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). Since the purpose of the present study was to gain an overall picture of Pakistani students' willingness to communicate in English in the Pakistani context, a survey was chosen. A survey can be designed and carried out in a number of ways. The most prevalent method, a self-completion questionnaire, was adopted by the researcher.

2.1 Instrumentation

To capture Pakistani students' WTC, twelve items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87) from McCroskey (1992) were modified according to Pakistani context and used. They measured WTC in terms of four communication contexts: dyad, large meeting, and small group and public speaking and three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintance and friends). The Pakistani students chose the percentage ranging from 0% (never)-100% (always) that they would be willing to communicate in each case.

2.2 Participant

Participants were 170 first year college students from a local district of Punjab province in Pakistan. Punjab is considered as the most privileged province in Pakistan. There were 79 males and 87 females (rest did not show their gender). The age of the students ranged from 15 years to 19 years and the average age was 17 years. They had been studying English as a second language for ten years.

2.3 Data collection procedure

Data were collected in January /February 2015. Prior to collecting the data, first author requested permission from the head of department to conduct this research. The first author (along with respective teachers) visited all classrooms personally to collect the data. The students were first told about the purpose of the research in Urdu (national language) and were allowed to ask questions if any. The students completed questionnaires while the first author remained in the classroom to answer the questions. The procedure took almost 30 to 40 minutes in each class to finish.

2.3 Data analysis

The SPSS (Version 17.00) was used to analyze the data.

3. Results

Overall, Pakistani college students' willing to communicate (WTC) in English was relatively high (M=64.84). They preferred to communicate in English with friends and acquaintances rather than with strangers. Similarly, they seemed to prefer to communicate in a dyad, or a small group, rather than communicating in front of a large group and public speaking. They were most willing to talk in English to small group of friends, while they were least willing to give a presentation in English before a group of strangers. **Mean value of WTC= 64.84**

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH	MIN	MAX	MEAN	S.D
Present a talk in English to a group of strangers.	00	100	37.64	24.13
Talk in English with an acquaintance	00	100	82.94	33.33
Talk in English in a large meeting of friends.	00	100	52.03	29.39
Talk in English in a small group of strangers.	00	100	76.55	33.19
Talk in English with a friend	00	100	88.33	30.47
Talk in English in a large meeting of acquaintance	00	100	51.63	22.29
Talk in English with a stranger	00	100	81.10	29.89
Present a talk in English to a group of friends.	00	100	41.39	22.49
Talk in English in a small group of acquaintances.	00	100	87.37	20.42
Talk in English in a large meeting of strangers.	00	100	49.92	29.48
Talk in English in a small group of friends.	00	100	91.86	24.57
Present a talk in English to a group of acquaintances.	00	100	37.36	21.23

Mean value of WTC in terms of types of receiver:

Regarding the question in terms of communication partner, the mean values are as follows:

WTC with friends: Mean = 68.40; with acquaintances: Mean =64.82 and with strangers: Mean = 61.30

WTC in terms of Communication contexts:

The findings of the situations are as follows:

WTC in dyad: Mean =84.12

WTC in small group: Mean =85.26

WTC in large meeting: Mean =51.19

WTC in public: Mean =38.79

4. Discussion

Willingness to communicate (WTC) varies considerably over time and across situations (MacIntyre et al.1998). This perspective that there are situational variables that have the potential to change an individuals' WTC has challenged the perspective that views WTC as a trait-like predisposition (as cited in Barjesteh et al., 2012).The immediate situational antecedent of WTC, according to MacIntyre et al. (1998)'s heuristic model, is a desire to communicate with a specific person. The objective of this study was to investigate the WTC of Pakistani college students in specific settings and contexts. The quantitative results of the present study revealed that Pakistani undergraduates had a relatively high level of willingness to communicate in English. Most, if not all, students demonstrated a desire to start communication wherever they had some opportunities. The total mean score from 170 Pakistani college students was 64.84 out of 100. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model considered WTC as a situational variable. However, previous studies used quantitative research methods utilizing questionnaires to

examine situational characteristics of WTC in real settings. The present study found that there was no significant difference among the majority of the Pakistani students regarding the receiver-type. They were willing to communicate with friends (Mean=68.40) in English, than acquaintances (Mean=64.82) and strangers (Mean=61.30). As evident from the previous studies, the topic of discussion, the formality of the situation, the degree of acquaintance among communicators, the number of people present in the communication, and, the degree of evaluation of the speaker, can affect one's WTC (MacIntyre et al 1998). The results revealed that Pakistani students' WTC, in this study, was high with friends because their degree of acquaintance with communication partners was very strong and intimate. These findings suggested that the familiarity of the audience could encourage students to communicate in English more. Therefore, they were more willing to communicate with their friends because of knowing them well as compare to acquaintances. This study found that in communication among Pakistani students; the more distant the audiences were; the less willing the students to communicate in English. Pakistani students were hesitant to initiate communication with an interlocutor who had not had English conversations with them and, they did not know the level of English proficiency well. That is why Pakistani students were not willing to initiate communication with strangers. McCroskey & Bear (1985) have argued that an individual's WTC could be affected by a host of factors including the familiarity of audiences. Similarly, MacIntyre et al (2001) also stated that audience had a profound impact on the performance of the individual. Pakistani university students showed that a familiar audience could be a significant factor in enhancing their WTC in English. This study is in congruence with the study done by Mari (2011) in that familiarity with receiver-type affects the learners' willingness to communicate. Cetinkaya (2005) conducted a study in a Turkey in which participants found friends, as an audience, attractive interlocutors. Same results were found in Canada by MacIntyre et al (2001). Kang (2005) also found that learners were more secure and comfortable when talking to somebody whom they were familiar with.

MacIntyre et al (1998) argued that number of people present in the communication and the formality of the situation could affect a person's WTC. The results of the present study revealed that the number of people present in the communication could sometimes cause the speaker unexpected anxiety that they might be unable to communicate in English properly. It was also discovered in the present study that participants were more willing to initiate communication with a small group of friends (Mean= 91.86), and seemed to avoid communicating in public with friends (Mean= 41.39). This indicated that Pakistani students were willing to initiate communication in situations experienced before, like communicating with their friends or group discussion. They did not feel confident enough to initiate or continue their communication in unfamiliar situations like public speaking in English. They would like to communicate in English with friends but preferably with very small groups. This may also have cultural implication that students' WTC increased in private and decreased in public. They were less willing to initiate communication in other situations. It seemed that the participants of the present study might be afraid of making mistakes in front of others. The other reasons included being embarrassed in public, losing face etc. Therefore, one can say that context- and receiver-type familiarity is an effective factor for the situation in which a learner initiates communication as stated by Barjesteh et al (2012). The learners seemed to feel more comfortable to initiate communication in English with familiar contexts and situations.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, it can be remarked that the present study was conducted using a quantitative research design, which described Pakistani students' WTC in English in Pakistan. Collecting data through a questionnaire provided an understanding of the nature of WTC among Pakistani students. It can be concluded from the findings that Pakistani college students' WTC is relatively high and familiarity with both context-type and receiver-type affect their WTC in English in Pakistan. These results imply some suggestions to language teachers in using different teaching approaches to enhance WTC in English among the college students. In Pakistan, English should be taught as a language rather than a subject. Decreasing the number of students in a class can also contribute to create situational WTC by increasing self-confidence and security among students. Given that when more facilitating factors are provided, a greater degree of WTC can be created, teachers should try to facilitate Pakistani students' WTC in English as much as possible. It is highly recommended that Departments of Education in Pakistan consider designing English Language courses with specific objective to create WTC among students, which can contribute to their successful SLA. Suggested future works include using qualitative or mixed method research design to enrich the literature regarding Pakistani context, exploring WTC in reading, writing and listening skills.

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