Investigating Willingness to Communicate: The Case of EFL Learners at Tlemcen University, Algeria

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Abstract
This paper deals with EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). The main objective is find whether communication confidence and classroom environment affect learners' willingness to enter into discourse in the classroom. A questionnaire was administered to twenty-one university students studying English at Tlemcen university, Algeria. The main results revealed that high levels of WTC are associated with both communication confidence and classroom environment. The paper also suggests some implications for EFL teachers.
Keywords: willingness, communicate, EFL.

1. Introduction

Since the rise of communicative methodologies, researchers have documented the importance of learners' interaction in language learning. As Weaver and Qi (2005) put it: "students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not" (p.570). For Ellis and Shintani (2014), interaction is a means for automatizing existing knowledge. They go so far as to consider it as a principle for second language acquisition. Willingness to communicate is a term that emerged in the literature to explain learners' decision to voluntarily use the L2 when the opportunity arises (MacIntyre and Doucette, 2010). Research on this variable lends support to its influence on developing learners' fluency and communications skills, as well as general language proficiency (Reinders, 2016).

Several publications have appeared documenting the impact other learner variables on WTC. As far as MacIntyre et al. (1998) are concerned, the desire to communicate and self-confidence (conceived as low anxiety and perception of L2 competence) are immediate influencing factors. In this line of arguments, Cao (2009, cited in Ellis, 2012) categorized the variables into individual characteristics (self-confidence, personality, emotion and self-perception of communicating) linguistic factors (L2 proficiency, reliance on L1), and the classroom (topic, task, teacher). A detailed view of willingness to communicate in an EFL context emerged from a study of Chinese learners by Peng and Woodrow (2010). The researchers found that communication confidence (low anxiety and perceived L2 competence) and classroom environment (student cohesiveness, teacher support, task orientation) have a direct impact. Anxiety is defined as worry and negative reactions which may arise when learning and using L2 (MacIntyre, 1999). Perceived self-competence is the learners' feelings of being able to effectively interact (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Student cohesiveness refers to students' relationships with each other. Using Peng and Woodrow's words "*the extent to which students know, help, and support each other*" (p.843, 2010). Finally, task orientation captures importance of the different types of tasks—meaning/form-focused (Peng and Woodrow, 2010). Motivation and learner beliefs were found to indirectly influence WTC. According to Oxford (2013) EFL learners with "the passion about learning a language for its own sake…" (p. 98) are said to be intrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motivation is influenced by outside factors like passing an exam. Finally, learners hold beliefs about the best approaches to learning a language (Ellis and Shintani, 2014). This paper concentrates mainly on the factors that were found to directly influence WTC. Thus, main question is: Do communication confidence and classroom variables affect EFL learners' WTC in Algeria? Based on the literature review, it is hypothesized that students with high WTC are likely to be influenced by such factors.

2. Methodology

Data of the present case study come from 21 university students, studying English as a foreign language at Tlemcen University, Algeria. They are second-year students whose learning experience ranges from 7 to 10 years. The researcher prepared a questionnaire which comprises three closed items (2,3,4) and two open items (1,5). The closed ones are in the form of frequency rating scale about WTC (2) and the reasons behind learners' voluntary participation in the classroom. The first open item seeks to find out the learning experience of the participants, the fifth one asks the subjects to suggest other factors that influence WTC. The participants were allowed to use any language they know to complete the questionnaire.

3. Results

As far as WTC is concerned, 17 participants wrote that they 'sometimes' or 'always' voluntarily participate in the classroom. 4 of them rarely show willingness to communicate (see table 1).

Table 1. WTC

Item 2	never	rarely	sometimes	Always	∑
WTC	0	4	14	3	**17**

The majority of participants chose the points 'sometimes' and 'always' for the reasons behind their voluntary classroom participation. These results, which are displayed in the following table, show that this majority views that having low anxiety, self-confidence, along with teacher support, and good relations with peers affect their WTC.

Table 2. Reasons behind WTC

Item 3	never	rarely	sometimes	Always	∑
Low anxiety	3	1	13	4	**17**
Self-confidence	1	4	8	7	**15**
Teacher support	1	1	12	5	**17**
Students cohesiveness	1	4	6	10	**16**

As far as task orientation is concerned, the majority of participants chose that they participate as frequently as 'sometimes' and 'always' in both types of practice (fluency and accuracy), though more students preferred to participate voluntarily in accuracy-based activities as it is shown in table 3.

Table 3. Task Orientation

Item 4	never	rarely	sometimes	Always	∑
Fluency	0	6	9	5	**14**
Accuracy	0	3	11	7	**18**

The questionnaire was further analyzed to find the difference between students with higher levels and lower levels of WTC. 17 learners with higher willingness to participate ('sometimes' or 'always') cited the following reasons as frequently as 'sometimes' or 'always': teacher support (16), student cohesiveness (14), self-confidence (13), low anxiety (13). They like to participate in both fluency and accuracy activities. In the fifth questionnaire item, some of these learners added other factors for encouraging WTC, including: setting goals, motivating students, preparation before the lesson, reading, practice even at home, positive self-talk, the module, learner's mood, in personalized learning where learners express their point of views, seeking correction, and self-evaluation.

The majority of learners who rarely show willingness to participate cited that they sometimes participate because of low anxiety. They also preferred participating in accuracy rather than fluency practice. In the fifth questionnaire item, some of them added that they participate willingly to improve their speaking skills and develop self-confidence. A student mentioned that he does not see that participation is beneficial in English language learning.

4. Discussion

This paper has examined WTC in EFL university students at Tlemcen University, Algeria. The main focus was on the impact of communication confidence and classroom environment. The data obtained confirmed the hypothesis that establishes a link between WTC and the other variables–low anxiety, self-confidence, teacher behaviour, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. These results are broadly consistent with previous research in this area. All the participants who cited that they are willing to voluntarily enter into classroom discourse reported that they do so because of low anxiety and self-confidence, teacher behaviours and student cohesiveness. What is different in this study is that the majority of the subjects with higher WTC preferred both types of activities: accuracy and fluency. Peng and Woodrow's study (2010) found participants with higher WTC in form-focus instruction to outnumber those with higher WTC in meaning-focus instruction. Another related finding is that the subjects with lower WTC were more willing to participate in accuracy practice. The explanation for this may be that these learners lack the necessary strategies to manage and fine-tune their communicative intentions (Thornbury, 2013). After all, accuracy activities are rather controlled in the sense that practice is restricted to what was presented in a previous lesson stage. For this reason, this paper proposes preparing learners before asking them to engage in fluency practice. Preparation may include: building background knowledge and providing students with some critical words to help them in completing the fluency task (Thornbury, 2013).

Finally, one question which remains unanswered is whether communication confidence and classroom environment have an impact on meaning negotiation. Merely participating in the classroom does not mean that learners are engaged in negotiating meaning, which refers to the interactional sequences during communication breakdowns. It involves interactional strategies like clarification requests and comprehension checks, and it is regarded as a cornerstone in second language acquisition (Ellis, 2012).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher explored factors influencing EFL learners' willingness to communicate. Summing up the results, it can be concluded that higher WTC is associated with low anxiety, self-confidence, teacher behaviour, student cohesiveness. The data obtained also show that learners with higher WTC are willing to participate in both accuracy and fluency practice. An important implication for these findings is that teachers should create a supportive class environment in which communication confidence is nurtured, the teacher supports learners and shows tolerance towards their mistakes. Group cohesiveness should also be promoted through encouraging learner cooperation (Dörnyei and Murphy, 2003).

Future research should go beyond exploring mere participation in the classroom to consider whether communication confidence and classroom environment affect negotiation of meaning.

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