

# **The Importance of Willingness to Communicate and Self-Esteem in Language Learning and Teaching**

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**Abstract.** Several social, cognitive, and affective factors are seemed to be important in the second language acquisition process among which willingness to communicate (WTC) and self-esteem take a high consideration. Learners are different with regard to their attitudes toward the second language, motivation, age, and personality. They bring their personality differences to the social environments such as a classroom, a meeting, or even a family gathering. Since some of these factors such as WTC and self-esteem have much more fundamental role in entering into a communication or for beginning a relation through speech, a review of them sounds to be essential. In regard to second language contexts, WTC is described by MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with specific person or persons using an L2” (p. 547), while self-esteem stresses the learners’ beliefs about his/her capabilities and attributes. The purpose of this study is to review the importance of WTC and self-esteem. The study can shed light on the significance of these two factors.

**Key words:** Willingness to communicate, Self-esteem.

## **1. Introduction.**

The second language acquisition process may get influenced by numerous social, cognitive or effective factors. In EFL classrooms, instructors are mostly dealing with a couple of major problems. At first they should teach and inform the students or language learners and after that, the teachers must have these learners communicate with each other due to their already learned materials through four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Since Iranian people learn English as a foreign language, they find it much more difficult or tough work than any other way of communication. Teachers have to do lots of various treatments to encourage the students communicate or at least be eager and interested in participating and attending in class activities as well as performances. More ever, sometimes the teachers’ strategies and experiences don’t work and students are not motivated enough to participate in the process of communication that is although they have been getting different treatments since they started language learning classes, there sure are other environmental as well as effective factors which differentiate some students’ communicative abilities rather than others.

Numerous studies have recently attempted to explain the role of various effective factors in language proficiency among which self-esteem and willingness to communicate have, in turns, absorbed lots of consideration. Although these studies investigated different aspects of WTC or self-esteem and in some cases the effect of each on the procedure of language learning, there are still niches in the literature to be occupied by other researchers. The review of the literature indicates that the relationship between EFL learners’ WTC and self-esteem of participants in different classroom task types were not investigated enough yet, and the present study attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

This study is of significance since, to the researcher’s knowledge no previous study has specifically probed into the relationship between these two psychological factors. The present study can shed light on the factors that might affect the amount of learners’ talk in foreign language speaking classes. The present study benefits both researchers and language practitioners. The results of this study can highlight the relationship between a state variable (WTC), and another trait-like variable (self-esteem). This can inform them, partially, about how to predict EFL learners’ WTC based on their more enduring traits. Furthermore, the findings of this study can help language teachers pinpoint those students who might speak less in conditions when they are not called upon and scaffold them in speaking courses.

## **2. Literature Review.**

MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualized WTC in L2 in a theoretical model in which social and individual context, affective cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioral intention are interrelated in influencing WTC in second language acquisition. Some researchers have argued that a fundamental goal of second language education should be the creation of WTC in the language learning process. It is also suggested that higher WTC among learners leads to increased opportunity for practice in L2 and authentic L2 usage (MacIntyre et al., 2003). In the communicative classroom, conscientious language teachers want motivated students who demonstrate a willingness to communicate in the L2.

A lack of willingness inhibits effective interaction and language production. Recent technological advances have changed the classroom so that interaction has come to mean not only spoken interaction but electronic interaction as well. Focusing on the classroom context, MacIntyre et al. (2001) measured L2 WTC in the four skill areas of speaking, reading, writing, and listening both inside and outside the classroom. social

context model does not deal with L2 usage, but describes the interrelations among interethnic contact, L2 confidence, L2 competence, and L2 identity, as Within the pyramid model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998), social situation refers not only to the physical location of interaction but also other elements of the interaction, including the participants in the social exchange, A situation in which social acceptance is one of the most salient motives for adolescents. It seems that the students' ability to feel secure in the relationship with the other person is a major concern and a key influence on WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

### **3. Individual Differences and WTC.**

One of the ID variables which has recently been introduced in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan (2003) defined WTC as "...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice" (p.538). Supposing that many factors influence a person's willingness to communicate, such as fear of speaking, lack of self-esteem and the issue of introversion and extroversion, the importance of evaluating the degree of the effect of WTC in success in SLA becomes clear. In order to estimate the level of WTC in communicating in second language (L2), it is necessary to identify the people's reactions to speaking situations. When presented with an opportunity to use their L2, some people choose to speak up and others choose to remain silent. WTC represents the psychological preparedness to use the L2 when the opportunity arises (MacIntyre, 2007). It is assumed that the degree of WTC is a factor in learning a second language and the ability to communicate in that language. The higher WTC a speaker has the more likely he is to succeed in second language (L2) acquisition. High WTC is associated with increased frequency and amount of communication. The choice to speak or to remain silent seems to be a factor in the success of a second language learner. When the opportunity to use the L2 arises, it is not unusual to be 'of two minds'; one mind wishes to approach the opportunity and the other wishes to withdraw from it (MacIntyre & MacKinnon, 2007). So if one can determine the contributing factors in the learners' choice of the first alternative: i.e. to approach the use of the L2, one has in fact created a successful learning situation. According to MacIntyre (2007), both individual factors (anxiety, motivation, attitudes, interpersonal attraction, etc.) and social contextual factors (ethno linguistic vitality, language contact, etc.) can enhance or reduce WTC. These factors interact at the moment a person chooses to speak in L2. WTC model of communication as a new trend of the study of second language acquisition (SLA) has brought about a lot of controversy in the field (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Conrod, 2001; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002; Yashima, 2002). If one takes it for granted that WTC plays an important role in L2 acquisition, we have to go a step further and determine the factors that contribute to the enhancement of it. One of these factors is the learner's motivation. It has been recognized that students' motivation is directly (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Donovan, 2002; Yashima, 2002; Baker, MacIntyre, 2000) or indirectly related to their WTC. However, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) viewed L2 WTC as an extension of the motivation construct. Therefore the relationship between the two concepts becomes an important issue to the extent that a path has been perceived between L2 WTC and motivation. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) inferred a path leading from L2 WTC to motivation. The other way around was proposed by Yashima (2002). He hypothesized a direct path from motivation to L2 WTC, based on MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model. The other important contributing factor to the enhancement of WTC is the learner's attitude. It has been suggested that, if a person has a positive attitude toward learning the second language, they may be more willing to use it in the future (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Studies have illustrated a direct and/or indirect relationship between WTC and attitude. While Yashima (2002) indicated a direct relation between students' WTC and their attitude toward international community in the EFL (English as a Foreign language) context, in the ESL (English as a Second Language) context, Clement et al. (2003) showed an indirect relation through linguistic self-confidence between WTC and attitude toward the other language group. Some studies have focused on the role of personality traits on the degree of WTC. MacIntyre et al. (1999) have illustrated that personality traits of introversion/extraversion and emotional stability are related to WTC through communication apprehension and perceived language competence. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) have demonstrated that while personality traits of intellect, extraversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are related to WTC through perceived language competence, communication apprehension, and motivation, the personality trait of agreeableness is directly related to WTC. However, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) treated WTC as a personality trait and defined it as variability in talking behavior. They argued that even though situational variables might affect one's willingness to communicate, individuals display similar WTC tendencies in various situations. Moreover, they identified introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension and cultural diversity as antecedents that lead to differences in WTC. Therefore, the study of the contributing factors in WTC leads to a sort of integrative motivation which includes all of the factors in a unified whole. MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) developed a comprehensive model of willingness to communicate in L2. They integrated linguistic, communicative and social psychological variables to explain one's WTC in her second language. WTC as "the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so" (p. 546). However, MacIntyre et al. (1998) did not treat WTC in L2 as a personality trait but as a situational variable that has both transient and enduring influences. Moreover, they theorized that WTC influence not only speaking

mode but also listening, writing and reading modes. Consequently, the study of the role of WTC in L2 learning necessitates a close examination of it in the real language use environment. Hashimoto (2002) conducted a study with Japanese ESL students to investigate the effects of WTC and motivation on actual L2 use. Another controversy is the investigation of the components which are more important in WTC in L2 learning. In their WTC in L2 model, MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) proposed that personality has an influence on one's willingness to communicate in second/foreign language. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (1998) maintained that certain personality types may predict one's reaction to a member of second/foreign language group. MacIntyre et al. (1998) hypothesized that authoritarian personality types would not be willing to communicate with a member of an ethnic group who is believed to be inferior. Similarly, they argue that an ethnocentric person, who believes that her ethnic group is superior to other ethnic groups, would not be willing to communicate in a foreign language. These factors help explain why some learners who achieve high levels of L2 linguistic competence remain reticent L2 speakers, as well as those with limited competence who speak incessantly. Theoretically, levels of anxiety and perceived competence coalesce to create a state of L2 self-confidence that, when combined with the desire to speak to a particular person result in WTC in a given situation (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Clement (1986) considers L2 self-confidence to be a motivational process, one that links WTC to a broad literature on motivation. Therefore, WTC is a composite ID variable that draws together a host of learner variables that have been well established as influences on second language acquisition and use, resulting in a construct in which psychological and linguistic factors are integrated in an organic manner (Dörnyei, 2005).

Arnold (1999) and many other researchers refer to the importance of affect in the language classroom. Language learning is an anxiety-provoking experience for many students (Muchnick & Wolfe 1982; Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Rubio 2004). As Horwitz et al. (1991, 31) note, "The importance of the disparity between the "true" self as known to the language learner and the more limited self as can be presented at any given moment in the foreign language would seem to distinguish foreign language anxiety from other academic anxieties such as those associated with mathematics or science. Probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self expression to the degree that language study does."

Generally speaking, self-esteem is one of the central drives in human beings. When the level of self-esteem is low, the psychological homeostasis is unbalanced, creating insecurity, fear, social distance and other negative situations. Self-esteem can exercise a determining influence on a person's life, for good or bad; when there is very low self-esteem, this may even bring about a need for clinical treatment. However, though in the context of language learning low self-esteem is a non-clinical phenomenon, it can have serious consequences. Students may avoid taking the necessary risks to acquire communicative competence in the target language; they may feel deeply insecure and even drop out of the class. Taking these effects into consideration, in the language classroom it is important to be concerned about learners' self-esteem. However, this implies more than doing occasional activities to make students reflect about their worthiness and competence. As a first step, teachers themselves need to be aware of their own self-esteem, to understand what self-esteem is, what are the sources and components, and how applications can be implemented in the language classroom. This implementation should be based on a valid framework. In this book, many authors have adopted Reasoner's model (1982), which comprises security, identity, belonging, purpose and competence as the main components of self-esteem. Applications of a self-esteem model should be pre-planned in the teaching units and integrated within the foreign language curriculum.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

Due to the above mentioned investigations, the relationship between the participants' WTC and self-esteem was significant. The components of WTC were also significantly correlated with the participants' self-esteem, however the participants' self-esteem level in most studies was not correlated with the amount of participation in pair activities, although, their self-esteem level was significantly correlated with the amount of the participants' participation in group and whole class activities.

To sum up, the results of mentioned studies indicated that willingness to communicate was significantly correlated with self-esteem. It was also found that WTC has significant relationship with EFL learners' self-esteem. The level of self-esteem was also found to affect the amount of learners' participation in pair-, group, and whole class activities. With regard to pedagogical implication, it can be concluded that pair-work activities should be included whenever possible since all students with different levels of self-esteem participate in these activities without major problems. This can lead to the provision of participation opportunities for all learners. However, group work and whole class activities should not be ostracized from the syllabus since these activities are usually samples of authentic situations, and the students should be encouraged to participate in different types of activities to become prepared for real life conditions.

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