

TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK: PERCEPTIONS OF YEMENI UNDERGRADUATES REGARDING THEIR WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

Nasser Omer M. Al-Tamimi

Dept. of English- College of Education- Seiyun, Hadhramout University, Yemen

ABSTRACT: *Willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign language has gained much more attention as an important concept in improving students' oral skills. The present study explored undergraduate students' perceptions of their WTC in English across four types of contexts and three types of receivers. The exploratory design was employed with 100 college students who were involved in the current study. Data of the study were collected through using a self-reported questionnaire. Descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviations were run to analyze the data. Students were found to be more willing and less willing to communicate in classes in terms of both communication contexts and in terms of the three types of receivers. Some pedagogical implications for future research are provided by the end of the study.*

KEYWORDS: Perception, Willingness to Communicate, Context- Type, And Receiver- Type.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of language learning, under the assumption of structure-based principles, is to develop linguistic competence and to master the structure of the language. However, the dominance of the communicative approaches in improving students' communicative competence has been a turning point from the traditional methods to a new pedagogy. Therefore, the teaching of oral skills is given a priority over the other language skills of English. Furthermore, the supporters of communicative approaches recommend that language should be developed through meaningful interactions which precisely resemble the real life of students outside the classroom (Swain & Lapkin, 2002 and Savignon, 1972). In this case, the focus is on the authentic use of L2 as an essential part of L2 learning. This authentic use of language has led to a growing amount of research into the WTC construct as an important construct in the field of L2 learning (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996).

English Language Teaching in Yemeni Schools

English is a medium for international communication. In order to meet the demands of modern society, teachers of English need to pay more attention to the development of learners' competence and focus on more effective and successful methods. However, traditional approaches to English language teaching still dominate Yemeni classrooms. Language teachers should not focus only on teaching language structures but also on other oral skills of the language. In this modern era, the 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, Yemeni learners are not able to master the English language communication skills. This shortcoming might be due to some factors. Students study English as a compulsory subject from grade seven through twelve, yet they cannot communicate well in English. English in Yemeni schools should be taught from an applied

linguistics point of view (Warsi, 2004). This means that there should be a link that exists between what the students learn in the classroom and what is in their real-life situations. Keeping this in mind, there is a need to explore how willing the Yemeni students are to communicate in English.

Statement of the Problem

In communicative classrooms, teachers prefer to have motivated students who demonstrate a high degree of WTC in the second/foreign language. A lack of willingness results in ineffective interaction and language production (Freiermuth and Jarrel, 2006). Therefore, the concept of WTC plays an integral part in learning a second/foreign language (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels, 1998). Some researchers (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998, 2003) have argued that a fundamental goal of L2 education should be the encouragement of WTC in language learning, because WTC is expected to facilitate the language learning process so that higher WTC among students leads to increased opportunity for practice in L2 and authentic language use.

However, most of the Yemeni students are not able to communicate in English in the classroom. This weakness in speaking the language might be due to the low willingness of students to communicate in English inside the classroom. Students' oral proficiency is integrated with students' WTC. It is also related to the encouragement of teachers, society members and the learning environment, which all support and play a role in developing students' WTC. Despite the availability of modern techniques in the teaching of English language at most of the Yemeni universities, most of the Yemeni college students tend to avoid speaking in English in the classroom. It has been said that most of those students, even after studying English for several years, cannot be able to speak English well.

Therefore, the present study examines students' WTC in the EFL context by using Yemeni college students as participants. The objectives of the study are to understand whether students who are learning English as a foreign language in the Yemeni context are willing to communicate in English when they have an opportunity to do so. Few studies conducted in this area in the Yemeni context and most of them were mostly conducted in schools. However, at the university level, especially in rural areas, foreign language WTC remains under-investigated.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine Yemeni students' WTC in English. To this end, we chose the College of Education, to investigate the extent to which English major students are willing to communicate in English.

Questions of the Study

- 1- What are the students' perceptions of their willingness to communicate in different types of contexts?
- 2- What are the students' perceptions regarding their willingness to initiate communication across different types of receivers?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in terms of using the site of a rural area in which English is only used in the classroom. The status of the place of the study and its nature allowed the researcher to examine the WTC and to gain a better understanding of students' perception towards speaking English in Yemeni contexts. The results obtained in this study have implications for language teachers, teacher trainers, and syllabus designers. The results of the study inform foreign language teachers about the need of their students in terms of developing oral skills. Finally, syllabus designers may get some benefits in terms of the communicative needs of language learners in the EFL context.

Literature review

This section deals with the theoretical background of WTC and the previous studies conducted on this area.

Willingness to Communicate

WTC is initially taken from studies on "unwillingness to communicate" (Burgoon, 1976), "predispositions toward verbal behavior" (Mortensen, Arntson, & Lustig, 1977), and "shyness" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). Those studies were mainly done on first language acquisition. With regard to second language, competence in oral skills and the influences of situations play a role in having a WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In this perspective, WTC in a second language is defined as "readiness to enter into the discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p.547).

WTC has been conceptualized as stable and trait-like. Learners' WTC is also influenced by the situation. It has been reported that WTC affects the communication skills of learners across many contexts (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987; Fayer, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1984; McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). According to McCroskey (1992), four communication contexts (groups, meetings, dyads, and publics) along with the three receiver types (strangers, acquaintances and friends) play a role in developing the willingness of students to communicate. Likewise, McCroskey & Richmond (1987) state that WTC can largely depend on situational or environmental factors. They consider that the individual characteristics of a person cause him/her to act differently in the same situations or environments. Specifically, they state that:

In order for us to argue that the predisposition is trait-like, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate in one communication context (like small group interaction) is correlated with the person's willingness in other contexts (such as public speaking, talking in meetings, and talking in dyads). Further, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate with one type of receiver (like acquaintances) is correlated with a person's willingness to communicate with other types of receivers (such as friends and strangers (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, p. 189).

WTC is a very important factor for developing students' level of proficiency in a second language. To achieve this level of proficiency, students who have been able to visually demonstrate the WTC will use the language more and will definitely develop their overall levels of proficiency (Kang, 2005). Consequently, WTC has been proposed as a fundamental goal of second language learning and instruction in line with the emphasis on authentic second

language communication as an essential part of second language learning, and to increase the use of the target language in classroom and outside the classroom in a real settings (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

In the literature, there are two general divisions of studies related to the field of WTC. The first division of studies pays more attention to a trait-like predisposition for WTC; however, the other division of studies puts emphasis on the situational construct for WTC (Kang, 2005). Nevertheless, WTC is considered as being a dual characteristic construct (Cao & Philp, 2006), namely, trait-like WTC and situational WTC, and they should be considered as complementary and investigate both in research upon WTC (MacIntyre, Babin, & Clement, 1999). The WTC model has been developed by MacIntyre et al., (1998). They conceptualized WTC in the second language as a layered pyramid in which both trait-like and situational factors influence students' WTC. This model integrates psychological, linguistic and communicative variables to describe, explain, and predict second language communication. It is hypothesized that all social, affective, cognitive and situational variables influence one's WTC in an L2, which in turn predicts one's actual use of that language. The model that they have presented is formed in a pyramid-shaped structure with six categories or variables called layers. The model proposes various potential influences on WTC in a second language.

In short, learner's WTC is affected by many factors which can be formed into two categories. The first category includes the personality of the language learner, his/ her self-confidence, and the social context, motivation and attitudes towards native speakers. The second category is related to situational influences which deal with the willingness of a person to communicate in the second or the foreign language with another person. Therefore, social, affective, cognitive and situational variables affect learner's WTC.

Previous Studies

Barjesteh et al. (2012) investigated the WTC of Iranian EFL students in English on four types of contexts and three types of receivers. Data of the study were collected through using a questionnaire consisting of 20 items related to different situations. The findings of the study indicated that Iranian students were highly willing to communicate in two types of contexts (group discussion and meetings) and only one type of receiver which is (friend). On the other hand, they have been found to be unwilling to communicate in public speaking, interpersonal conversation, strangers, and acquaintances.

Mahdi (2014) conducted a study to identify the main communication difficulties facing EFL study at King Khalid University and to explore the reasons behind these difficulties. The researcher investigated students' WTC in English. Data were collected by using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. These instruments measured four types of communication contexts (public speaking, meetings, group discussions and interpersonal conversations) with three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends). The results indicated that students were quite willing to communicate in the interpersonal conversation context and group discussions. Nevertheless, students were less willing to communicate in the public speaking and meeting contexts. They were to some extent willing to communicate in group discussion. The study provides some suggestion and recommendations for future study.

Bukhari et al. (2015) investigated the perception of Pakistani undergraduate students' WTC in English across four types of contexts and three types of receivers. 170 students were involved

in the study. The study is quantitative in nature and the data were collected by using a questionnaire. The study showed that students' WTC is high, particularly in small groups of friends and in private contexts. They are least willing to communicate in English in presentation in front of a large group of strangers and they do not prefer to communicate in front of a large group and in public speaking.

Baghaei, et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between WTC along with its components and success in foreign language learning among Iranian students. 148 undergraduate English major students participated in the study. The data were collected by using a questionnaire along with a C-Test battery to measure the proficiency of the students. The questionnaire was divided into three sub-scales. The first one deals with WTC in the school context. The second one is the WTC with native speakers of English, and the third sub-scale is the WTC with nonnative speakers of English. Generally, the findings of the study indicated that there is a moderate correlation between WTC and success in learning English. The results of the subscales indicated that the highest correlation with C-Test is the willingness to communicate in the school context. The second highest correlation is given to the willingness to communicate with native speakers; whereas no correlation found between success in foreign language learning and willingness to communicate with non-native speakers.

Edwards (2006) investigated the willingness to communicate among Korean students. Exploratory design of both quantitative and qualitative methods was employed by the study. 4000 students were involved in the study. The data were collected by using a questionnaire and an interview. The two instruments were used to complement each other and to generalize the results to the whole population. The findings of the study revealed that many Korean students were found to be unwilling to communicate in English although they are keen and motivated to learn English.

Jing (2013) investigated the WTC of non-English majors in a Chinese public university- first and second-year level. The design of her study employed both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. Data of the study were collected through using a combination of internal interest, self-perceived communication competence, personal development, and communication apprehension. The data were analyzed by a multiple regression analysis. The findings of the study showed that students were most willing to communicate in a discussion with a group of students or a peer, and with the guidance of their teachers.

Previous studies have proved that WTC has a positive impact on the acquisition of the second language. It enables students to improve their second language skills, particularly oral skills. Major findings, from those studies on WTC, indicated that communication contexts and types of receivers play an important role in the interaction of the speakers of English. Results of research reveal that familiar contexts and receivers help in encouraging students to successful interaction between them. Therefore, the aim of second language instruction should be to improve WTC, and for second language acquisition research, to investigate how this can best be done. The following section will explain the methodological approach that is used for collecting the data related to the topic of the current study.

METHODOLOGY

This study is exploratory in nature, as its aim is to explore the students' WTC in an EFL context. Based on the quantitative approach, descriptive statistics were considered to determine the survey results through a self-reported questionnaire. The number of research participants was determined by purposive-cluster random sampling with the Slovin's formula.

Participants

The study was conducted among 100 Yemeni learners of English studying at Hadhramout University –College of Education- Seiyun. All of the students were English majors pursuing an undergraduate degree in the English language. There were females and males. The age of the students ranged from 18 years to 20 years at the time of conducting this study. They had been studying English as a foreign language for ten years. The participants were from the same location and they had also been following the same course of studies, which, apart from extensive instruction in English as a foreign language, included classes in applied linguistics, literature, linguistics, public speaking, presentation, and teaching methodology, all of which were conducted in the target language.

Instrumentation

The measure of WTC in the FL Classroom was designed to gather data needed to answer the research questions. The instrument had the form of a 20-item questionnaire based on the work designed by McCroskey (1992). This questionnaire was designed to measure a respondent's inclination toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication and has been deemed as reliable and valid. The participants were asked to choose the degree of willingness with which they tend to participate in different oral communicative tasks performed during the course. The items of the questionnaire can be classified on the basis of two categories: I) four communication contexts (groups, meetings, dyads and publics) crossed with the three receiver types (strangers, acquaintances and friends) formed 20 situations people may find themselves in. The participants of the current study showed the percentage of the time, ranging from 0% to 100%, that they would be willing to communicate in each case. The questionnaire was filled in by the participants during the last regular class of English. The questionnaire took approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete. The participants were told that there were no wrong or right responses to any of the statements on this questionnaire and that their results would be used only for scientific purposes.

RESULTS

The purpose of the current section is to report the results of the study that tested the willingness of students to communicate in English in EFL contexts on measures of communication contexts and in terms of types of receivers. This section is divided into two sub-sections addressing each of the two research questions. The main analysis to each of the research questions includes descriptive statistics, with mean scores and standard deviations. Finally, the discussion of the results is presented in a separate section.

WTC in Terms of Communication Contexts

To answer the first research question, *what are the students' perceptions of their willingness to communicate in different types of contexts?*, the scores of the students were analysed to investigate their WTC in terms of communication contexts. It begins with a description of the overall scores of the WTC in terms of communication contexts and then the results of the communication contexts in terms of four sub-scales (i.e., group discussion, meetings, interpersonal, and public speaking). Table 1 summarises the mean scores and standard deviations of the students in the WTC.

Table 1: WTC in terms of communication contexts

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
group discussion	100	66.00	80.33	71.6867	3.59536
meetings	100	54.00	71.67	63.6267	4.51864
interpersonal	100	37.67	51.00	44.4867	2.57564
public speaking	100	68.00	80.00	73.8467	3.26166
Valid N (listwise)	100				

The students' responses in the WTC in terms of the overall mean value as well as the four sub-scales identified, and group discussion, meetings, interpersonal, and public speaking were examined. As Table 1 shows, the overall mean score of the WTC in terms of types of communication contexts was 63.40, indicating an average score according to established WTC criteria by McCroskey, & Richmond (2013) as follows:

Norms for WTC Scores by McCroskey, & Richmond (2013)		
Situations	High WTC	Low WTC
Group discussion	>89	<57
Meetings	>80	<39
Interpersonal conversations	>94	<64
Public Speaking	>78	<33
Stranger	>63	<18
Acquaintance	>92	<57
Friend	>99	<71
Total WTC	>82	<52

These criteria are used as a benchmark to make comparison between the overall WTC and the subscales in terms of communication contexts as well as in terms of the three types of receivers. The results, in Table 1 indicate that the mean value of the group discussion is 71.68 with a standard deviation of 3.5953 and the mean value of the meeting is 63.62 with a standard deviation of 4.5186. Also the results indicate that the interpersonal communication is 44.48 with a standard deviation of 2.5756 and the mean value of public speaking is 73.84 with a standard deviation of 3.2616. Such results showed that the mean scores in the sub-categories

obtained by the students in WTC in terms of communication contexts were almost always different in each sub categories.

WTC in Terms of Types of Receivers

To answer the second research question, *what are the students' perceptions regarding their willingness to initiate communication across different types of receivers?*, the results of the students are presented and analysed. It begins with a description of the overall scores of WTC in terms of types of receivers. Then the results of the WTC of types of receivers in terms of the three sub-scales (i.e., stranger, acquaintance and friend), are presented and analysed.

Table 2: WTC in terms of types of receivers

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
stranger	100	51.25	62.75	58.4350	2.82231
acquaintance	100	57.00	69.75	62.3575	3.28588
friend	100	63.50	76.50	69.4425	3.77021
Valid N (listwise)	100				

The students' responses in the WTC in terms of the overall mean value were examined. As Table 2 shows, the overall mean score of the WTC in terms of types of receivers was 63.40, indicating a moderate score, according to established WTC criteria by McCroskey, & Richmond (2013). These criteria are used as a benchmark to make comparison between the overall WTC and the subscales in terms of type of receivers.

As depicted in Table 2, the mean value of stranger is 58.43 with a standard deviation of 2.82 and the mean value of the acquaintance is 62.35 with a standard deviation of 3.29, whereas the results indicate that the mean value of friend is 69.44 with a standard deviation of 3.77, Such results showed that the mean scores in the sub-categories obtained by the students in WTC in terms of communication contexts were almost different in each sub-categories.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the results of the two research questions, the research objectives of the current study were achieved. For ease of reference, the results of each of the two study questions are discussed separately in terms of communication contexts and types of receivers below.

WTC in Terms of Communication Contexts

The findings of this study showed that communication contexts and types of receivers are very important in affecting students' WTC. With regard to communication context, the results of students indicate that the preferable communicative situation for them was the interpersonal conversation. On the other hand, students show less WTC in English in the meeting. This result justifies the standard prevailing assumption that talking in meetings is formal and many people prefer to keep silent rather than talking in meetings. Results of group discussion indicate that some of the students prefer to talk in English. This may prove the reality of students who are

keen to develop their communicative competence. Notably, students show moderate scores in public speaking. This finding shows that students expressed positive feelings regarding public speaking (Al-Tamimi, 2014). Those students prefer to talk in public because they have been accustomed to this task in one of their courses given to them in the BA courses.

WTC in Terms of Types of Receivers

The findings, with regard to the three types of receivers (stranger, acquaintance, friend), interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, generated very good points. The results with regard to strangers indicated a moderate score. This implies that students in Yemen are very friendly and they are eager to talk in English with foreigners. They feel secure that foreigners will not laugh at them if they make some errors, and on assumptions quite contrary to those made going into the study, to talk willingly to their peers. The results also indicate that they were more willing to meet new people and learn new things. Therefore, they were more willing to communicate with strangers. The scores of the sub-groups (friends and acquaintance) showed that the students are quite unwilling to initiate communication with friends, but are willing to initiate a conversation in English with acquaintances. This also shows that students would rather talk in English to acquaintances than to friends. This implies that students might not feel embarrassed if they make mistakes in front of acquaintances because they don't know them.

Pedagogical Implications

Given that English is an important language in Yemen, it is hoped that the findings of this study will be beneficial for curriculum designers, teaching and learning a foreign language and teacher training programmes. These programmes should put emphasis on improving students' communication skills to equip students with ability to interact with people in different communication contexts and with different people.

Language is primarily speech and therefore, oral skills are basic to human life, as most of the information passes between people through oral means, either face to face or through the phone. In the classroom, the teacher speaks most of the class time and the students listen to him and understand, as a part of the teaching-learning process. Outside the classroom, the use of English is limited in an EFL situation, but not absent. Teachers should remember that speaking activities by the students should not be a mere repetition of what they speak in the class but communicative activities involving them. Students should often be given opportunities to initiate conversations in the class. The basic dictum is that speaking can be learned only through speaking.

However, in the preparatory classes, in the beginning, there can be a repetition of teacher's sentences and expressions till the students develop fairly good speaking habits in English. Most of the students fail to develop confidence and they are always afraid of making mistakes; that is why they hesitate to speak in English. One of the best ways of helping the students to get rid of this hesitation is to involve them in choral drills in the beginning classes and in group work in later classes. It is important that the teacher should see all the students participate in these activities and they use as much English as possible. At the same time, teachers should be patient and tolerate the students' errors, encourage them to speak without worrying about the errors, and correct their errors tactfully without hurting their feelings. Communication skills, being a productive skill, will take its time to emerge and researchers in second language acquisition advise us not to force the students to produce until they are ready. Nevertheless, it true that a lot of listening is important for speaking to emerge.

Future research

Future studies may approach the L2 WTC using a mixed-method design and form new views corresponding to pronunciation anxiety which can have an effect on students' WTC. For the future researchers, pronunciation anxiety is of a vital concern in EFL context and significantly in Republic of Yemen, as students feel embarrassed in talking in English if their pronunciation isn't that smart. Also, researchers ought to extend the scope of the study to incorporate alternative factors corresponding to personality traits with larger samples of participants from primary and secondary levels. Future analysis might investigate students' WTC not solely in oral communication but to other modes such as reading, and writing. For such studies, deep and large data should be collected using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the current study, teachers of English should try different methods to improve students' WTC at primary, secondary and university levels. A model class of small number of students will contribute in giving the students sufficient time for ample practice in oral skills of English inside the classroom. Providing students with this opportunity might encourage them and create situational WTC which, in turn, might also increase students' confidence in speaking the language. It is worth noting that communication skills are more difficult to develop than the other skills in an EFL situation because students have little opportunity to listen to and speak English except in classes and so it is the teacher's responsibility to create interest in the students to learn these skills. It is difficult but not impossible to develop these skills if the teacher is willing to do so. It is also important that the teacher's spoken English should be fairly good (it need not be like that of a native speaker). Finally, further studies are required to explore students' WTC in other skills such as reading, writing, and listening. These skills are to be taken into consideration by prospective researchers in the Yemeni context

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