The Relationship between EFL Learners’ Language Anxiety and their Willingness to Communicate

Neda Rahi Shahraki¹,², Seyyed Hassan Seyedrezaei³*

¹Department of English Language Teaching, Golestan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran
²Department of English Language Teaching, Gorgan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran
³Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

*Corresponding Author Email: teflsh@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Recently, the purpose of teaching has shifted from the mastery of structure to the ability to use the language for communicative purposes. This study examines the relationship between the foreign language anxiety (FLA) of Iranian EFL students with willingness to communicate (WTC) in relation to four language skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing at intermediate level. Data were collected from 60 participants who were learning English as a foreign language by the use of a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and an adapted version of Likert-type Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire. A series of descriptive statistics, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, and Pearson Correlation test were run to provide answers to the research questions. Results of this study revealed that the foreign language anxiety which was experienced by EFL learners differed in relation to language skills. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to try to see whether anxiety is a significant barrier to WTC, to find the source(s) of language anxiety, and to provide suggestions and strategies to help minimize anxiety to increase WTC in four language skills.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, Language Anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have confirmed that language anxiety has a negative effect on the performance of foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Moreover, anxiety has been considered as one of the most influential element of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) particularly in EFL contexts (Clement et al., 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2001). In this regard, by helping the students to reduce language anxiety and enhance a willingness to use the FL inside the classroom, the focal point of language teaching go away from only linguistic and structural competence to authentic communication. Willingness to communicate (WTC) model combine these variables to forecast L2 communication, and a few number of studies have tested the model with EFL students. To meet this end, the present study aims to investigate the effect of language anxiety on Iranian EFL learners WTC.

Communication is referred to a helpful instrument in order that one can positively or negatively influence other people and in this regard, interaction is regarded as the most important toll of communication among them. Additionally, it is though that learning inside classroom may bring about positive atmosphere which is fostering student involvement and in contrast reduce passivity (Sidlinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). The level of WTC among people is different.

Little research, if any, has investigated the relationship between foreign language anxieties and willingness to communicate in EFL context in Iran. Almost all researchers revealed that foreign language anxiety is a phenomenal issue and mainly a negative factor in language learning. The differences in foreign language learning situations and difference in basic causes for foreign language classroom anxiety require more research.
to be done to examine students’ anxiety levels, causes for and consequences of anxiety, and their relationships with WTC in various foreign language learning contexts.

Willingness to communicate has been emphasized a lot in the literature as an important factor in speaking (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). People differ in their communication behaviors. Some people are active participants, whereas others tend to speak only when spoken to; individuals tend to constantly verbalize with some interlocutors but remain silent with others. Language anxiety has been also considered as one of the main barriers for WTC.

There are also studies regarding anxiety in general and some with regard to language anxiety in particular. For instance, MacIntyre (2007) points out that language anxiety and motivation are vital factors in willingness to communicate in L2. Most of these studies only dealt with theoretical ideas regarding anxiety and willingness to communicate. Other studies also merely provided quantitative data on the topic that cannot be generalized. This study, however, actually filled the gap by making attempts to use a mixed method to elaborate on the relationship between language anxiety and willingness to communicate related to four language skills i.e. speaking, listening, writing and reading for the first time in EFL contexts as Iran in order to find the sources of anxiety of the skills and strategies to minimize them in such contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to try to see whether anxiety is a significant barrier to WTC, to find the source(s) of language anxiety, and to provide suggestions and strategies to help minimize anxiety to increase WTC in four language skills.

** METHODOLOGY **

This study combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches during the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. The quantitative part of the research targeted the statistical analysis of questionnaire results which described students’ opinion of their willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language and language anxiety. The qualitative aspect of the study was the qualitative analysis of data actually to expand and elaborate the quantitative results and to find sources of language anxiety influencing willingness to communicate (WTC) among EFL learners.

** Participants **

The participants of this study were 60 female language learners enrolling at intermediate English courses at Sama language institute in Aliabad-e Katoul, Iran. The participants were all from Iran. The participants’ age ranged from 18 to 25. They were studying English for a number of years. For the quantitative part of the study, the researcher applied random sampling to select the participants in which each of students in Sama Language institute at intermediate level had an equal and independent chance of being chosen. They were asked to fill out self-report questionnaires about the degree of foreign language anxiety they experienced during their English classes and their willingness to communicate in EFL contexts.

** Procedure and Instruments **

In order to come up with a suitable case for the study, the researcher administered two questionnaires given to each participant.

** WTC Questionnaire **

The present study used WTC scale with the total reliability of 0.87. It was adapted from MacIntyre et al (2001) to evaluate learners’ inclination toward coming or keeping away from the communication. Since this questionnaire had been considered for French students in Canada and presented in English that is the native language of the participants, certain modifications were made to be adapted for the current study carried out to tackle the learners’ willingness to communicate in their EFL class while being assigned the communicative tasks. The WTC questionnaire asked for students’ level of WTC related to four skills, in fact communication was not only seen as oral communication. In other words, communication is of two sides including oral (listening and speaking) and written (reading and writing) communications. It had 27 items based on four skill areas i.e. listening (5 items), speaking (8 items), reading (6 items), and writing (8 items).

It was in English. In this regard, a 5-point Likert scale was adopted to ask the students to rate their willingness to communicate as follows

1 = almost never willing
2 = sometimes willing
3 = willing half of the time
4 = usually willing
5 = almost always willing
Language anxiety Questionnaire

This research also used language anxiety scale with the reliability of 0.82. It was taken from Horwitz et al (1986) FLCAS (Foreign language classroom anxiety scale). This scale was intended to assess three components of anxiety involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Adding communication apprehension in this scale presupposes that the communication is taking place in a classroom setting, which may incite anxiety.

The second scale was FLCAS. To be consistent with the first scaling system, a 5-point Likert scale will be applied including
1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree
3= neutral, 4= agree and 5= strongly agree

The score is obtained by summing the responses for all 16 items. The items dealt with the students’ general English language anxiety in EFL classes. Some of the examples were given below.

- I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
- It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
- It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my reading class.

Before the study was carried out, reliability and validity of the instruments had been established. To do so, a pilot study was conducted. Three months before the study, the instruments were administered to 30 female students at the same institute. Cronbach’s alpha had been calculated for the instruments. The reliability coefficient ranges from 0 to 1. While 0 indicates that the whole measurement is error, 1 shows that the measurement totally lacks error.

Instrument validity is whether an instrument accurately measures what it is supposed to measure. Given that the researcher employed well-established instruments prepared by the experts in the field, the content validity was already established.

RESULTS

This study deals with the following two hypotheses:
1. Is there any relationship between the foreign language anxiety (FLA) of Iranian EFL students with willingness to communicate (WTC) in relation to 4 language skills?
2. What are the most effective sources of language anxiety influencing Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among EFL learners?

Descriptive statistics and correlation were used to analyze the data. KS test was used to check the normality of data. Then, a test of correlation was employed to test the first hypothesis. Finally, descriptive qualitative analyses were carried out to deal with the second null hypothesis.

The descriptive statistics of the WTC scale, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCA) was summarized in following Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>3.0796</td>
<td>0.06068</td>
<td>0.47001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>3.1009</td>
<td>0.04947</td>
<td>0.38319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table illustrated, for WTC scale the minimum of the scores was 2.11; the maximum of the scores was 4.63; the mean was 3.07; the standard deviation was .06. For foreign language anxiety, the minimum of the scores was 2.19; the maximum of the scores was 4.52; the mean was 3.1; the standard deviation was 0.04.

Tests of Normality of Data (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test)

Evaluating the normality of data is regarded as a prerequisite for many statistical tests since normal data is a primary assumption in parametric testing. In doing so, The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (Chakravart et al., 1967) was used to decide if the population under investigation is normal.
Table 2. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (K-S).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WTC</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal Parameters(^a)</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.0796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.47001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Differences</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>0.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>-0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</td>
<td>1.004</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.537</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Test distribution is Normal.

According to Table 2, the sig value for WTC and FLA reading were 0.26, 0.53. Since these values were more than α=1% (sig>α), it can be concluded that the data are distributed normally and therefore parametric tests can be employed for the present study.

**Pearson Correlation Test**

Since the variables were approximately normally distributed and the associations between the variables were linear, The Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test was used to measure the strength of a linear association between two variables. The output data by SPSS software followed as:

Table 3. Correlation between FLA and WTC in terms of language skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>WTC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLA Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.484(^*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed) -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>0.484(^*)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed) 0.000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\) Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Main Hypothesis**

H0: There is no relationship between the foreign language anxiety (FLA) of Iranian EFL students with willingness to communicate (WTC) in relation to 4 language skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing at intermediate level.

According to the above table, the degree of correlation between anxiety and WTC from language skills point of view was given. Based on the data represented in this table it can be seen that anxiety shows a significant and strong correlation with WTC at 99% confidence level (r = 0.48).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be said that there was a statistically significant relationship between learner anxiety and WTC of Iranian EFL learners, and the null hypothesis, that is, there was no statistically significant relationship between learner anxiety and WTC of Iranian EFL learners in relation to four language skills, was rejected.

Based on the obtained results and items, EFL learners suffer from language anxiety which is resulted from more than a few factors including not prepared for class; communication uneasiness with teachers, teachers’ questions, students’ perception of low ability in relation to their classmates. EFL learners language anxiety
sources consisted of being negatively judged by other learners, leaving unfavorable impressions on others, making verbal, pronunciation, grammar or spelling mistakes and disapproval by others in their different language skill.

The findings of the present research are in line with some researches in this area. In fact, those students who felt more foreign language anxiety in their English class demonstrated less willingness to communicate in English.

Williams and Andrade (2008) carried out a study between 243 Japanese students in 31 English conversation classes at four universities in Japan. They discovered that language anxiety was frequently related to the output and processing stages of the language learning process. Furthermore, they reached to the point that mostly students believed that the sources of anxieties associated with teachers and classmates. Also, Tabataba’ian (2012) examined the relationships among emotional intelligence, foreign language anxiety, and willingness to communicate. He found that, among other variables, there was a significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate. He even reached to the point that, like the method the current thesis employed, regression analysis indicated that foreign language anxiety and some of its subscales were predictors of willingness to communicate.

As for language institutes, the findings of this study can be applied by EFL institute to see the language anxiety and WTC of EFL learners in relation to language skills whilst making decision on their weak and strong points concerning speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In fact, the results of the study are significant for teaching staff. It is expected that enhancing awareness of the dynamics of foreign language anxiety help foreign language educators and researchers in dealing with students since they are in better position to help out learners to reduce their anxiety in the English classroom.

As for material developer, it is suggested that level of instruction and the related anxieties EFL learners may experience regarding four language skills be concerned when preparing and planning foreign language curricula and in class activities.

As for teachers, it is highly recommended that language teachers in institutes at first step are required to become conscious that their learners are mostly experiencing anxiety inside the classes. They should also comprehend that learning a foreign language particularly speaking and listening and somehow reading skill are also their primary struggle. Secondly, they should carry out some researches on the nature of the language anxieties of the learners, which differing from one student. Therefore, they can plan lessons and also organize activities that effectively cope with their language anxieties to develop their WTC in four language skills.

As a final point, simultaneous instruction of the four language skills from beginner levels and at the same time feeling that the acquisition of all of the skills is similarly important will enable students not to concentrate on only one aspect of communication i.e. speaking.

The current research has the typical limitations of similar researches i.e. a small sample size, gender and level of proficiency leading to lack of generalizability. It was not claimed that the implications come from these findings would be duplicated in another similar study, but if such a study were to be done, the comparisons would be a more contribution to this area of research.

In additional studies, classroom observations by the teacher and/or researcher, interviews with the participants’ past and present teachers, and a longitudinal investigation of the WTC of the participants during a semester or more interview events, would add validity to and rationale of the findings of this study.

Comparing the learners’ WTC in relation to anxiety regarding language skills inside and outside the classroom would be a motivating additional aspect. Also, investigating and comparing learners’ anxiety in different level of proficiency and gender would be helpful.

REFERENCES


