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*Corresponding author: Forough Rahimi, English Language Department, School of Allied Medical Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
E-mail: rahimi.forough@yahoo.com

Reviewing editor:
Xiaofei Lu, Pennsylvania State University, USA

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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Situational and individual factors engendering willingness to speak English in foreign language classrooms

Mohammad Javad Riasati¹ and Forough Rahimi^{2*}

Abstract: The present study is an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL learners' willingness to speak English in language classrooms, and the situational and individual factors that influence their willingness to speak. The study adopts a primarily quantitative approach, followed by qualitative data aimed at expanding and elaborating on the quantitative data. One hundred and fifty six EFL learners took part in the study. A researcher-made Willingness to Speak questionnaire was used to measure willingness to speak. To shed more light on learners' willingness to speak, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants in order to arrive at richer findings. Several factors were identified as having an influence on learners' willingness to speak, including topic of discussion, effect of interlocutor, shyness, self-confidence, teacher, and classroom atmosphere. Results can bring about pedagogical implications for language educators and curriculum developers.

Subjects: Higher Education; Classroom Practice; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: willingness to speak; situational factors; individual factors; foreign language classrooms; EFL learners

1. Introduction

The notion of willingness to communicate (WTC), which is actually the intention and desire to initiate communication, plays a key role in learning a second/foreign language (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Some researchers (e.g., MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 1998) have argued that a fundamental goal of L2 education should be the encouragement of willingness to communicate 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. It is quite clear that when being given an opportunity to use foreign language, some language learners prefer to speak up and express themselves, whereas others choose to remain silent. Why is it that some language learners—even after studying English for several years—do not voluntarily speak up in language classrooms? It is not a simple question to answer, particularly when one takes into account the various relevant

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mohammad Javad Riasati is a faculty member at Islamic Azad University Shiraz Branch. His area of interest is language education.

Forough Rahimi is a faculty member at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences and works within the domain of language teaching and learning, assessment and teacher education.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

When provided with the opportunity to speak in language classrooms, many language learners do not exhibit a high degree of willingness to speak. This has always been a thorny issue among language educators as the ultimate goal of language learning is for the learners to be able to speak the language. With this in mind, the researchers of the present study sought to investigate Iranian

individual, social, linguistic, situational, and other factors that may prevent one from speaking up (MacIntyre, 2007). This issue is undeniably important in the field of language pedagogy that it deserves to be delved into thoroughly. Therefore, understanding the factors that might increase or decrease language learners' opportunities and readiness to speak in language classrooms seems to be pertinent in today's context.

Given the paramount importance of communication in English, the "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC) model, developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) combines psychological, linguistic and communicative variables. The developers of the model aim at describing, explaining, and predicting second language communication. According to the WTC model, there are two types of factors that affect one's WTC in a second or foreign language, which is quite different from one's WTC in his/her native language. Enduring factors include the personality aspects of the language learner, the social situation in which he/she lives, intergroup attitudes between native speakers and second language groups, general self-confidence of the learner, and his/her motivation to learn English. Situational variables, on the other hand, are identified as one's desire to speak with a specific person, and the self-confidence that one feels in a specific situation. In the WTC model, it is hypothesized that all these social, affective, cognitive, and situational variables influence one's WTC in the second or foreign language, which in turn predict one's actual use of that language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The point that the developers of WTC model try to put across is that the most important goal of language pedagogy is to create WTC within individuals. They argued that after all, the ultimate goal of second/foreign language education should be to "engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness to communicate in them" (p. 547). Such being the case, it is essential to find out what factors affect their WTC. It is, therefore, crucial to find out what makes some learners willing to speak while others unwilling. Using MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model as a framework, the current study is expected to shed some light on this concern.

The bulk of studies reviewed in the literature have tackled WTC via self-report questionnaires mostly in general conversational settings. In fact, little attention has been given to examining situational and individual factors influencing willingness to speak in an educational setting like a language classroom environment. House (2004), for example, studies L2 learners' perception of factors that influence WTC in language classrooms. Using diaries and interviews, the researcher interviewed six language learners to explore their perceptions. Findings revealed a range of factors perceived by learners as having an impact on their WTC. Several respondents referred to their mood, or the way they felt on a particular day, as a crucial factor. Perceived speaking ability was also found to play a key role in the learners' WTC. Lack of actual opportunity to speak and lack of motivation were two other factors the interview respondents noted as influencing their WTC. In a similar study, Cao (2009) identified several factors having an impact on WTC. These factors included learners' perceived opportunity to communicate, personality, self-confidence, emotion, topic, task type, interlocutor, teacher, class interactional pattern, reliance on L1. It was found that these factors can either facilitate or prohibit students' WTC in class.

In a study of learners' perception of factors influencing WTC, Xie (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with four individuals to explore their perceptions. Findings revealed that a range of factors were perceived by learners as having an impact on their WTC. These factors include reasons for studying L2, personality, self-rated L2 proficiency, feelings toward the learning environment, motivation to learn L2, classroom anxiety, task type, and interest in foreign affairs. Given the dearth of research in this area, the role of environmental and individual factors in encouraging or discouraging willingness to speak among language learners warrants careful examination.

Some studies have investigated learners' perception of WTC. In a quantitative study, for example, Öz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015) investigated Turkish EFL learners' perception of WTC and its relationship with communication factors such as communication apprehension, self-perceived communication competence and affective factors such as integrativeness, attitudes toward the

learning situation, motivation, instrumental orientation and ideal L2 self. The participants were a group of EFL learners of a teacher education program at a major state university in Turkey. Results indicated that communication competence and communication apprehension strongly predicted WTC, whereas motivational factors were found to have an indirect effect on WTC. Aydin (2017), too, investigated the underlying factors of WTC among intermediate-level adult EFL learners. Nine factors were found to affect WTC the participants of the study. These factors are the teacher, the student, other students, class atmosphere, topic, materials, activities, and administration.

In one of the few studies conducted on WTC in Iranian EFL context, Khajavy, Ghonsooly, Hosseini Fatemi, and Choi (2016) examined WTC in English among Iranian EFL learners in the classroom context. Results of the SEM indicated that classroom environment was the strongest direct predictor of L2WTC; communication confidence directly affected WTC; motivation indirectly affected WTC through communication confidence; English language proficiency indirectly influenced WTC through communication confidence; and the classroom environment directly impacted attitudes, motivation, and communication confidence.

Previous research, however, suffers from a number of shortcomings. They have dealt with WTC in social situations rather than language classroom environment. They have dealt with WTC in its general term which refers to communication in both written and spoken forms. The present study is novel in the sense that it has addressed one form of communication, namely spoken; hence it is referred to as willingness to speak. Using mainly quantitative methodology, they have merely demonstrated the correlational relationships between WTC and its predictors. However, little effort has been devoted to examining contextual (environmental) and individual factors influencing such willingness in language classroom environments. In Iran EFL context, a large number of individuals are learning English as a foreign language, and this number is increasing day by day. As such, it is necessary for teachers to get to know what factors, both situational and individual, contribute to a low or high degree of willingness to speak among their students, with the goal to determine why some language learners with limited language proficiency are more active than those who are more competent. When armed with the knowledge of the factors that contribute to the learners' willingness to speak, teachers can be in a better position to take steps to create an environment that builds up learners' willingness to speak. Further, previous studies have ignored to provide practical techniques and strategies to promote such willingness. Such being the case, the present study has attempted to fill in such gaps. The present study thus seeks to answer the following research question:

To what extent do situational and individual factors influence Iranian EFL learners' willingness to speak English in language classrooms?

2. Method

The current study employs an explanatory design in which the researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data sequentially or in two phases. This design is perhaps the most common and popular design in educational research (Creswell, 2008). An explanatory design (also called a two-phase model; Creswell, 2003) consists of first gathering quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data in order to help expand and elaborate on the quantitative data. With this in mind, the present study adopts the explanatory design, in which the quantitative data (questionnaires) was collected first, followed by qualitative information (interview).

Willingness to speak was measured by a 27-item questionnaire that sought students' perception and degree of willingness to speak English in different situations in language classrooms. Having reviewed the related literature, the researcher could not find an appropriate instrument that could tackle the problem under investigation. The WTC questionnaires mostly used in literature all investigate the degree of individuals' WTC in different social situations, not only classroom setting (e.g., Cao, 2009; House, 2004; Xie, 2011). In other words, there does not exist a language-classroom-specific questionnaire to examine language learners' willingness to speak in classrooms.

Such being the case, by taking some items from different questionnaires, the researcher devised a questionnaire that specifically investigates language learners' willingness to speak in language classrooms. The questionnaire covered situations or tasks that the students were familiar with and had already experienced during class time.

For the quantitative part of the study, the required data were collected from 156 Iranian EFL learners. For the qualitative part, however, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven language learners who had already filled out the questionnaire. The interviews, in fact, intend to support the quantitative findings, and thus gain a better insight into the learners' feelings and attitudes toward their willingness to speak. The interviewees were asked to choose a pseudonym for the interviews.

Before the actual study, the questionnaire was administered to a group of 30 language learners randomly selected from among the population of the study. They were then excluded from the actual study. The feedback the researcher received from the participants of the pilot study as well as the information received during the process of validating the questionnaire with the panel experts helped the researcher make the necessary amendments to the questionnaire. Then the reliability of each questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach alpha through Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. The reliability index of the questionnaire was proved to be 0.93 which is highly reliable.

3. Results and Discussion

The question of the study seeks how willingness to speak English in language classrooms among Iranian EFL learners is affected by environmental and individual factors. The data were gathered through willingness to speak questionnaire that measures the learners' degree of willingness to speak in different situations, supplemented with an interview. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics to answer the research question. Table 1 illustrates the results.

As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents' mean on the willingness to speak questionnaire is 3.77, which is indicative of the fact that the respondents were willing (but not highly willing) to speak English in language classrooms. The questionnaire measured the learners' willingness to speak on a scale of 1 to 5 from definitely not willing to definitely willing. The mean achieved in the descriptive analysis of the data reveals that they were more than moderately willing to speak English in class. Item analysis of the questionnaire provides a better picture of learners' willingness to speak. Table 2 demonstrates the results of item analysis in ascending order.

The table starts with the items that show learners' least degree of willingness to speak and moves toward those that display learners' greater willingness. Starting from top of the table, one can see that the mean of item 17 (volunteer to speak individually in class) is the lowest (3.32), which means learners showed least degree of willingness to volunteer to speak individually in class, as compared to other items. On the contrary, the item in which students expressed the highest degree of willingness is item 16 (Speaking about a topic I am interested in), whose mean is 4.45. The following is a thorough description of the main results of the data.

3.1 Task type

Several items in the willingness to speak questionnaire address the issue of task type. Three items concerned learners' degree of willingness to speak individually in class, speaking in pairs, and speaking in groups. Descriptive statistics of the data show that learners showed less

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of willingness to speak

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Willingness to Speak	156	1.41	4.96	3.77	.06

Table 2. Learners' degree of willingness to speak

No.	Willingness to speak	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
17	Volunteering to speak individually in class.	6.4	11.5	39.1	29.5	13.5	3.32	1.05
9	Presenting a lecture in front of class.	7.1	15.4	30.1	29.5	17.9	3.35	1.15
20	Speaking when I am sitting in the back of the classroom.	6.4	10.3	32.1	34.6	16.7	3.44	1.08
26	Discussing a topic with my teacher when (s) he has a different view.	6.4	15.4	25.6	31.4	21.2	3.45	1.17
10	Trying to talk than listen during a conversation.	3.8	12.8	30.1	39.7	13.5	3.46	1
1	Volunteering to answer when teacher asks a question.	5.8	12.2	27.6	31.4	23.1	3.54	1.15
2	Talking in large groups.	3.2	13.5	29.5	30.1	23.7	3.58	1.09
25	Speaking when no one else is speaking.	3.2	12.8	25.0	37.8	21.2	3.61	1.05
21	Speaking when I am sitting in front of the classroom.	2.6	10.9	32.1	30.8	23.7	3.62	1.04
12	Speaking to a classmate who is of the opposite sex.	3.2	9.0	29.5	32.7	25.6	3.68	1.05
14	Speaking to a classmate who is younger than me.	3.8	5.8	31.4	35.9	23.1	3.68	1.01
8	Helping other classmates answer a question.	3.2	11.5	23.7	35.9	25.6	3.69	1.07
7	Volunteering to participate in class discussions.	3.2	12.2	26.3	28.2	30.1	3.7	1.12
19	Discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different.	.6	10.3	25.6	42.9	20.5	3.72	.92
5	Asking a question in class.	1.9	14.1	23.1	30.8	30.1	3.73	1.09
6	Presenting my opinions in class.	2.6	7.7	26.3	39.7	23.7	3.74	.98
11	Speaking to a classmate who is of the same sex.	3.8	7.7	25.0	34.6	28.8	3.76	1.07
23	Speaking about a controversial topic.	.6	5.1	32.7	37.8	23.7	3.78	.89
22	Speaking when I know my speaking will be graded.	1.9	12.8	18.6	36.5	30.1	3.8	1.06
13	Speaking to a classmate who is older than me.	1.9	3.8	30.1	39.7	24.4	3.8	.91
3	Talking in small groups.	0	11.5	17.3	35.3	35.9	3.96	.99
18	Speaking about a topic when I am prepared.	1.3	5.8	16.0	32.7	44.2	4.12	.96

(Continued)

Table2. (Continued)

No.	Willingness to speak	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
4	Talking in pairs.	2.6	5.1	12.8	32.7	46.8	4.16	1
24	Speaking about a topic that I am comfortable with.	1.3	3.8	13.5	37.2	44.2	4.19	.9
27	Speaking when I am sure that my answer is correct.	1.3	7.1	10.9	28.2	52.6	4.23	.99
15	Speaking about a topic I am familiar with.	1.3	3.2	10.9	35.3	49.4	4.28	.87
16	Speaking about a topic I am interested in.	1.9	1.9	4.5	32.1	59.6	4.45	.82
	Total						3.77	.06

1: Definitely not willing; 2: Not willing; 3: Moderately willing; 4: Willing; 5: Definitely willing

willingness to speak individually in class; however, when it comes to talking in groups (either small or large) or in pairs, they are more willing. As the table shows, the means of item 2 (talk in large groups), item 3 (talk in small groups), and item 4 (talk in pairs) are higher than that of item 17 (volunteer to speak individually in class). A comparison of talking in groups (both small and large) and talking in pairs shows that the mean of talking in large groups (3.58) is less than those of talking in small groups and in pairs (3.96 and 4.16 respectively). This indicates that students are more willing to speak when they are in pairs or small groups rather than large ones. In line with this, item 9 asks students to express their degree of willingness in terms of giving a lecture in front of class. Students showed less degree of willingness in giving a lecture in front of class, in comparison with other items and other situations. This indicates that learners are not highly willing to present a lecture in front of class where everybody is watching them closely.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews shed more light into this issue. Most of the respondents (5 out of 7) support the argument that the type of speaking tasks they are expected to carry out (speaking individually, in pairs, or groups) plays a crucial role in their degree of willingness to speak. Anahita, for example, is more willing to speak in pairs and groups because she feels more comfortable doing so rather than speaking individually while everybody is listening.

I prefer to speak with one of my classmates because I have less stress. I'm more comfortable, but if I want to speak individually I get anxious because I feel everybody is listening to me.

When asked to express their degree of willingness to present a lecture in front of class, nearly all the respondents (6 out of 7) expressed low willingness to perform such an activity. Instead, they preferred to give a lecture to their classmates in pairs or groups rather in front of the class.

The first item of the willingness to speak questionnaire asks the respondents to express their degree of willingness to volunteer to answer when their teacher asks a question. The mean of this item is 3.54, which is relatively low in comparison with other items. In contrast, when it comes to volunteer to participate in classroom discussion (item 7), students show more willingness to speak ($\bar{x} = 3.7$). Similarly, Item 25 asks students to express their willingness to speak when no one else is speaking. The mean of this item is 3.61, which, similar to item 1, is relatively low. With respect to asking a question in class (item 5) and presenting their opinions in class (item 6) and helping other students answer a question (item 8), students display similar degree of willingness. The mean of these three items is 3.73, 3.74, and 3.69 respectively.

To shed more light into this issue, interview respondents were also required to express their degree of willingness to volunteer to answer a question or participating in a discussion which has already started. The purpose was to see if individuals are more willing to be the initiator of a discussion or take part in a discussion. The majority of the individuals who were interviewed (five out of seven) expressed more willingness to be involved in a discussion rather than voluntarily answering a question and hence starting a class discussion.

Cetinkaya (2005) showed that the individuals in his study preferred to speak in dyads or groups rather than speaking individually in front of a large group of people. Cao and Philp (2006), too, contend that running a pair or group work in class gives individuals greater opportunity to speak than in the case of speaking individually. The participants in their study reported that they were more willing to speak in groups with a small number of participants, ideally three or four members, since they have the opportunity to help each other and learn from each other. Similarly, the participants in Fushino's (2008) study expressed relatively high degree of willingness to speak during group work activities.

3.2 Seating location

Items 20 and 21 requested students to express their degree of willingness to speak when they are sitting in front of classroom as compared to sitting at the back of the classroom. The mean of item 20 (Speaking when I am sitting in the back of the classroom) is 3.44 while that of item 21 (Speaking when I am sitting in front of the classroom) is 3.62. This means that students are more willing to speak when they are sitting in front of the classroom.

During the interviews, respondents were asked to express their opinion as whether they are more willing to speak when they sit in front or at the back of the classroom. This was labeled as seating location as a category emerging from interview data. The majority of the interviewees (five out of seven) were more willing to speak when sitting in front of the classroom for different reasons. To Azadeh, sitting in front of the classroom is more beneficial than sitting at the back. She prefers to sit in front of the class because she thinks she can be observed more easily by everybody.

... when I sit in front I feel that I'm more involved and I feel that all persons expect me to speak when they see me more than a person who is sitting in the back because they don't see him a lot.

3.3 Topic of discussion and interlocutor

Two items in the questionnaire (items 19 and 26) asked respondents to express their willingness to speak with their classmates or their teacher when they have different opinions. The mean of item 19 (discussing a topic with my friends when our opinions are different) is 3.72, which is lower than that of item 26 (discussing a topic with my teacher when he or she has a different opinion), which is 3.45. This is indicative of the fact that the respondents are more willing to discuss a topic with their classmates when they think differently.

In the interviews, students were asked to express their willingness to speak with their teacher or their classmates when they have different opinions on a certain topic. Of the seven individuals who were interviewed, three expressed more willingness to speak with their teacher in such a situation. Azadeh, for example, sees the teacher as an authority and thus is more willing to discuss the topic with her teacher since the teacher is a more reliable source of information from whom she can learn better.

... I prefer to discuss with my teacher because I think the teacher can improve me and the teacher can find my mistakes and correct my mistakes, so I can learn more from my teacher than the students. If I talk to students, they may give me wrong information and I learn those wrong information. But when I talk to the teacher, then I can be sure everything is right.

3.4 Fear of negative evaluation

Item 22 of the questionnaire requires the respondents to evaluate their degree of willingness to speak when they know their speaking is graded. The mean of this item is 3.8. More than 33% of the respondents are unwilling to speak or moderately willing to speak when they are aware that their speaking will be graded.

Qualitative interviews helped expand this issue. In terms of the learners' willingness to speak when they know their speaking is graded, the individuals expressed different views. Azadeh, for example, is among those respondents who believed that the score she receives can be a good measure of one's speaking ability and thus she is willing to be evaluated by the teacher while speaking.

Yes of course because I want to evaluate myself... to check myself... of course I'm sometimes scared of the score but I like to know how is my speaking. If I don't receive score, how can I know if my speaking is better than before?

To support such findings, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (2001) managed to show that learners' WTC decreases if they know they are being formally evaluated. The Iranian EFL learners in Jamshidnejad's (2010) study, too, reported that they are over-concerned with making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by others, and that the fear of making mistakes increases the chance of losing one's face.

3.5 Fear of correctness of speech

However, in item 27 (speaking when I am sure that my answer is correct), the mean is higher (4.23) which shows learners are more willing to speak when they are confident of the correctness of their response rather than the time they know their speaking is being graded by their teacher. Above 80% of the respondents expressed their willingness to speak when they are sure that their answer is correct.

Interview respondents were required to express the extent to which they are willing to speak if they are sure their speech is correct. Most of the interviewees (five out of seven) believed that accuracy is important to them and that if they are sure of the accuracy of what they want to express, they would be more willing to speak. Anahita, for example, believes that she is more willing to speak when she is sure what she wants to say is correct. For this reason, she prefers to think about her speech, organize her thoughts and then express her ideas.

I always think about my sentences, plan them in mind carefully, pay attention to their grammar, and then speak. This way I can speak better.

The participants in Sun's (2008) study, too, showed little degree of WTC as a result of being too much rule-driven in their speech, which, as the researcher notes, lead to lack of fluency and a decrease in their willingness to verbally communicate.

3.6 Effect of topic of discussion

Five items in the questionnaire (items 15, 16, 18, 23, and 24) discuss the issue of the influence of the topic of discussion on the learners' degree of willingness to speak. Item 15 concerns topic familiarity and asks the respondents to express their willingness when they discuss a topic they are familiar with. This item receives a high mean value of 4.28, which indicates that learners are most willing to speak about a topic they have familiarity with. Similarly, item 16, which has the highest mean value (4.45), addresses the issue of topic interest. The learners seem to have the greatest degree of willingness to speak about a topic they are interested in.

This issue of the influence of topic on willingness to speak was expanded in the interviews. To Azadeh, the topic under discussion is very important and she is more willing to discuss topics related to her major—psychology, since she has more information in this regard.

... The topic is very important. For example, I would like to speak about psychological subjects because I know about that. I have already read about that a lot.

Topic familiarity is equally important to others individuals who took part in the interview. They unanimously believe that this factor significantly influences their degree of willingness to speak, and that when they benefit from ample knowledge and information concerning a particular topic, they would be more willing to speak about it.

Another major characteristic of topic that the respondents refer to is topic interest. They unanimously believe that the more interested they are in a certain topic, the more willingness they would display to speak about it.

Being prepared to speak about a certain topic is the issue addressed by item 18 in the questionnaire. This item, too, receives a rather high mean value of 4.12. Around 77% of the respondents are

most willing to discuss a topic when they are prepared to talk about. The interview respondents noted topic preparation as an important factor influencing their degree of willingness to speak.

Item 23 (speaking about a controversial topic) is the item with a relatively lower mean value (3.78), as compared to other items in this regard, which indicated learners' less degree of willingness to speak, comparing with the case they are familiar with or interested in a certain topic. The last item in this category is item 24, which requires the respondents to express their degree of willingness to speak about a topic they are comfortable with. The mean value of this item is 4.19, which is higher than the case of item 23.

This issue is also addressed in the interviews. The interviewees express their willingness to discuss a topic they can have a thorough discussion about with their partners or their teacher. Poorya, for example argues that:

I like to discuss topics that I can speak about it for a long time with other classmates, such as marriage, education, social problems, etc.

Finally, respondents believe that they are more willing to discuss a topic that they are more comfortable with. They believe that some topics are not socially or culturally appropriate to discuss, and thus they are not comfortable to discuss them.

With regard to topic familiarity, which is manifest in Layer IV of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model, participants of the study argued that they were more willing to discuss a topic they are more familiar with and about which they have some background knowledge, since it is a factor that motivates them to discuss the topic. In Nagy and Nikolov (2007), students noted topic of discussion as a major factor that made them unwilling to speak English, either because they did not know anything about the issue, or they did not have any opinion about the topic or did not understand the topic. Moreover, 17 percent of the participants in Woodrow's (2006) study referred to topic of discussion as an influential factor that made them reticent in class.

3.7 Interlocutor effect

Another category the researcher arrived at was the effect of interlocutor on the learners' degree of willingness to speak. In this respect, four factors were mentioned by the interview respondents as influencing their willingness to speak: familiarity with interlocutor, interlocutor participation, sex and age of the interlocutor. These four factors were categorized under interlocutor effect. These four factors are discussed below.

Familiarity with interlocutor

Familiarity with the interlocutor is one important factor that some of the respondents referred to. Among the respondents, four stressed the importance of this factor in making them willing or unwilling to speak in class. They expressed more willingness to speak with a person whom they know well and hence they are more comfortable with.

Interlocutor participation

Interlocutor participation was also noted by three of the learners as having an impact on their degree of willingness to speak. Mary, for example, regarded her interlocutor's degree of participation and performance as a motive for her to contribute to the discussion.

If I talk to a person who is motivated to speak, I also get motivated to participate in the discussion. But if I talk to a person who prefers to talk less and listen all the time, I lose my motivation to speak.

Sex of interlocutor

Items 11 and 12 address the issue of the sex of the interlocutor. They get the students to show their level of willingness to speak with somebody who is of opposite sex or somebody who is of the same sex as them. The mean of item 12 (speaking to a classmate who is of the opposite sex) is 3.68, while that of item 11 (speaking to a classmate who is of the same sex) is 3.76. This proves that the sex of interlocutor is relatively important to the students and they prefer to talk to somebody who is of their sex rather than somebody who is of the opposite sex.

During the interviews, the respondents were asked to state whether they are more willing to speak with a person of their sex or a person of the opposite sex. Of the seven students who were interviewed, three stated they were more willing to speak with a person of their sex, two individuals expressed their willingness to speak with a person of the opposite sex, while the other students believed that sex of the interlocutor does not matter.

Age of interlocutor. Items 13 and 14 deal with the age of the interlocutor. These two items ask the respondents to express their degree of willingness to speak with a person who is older or younger than them. Results show that the mean of item 13 (speak to a classmate who is older than me) is 3.8, while the mean of item 14 (speak to a classmate who is younger than me) is 3.68. The mean difference shows that students are somewhat more willing to speak with a classmate who is older than them. In fact, 59% of the individuals expressed their willingness to speak with a classmate who is younger than them, while more than 64% of them preferred to speak with an older classmate.

Interview results clarified the effect of the age of the interlocutor on the learners' degree of willingness to speak English in class. Students were asked to express their degree of willingness to speak with a person who is younger or older than them. Among the seven individuals who were interviewed, two expressed a neutral belief in this regard, two felt to be more willing to speak with a younger person, and the other three were more willing to speak with an older interlocutor.

The important role of the interlocutors' characteristics such as age and gender in one's willingness to speak is supported by Jamshidnejad (2010) who argues that the presence of an opposite sex and age in a conversation may motivate the learner to maintain an acceptable level of accuracy probably in order to demonstrate one's higher proficiency level.

3.8 Students' personal characteristics

Another factor that the respondents described as contributing to their degree of willingness to speak is their personal characteristics and their personality. Four of the respondents unanimously describe this factor as an important contributor to their degree of willingness to speak. To Azadeh, one reason why some students are more willing to speak than others is personality.

Another important factor, I think, is the students' personality. Some students are shy by nature and prefer to be silent, but some others are very active and like to talk all the time.

Another reason she notes is the learners' lack of self-confidence and the lack of trust in their speaking ability.

I also think some students do not have enough self-confidence and they think their English and their speaking is not good enough, so they are afraid of speaking.

Mac refers to personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their self-confidence as two most important factors that influence learners' willingness to speak. Parisa mentions learners' shyness, self-confidence, and their self-rated speaking ability as two important factors in this regard.

Probably one factor is shyness. Or because some students do not have enough self-confidence to speak or they think their speaking is not good and that they are weak, so they prefer to be silent.

This can be enough evidence to confirm that self-confidence, which is identified as a combination of perceived communication competence and lack of anxiety by previous research (Baker and MacIntyre, 2003; Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2003, 2001; Yashima, 2002) is perceived by the respondents in the present study as a determining factor in their willingness to speak. Consistent with the findings of the present study is Tong (2010) who attributed the students' reticence to their shyness and lack of self-confidence. Similarly, the participants in Zeng's (2010) study expresses personality and shyness as reasons that hindered their WTC.

3.9 Perceived speaking ability

Another factor some of the learners noted as contributing to their willingness to speak is their perception of their speaking ability. The respondents argued that they were not very satisfied with their current speaking ability, and that this is a factor that discourages them to speak in class. Such finding is in keeping with Chu (2008) who finds out that the higher a person perceives his or her ability to communicate, the more willing to speak he or she will be. One again, as stated earlier and as shown by previous research (e.g. Cetinkaya, 2005; Hashimoto, 2002; Kim, 2004), individuals who have a higher perception of their abilities experience less degree of anxiety and benefit from more self-confidence.

3.10 Teacher's role

Another factor the respondents described as influencing their degree of willingness is the teacher and the role he/she plays in the classroom. The interviewees contend that the vital role the teacher plays in making learners willing or unwilling to speak cannot be neglected. Azadeh believes an effective teacher needs to pay equal attention to all the students in class and motivate them all to speak.

I think one of the most important things that a teacher can do is encouragement. When the teacher encourages all the students, not only some special students, I think it's a very good strategy to motivate all students to speak.

More recent research (e.g. Cao, 2009; Sun, 2008; Tong, 2010; Zeng, 2010), too, confirm the findings of the present study and acknowledge the important role of teacher in facilitating or inhibiting learners' participation.

3.11 Classroom atmosphere

Another important factor that is evident in the respondents' interviews is the atmosphere of the classroom, which makes them willing or unwilling to speak. Four of the respondents consider the class atmosphere as an important factor contributing to their degree of willingness to speak. Respondents contend that they feel more willing to speak in a stress-free environment where there is a friendly rapport between the teacher and the students. Some related remarks are as follows.

If the environment of class is relaxed and I feel comfortable in the class, I will be more willing to speak. (Azadeh)

Zeng (2010), too, contends that learners' degree of participation increases as a result of the relaxing environment in which they learn and the degree of familiarity with it.

3.12 Perceived speaking opportunity

Another factor the interview respondents refer to as having an impact on their degree of willingness to speak is the degree of speaking opportunity they have to speak. The respondents complain that in some cases, they are not given enough opportunities by the teacher to practice

Table 3. Factors influencing willingness to speak

Factors influencing willingness to Speak	N/7
Task type	5
Topic familiarity	4
Topic interest	3
Topic preparation	5
Challenging topic	3
Topic comfort	3
Sex of interlocutor	5
Age of interlocutor	4
Familiarity with interlocutor	3
Degree of interlocutor participation	4
Fear of negative evaluation	4
Fear of correctness of speech	5
Personality (Shyness)	4
Self-confidence	4
Perceived speaking ability	4
Teacher's role	4
Classroom atmosphere	4
Perceived speaking opportunity	4
Seating Location	5

their speaking, and that this is a major factor that makes them unwilling to speak. Four of the respondents attribute their lack of willingness to speak to lack of opportunities. Previous research (Cao, 2009; Cao & Philp, 2006; House, 2004) acknowledge the important role of speaking opportunities in making learners willing to speak in classes.

In summary, based on the findings of the study, a number of factors were found to have an impact on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to speak in English classes. Table 3 illustrates such factors and the number of interview participants who noted each factor in the interviews.

As MacIntyre et al. (2001) put it, it is really necessary to delineate factors that contribute to WTC. Having analyzed the quantitative data of the study, complemented with the qualitative interviewing, the researcher of the present study identified a number of contributing factors.

4. Conclusion and Implications

Findings revealed a number of factors that influence willingness to speak. The factors that were identified as having an impact on their willingness to speak are divided into two larger categories, that is environmental (situational) factors and individual factors, as illustrated in the model above. The environmental factors include factors that exist in the classroom environment and influence the learners' degree of willingness to speak. These include task type, topic, interlocutor, teacher, classroom atmosphere, and seating arrangement. The individual factors, on the other hand, refer to the individuals' personal characteristics and include learners' personality, self-confidence, the degree of opportunity they have in language classes, fear of evaluation, and fear of correctness of their speech. It was shown that these factors influence learners' willingness to speak English in language classrooms. Finally, when a higher degree of willingness to speak is observed among language learners, students tend to participate more actively in classroom activities and discussions (Cao, 2009).

The current study is an initial attempt to examine WTS construct among Iranian EFL learners in a language classroom. Thus, it can contribute to the conceptualization of WTS construct in Iranian EFL setting and inform language educators of the causes of diversity in WTS among Iranian EFL learners. Language practitioners should recognize the fact that willingness to speak is an important factor that deserves more attention and consideration. Without creating willingness to speak among learners, the efforts teachers make in producing autonomous learners would be all in vain. As MacIntyre et al. (1998) put it, an important goal of language education should be creating WTC, and that “a program that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed program” (p.547).

As willingness to speak is shown to be a predictor of better speaking performance, it seems necessary for language teachers to identify the possible ways through which learners’ degree of WTC can be enhanced. The results of the study suggest that willingness to speak is influenced by several factors. Thus, teachers should not attribute students’ reticence to one single factor such as personality or shyness. They need to be aware of the factors that could encourage or discourage communication among learners. Therefore, it is really necessary for language teachers to promote factors that facilitate communication and remove those that hinder communication. They should also be mindful of the interactions between variables while planning learning activities (Cao & Philp, 2006).

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Author details

Mohammad Javad Riasati¹

E-mail: mjriasati2002@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1737-6501>

Forough Rahimi²

E-mail: rahimi.forough@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4735-7176>

¹ Department of English Language, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran.

² English Language Department, School of Allied Medical Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

Author statement

The authors of the present study have been involved in language teaching for more than a decade. They have been interested in such areas of research as language learning, language teaching, teaching language skills and components, as well as individual differences in language learning. With this research interests in mind, the authors of the current study intended to figure out why some language learners in a certain language classroom are more willing than some others to take part in class discussions and activities. This great concern prompted them to carry out the present study, hoping that the findings would have pedagogical implications for language learners, teachers, and in a wider scope language educators and practitioners.

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