

The Psychological and Environmental Aspects Impacting the Willingness to Communicate in Foreign Language Acquisition

الجوانب النفسية والمحيطية المؤثرة في الرغبة على التواصل في اكتساب اللغة الأجنبية

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Abstract (English):

The achievement of successful language acquisition can be determined by the ability of learners to communicate effectively and accurately in real life situations. Yet, many language learners prefer to remain silent rather than speak when given the chance to express themselves, even if they have good language competence. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the extent to which psychological and environmental factors affect learners' speaking ability and their willingness to communicate (WTC). To this end, field study was conducted in the English department at the University of Tlemcen, in which data were gathered from 53 second-year students and 4 teachers of English. The research instruments consist of questionnaires for students and a semi-structured interview with teachers. Results revealed that psychological and environmental factors have an impact on the willingness to communicate in learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: Environmental factors; Psychological factors; willingness to communicate.

ملخص باللغة العربية

يرتكز اكتساب اللغة على قدرة المتعلمين على التواصل بدقة وفعالية، في حين توجد فئة من المتعلمين ليس لهم القدرة على التعبير عن أفكارهم عندما تتاح لهم فرصة للحديث عنها، مع العلم أنهم يتمتعون بإمكانيات لغوية جيدة. ولهذا سعت هذه الدراسة للكشف عن مدى تأثير العوامل النفسية والمحيطية على الرغبة في التواصل للمتعلم، ومدى قدرته على استعمال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وعلى هذا الأساس تم إجراء دراسة ميدانية بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة تلمسان باستخدام استبيان موزع على 53 طالب بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، وإجراء مقابلة مع 4 أساتذة من نفس القسم، حيث كشفت النتائج على أن للعوامل النفسية والمحيطية تأثير في الرغبة على التواصل في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

كلمات مفتاحية: العوامل النفسية: العوامل المحيطية: الرغبة في التواصل.

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1- Introduction

The communication aspect of teaching languages has gotten increased attention with the introduction of the communicative language teaching (CLT) method. As a result, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) established the idea of language learners' willingness to communicate in the target language, which indicates the psychological readiness to communicate successfully in the second language. This notion has become more important in second language teaching and learning research.

One of the primary goals of studying foreign languages is to use the target language. Yet, not all language learners can speak smoothly and properly. As a case in point, some students stand up and express themselves when they have the chance to use the language, but others choose to keep silent even if they have good language competence. Therefore, learners' hesitation to talk is the biggest dysfunctional behaviour in foreign language acquisition that deserves to be addressed in order to help them overcome this hindrance and subsequently enhance their oral performance.

The present study seeks to explore the extent to which English learners' willingness to communicate influences their speaking abilities, as well as to provide insight on the psychological and linguistic variables that cause students to avoid using English in the English contexts. The work is guided by research questions, including the following:

1. Does willingness to communicate have an effect on EFL learners' speaking ability?
2. To what extent do personality traits influence English learners' willingness to communicate?

Based on prior studies and researcher's personal experiences the following hypotheses were established to answer the aforementioned research questions:

1. Willingness to communicate has a paramount influence on EFL learners' speaking skill.
2. Personality traits may affect the students' willingness to communicate in different types of communicative situations and with various types of interlocutors.

2- THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

2-1 An Outlook on Speaking Skill

Effective communication depends on individuals' speaking skills since it molds, alters, expands, and organises ideas. Speaking, along with listening, reading, and writing, is one of the four language skills. It is the technique through which learners interact with others in order to attain certain goals or to convey their thoughts, intentions, hopes, and points of view. Speaking is, in fact, the most often employed language skill. In this vein, Rivers (1981) believes that speech is employed twice as frequently as reading and writing in human communication.

On her side, Florez (1999, 98) defines speaking as *"an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information"*. Speaking, therefore, is part of reciprocal exchange in which both reception and production play a part.

2-2 Communication in Foreign Languages

It is widely recognized that communication is fundamental for the development of human relationships (Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1991). In this respect, Mac Croskey and Richmond (1987, as cited in Mohseni & Niknejad, 2013) believe that one of the dysfunctional behaviours in society is the inability or unwillingness to interact with people. Regarding the significant role of communication in second and Foreign language acquisition, MacIntyre and Charos (1996, 3) postulate that:

Communication and second language acquisition are closely tied together. On one hand, recent trends toward a conversational approach to second language pedagogy reflect the belief that one must use the language to develop proficiency, that is, one must talk to learn. On the other hand, communication is more than a means of facilitating language learning, it is an important goal in itself.

It is a truism to assert that the more second/foreign language input learners get, the better their competence will be. According to research and theory on second and foreign language acquisition, students' linguistic progress is connected to the time spent with the language in meaningful exposure to it, referred to as "comprehensible input" by Krashen (1985). Communication opportunities are also seen as vital in building oral proficiency. Opportunities to communicate are also viewed as important in developing oral proficiency. Met and Rhodes (1990, 438) note that *"Both research and experiential data suggest that the amount of time spent on language learning and the intensity of the experience have significant effects on the acquisition of significant levels of foreign language proficiency"*.

Based on the aforementioned, many educators concur that students need to communicate using the target language in order to practice it. In this respect, they should be able to monitor different aspects of language, including comprehension, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and especially being linguistically competent, fluent, and accurate.

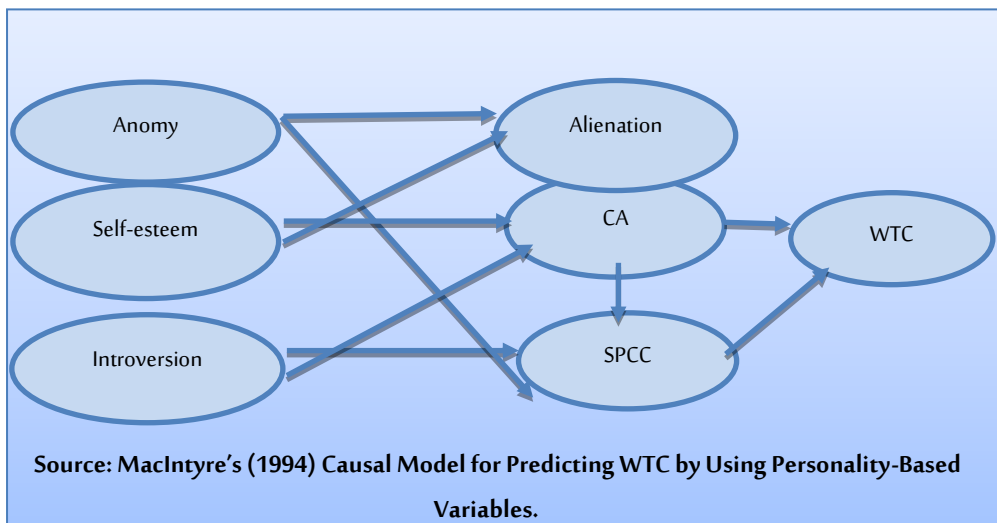
2-3 Willingness to Communicate

The concept of willingness to communicate (henceforth,WTC) has been a popular area of study among academics in linguistics, psychology, sociology and other domains. It brings together several aspects that explain why learners engage or do not engage in target language communication (Reinders, 2016). More precisely, WTC construct was introduced to research in second and foreign languages in light of the fact that many language learners avoid communication even though they are linguistically proficient, while others, even with limited linguistic competence, actively seek out opportunities to use their L2/FL. (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998).

WTC can be defined as *"the intension to speak or to remain silent , given free choice"* (McIntyre, 2007). In the same line of thought, McCroskey (1997, 77) perceives WTC as *"an individual's predisposition to initiate communication with others"*.

The literature identified several factors that have direct or indirect influence on WTC, mainly perceived communication competence, anxiety, attitude, motivation, social support, personality, content and context. (Bukhari et al., 2015). In this context, MacIntyre (1994) proposed a model, in which he identifies variables such as anomie, alienation, self-esteem, introversion, communicative apprehension, and self-perceived communication competence. He views these variables as

predictors of the WTC concept. He discovered that the only two immediate factors influencing a person's WTC were communication apprehension and self-perceived communication. In order to explain this, he hypothesizes in his model that higher levels of WTC are based on a combination of better perceived communicative ability and a lack of communication apprehension. In addition, this model also illustrates the role of personality factors.



2-4 WTC in Second/Foreign Languages

Early in the 1990s, WTC research began to attract researchers' attention in the field of L2 under the general heading of individual differences research. According to MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998), the issue is more complicated when L2 is involved since one's competence level, and particularly their degree of L2 communication skill, is a further potent modifying factor. Accordingly, L2 WTC was described as *"a ready to participate into conversation at a certain moment with a specific person or individuals, using L2"* by MacIntyre et al. (1998, 547).

Due to the vast differences in L2 users' communicative competence and social aspects impacting L2 usage, and considering WTC in a second or foreign language environment needed a more generic and multidimensional term (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Cao & Philip, 2006), WTC in a FL may therefore be viewed as an expression of a variety of distinct characteristics, including linguistic, communicative, and socio-psychological aspects, rather than just a basic reflection of the person's personality.

WTC may be raised by implementing broad patterns of communicative language instruction, including content-based or immersion techniques. According to McIntyre and Wang (2021), these approaches are likely to increase learners' WTC as well as their perceptions of their communication

skills. Furthermore, WTC appears to have a significant role in language learning, as more engagement leads to greater language acquisition (Kang, 2005).

3- Methods (14 G)

3-1 Sample Population

This study targeted second-year English students as well as teachers of oral production in the English department at the University of Tlemcen (Algeria). The study included 53 undergraduate English students with an average age of 20 years. They were 39 (73%) female and 14 (26%) male participants. The researcher used cluster random sampling to select the students participating in the research. As for teachers, four were randomly selected, taking charge of the oral production module for second-year students to conduct a semi-structured interview. Their experience in teaching English ranged from 3 to 15 years. Two of them were males, and two were females, whose ages ranged from 30 to 40.

3-2 Research Procedure

This study sought information from both students and teachers. The questionnaire attempted to determine what influences students' WTC, and how it affects their speaking skills. In other words, investigate the internal and external factors that trigger or hamper EFL learners from practicing their speaking skills. The questionnaire was composed of 16 items developed by the researcher and was designed to investigate the psychological and linguistic aspects that are likely to influence students' communicative behaviour in the classroom. Accordingly, respondents were asked to rate their degree of agreement with the statements that were based on a five-point Likert scale. It must be noted that the questionnaire was piloted prior to the study, and modifications were made in response to the comments of the participants in the pilot study.

The semi-structured interview was developed to understand how the teacher influences students' willingness to speak, identify the many contributing elements, and find out potential solutions to help students overcome their reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms.

4- Results

The analysis of the collected data in this study was guided by a number of statements essentially connected to five main rubrics, each of which had a distinct goal, such as the attitudes towards English, the relationship with the interlocutors, task type, personality and the impact of teacher.

1. Learners Attitude towards the English Language in EFL Classroom:

It was evident, as shown in Figure (2), that the majority of participants confirmed that they have a strong tendency to learn the language. Nevertheless, most of them are not really satisfied with their speaking skills.

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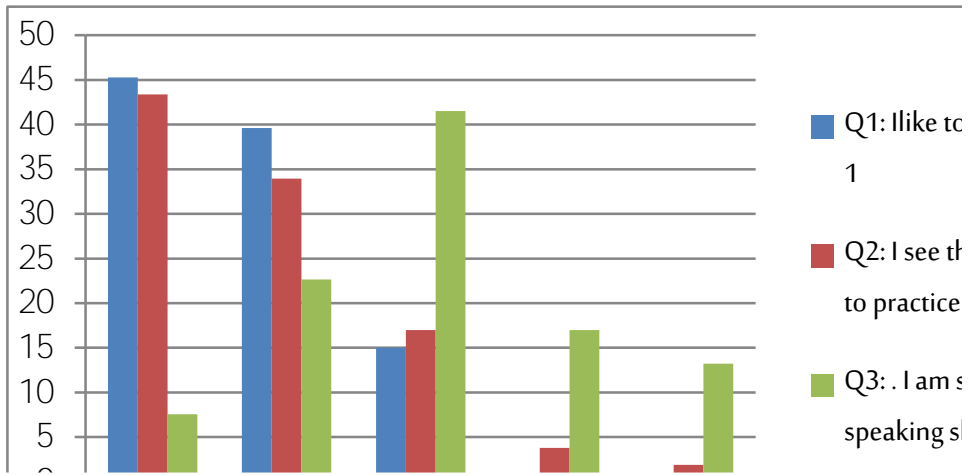


Figure (2): Attitudes towards English in the Classroom

2- Relationship with Interlocutors:

English-speaking was advocated by participants, since most of them indicated that they enjoy expressing themselves in English in front of their teachers and classmates outside the classroom (see figure 3). In this respect, it could be inferred that they are most likely linguistically competent and able to convey their thoughts, views while providing evidence for their opinions. Consequently, students possess the WTC and thus tend to expose their speaking skills.

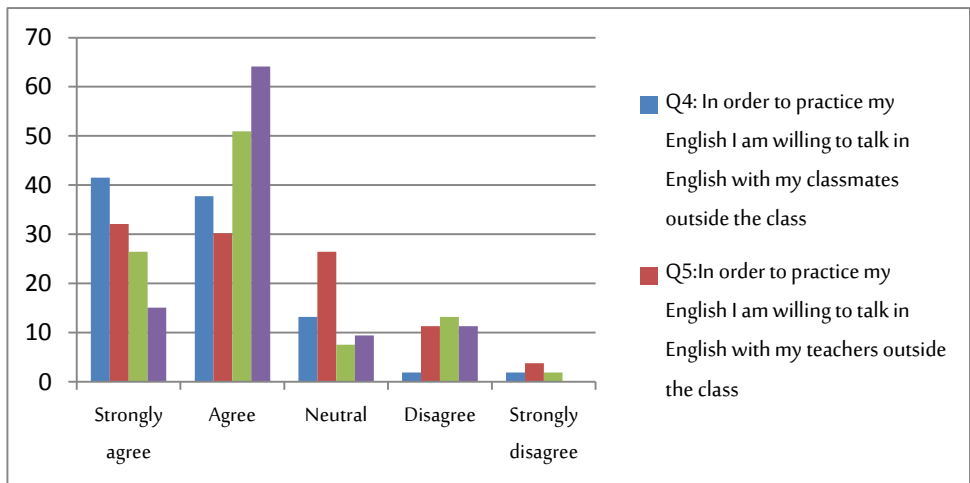


Figure (3): Relationship with Interlocutors

3- Task type:

In order to understand how the various task types could affect the development of speaking abilities, it is also worthwhile to investigate the relationship between speaking and task type. As a

result, pair or group tasks tend to motivate students to communicate and demonstrate their skills. It was assumed that respondents concur and feel comfortable performing in front of close friends for assignments that are focused on group work. However, they opposed working in groups if the members are not their friends as figure (4) explains.

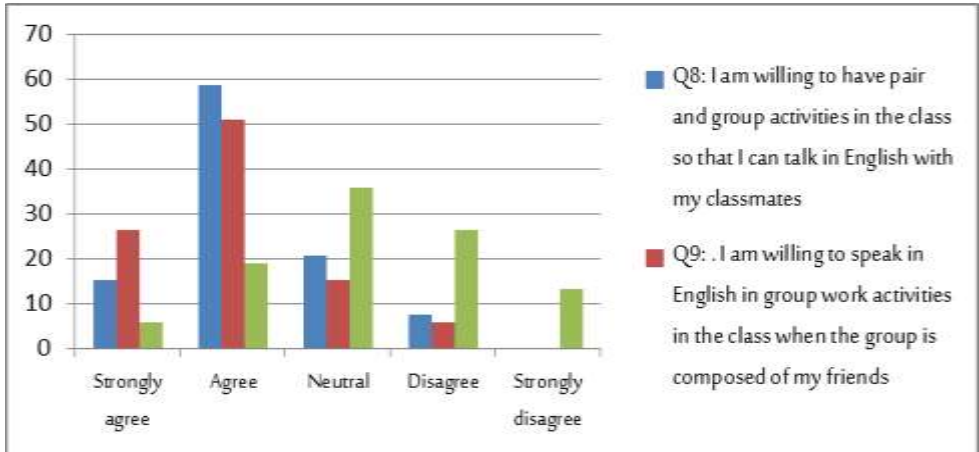


Figure (4): Task Type

4- Topic Selection

Participants revealed that they consider the topic the most important element influencing their motivation to talk. Hence, students' WTC has a favorable association with the topic under discussion. The following bar graph illustrates this.

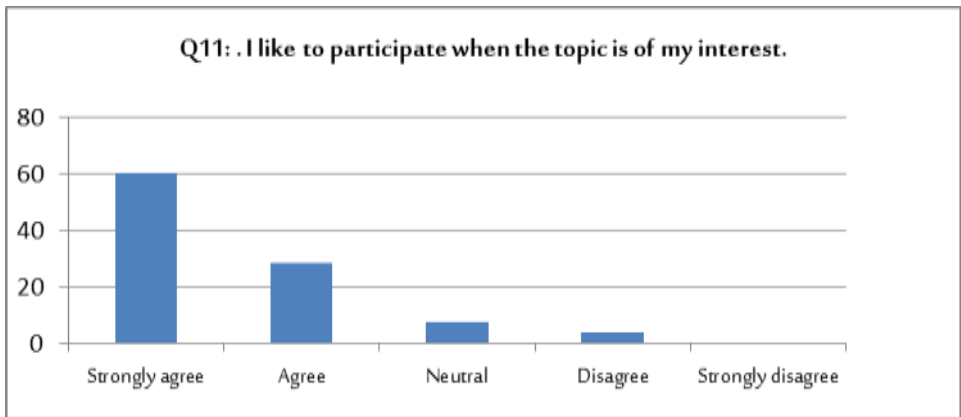


Figure (5): Topic Selection

5- The Personality

Self-confidence, anxiety, fear of expressing oneself and making mistakes were the major elements were the four main components that were addressed in the form of a series of questions, as demonstrated in the following figure.

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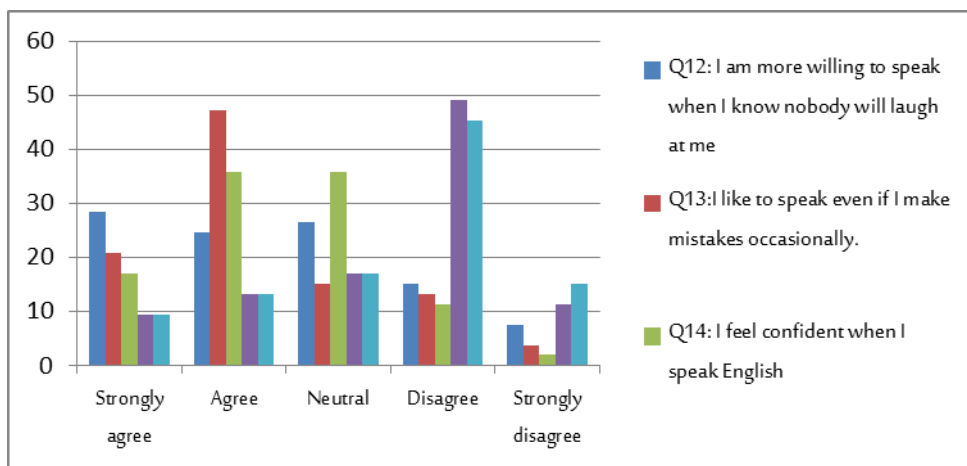


Figure (6): Personality

In terms of personal differences, it was discovered that students feel confident and willing to speak in situations where no one will laugh at them, even if they may make mistakes. What is worthy of note is that the majority of participants reported that they like to speak and express themselves without any reluctance or feeling of anxiety.

5- Discussion

Based on the data collected by the questionnaire and teachers' interview, findings showed a strong relationship between learners' WTC and their speaking ability, demonstrating that learners are more likely to speak when their WTC is higher. Additionally, the internal and external factors that were investigated in this research, such as attitude towards the English language, the relationship with the interlocutor, task type, the topic, and student's personality, appear to have a significant influence on both speaking ability and learners' WTC. On account of this, it could be concluded that the two variables are interrelated and that one is dependent on the other. Therefore, this may validate the first hypothesis of the study.

It is beyond any question that individual differences have a paramount effect on learners' WTC. This is why the personality of each learner influences how he or she communicates, which explains why extrovert learners are more sociable and willing to communicate than introvert ones. From an academic standpoint, it is reasonable to say that students with high self-confidence and low anxiety are more likely to be risk takers and express themselves in a variety of ways by presenting their thoughts aloud without concerns of how the others may react. Therefore, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

Another determining factor is the topic of the lecture. Genuinely, when learners feel unprepared, uninterested, or have poor knowledge about the topic being discussed in the classroom, their ability to speak will be very limited, and their WTC will decline. Moreover, the relationship with the

interlocutor is also critical to increasing students' WTC. In this respect, learners may find it challenging to express themselves in unfamiliar surroundings.

Task type, on the other hand, plays a decisive role in raising learners' WTC as it provides them with opportunities to expose their communicative competence, wherein tasks relying on pair or group work encourage them to practise the language. Finally, this study demonstrated that students holding a positive attitude towards speaking English are substantially more willing to communicate than those who hold a negative one.

6- Conclusion

It goes without saying that raising learners' WTC would significantly boost their speaking ability because a higher level of WTC results in success in gaining English proficiency. Accordingly, EFL teachers must be aware of the affective factors and their effects on learners' WTC.

In an attempt to improve the situation, teachers should be aware of the challenges that learners face and be able to deal with them appropriately. They must also establish positive relationships with students in order to create a safe and supportive learning environment, be innovative when choosing topics and using technology, and give students plenty of opportunities to speak in class by maximising their talking time. In order to boost their self-confidence and get rid of anxiety issues, learners must simultaneously investigate who they are by expanding their vocabulary and improving their competence. This is done with the aim of developing high English language abilities. Additionally, they must determine what will strengthen their WTC in terms of both their personalities and mindsets in order to establish good communication.

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