Factors Influencing Willingness to Communicate: A Model Proposed Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

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Abstract

A common concern experienced by language teachers in English language classrooms is the learners' unwillingness to speak. The current study is an attempt to investigate Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perception of factors contributing to their willingness to speak English in language classrooms. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4language learners to determine the recurrent themes in their opinions about underlying factors contributing to L2WTC. Using themes, a second language willingness to communicate (L2WTC) model was proposed by researchers based on WTC theory (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) and empirical studies and was then modified through an extensive search in the literature to account for direct or indirect effects of factors on the WTC construct. Having found the factors and building a hypothesized model, six questionnaires for measuring the variables were administered among 127 subjects at the intermediate level of language proficiency in 4 private language institutes in Mashhad and Tabas. The proposed model was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS to see if the obtained data in the quantitative phase of the study supported the model built on the basis of the qualitative data. The proposed SEM model adequately fitted the data after some modifications. Results of the SEM indicated that learning climate and communication confidence could be considered as predictors of L2WTC among EF intermediate learners. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the nature and role of WTC in language pedagogy and suggest implications for an effective language teaching and learning.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, learning climate, communication confidence, EFL

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the importance of English cannot be overlooked. For decades, traditional methods of language teaching have used grammar topics or texts (e.g., dialogues, short stories) as a basis for organizing a syllabus. With communicative language teaching (CLT) methodologies, this approach has changed; the development of communicative skills is placed at the forefront, while grammar is now introduced only as much as

needed to support the development of these skills [1]. The emphasis of CLT as the recent approach to language teaching and learning is improving authentic and meaningful communication. Usually, the primary reason for language learning is to use it to communicate. Foreign/second language (L2) learners who wish to become proficient must use language communicatively [1].

Concentrating on communicative interaction as an asset to L2 acquisition was given impetus after Long's (1980) Interaction Hypothesis. Long (ibid) argues that L2 communicative competence develops as a result of conversational adjustments happening during language communication between interlocutors. [2] state that "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" (p. 3).

Willingness to communicate gains importance when the goal of teaching English is determined as being able to communicate effectively. When presented with an opportunity to use their L2, some people choose to speak up and others choose to remain silent and say nothing. The reasons for choosing to avoid using a second language are not straightforward or simple if one considers the various individual, social, linguistic, situational, and other factors that are relevant to the decision to speak in the L2 [2].

A focus on the affective variables, e.g. attitudes, motivation, and language anxiety on achievement or proficiency supporting authentic communication in the current language teaching methods seems especially pertinent [3]. [4] believe that an ultimate goal of second language teaching should be to enable students to willingly use language for authentic communication.

[5] stated that "… we may be dealing with the willingness different learners have to talk in order to learn, and this as a non-cognitive individual difference (variable), may be altogether more elusive for researchers" (p.48, emphasis added). [6] believe that the variable Skehan and others have been looking for is willingness to communicate (WTC), as it applies to the L2 (L2 WTC). In [7] view, such learner willingness is believed to increase the frequency of learner interactive communication, leading, in return, to the development of their L2 communicative competence.

The WTC model has been developed by [4]. It tries to integrate psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables to describe, explain, and predict L2 communication. They define willingness to communicate as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (p. 547). In fact it refers to the inclination of a person to commence communication when free to do so [7][8].

Since a higher willingness to communicate in a foreign language facilitates L2 use, L2 WTC is seen as the ultimate goal of language learning [4]. Some researchers [4] 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.

1.1. Iranian English language teaching (ELT) system

The ELT system in Iran is divided into two sections: the public sector and the private sector. The public system of English language teaching mostly follows the Grammar Translation Method and does not address the communicative aspects of language teaching. The private sector, on the other hand, follows communicative approaches and in comparison to the public sector concentrates more on speaking and communication. Therefore, teachers are expected to create a learner-centered atmosphere, devote their attention to the students' needs and feelings

and make a great deal of interaction with the students. It can be said that WTC is to some extent meaningless since the focus is not on communication, but in private language institutes learners are much freer to communicate. So, in this context WTC gains importance and seems relevant.

1.2. Factors Affecting WTC

A number of factors have been identified in the literature as directly or indirectly influencing WTC, including motivation [9][10], communication anxiety [11][12], perceived communication competence [11][12], personality [13][14], classroom environment [15], self-confidence [13][16][17] and content and context [18]. [19] considered personality-based sources of WTC among the constructs originally identified by Burgoon (communication apprehension, anomie, alienation, introversion, and self-esteem). The relations among these variables and their contribution to WTC were tested. Results suggested that WTC is caused by a combination of communication apprehension and perceived competence which have their roots in introversion and self-esteem.

In [20], a range of factors were perceived by the interview respondents as influencing WTC. They included familiarity with the environment, the effect of the relaxing classroom, teacher support, personality, self-confidence, fear of making mistakes and hence getting embarrassed, fear of leaving a bad impression as a result of making mistakes, losing face, one's perception of his or her speaking ability, topic familiarity and degree of familiarity with interlocutor.

The majority of studies carried out on WTC have examined it in the English as a second language (ESL) context (e.g. [2][21][22] and there is a paucity of research on it in EFL contexts. Some recent studies have investigated WTC in EFL contexts (e.g. [15][16][23][24]. They have examined WTC in EFL classroom contexts by investigating a mixture of psychological, contextual, and linguistic variables.

In [11], relations among L2 learning and L2 communication variables in the Japanese English as an EFL context were examined using the WTC model and the socioeducational model as a framework. A L2 communication model was constructed and tested in [11]. The statistical analyses revealed that international posture influences motivation, which, in turn, influences proficiency in English and L2 communication confidence.

[25] did a large-scale investigation of WTC in Chinese EFL classrooms. A hypothesized model integrating WTC in English, communication confidence, motivation, learner beliefs, and classroom environment was tested using structural equation modeling. The results showed that classroom environment predicts WTC, communication confidence, learner beliefs, and motivation.

[16] examined L2 WTC construct and its underlying variables among non–English major students in Iran. The study used WTC and socioeducational models for examining L2 communication and L2 learning. An L2 communication model was proposed and tested. Significant positive paths were obtained from L2 self-confidence and international posture (attitudes toward international community) to L2WTC.These two variables were two predictors of L2WTC in Iranian context. The paths from motivation to L2WTC and openness to experience to L2 self-confidence were not significant and thus were deleted.

Working with English major university students, [15] proposed a second language willingness to communicate (L2WTC) model based on WTC theory [4]. Given the importance of

creating L2 WTC among language learners as a fundamental goal of language education, it is essential to find out what factors affect language learners' WTC. In comparison to the previous studies conducted in the Iranian context, this study has two main advantages. First, the previous researchers have supposed a model and then tested it and sometimes confirmed it, i.e., they have followed a top-down approach. In most of these studies, the model was proposed by researchers, as experts who know what affects the learners' WTC. The unique feature of the present study is that the researchers assume that the perceptions of learners of what influences them to take part in discussions or initiate a conversation in class, i.e. what factors affect their WTC, is different from what teachers or researchers believe to be the right predictors of their WTC. Therefore, we started from examining learners' ideas about what seems important to them as influential in their WTC through conducting an interview and analyzing their interviews to find the themes (i.e. factors they mentioned) recurrent in their talk. This means giving voice to learners to express what they think about their own learning and also it helps us check whether what learners, and not experts of the field, think as important criteria can really predict their WTC.

The current study goes a step further and not only testes a model in the EFL context but also describes the learners' viewpoint of what factors account for their WTC in their language classrooms, giving them a voice to talk about their classroom experiences through employing qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Through a mixed method approach, the present study attempts to explore what Iranian EFL learners think of the factors influencing their willingness to speak English in language classroom. It attempts to examine the relationships among the variables believed to affect Iranian learners' L2 WTC. The concept could include communication in written forms, but this study focused on face-to-face communication or, more specifically, talking in an L2.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The subjects of the present study were 127 intermediate English language learners, including 68 females (53.5%), 59 Males (46.5%) in Mashhad and Tabas. The age range of the participants was 15-32; the mean age was 22.13 (SD = 4.519). We selected intermediate level of language proficiency because a learner at this level has already passed several semesters and can give his/her opinions on language classes very comprehensively. Another reason for choosing intermediate level was the fact that at this level it wasn't necessary to translate and validate the questionnaires used. We also chose language institutes instead of a university or public school because here learners have the chance to speak English in classrooms and their English class time is not limited to reading and vocabulary. In phase I of the study, 4 learners (2 male, 2 female) took part in the semi-structured interview sessions with one of the researchers outside the class. In phase II, 127 participants filled out 8 different questionnaires covering the 7 variables identified in the interview section. Questionnaires consisted of a demographic section, a scale measuring learners' WTC, and 7 scales measuring factors identified as influencing their WTC in English classes in their institutes. The questionnaires were administered to participants in their regular class time. Participants were informed that their participation was optional. All participants agreed to answer the questionnaires. All ethical issues of participation were taken closely into consideration.

2.2. Procedure

A mixed-methods design consists of a qualitative and a quantitative section which can be carried out consecutively or simultaneously to back the results found in the other part. The design hypothesized to be used within this study is "first Qual, then Quan" [26], that is the findings of the qualitative part, which was obtained through a semi-structured interview, were used to build a hypothetical model which then was tested and validated in the quantitative part. First, participants of the study were categorized into two groups: one needed for phase I of the study, the qualitative part, and the other one for phase II, quantitative part, in which the participants filled in the questionnaires. Interviews were conducted and were next transcribed and scrutinized in detail through content analysis to look for recurrent themes in the learners' opinions about factors that they thought influenced their degree of WTC.

Using themes found in the previous step, a model of factors effective in classroom WTC was devised. Then, through an extensive search in the literature, the model was modified to account for direct or indirect effects of factors on the WTC construct. Having found the factors and building a hypothesized model, questionnaires for measuring the variables were adopted, and adapted from previous studies. After finding the appropriate questionnaires, they were filled out by learners at the intermediate level of language proficiency level. The data obtained from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS, version 22, to be made ready for further analysis. The proposed model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS to see if the obtained data in the quantitative phase of the study supported the model built on the basis of the qualitative part.

2.3. Instruments

The six scales were adapted from previous studies. Each scale is described below.

L2 WTC: To measure L2 WTC, twenty-seven items were taken from [24]. Students were asked to answer the questions by indicating whether they were willing to communicate in each type of situation. A sample item is "I am willing to find opportunities to speak no matter how crowded the classroom is". Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient of the scales was .822.

Classroom Anxiety Measure: Twenty items from Richmond, Wrench, and Groham (2001) were used to measure a student's anxiety in the classroom. This form is composed of statements students have used to describe how they feel in their classroom. The subjects answered the items on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It is based on Richmond's Situational Communication Apprehension Measure. A sample item is "I feel apprehensive". Alpha reliability was .833.

Teacher Apprehension Test: Twenty items from Richmond, Wrench, and Groham (2001) were used to be a measure of apprehension students have with a given teacher. Students describe how they feel about receiving communication from their teacher after each statement on the basis of 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). A sample item is "I feel uncomfortable receiving communication from my teacher". The reliability was 0.837.

Shyness Scale: Fourteen items from [8] were used to obtain individual's self-report of their shy behaviour. The subjects answered the items on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A sample item is "Other people think I am shy". The alpha reliability estimate is .619.

Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC): To obtain information concerning how competent people feel they are in a variety of communication contexts and with a variety of types of receivers, twelve items from McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) were used in the study. The subjects indicate how competent they believe they are to communicate in the twelve situations described. They estimate their competence by presuming 0 = completely incompetent and 100 = competent. A sample item is "Present a talk to a group of strangers". Alpha reliability estimate is .883.

Classroom Climate Inventory: Forty-nine items were used from [27] to find out the subjects' opinions about the class they are attending right now. This questionnaire is designed for use in gathering opinions about small classes. This form of the questionnaire assesses your opinion about what this class is actually like. The learners indicated their opinion about each statement by answering on a 4-point Likert-scale form strongly disagree to strongly agree. A sample item is "Students put effort into what they do in classes". This questionnaire measures learners' opinions on seven scales. However, not all seven scales were mentioned as potential factors by interviews. Therefore, scales numbers 1,2,3,4, and 6 were adopted to be used in the present study. Alpha reliability coefficient is .707.

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative Part

In the qualitative phase of the study, 4 learners (2 males, 2 females) were interviewed to get a clear idea of factors influencing their WTC in language classes. Interviews were semi-structured so that the interviewer could ask for elaborations or more details on the part of the interviewee. Names of the interviewees are changed in the present work to ensure anonymity. The two males participating in the interview were named as M1 and M2, while the females were named as F1 and F2. The age of male interviewees was 28 and 19 for M1 and M2 respectively. F1 and F2 ages were 36 and 15 respectively. Two males and two females were selected for the interview with different ages to be representative of both genders at various ages. The aim of the qualitative phase was to obtain views of interviewees as to what factors they deemed influential on their WTC so that a hypothetical model of factors could be devised on the basis of their own words and backed by the existing literature. The model could next be tested in the quantitative phase of the study. Following are themes extracted from the interviews.

All four cases described teacher as an influential factor in their WTC. The reason was that the teacher motivated the learners (M2) and acted as the organizer of the whole class, as put by M1:

> I think the teacher is the most important factor to speak to participate in discussions because the teacher manages all of the class, whole of the class. And… because the teacher chooses the issues, the teacher manages the class, the teacher choose the learners and other things.

Despite considering the teacher as an important contributing factor to WTC, interviewees admitted that communications occurring in the classroom are governed by learners' own willingness to talk in the class, which reflects the volitional nature of WTC as proposed by [28]. As M1 expressed "Most of the time the teachers choose a person to speak. But I believe every person should speak spontaneous in the class before the teacher chooses them."

M1 pointed out that he did not like classes which were teacher-oriented. He preferred classes in which students had greater opportunities to talk, as he exemplified it this way:

> The communication between the student and the teacher should be more and more. And most of the time, for example, in one hour, sometimes, forty-five minutes should students speak and the teacher most of the time should listen to speaking of the students.

In order to let the learners speak for such a long time in class, the class environment should promote communication. The teacher should possess a set of characteristics in the eyes of the interviewees. F2 mentioned that she liked serious teachers who openly accepted various opinions expressed in the class and also added an air of humor to their teaching because serious teachers always expected their students to talk and this made students more active. F1 asserted that the teacher should give an equal chance to all learners to express their views and that "The teacher should take turn and ask all of the students."

The classroom environment should also be relaxing so that students enjoy attending and participation. Interviewees associated their experience of a good classroom environment with their familiarity with the teacher and the students and also the tasks that were carried out in the class. M1 contended that he felt more comfortable to speak "when the atmosphere of the class is friendly. When the situation is welcoming, for example your teacher is young and you are young… Atmosphere should be good. Atmosphere should be more and more relaxed." Both F1 and F2 emphasized that they preferred the situations in which they knew their classmates. This point was further elaborated on by M2 who explained that "[s]ometimes yes, you know some students, if they know their classmates, if they are friends, they can speak better. But when they are strange, they feel shy. You know, they feel shy and they can't speak very well."

When discussing tasks, interviewees demonstrated a variety of tasks they preferred to be carried out in class. This point highlights the importance of varying the instruction and application of a wide range of tasks by the teacher in the class in order to maximize participation of learners with differing task-type interests. Two quotations from F1 provided below illuminate the important role of task types conducted in the class in the eyes of language learners:

> I like various tasks. It is good opportunity for different students. For example listening. Some students like to listen subjects and after talk about it but some students like to write texts at home and in class talking about it and they are different and I like it.
>
> Different tasks can help the teacher for motivating different students. For example, I like Listening more. Because it can help me to talk. But special subject task, writing and talking about it it's difficult for me for example. Different task. I know the writing is very important but I like listening more. I think it's easier for me.

Other interviewees also pinpointed task as a critical issue in their WTC. M2 asserted that visual tasks, photos and videos would make him focus on the topic and speak more about it, because it provided them with some background knowledge to focus on and think about. M1 proposed that he preferred role plays and games as they made students more willing to participate in the activities.

It can be concluded from what interviewees expressed in this part that having a relaxed and comforting classroom environment increase their WTC and that they believed the combination of teacher characteristics, task types carried out in the class and the overall classroom atmosphere as determined by the relationship between the teacher and the students and among the classmates themselves provide a positive classroom environment which promotes learners' WTC.

Interviewees were more willing to take part in classroom activities when they had some knowledge about the topic, or if the topic was technical they preferred to get prepared in advance. They also expressed that they preferred their interlocutors to be familiar to them rather than strangers. This led us to suppose that their WTC is a function of both their competence and the situation in which they are. Interviewees also mentioned that in order to be more active in the class, learners should not be shy and as M2 put it,

> I, like I said, sociable and social person are very important, because if you are shy, you cannot communicate. You are fear to say something wrong. Therefore, you can't speak well, you can't share your thoughts. So I think the social features are very important.

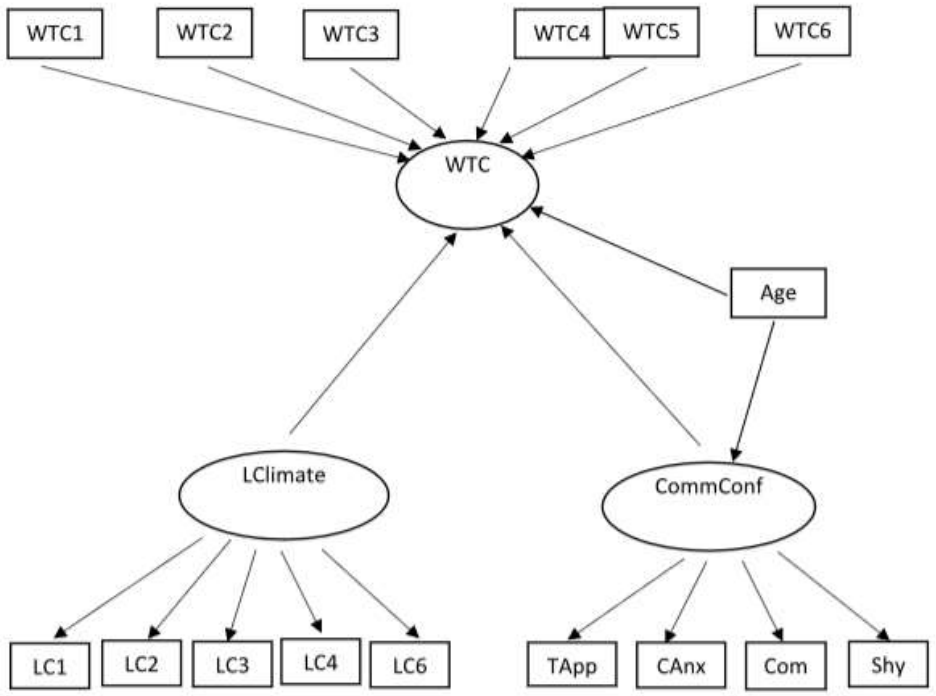
From the quotation above, it can be hypothesized that shy people appear to have less confidence in their competence and are fearful to initiate communication. Other interviewees also mentioned the importance of not being shy in order to have more communication in the class. M1 even added that if a student were shy, it would be the teacher's duty to make him/her participate in the tasks.

Interviewees were also asked about occasions when they felt stressful and less willing to talk. F2 stated that the teacher should not get angry with the students when they make mistakes, and F1 asserted the same idea that she did not like the teacher punish her by words if she used a grammatical point incorrectly. M1 confirmed the same idea that the teacher should not repeatedly stop the conversation. Therefore, it can be inferred that learners' being repeatedly corrected and penalized either through words or through losing points makes them apprehensive of the teacher and results in having anxiety in class. Thus, it was concluded that the four factors of shyness, competence, teacher apprehension and classroom anxiety affected learners' communication confidence. The hypothesized relation is also in line with other works such as [19], [20], [10], [11], [12], [29], [30].

F1 contended that the reason why she was not shy was the fact that she was an adult. The quotation is provided below:

> F1: I'm not too silent because I'm adult. When I was student, it's difficult to me to talk.
> Interviewer: you mean teenager?
> F1: Yes. But now I am in society and I force to talk with different people and it's a good opportunity for me to learn talking more to different people for example talk to men.
> Interviewer: Because of your job?
> F1: Yes. And when I was teenager, I liked just talking with my people have the same age and I was shy student but now it's related to my job. It's easy to talk with different people.

From what F1 mentioned the researchers hypothesized that age could be an influential factor in learners' WTC. We also aimed to investigate whether learners' gender was a significant contributor to their level of WTC. Both age and gender were conjectured to have a direct or indirect effect on WTC. They could have a direct effect if the path from age and gender turned out to be significant. The indirect effect was hypothesized through affecting learners' communication confidence and the latent variable of communication confidence, defined by shyness, communication competence, classroom anxiety and teacher apprehension as its indicators, directly having a path to WTC. The model that we aimed to test is provided below:



Notes: WTC= Willingness to Communicate; LClimate=Learning Climate; LC1=Personalization; LC2= Involvement; LC3= Student Cohesiveness' LC4=Satisfaction; LC6=Innovation; CommConf=Communication Confidence; TApp=Teacher Apprehension; CAnx=Classroom Anxiety; Comp=Competence; Shy=Shyness

Table 1. Correlation Matix

	Age	CAnx	Shy	Comp	TApp	WTC1	WTC2	WTC3	WTC4	WTC5	WTC6	LC1	LC2	LC3	LC4	LC6
Age																
CAnx	-.027															
Shy	.011	.349**														
Comp	.091	-.171	-.230**													
TApp	-.052	.074	.039	.103												
WTC1	.170	-.284**	-.162	.284**	-.001											
WTC2	.005	-.370**	-.252**	.005	-.223*	.271**										
WTC3	.048	-.295**	-.216*	.233**	-.058	.235**	.366**									
WTC4	-.014	-.268**	-.269**	.163	-.120	.298**	.449**	.281**								
WTC5	.003	-.211*	-.270**	.160	-.149	.398**	.304**	.241**	.243**							
WTC6	.032	-.197*	-.197*	.264**	-.071	.271**	.247**	.215*	.272**	.342**						
LC1	-.041	-.179*	-.142	.004	-.189*	.022	.187*	.167	.110	.133	.060					
LC2	.018	-.002	-.116	.087	-.197*	-.074	-.127	.019	-.085	-.090	-.082	.281**				
LC3	.207*	.306**	.093	.208*	.216*	.079	-.395**	-.165	-.197*	-.177*	.064	-.064	.130			
LC4	-.057	-.048	-.275**	.181*	.014	-.016	.100	.056	-.067	.158	.097	.329**	.348**	.106		
LC6	-.134	-.066	.010	.104	-.034	-.059	.014	-.015	.042	-.102	.086	.296**	.207*	.042	.208*	

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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

3.2. Quantitative Part

Based on the factors identified in the qualitative part, relevant questionnaires were administered to the target sample of intermediate language learners in Mashhad and Tabas. Learners were told that participation in the study was voluntary and the answers and results did not affect their grades. The questionnaires were handed in to learners and necessary instructions were given to them. Learners took the questionnaires home and brought them back the next session. The obtained data was then used as the input for the structural equation modeling conducted in Amos 23®. As defined by Hoyle (1995, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the

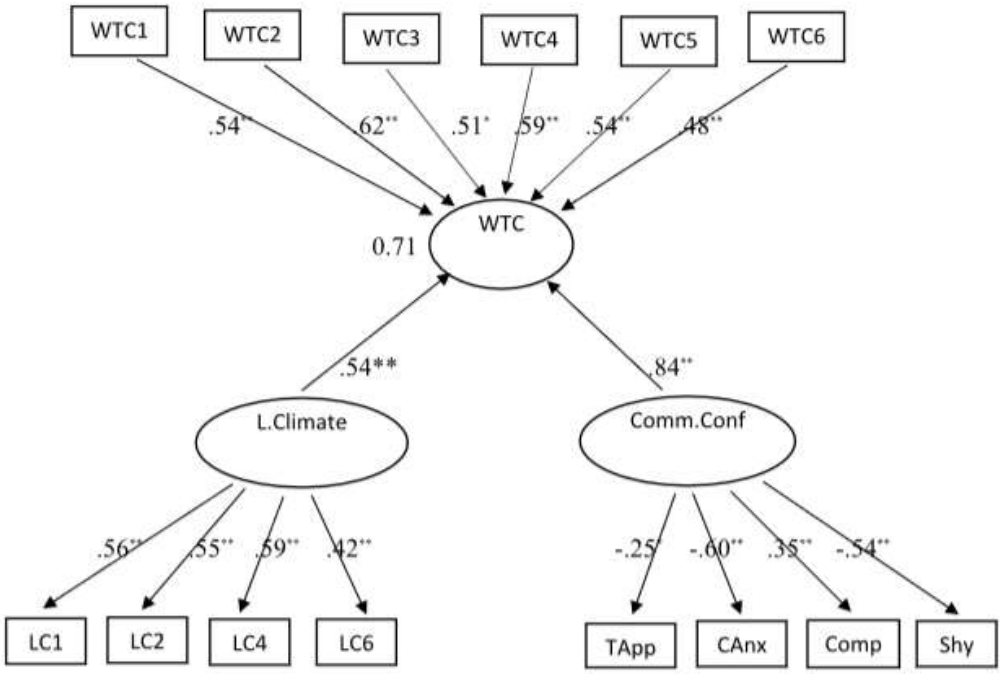
hypothesized relations among age, the latent variables of WTC (Willingness to Communicate), CommConf (Communication Confidence) and Climate (Learning Climate), and their observed variables measured by the questionnaires.

First data was screened for its normality and any probable outliers. Data is considered normally distributed if values of skewness and kurtosis fall between ±2. To check for outliers, Amos provides the Mahalanobis D-squared whose values should be less than 0.001 for a case to be flagged as an outlier (Kline, 2011). The output of Amos proved the data to be normal and no outliers were detected. The next step was to check whether the data fitted the proposed model well enough. Amos provides a number of measures of goodness-of-fit for the default model compared to the saturated model. Optimally, indices of GFI, AGFI and CFI should be above 0.9, the ratio of CMIN/DF should be close to 1, and the value of RMSEA should be less than 0.05 (Arbuckle, 2014). For the proposed base model here, values of GFI, AGFI, and CFI were slightly below 0.9. RMSEA turned out to be 0.54 The CMIN/DF ratio was 1.365, which is an acceptable value. The regression weights and their respective p values were checked for the specified paths. The paths from Age to WTC, Age to Confidence, and from LClimate to LC3 were not significant. Therefore, these paths were discarded from the model, and the analysis was run for the second time excluding the nonsignificant paths. This time, fit indices improved and the following values were obtained:

Table 2: Fit Indices for the Base and Revised Model

	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA	CMIN/DF
Base Model	0.87	0.84	0.86	0.54	1.369
Revised Model	0.91	0.90	0.90	0.50	1.346

The revised model showed better fit indices and the following figure displays the standardized regression weights obtained through the output. As can be seen on the model, teacher apprehension, communication anxiety and shyness are inversely related which means that learners' communication confidence decreases as their anxiety and their degree of shyness increases. However, their perceived communication competence is positively related to their level of confidence. Measures of learning climate indicate that teacher's characteristics such as friendliness and considering learners' feelings, teacher's involving of learners instead of being the sole speaker of the class, the teacher's innovations and use of a variety of tasks, and the learners' enjoying the class were significant contributors to the learning climate, which in turn played a significant role in learners' WTC.



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4. Discussion

This study focuses on antecedents of L2 WTC. Results of the SEM indicated that two of the three hypothesized factors, namely classroom climate and communication confidence, significantly predicted learners' WTC. Age turned out not to be a significant predictor of WTC either directly or indirectly. The findings imply that having a positive classroom environment and high levels of communication confidence promote learners' WTC. These same results have been obtained by [15] and [25].

Regarding communication confidence, measures used as indicators of communication confidence suggested that learners' personality factors such as shyness, classroom anxiety and teacher apprehension negatively affected learners' confidence, and therefore were negatively related to WTC. This means that the higher the learners' degree of shyness, the more they are apprehensive of the teacher, and the more the classroom environment induces anxiety in learners, the less their communication will be, and consequently, the less their WTC will be. The fourth measure of communication confidence was learners' perceived communication confidence which had a positive significant relation to its construct. It can be inferred that the higher a learner's competence is, the more confident the learner will be and the more willing s/he will be to communicate. A number of other studies have also reported communication confidence as influential in learners' WTC e.g. [4]; [11]; [13]; [25]. Altogether, these findings suggest that teachers should try to reduce levels of stress in the class and provide an atmosphere in which learners will not feel apprehensive and anxious. This underlines the important role of the teachers in the classroom. Teachers can decrease language learners' anxiety by creating a supportive and relaxing

learning environment, setting goals that are not too easy or too difficult, and using anxiety-reducing techniques [31].

Concerning classroom climate, its measures were positively related to the construct of classroom environment. The five scales used to measure classroom climate were Personalization, Involvement, Student Cohesiveness, Satisfaction, and Innovation. [27] define the scales as provided in table 3:

Personalization	Emphasis on opportunities for individual students to interact with the instructor and on concern for students' personal welfare
Involvement	Extent to which students participate actively and attentively in class discussions and activities
Satisfaction	Extent of enjoyment of classes
Student Cohesiveness	Extent to which students know, help and are friendly towards each other
Innovation	Extent to which the instructor plans new, unusual class activities, teaching techniques and assignments

Table 3. Definitions of Scales Used by [27]

The student cohesiveness scale did not display significant path coefficients and was discarded as a result. The other four paths were significant. The personalization scale suggests that the teacher's attitudes and consideration of learners' feelings and problems, and having individual communication with the learners improves classroom atmosphere. The involvement scale implies that the teacher should not dominate the classroom, should let learners express their opinions to the class and be open to their opinions. Learners should also share their ideas with their classmates and pay careful attention to contributions of other classmates, too.

Student cohesiveness underscored what interviewees had mentioned as their preference for knowing their classmates and being more willing to talk when their classmates are familiar to them. This factor had been found to be influential in [15] study where their findings confirmed that students' supporting each other affects their interaction [32]. However, results of the present study showed the effect of student cohesiveness to be nonsignificant. The reason for this difference might be that the present study was conducted in private institutes and the language learners met each other only twice a week, during class meetings which gave them little opportunity to know each other very well. However, [15] was conducted on university students who were classmates that frequently met each other in other classes during the week, too. However, further studies need to be done to corroborate this finding.

The innovation scale highlighted the importance of deploying a variety of tasks in class to increase learners' participation. Among these four measures of classroom environment, innovation had a lower factor loading. However, it acted as a significant contributor of positive class environment and subsequently, to WTC. Findings are in line with [33]. The other three had almost similar factor loadings which were higher than innovation in class activities. This means that learners' interest in and liking the class, the teacher's letting the students express their

opinions and receiving differing opinions openly, and the teacher's attitudes and caring for the learners make great contributions to increase learners' WTC.

On the whole, having a positive climate environment positively and significantly influenced learners' WTC. The same line of argument can be found in [15] and [25]. The two discussed factors, that is learning climate and communication confidence, turned out to be significant predictors of WTC in [15] and [25], too. The present study found similar results as Peng & Woodrow's. Their study found communication confidence as a stronger predictor of WTC than classroom environment, which is the same as the findings of the present study. Despite being significant predictors for L2 WTC, [15] found classroom environment a stronger predictor than communication confidence.

Age of the learners was also considered in the present study. It was hypothesized that age could affect learners' WTC directly and/or indirectly by influencing learners' communication confidence. However, neither the path from age to WTC, nor the path from age to communication confidence turned out to be significant. Therefore, the paths were excluded from the model in the revised version. The reason for this finding might be the point that learners voluntarily attend English language classes at institutes as compared to formal settings like schools and universities in which they simply have to take and pass the English course. It seems to the researchers as a justification for the results obtained that the voluntary nature of attending classes increases their WTC in all age levels and covers any probable significant difference between various age levels. However, this needs to be investigated in formal and obligatory educational settings to see whether age plays a role as a significant predictor of WTC.

Age had also been found not to be a predictor of WTC in a number of other studies. As for similar studies carried out in Iran in private language institutes, [34] and [35] performed ANOVA analyses on the relationship between different age groups and WTC which both showed nonsignificant F values. [6] investigation of WTC across three grades of 7 to 9, with the age range of 11 to 16, among junior high school L2 French immersion students in Canada showed that WTC increased from grade 7 to 8 but remained stable from grade 8 to 9. [36] displayed mixed results across sexes, with males' WTC increasing with age and females' WTC decreasing with age.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to investigate factors affecting WTC in private language institutes at the intermediate level in Iran. The initially hypothesized model containing paths from age to WTC and communication confidence turned out not to be significant and thus, were deleted from the model. From among the measures of learning climate, what interviewees had mentioned as their preference to have classmates whom they were already familiar with, was measured by LC3 and the path turned out not to be significant. The model was then revised based on nonsignificant paths and the revised model showed a better fit to the data with learning climate and communication confidence acting as significant predictors of intermediate language learners. Age of the learners was found not to be a predictor of WTC neither directly nor indirectly through influencing their communication confidence. The model proposed for intermediate language learners at Iranian language institutes in an English-as-a-foreign-language-context based on the interviews conducted with the learners was tested and validated. The model indicated significant contributions of high communication confidence and positive classroom environment as predictors of WTC for language learners.

There were a number of limitations to the present study. This study targeted only intermediate students. The proposed model can be tested with learners with higher or lower levels of ability to see whether predictors of WTC change through different levels of ability. Also, more complex models can be considered with other variables which have been proven to be influential on WTC. Factors such as international posture [13], attitudes towards the foreign language [15], motivation [10]; [11] have been shown to affect WTC in EFL settings. Subsequent studies may incorporate such factors into the model to see whether they still significantly influence learners' WTC in language classrooms in the institutes. The sex of the learners can also be tested as a possible source of influence on their WTC or communication confidence.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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