

Investigating the effect of EFL Learners' Gender and Second Language Proficiency on Willingness to Communicate in the upper secondary schools of the Republic of Kosova

MejremeYmeri

PhD candidate in Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication
South East European University-Tetovo/FYROM,
mejremeymeri@gmail.com

Abstract

Second language willingness to communicate (WTC) has become a significant concept in second language learning and communication. Previous research on willingness to communicate (WTC) has shown that except the attitude, support and the teaching style of the teachers that influence learners' WTC, the gender and the language proficiency plays a role, too. This study was carried out to investigate the effects of gender and language proficiency on willingness to communicate. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate. In addition, by this study there is intended to provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves. This study included a questionnaire with upper-secondary school students. In order to measure students' willingness to communicate there was administered a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by Macintyre et al. (2001). A total of thirty-two participants respectively upper-secondary school students participated in the study. Results from the study show that the gender of the students plays somerole on their willingness to communicate respectively based on the results female students are just a little bit more willing to communicate compared to male students. On the other side the proficiency of the students has a remarkable effect on the willingness of the students to communicate respectively proficient students are much more willing to communicate than the non-proficient students.

Keywords: *willingness to communicate, gender, second language proficiency, upper- secondary school students*

Introduction

Prior to the introduction of communicative language teaching, the major purpose of language learning was to advance linguistic competence and to dominate the structure of the language. However, in recent decade we are experiencing the fact that communication is gaining momentum and is becoming a very important tool if one wants to be successful in various settings. According to Daly (1986, cited in Civikly, 1986 p.21) communication is critical to success in academic, occupational and social settings.

The English language is the most important foreign language in Kosovo and it is widely used in the education system from the lowest level in education system to the highest one. In addition it is widely used in numerous professions such as in the sector of medicine, engineering, legal, business etc. Therefore, it is very important for upper school students to become proficient in English so that they can use the language competently in various settings. In addition to this many students of this age after finishing upper secondary school plan to study or work abroad where English proficiency and in particular communication skills are very necessary.

Furthermore, these proficient students in English language after they have graduated will have enhanced opportunities to be employed by international business companies. Increasingly these companies will select those applicants who can deliver not only technical skills but also the soft skills and the ability to communicate in English successfully is one of these skills.

Literature review

Willingness to Communicate

Latest methods on teaching a second language (e.g. communicative language teaching) regarding the gaining L2 competence have set a great importance to the role of everyday expressive communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Howat (1984, p. 279, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 155), “language is acquired through communication”. In addition, he states that if ‘he or she is not fully willing to communicate his attempts at establishing sound communication will be less than desirable’. Therefore, the willingness of the learners to communicate is very crucial to their second language acquisition.

In a foreign or second language classroom context WTC has been defined (Oxford, 1997) as “a student’s intention to interact with others in the target language, given the chance to do so” (p. 449). Further on, according to McCroskey, 1984 cited in Oxford, 1997, p. 449) it is stated that research has shown that willingness to communicate in one’s own native language is related to a feeling of comfort, high self-esteem, extroversion, low anxiety and perceived competence, whereas unwillingness to communicate is associated with the opposite feelings.

McCroskey and Baer (1985) points out that the concept of WTC has been developed from three different constructs: “unwillingness to communicate” (Burgoon 1976, cited in McCroskey& Baer, 1985), “predispositions toward verbal behavior” (Mortensen, Arntson, & Lusting, 1977, cited in McCroskey& Baer, 1985), and “shyness” (McCroskey& Richmond, 1982). Although the WTC construct was originally applied in L1 communication context, it is now a “necessary part of becoming fluent in a second language, which is the ultimate goal of many L2 learners” (MacIntyre& Doucette, 2010, p. 196).

The Pyramid Model of WTC

MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a pyramid model of L2 WTC integrating linguistic, communicative and social psychological variables. As they already quote in their study (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 548) their model is based on Fishbien-Ajzen’s Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen&Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein, 1980; both quoted in and Ajzen’s (1988) Theory of Planned Behaviour model which stipulates that the most immediate cause of behaviour is the intention to engage in behaviour.

Consequently, in the focus of their model is the individual who ‘has some control over his or her actions and is behaving in a reasoned manner to achieve his or her goals’ (1998, p. 548). The first layer of communication behaviour is interpreted in a broad sense of L2 use. MacIntyre et al. (1998) argued that “the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them” (p. 547). Hence, L2 use is set at the top of the pyramid model as the primary and ultimate purpose of the second language learning.

As we notice from multi-level model (figure 1) it consists of six layers which are divided on situational and enduring influences. The top three layers refer to situation-specific influences and they involve L2 use, willingness to communicate, desire to communicate with a specific person,

and state communicative self-confidence. These variables depend on the particular situation in which the individual functions at a certain time and as a consequence of this their influence on the learner is temporary. While as it concerns the variables in the bottom three layers they are believed to have more stable influences on learners' willingness to communicate, as they are not likely to change from situation to situation or over time. As we notice from the figure, these layers entail motivational variables, affective and cognitive context, and social and personality variables. In this pyramid model, L2 WTC is not conceptualized at the trait level, but rather as a state.

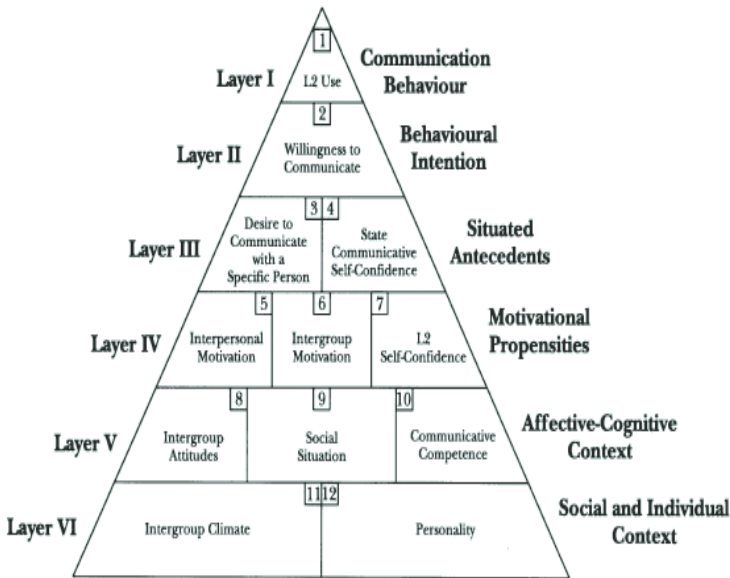


Fig. 1. The pyramid Model of WTC

Second language proficiency

According to Baker and MacIntyre (2000) it is the learners' perceptions of competence that will affect learners' willingness to speak rather than their actual ability. Neither have there been a large number of studies that inquired into how learners' willingness to speak, and ultimately their language production might affect their language skills.

Moreover, the role of L2 production and interaction in L2 development is not clear cut. However, according to some studies it seems that it may facilitate language acquisition (e.g., Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998 cited in Nagy 2007, p.59), therefore, it is reasonable to suppose a positive

relationship between language proficiency and L2 WTC. According to Nagy (2007.p.59) it might be thought that if

'language learners have linguistic means to communicate their ideas or obtain information, there is no reason why they should not do so. In addition, if learners do not have adequate language skills it does not come as a surprise that they will be reluctant to speak up in the target language. On the other hand, on some occasions and under certain circumstances proficient L2 learners may be unwilling to speak in the target language'.

The effect of Gender on willingness to communicate

It is evident that gender might have influence on L2 communication. Gardner (1985 cited in Macintyre et.al 2002 p. 542) mentions few studies that show that girls have more positive attitudes toward language learning and according to him attitudinal differences might be responsible for obtained sex differences in achievement. In addition, (Clark & Trafford, 1995 cited in Macintyre et.al 2002 p. 542) modern languages seem to be perceived as a "traditionally 'female' subject".

On the other side, in relation to the effect of the gender on Willingness to Communicate, Afghari and Sadeghi (2012) proved the opposite of the Gardner's findings (2008) which indicate that 'females are significantly more prone to experiencing anxiety than young men' (p. 61). According to the findings of this study there are not showed any noteworthy difference between male and female learners in their rate of communication apprehension.

Wright (1999) in his study established that in a sample of Irish adolescents learning French girls had more positive attitudes than boys toward learning and speaking French. Regarding gender, Baker and MacIntyre (2000 cited in Afghari and Sadeghi 2012 p. 52) stated that 'boys prefer L2 communication outside of class, whereas girls prefer in-class communication, and effect sizes for sex and for interactions involving sex as an independent variable are small'.

Research Methodology

Research Questions

1. Does learner's gender have any effect on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)?
2. Is there any relation between the language proficiency and WTC among the upper secondary school students?
3. What can the teachers do to help increase the willingness of the students to communicate?

Objectives of the research

The purpose of this research was to explore the effects of EFL learner's gender and second language proficiency on willingness to communicate.

The major objectives of this study are:

- To identify the factors that influence willingness to communicate
- To find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate.
- To provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves.

This present study was carried out at high secondary schools during the Winter Semester 2015/16. Thirty-two (32) students were involved in the present study and both male and female students were included. The age of the students is between 15-18 years. These are high school students of different profiles (natural sciences, economy and architecture).

In order to measure students' willingness to communicate, a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was distributed to the participants. The questionnaire is comprised of 24 items entailing speaking, reading, writing and listening comprehension. Students rated each item in a range from 1 to 5 (1 = almost never willing, 2 = sometimes willing, 3 = willing half of the time, 4 = usually willing, and 5 = almost always willing) according to their WTC in each situation.

Analysis of Results and Discussions

Analysis of the Results of the Students' questionnaire

Results from the gender

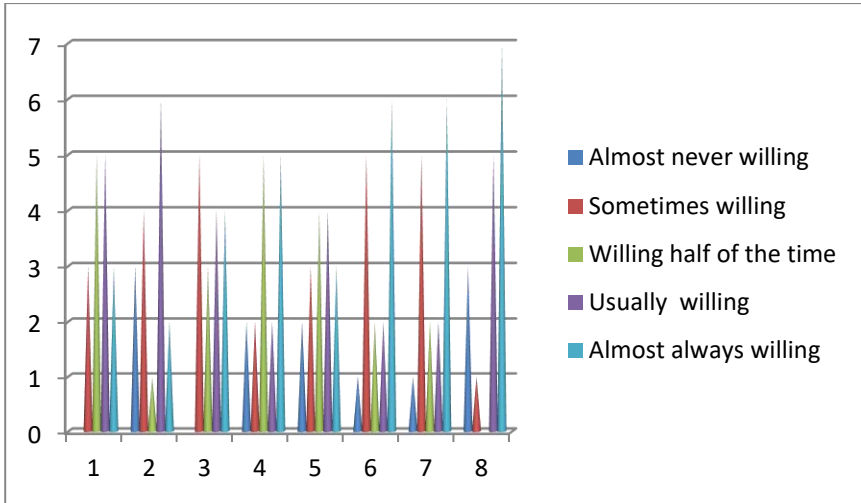


Table 4.1.1: Results from the speaking skills (female students)

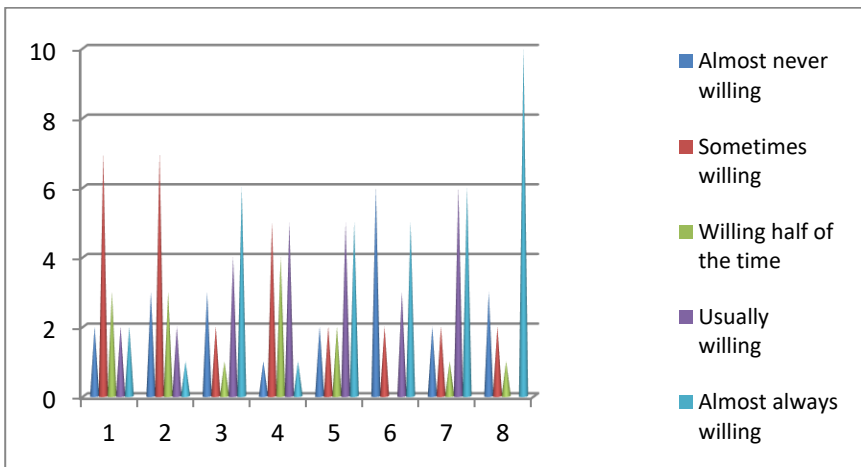


Table 4.1.2 : Results from the speaking skills (male students)

From the tables above we can notice that regarding the first question on willingness to “speak in a group about your summer vacation” 12 out of 16 proficient students in English (or 70%) responded positively that they are

willing to communicate while the number of non-proficient students who responded positively is 8 (or 50%).

On the second question “Speaking to your teacher about your homework assignment” 10 proficient students (or 60 %) responded positively while the number of non-proficient student who responded positively is 6 (less than 40%).

On the third question “ A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first” there is only a very slight difference between proficient and non-proficient students respectively 11 proficient and 10 non-proficient students responded positively etc.

On the fourth statement” You are confused about a task you must complete, how willing are you to ask for instructions/clarification” there is only a very slight difference between the proficient and non-proficient students, respectively 12 (or 75%) non-proficient and 10 (or 63%) proficient students responded positively.

On the fifth statement” Talking to a friend while waiting in line” there is little bit larger difference respectively 10 (over 60%) non-proficient students responded positively while 14 males (a little bit over 80%) responded positively.

On the sixth statement” How willing would you be to be an actor in a play” 8 proficient students respectively nine non-proficient students responded positively.

On the seventh statement” Describe the rules of your favourite game” the difference among the proficient and non-proficient students is a little bit larger. The number of proficient students who responded positively is twelve while the number of non-proficient students is nine.

On the eighth statement”Play a game in English” the difference of proficient and non-proficient students is very slight, in other words twelve students compared to eleven.

Results from proficient and non-proficient students

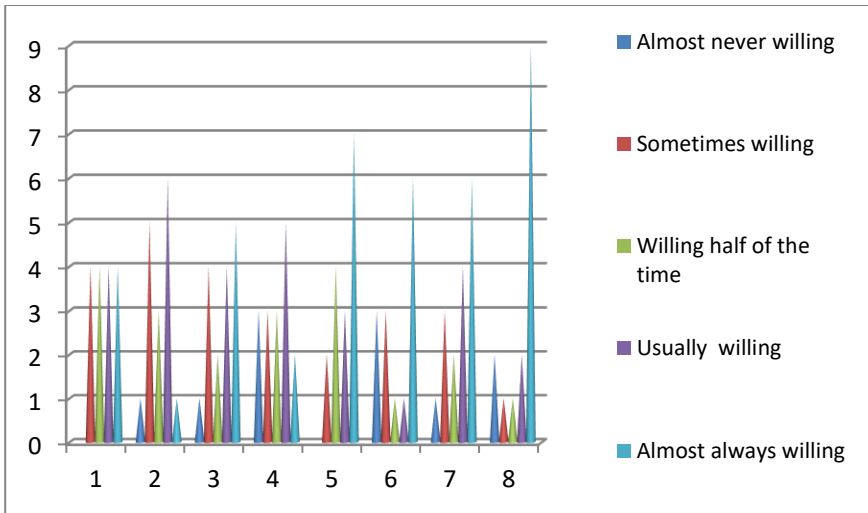


Table 4.2.1. Results from the speaking skills (proficient)

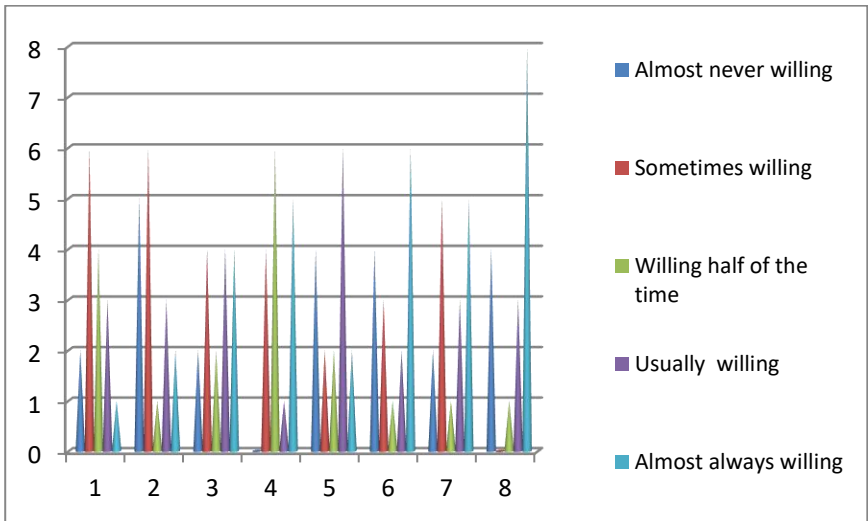


Table 4.2.2. Results from the speaking skills (non-proficient)

From the tables above we can notice that regarding the first question on willingness to “speak in a group about your summer vacation” 12 out of 16 proficient students in English (or 70%) responded positively that they are willing to communicate while the number of non-proficient students who responded positively is 8 (or 50%).

On the second question “*Speaking to your teacher about your homework assignment*” 10 proficient students (or 60 %) responded positively while the number of non-proficient student who responded positively is 6 (less than 40%).

On the third question “*A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first*” there is only a very slight difference between proficient and non-proficient students respectively 11 proficient and 10 non-proficient students responded positively etc.

On the fourth statement” *You are confused about a task you must complete, how willing are you to ask for instructions/clarification*” there is only a very slight difference between the proficient and non-proficient students, respectively 12 (or 75%) non-proficient and 10 (or 63%) proficient students responded positively.

On the fifth statement” *Talking to a friend while waiting in line*” there is little bit larger difference respectively 10 (over 60%) non-proficient students responded positively while 14 males (a little bit over 80%) responded positively.

On the sixth statement ”*How willing would you be to be an actor in a play*” 8 proficient students respectively nine non-proficient students responded positively.

On the seventh statement”*Describe the rules of your favourite game*” the difference among the proficient and non-proficient students is a little bit larger. The number of proficient students who responded positively is twelve while the number of non-proficient students is nine.

On the eighth statement”*Play a game in English*” the difference of proficient and non-proficient students is very slight, in other words twelve students compared to eleven.

Conclusions and recommendations

From the results of the questionnaire regarding the speaking skills in general we can conclude that as it concerns the gender, female students (at least for 10-30%) are more willing to initiate a conversation in various situations compared to male students. In regards to the other skills the difference between male and female students is not so significant. This difference rises up to 10% respectively the female students are more willing to read in class. Also, regarding the writing skills and the comprehension this difference is almost the same.

Concerning the difference between proficient students and non-proficient based on the results of the questionnaire it can be noticed that proficient students are quite more willing to initiate a conversation in various situations compared to the non-proficient students.

Therefore, based on the results of the pilot study it can be stated that while the gender does not play a significant role on the willingness of the students to communicate this cannot be stated for the proficiency of the students. In other words, the students who are more proficient in English language are more willing to communicate in various situations.

This study tried to identify the factors that influence willingness to communicate, to find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate and to provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves.

In order to increase the willingness of the students to communicate perhaps it is good to recommend the following points:

1. As students lack practice in speaking, they experience significant communication apprehension, therefore a good communicative approach should be adopted to provide students with more opportunities to practice their speaking skills.
2. As students appear to be extremely sensitive to the fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage students to have the confidence to learn from their mistakes in order to improve their communication skills.
3. In order for the student to participate actively in the classroom discussion, teachers should provide a low stress, friendly, informal and learning-supportive environment. Teachers should be friendly, helpful and cooperative in order for the students to feel comfortable in the class.
4. The teachers should initiate discussion in the class after making sure that the students are ready for the given activity and have sufficient ideas and lexis to complete the task successfully. In addition they should take measures to reduce the sense of competition among students.
5. Above all they should continuously offer words of encouragement; This may be the best way to make students express themselves.

6. In addition they should try to find relevant and interesting topics for class discussions and exercises and progress gradually in order to reinforce the material

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