



An Investigation of University Students' Willingness to Communicate in English in Relation to Some Learner Variables

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, scientific studies on willingness to communicate have been carried out in many countries such as America, Canada, England, Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan, China, Iran and Turkey. Despite many studies on willingness to communicate in the world and our country, university students' willingness to communicate has not been studied by researchers. With this in mind, this study aimed to examine the randomly selected 328 students' willingness to communicate at a state university in the Western part of our country in relation to some student variables. In the present study, the willingness to communicate scale developed by McCroskey (1992) was used as a data collection instrument. The first part of the scale contained personal information such as age, gender, major, and having direct contact with English-speaking people at the university. In the second part of the scale, there were 20 items measuring students' willingness to communicate in English. However, eight filler items were not analyzed. The results of the study showed that students had moderate WTC in English. While it was found in the study that learner variables such as major and having direct contact with English speaking people had effect on university students' willingness to communicate in English, learner variables such as age and gender were not found to have effect on their WTC in English.

Keywords: Communication, willingness to communicate, university students, Turkish higher education context, learner variables.

Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Bazı Öğrenci Değişkenleriyle İlişkili Olarak İngilizce İletişime Gönüllülüğünün Araştırılması

Öz

Son yirmi yılda, Amerika, Kanada, İngiltere, Almanya, İspanya, İtalya, Japonya, Çin, İran ve Türkiye gibi pek çok ülkede amaç dilde iletişime gönüllülük ile ilgili bilimsel çalışmalar yapılmıştır. Dünyada ve ülkemizde amaç dilde iletişime gönüllülük ile ilgili yapılan birçok çalışmaya rağmen, ülkemizdeki üniversite öğrencilerinin İngilizce iletişime gönüllülüğü araştırmacılar tarafından incelenmemiştir. Bu noktadan hareketle, bu araştırma ülkemizin Batı kesiminde yer alan bir devlet üniversitesindeki rastgele seçilmiş 328 öğrencinin İngilizce iletişime gönüllülüğünü bazı öğrenci değişkenleri ile ilişkili olarak incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Bu çalışmada veri toplama aracı olarak McCroskey'in (1992) geliştirdiği iletişime gönüllülük ölçeği kullanılmıştır. İki bölümden oluşan ölçeğin birinci bölümünde yaş, cinsiyet, alan ve üniversitede İngilizce konuşan insanlarla doğrudan bağlantı gibi kişisel bilgiler yer almıştır. Ölçeğin ikinci bölümünde ise, öğrencilerin İngilizce iletişime gönüllülüğünü ölçen 20 madde yer almıştır. Sekiz adet tamamlayıcı niteliğindeki maddenin çözümlenmesi yapılmamıştır. Araştırma sonuçları, öğrencilerin orta düzeyde İngilizce WTC'ye sahip olduklarını göstermiştir. Araştırmada, alan ve İngilizce konuşan insanlar ile doğrudan temas kurma öğrenci değişkenlerinin üniversite

öğrencilerinin İngilizce iletişime gönüllülüğünü etkilediği bulgulanırken, yaş ve cinsiyet öğrenci değişkenlerinin üniversite öğrencilerinin İngilizce iletişime gönüllülüğünü etkilediği bulgulanmamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim, iletişime gönüllülük, üniversite öğrencileri, Türk yükseköğretim bağlamı, öğrenci değişkenleri

INTRODUCTION

The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC), which was originally developed with respect to L1 communication (Yu, 2009), emerged in the mid 1980s (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). McCroskey & Richmond (1987) defined it as a person's ordinary self direction to conversing. It was MacIntyre and Charos (1996) who applied the WTC model to L2 contexts. MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) described L2 WTC as preparedness to access to discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons, utilizing L2. They emphasized that the goal of L2 or FL learning should be to create in language learners the eagerness to find out communication opportunities and the eagerness to interact in them. In this vein, ESL/EFL teachers should try to establish student-friendly and positive classroom environment so that learners could be more willing to talk in the classroom. In a non-threatening and motivating environment, learners can construct a better interaction not only with their peers but also with the teacher, which will, undoubtedly, foster the learning process to a great extent (Akbarzadeh & Narafshan, 2016).

During the past twenty years, many research studies have been done on WTC in L2 in a variety of countries including US and Canada (e.g., Clément, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Conrod, 2001; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2003), England (e.g., Edwards, 2006), Germany (e.g., Sarah, 2013), Spain (e.g., Lahuerta, 2014; Rico, 2015), Italy (e.g., Aiello, Martino & Sabato, 2015), Japan (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; Watanabe, 2013; Yashima & Zenuk, 2008; Yashima, Zenuk & Shimizu, 2004), China (e.g., Peng, 2007; Xie, 2011; Yang, 2015), Iran (e.g., Akbarzadeh & Narafshan, 2016; Alemi, Tajeddin & Mesbah, 2013; Aliakbari & Mahjoob, 2016; Baghaei, Dourakhshan & Salavati, 2012; Ghanbarpour, 2016; Jamaledin, 2015; Moazzam, 2014) and Turkey (e.g., Asmalı, 2016; Bektaş, 2005; Öz, Demirezen & Pourfiez, 2015; Şener, 2014).

Despite numerous studies done on L2 WTC in the world as well as in our country, Turkish university students' WTC in English has not been investigated by researchers. Hence, this study attempted to examine university students' WTC in English at a state university located in the West part of Turkey. The main purpose was to reveal university students' level of WTC in English and explore the possible relationships among some learner variables (e.g. age, gender, major and having direct contact with English speaking people) and L2 WTC.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last two decades, many researchers have investigated learner variables to explain the variations in learners' rate and degree of achievement in mastering L2 or

FL. One of the learner variables which has recently attracted researchers in the field of second or foreign language learning is WTC (Akbarzadeh & Narafshan, 2016). In the literature, researchers investigated the effect of age on one's willingness to communicate. While some researchers (e.g., Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004; Lu, 2007) found that people's degree of WTC increased with age, other researchers (e.g., Alemi, Tajettin & Mesbah, 2013; Aliakbari & Mahjoob, 2016) revealed that age did not have any impact on students' WTC in English.

The effect of gender on L2 communication has received much interest in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) with various results. While some researchers (e.g. MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovan, 2002; Maftoon & Sarem, 2013) found that female students were more willing to communicate in English than male students, some researchers (e.g., Jamaledin, 2015) unearthed that male students were more willing to communicate than female students. On the other side, some researchers (e.g., Afghari & Sadeghi, 2012; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Valadi, Rezaee & Baharvand, 2015) found that there were no significant differences between male and female students' WTC in English.

Related to the effect of major on students' WTC, researchers (e.g., Alemi, Tajettin & Mesbah, 2013) found that major did not have any effect on students' WTC in English. In Alemi, Tajettin & Mesbah's (2013) research study, students were categorized into three basic groups as mathematics, arts and science. The results of the descriptive statistics showed that students of Art were superior to students of the other two groups. However, the results of the ANOVA tests revealed that there were no significant disciplinary differences between students' major and their WTC in English.

Relevant to the effect of having direct contact with English speaking people on WTC in English, while some researchers (e.g., Adachi, 2009) indicated that those who have direct contact with English speaking people can exhibit positive attitude toward English speaking cultures and nationalities and hence they can have high level of WTC in English, other researchers (e.g., Csizer & Kormos, 2009) found that direct contact with L2 speakers did not affect students' attitude toward the target cultures and nationalities and hence they did not have high level of WTC in English. Csizer & Kormos (2009) also revealed that students' millieu and indirect contact with L2 speakers affected their attitudes toward L2 cultures and WTC in English.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sample characteristics

A total of 328 students who studied English as a foreign language at a state university located in the West part of Turkey participated in the present study. The subjects were randomly selected. One hundred and fourteen were males and two hundred and fourteen were females. The participants were divided into five groups in terms of their majors such as science, arts and humanities, engineering, health and applied sciences. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean of 20. Thirty eight students had direct contact with English speaking people at the university,

while two hundred and ninety students did not have direct contact with English speaking people at the university.

2.2. Instrument and data collection

The data for this study were collected by using McCroskey's (1992) willingness to communicate (WTC) scale. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part asked about personal information such as age, gender, major and having direct contact with English speaking people at the university. The second part of the questionnaire had twenty items assessing L2 learners' WTC in English. Data from the eight filler items were not analyzed. The items of the questionnaire were translated into Turkish to increase the comprehensibility of the scale. A back translation method was utilized to provide the consistency of item translations from English to Turkish. The participants expressed how often they would prefer to communicate in each type of situation from 0 (never) to 100 (always). While the internal consistency of the original scale was $\alpha = .94$, the internal consistency of the scale for the present study was $\alpha = .86$, which showed a high level of reliability.

After getting permission from academic unit administrators, the questionnaires were given to randomly selected university students (N=328) who studied English as a foreign language at four different academic units (Faculty of Arts and Science, Faculty of Engineering, School of Health and School of Applied Science) of a state university located in the West part of Turkey during March 2017. All questionnaires were filled out by students in their regular classroom hours and it took the students about 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

2.3. Data analysis

In the present study, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 16.0) was utilized for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to indicate the participants' demographic features and their willingness to communicate. To measure the participants' WTC scores, McCroskey's (1992) suggested norm for total WTC score (total WTC >82 High Overall WTC, <52 Low Overall WTC) was utilized. A series of independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were also employed to explore the effects of learner variables such as age, gender, major and having direct contact with English speaking people on university EFL learners' WTC.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Students' scores on questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire indicated that although students who studied English as a foreign language at a state university had moderate WTC with respect to (a) talking in a small group of friends (item 19, M=75.53; SD=26.62), (b) talking with a friend while standing in line (item 9, M=73.32; SD=26.40), (c) talking with an acquaintance while standing in line (item 4, M=70.12; SD=24.71), (d) talking in a large meeting of acquaintances (item 11, M=63.03; SD=29.90), (e) talking in a small group of acquaintances (item 15, M=60.44; SD=25.93), (f) talking in a large meeting of friends (item 6, M=58.99; SD=28.52), (g) presenting a talk to a group of acquaintances (item 20,

M=57.09; SD=28.62), h) presenting a talk to a group of friends (item 14, M=53.28; SD=27.83), they had low WTC with respect to (a) talking in a large meeting of strangers (item 17, M=35.37; SD=30.28), (b) presenting a talk to a group of strangers (item 3, M=36.51; SD=31.75), (c) talking with a stranger while standing in line (item 12, M=39.79; SD=29.24) and (d) talking in a small group of strangers (item 8, M=40.17; SD=29.66). Overall, students had moderate WTC in English (M=55.30; SD=28.29). This result supported the result of Peng (2014) who found that students were moderately willing to communicate in English.

3.2. Age and students' WTC in English

Table 1. Students' WTC in English with respect to age

	Item #			F(Anova)	p
	18-20	(2) 21-23	(3) 24-24+		
	(n=141)	(n=166)	(n=21)		
	(M, SD)	(M, SD)	(M, SD)		
3	36.52 (30.25)	34.94 (32.90)	48.81 (31.11)	1.79	0.17
4	70.04 (24.86)	70.33 (24.71)	69.05 (24.88)	0.03	0.97
6	57.09 (28.40)	61.30 (27.74)	53.57 (34.72)	1.24	0.29
8	39.89 (29.73)	40.36 (29.86)	40.48 (29.02)	0.01	0.99
9	74.47 (25.26)	73.34 (26.99)	65.48 (29.02)	1.06	0.35
11	64.89 (29.12)	62.95 (29.86)	51.19 (33.98)	1.93	0.15
12	40.07 (29.26)	39.16 (29.57)	42.86 (27.55)	0.16	0.85
14	53.72 (26.88)	53.31 (28.00)	50.00 (33.54)	0.16	0.85
15	61.88 (25.81)	60.24 (25.68)	52.38 (28.40)	1.24	0.29
17	38.30 (29.81)	33.89 (30.53)	27.38 (30.52)	1.60	0.20
19	75.00 (26.05)	77.11 (26.60)	66.67 (29.93)	1.49	0.23
20	57.09 (27.92)	57.98 (28.74)	50.00 (32.60)	0.73	0.49
Overall	55.75 (27.78)	55.41 (28.43)	51.49 (30.44)	Score	

* $p < 0.05$

To compare the possible differences derived from age groups, the researcher classified participants into three groups: age 18-20 group, age 21-23 group and age 24-24+ group. As seen in table 1, the results of the descriptive statistics indicated that students at the age 18-20 group (M=55.75, SD=27.78) were more willing to communicate in English than students at the age 21-23 group (M=55.41, SD=28.43) and those at the age 24-24+ group (M=51.49, SD=30.44). This outcome indicated that students' WTC in English decreased as they got older. However, the results of the ANOVA tests showed that age did not have any impact on students' WTC. Hence, it can be stated that the results of this study are in line with those of Alemi, Tajettin and Mesbah (2013) and Aliakbari & Mahjoob (2016) who indicated that age did not have any impact on students' WTC in English.

3.3. Gender differences on WTC in English

Table 2. Students' WTC in English with respect to gender

Item #	Male (n=114) (M, SD)	Female (n=214) (M, SD)	t-value	df	p
3	36.84 (32.11)	36.33 (31.63)	0.138	326	0.89
4	70.61 (25.60)	69.86 (24.28)	0.263	326	0.79
6	56.36 (29.90)	60.40 (27.73)	-1.222	326	0.22
8	42.54 (30.10)	38.90 (29.41)	1.059	326	0.29
9	72.37 (29.07)	73.83 (24.91)	-0.478	326	0.63
11	62.50 (31.77)	62.32 (28.93)	-0.236	326	0.81
12	42.11 (31.26)	38.55 (28.10)	1.048	326	0.30
14	52.41 (30.11)	53.74 (26.60)	-0.410	326	0.68
15	59.43 (27.51)	60.98 (25.10)	-0.515	326	0.61
17	36.62 (30.52)	34.70 (30.20)	0.548	326	0.58
19	74.78 (28.12)	75.93 (25.85)	-0.373	326	0.71
20	56.14 (29.29)	57.59 (28.32)	-0.437	326	0.66
Overall Score	55.23 (29.61)	55.26 (27.59)			

* $p < 0.05$

As seen in table 2, the results of descriptive statistics revealed that the total mean of WTC in English for female students ($M=55.26$, $SD=27.59$) was higher than the total mean of WTC in English for male students ($M=55.23$, $SD=29.61$), which indicated that female students were more willing to communicate in English than male students. However, a series of Independent-Samples T tests which were performed to compare male students' mean scores for WTC in English with female students' mean scores for WTC in English indicated that none of the twelve items examined was found to be significantly different. This finding provided evidence in support of Afghari & Sadeghi (2012), Baker & MacIntyre (2000), Moazzam (2014), Nadafian & Mehrdad (2015) and Valadi, Rezaee, Baharvand (2015) who indicated that there were no significant differences between male and female students' mean scores with respect to their willingness to communicate in English.

3.4. Major and students' WTC in English

Table 3. Students' WTC in English with respect to major

Item #	Major					F(Anova)	p Scheffe Test
	(1) (n=80) (M, SD)	(2)A (n=70) (M, SD)	(3) ENG (n=62) (M, SD)	(4) H (n=47)	(5) ASCI. (n=69) (M, SD)		
3	33.13 (30.24)	40.36 (34.13)	47.18 (34.80)	30.85 (27.69)	30.80 (28.49)	3.25	0.01*
4	70.94 (22.66)	68.93 (26.73)	68.55 (25.98)	70.74 (24.07)	71.38 (24.73)	0.18	0.95
6	63.75 (26.05)	61.07 (26.80)	58.47 (31.99)	55.85 (26.69)	53.99 (30.51)	1.33	0.26
8	39.38 (26.91)	46.43 (31.36)	43.15 (34.53)	36.70 (26.50)	34.42 (27.49)	1.78	0.13
9	74.06 (23.35)	78.57 (23.03)	66.94 (33.81)	73.40 (23.55)	72.83 (26.69)	1.63	0.17
11	64.06 (28.64)	66.43 (29.45)	64.52 (33.74)	59.57 (26.86)	59.42 (30.35)	0.69	0.60
12	37.19 (24.84)	39.29 (31.15)	39.52 (34.04)	45.74 (26.74)	39.49 (29.21)	0.65	0.63
14	52.50 (26.86)	61.43 (26.47)	51.21 (31.17)	53.19 (26.38)	47.83 (27.03)	2.30	0.06
15	58.44 (25.76)	67.86 (23.37)	59.68 (29.11)	60.64 (21.96)	55.80 (27.17)	2.15	0.08
17	34.38 (31.67)	39.64 (33.38)	35.08 (27.71)	39.36 (28.90)	29.71 (28.20)	1.18	0.32
19	71.88 (28.79)	80.71 (22.19)	80.24 (26.83)	73.94 (24.98)	71.38 (28.20)	2.01	0.09
20	55.63 (26.97)	65.36 (26.00)	59.27 (32.08)	52.13 (30.76)	51.81 (26.88)	2.59	0.04*
Overall Score	54.61 (26.90)	59.67 (27.84)	56.15 (31.32)	54.34 (26.26)	51.57 (27.91)		

* $p < 0.05$ SCI=Science, A=Arts, ENG=Engineering, H=Health, ASCI=Applied Sciences

Overall, the results of descriptive statistics revealed that the total mean of WTC in English for Arts students ($M=59.67$, $SD=27.84$) was higher than the total means of Engineering students ($M=56.15$, $SD=31.32$), Science students ($M=54.61$, $SD=26.90$), Health students ($M=54.34$, $SD=26.26$) and Applied Science students ($M=51.57$, $SD=27.91$). This outcome showed that Arts students were more willing than the other four groups. The researchers also conducted a series of ANOVA test analyses to evaluate the possible interactions between students' major and their WTC in English. The ANOVA tests displayed that students' major had impact on two items (3, 20) of WTC scale ($p < 0.05$).

After the ANOVA tests, a series of post hoc tests (Scheffe tests) were performed to make multiple comparisons among five major groups. These comparisons indicated that Engineering students were more willing to present a talk to a group of strangers than the other four groups (item 3, $F=3.25$, $p < 0.05$). They also revealed that Arts

students were more willing to present a talk to a group of acquaintances than the other four groups (item 20, $F=2.59$, $p < 0.05$). Based on the multiple comparisons made among five major groups, overall, we can infer that Arts students were more willing to communicate in English than the other four major groups. Hence, it can be indicated that the results of this study were contrary to those of Alemi, Tajettin and Mesbah (2013) who indicated that major did not have any impact on students' WTC in English.

3.5. Having direct contact with English speaking people and students' WTC in English

Table 4. Students' WTC in English with respect to having direct contact with English speaking people

Item #	Students who have direct contact with English speaking people (n=38) (M, SD)	Students who do not have direct contact with English speaking people (n=290) (M, SD)	t-value	df	p
3	58.55 (37.79)	33.62 (29.76)	4.696	326	0.00*
4	75.66 (23.60)	69.40 (24.80)	1.471	326	0.14
6	66.45 (33.53)	58.02 (27.71)	1.718	326	0.09
8	58.55 (31.98)	37.76 (28.53)	4.164	326	0.00*
9	73.03 (26.88)	73.36 (26.38)	-0.074	326	0.94
11	71.71 (32.45)	61.90 (29.42)	1.910	326	0.06
12	53.95 (29.94)	37.93 (28.68)	3.220	326	0.00*
14	61.84 (32.74)	52.16 (27.00)	2.027	326	0.09
15	69.74 (26.74)	59.22 (25.62)	2.366	326	0.03*
17	39.47 (25.75)	34.83 (30.82)	0.889	326	0.31
19	81.58 (25.12)	74.74 (26.75)	1.491	326	0.12
20	60.53 (30.00)	56.64 (28.46)	0.787	326	0.45
Overall Score	64.26 (27.46)	54.13 (27.83)			

* $p < 0.05$

As displayed in table 4, the results of descriptive statistics revealed that the total mean of WTC in English for students who have direct contact with English speaking people ($M=64.26$, $SD=27.46$) was higher than the total mean of WTC in English for students who do not have direct contact with English speaking people ($M=54.13$, $SD=27.83$). This outcome indicated that students who have direct contact with English speaking were more willing to communicate in English than students who do not have direct contact with English speaking people. Moreover, a series of Independent-Samples T tests were performed to compare the mean scores of students who have direct contact with English speaking people with those who do not have direct contact with English speaking people. The results of these Independent-Samples T tests unearthed that there were significant differences between students who have direct

contact with English speaking people and students who do not have direct contact with English speaking people with respect to four items (3,8,12,15) in WTC scale.

More specifically, students who have direct contact with English speaking people (M=58.55, SD=37.79) were more willing to present a talk to a group of strangers than those who do not have direct contact with English speaking people (M=33.62, SD=29.76) (item 3, $t(4.696)$, $p = 0.00$, $p < .05$). Students who have direct contact with English speaking people (M=58.55, SD=31.98) were more willing to talk in a small group of strangers than those who do not have direct contact with English speaking people (M=37.76, SD=28.53) (item 8, $t(4.164)$, $p = 0.00$, $p < .05$). Students who have direct contact with English speaking people (M=53.95, SD=29.94) were more willing to talk with a stranger while standing in line than those who do not have direct contact with English speaking people (M=37.93, SD=28.68) (item 12, $t(3.220)$, $p = 0.00$, $p < .05$). Students who have direct contact with English speaking people (M=69.74, SD=26.74) were more willing to talk in a small group of acquaintances than those who do not have direct contact with English speaking people (M=59.22, SD=25.62) (item 15, $t(2.366)$, $p = 0.03$, $p < .05$). These results were in line with those of Adachi (2009) who indicated that students who had direct contact with English speaking people can be more willing to communicate in English than those not contacting with English speaking people.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that students had moderate WTC in English. While it was found in the study that learner variables such as *major* and *having direct contact with English speaking people* had impact on university students' willingness to communicate in English, learner variables such as *age* and *gender* were not found to have impact on their WTC in English.

Unfortunately, most university students in our country are unwilling to communicate in English within and beyond the classroom context due to fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence and low English proficiency, crowded classes, etc. In this vein, then, for increasing students' WTC in English, teachers should give students the chance to talk by increasing the amount of time allocated to student talk and reducing the amount of time for teacher talk (Harmer, 2000; Zhou & Zhou, 2002). According to Nazari & Allahyar (2012), teachers can boost their students' level of participation by:

- raising students' opportunity to talk,
- engaging all students equally in classroom activities,
- letting students produce language without limitations,
- reflecting on their interactional behavior by video taping themselves in the classroom,
- involving students in classroom activities,
- recalling and practising the rule of thumb: *Tell me and I will forget; teach me and I will remember; involve me and I will learn.*

- maximizing their own awareness of appropriate interaction strategies that are applicable to specific students

Former studies in the related literature have also shown that teachers have active roles in encouraging WTC (e.g., Vongsila & Reinders, 2016). More specifically, they can increase students' WTC in English by reducing group size (Léger & Storch, 2009), familiarizing students with the interlocutors and discussed topics (Cao & Philip, 2006), creating a student-friendly and positive environment (Riasati, 2014) and giving students the chance to interact with their peers (Philp et al., 2014).

Finally, as Zarrinabadi (2014) indicates, teachers can impact their students' WTC in English by encouraging students to negotiate topics, concentrating more on students' a priori knowledge, knowing and adapting methods of error correction, allocating more time for thinking and reflection prior to responding to students' questions, and by establishing a learning context in which the learners feel comfortable, secure and supported.

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