

The Role of Language Proficiency in Willingness to Communicate: A Case Study of Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study's principal aim revolves around expanding comprehension of the facets affecting people's readiness to use foreign languages. To achieve that, the study investigates the various elements of verbal interaction between undergraduate English as a Foreign Language learners and their instructors in the classroom. Linguistic skills are of particular interest, especially their connection to learners' readiness to speak during classes. The research aims to answer the question 'How does language proficiency affect the willingness to communicate among Saudi EFL students in the classroom?' Qualitative data was gathered through the implementation of a triangulation strategy that incorporated focus-group discussions and individual interviews. Moreover, the research takes inspiration from the work of MacIntyre (1994) and MacIntyre and Charos (1996), who focused on learners' readiness to speak as the conceptual basis for their studies. The study shows that learners exhibit an unwillingness to speak in EFL settings due to perceived linguistic inadequacies, a limited lexicon and concerns that they may make mistakes when attempting to speak English, which would, in turn, prompt further misunderstandings. The study concludes with recommendations for further studies in similar institutions to investigate other factors that may influence students' willingness to communicate.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, language proficiency, willingness to communicate, Saudi EFL learners

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Introduction

The governments of Saudi Arabia as well as its people understands the importance of English and consider it as a source of professional growth that plays a significant role in international trade. Thus, it becomes vital for specialists in this field to examine all aspects of teaching and learning English as a foreign language in order to fill the gaps and promote the levels of fluency.

This study hopes to contribute to such issues by investigating the factors that affect oral communication in EFL classrooms in Saudi higher education. It is hoped to establish the reasons for the oral communication difficulties experienced in EFL classrooms and to look for ways to address these issues in terms of teaching and learning in order to improve the learning experiences of students in EFL courses. It is also hoped that the study becomes valuable for local and regional decision makers and course designers and provides teachers with knowledge about teaching oral communication skills in EFL classrooms.

This study aims to answer one main question and two sub-questions. These questions are as following:

How does language proficiency affect the willingness to communicate among Saudi EFL students in the classroom?

- a) How does the lack of vocabulary affect the willingness to communicate in Saudi EFL students in the classroom?
- b) How does incorrect pronunciation affect the willingness to communicate in Saudi EFL students in the classroom?

Literature Review

Research into first languages led to the development of the notion of Willingness to Communicate, otherwise known as WTC, in additional languages. The concept of WTC was formulated in response to ongoing communication during the use of native languages in communal environments (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990; McCroskey, 1997). Studies of the willingness to communicate in first languages aid the growth of WTC in utilizing second languages, the usage of which tends to involve more complications than speaking in a native tongue (MacIntyre, D'oronyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). The conceptual framework of second language WTC, as posited by MacIntyre et al. (1998), expands upon the L1 willingness to communicate model founded by McCroskey and Baer (1985, as cited in MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). The second language framework offers a clarification of the cognitive process involved in L2 interactions and uses a pyramid model to describe speakers' usage of such languages (MacIntyre et al., 1998). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998) communicating during the second-language acquisition process demonstrates a willingness to use L2 when interacting with others in different scenarios. This framework represents the cognitive activity wherein different elements come together and help speakers in their attempts to interact using second languages.

The WTC framework consists of 12 elements spread over six layers and collected together in two levels: situational variables and individual influences. The former involves different aspects, such as the speaker's eagerness to communicate with other people, and comprises the first three layers. These elements respond to the unique requirements of any given interaction and demonstrate flexibility because they can be applied in numerous ways and

settings. Meanwhile, the individual variables, as demonstrated by, for example, personal relationships and the speaker's character, are found in layers four to six and represent a person's fixed attributes which are applicable as required.

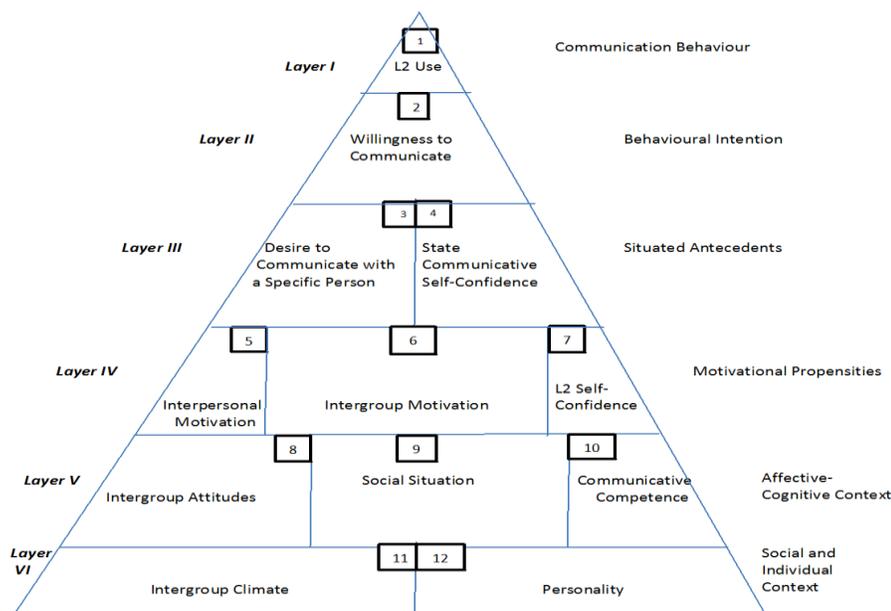


Figure 1. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model of variables influencing WTC

One of the model's variables is state communicative self-confidence, referring to the "overall belief in being able to communicate in L2 in an adaptive and efficient manner" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 551). It is a construct that consists of two dimensions: state anxiety and state perceived competence (Clement, 1986). The former reflects a speaker's beliefs about their communication ability when engaging in conversation (MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Meanwhile, the latter demonstrates the level of concern experienced by a speaker when using a second language and can stem from different elements or previous experiences that had a detrimental impact on them. Thus, the ability to acquire an additional language and competently use it can be based on different factors, such as an adequate lexicon, fluent speaking skills and linguistic comprehension. Therefore, this study investigated the role of language proficiency in WTC among Saudi learners in English as Foreign Language courses at the university.

Language Proficiency

According to Assulaimani, (2019) for the majority of learners, the goal of their attempts to acquire a second language is achieving a level of competence comparable to that of native speakers. During the initial stages of the learning process, many students' limited linguistic skills prompt a reluctance to engage during English as a Foreign Language classes. Hamouda (2013) found that, in one area of research, approximately 75 per cent of learners believed their lack of

proficiency impeded their attempts to progress. Additionally, Zhiu (2013) argues that a principal aspect hindering learners' involvement in the spoken aspect of English classes is their linguistic skill. Concerns over language fluency constitute an area of potential anxiety for EFL students (Thaher, 2005). Limited linguistic skills can manifest themselves in the majority of areas of language acquisition, such as diction and syntax. Research rarely focuses on the latter because meaning can be gleaned during interaction even if speakers make mistakes. However, diction or a limited lexicon can result in engagement issues when speaking, as the next section will illustrate.

According to Hamouda (2013), diction and articulation represent a major area of concern for EFL students. In many cases, pronunciation proves to be the element causing the most issues, which proves to be a further hindrance when attempting to learn the language (Al-Saidat, 2010). Thaher (2005) study shows that students are fearful of receiving criticism if they make any mistakes when attempting to pronounce words or phrases. Furthermore, Hamouda (2013) found that the majority of research subjects expressed concern over their diction abilities, particularly when communicating in front of their classmates. Approximately three-quarters stated they would feel embarrassed if they pronounced something incorrectly and considered the notion to be a cause of anxiety. An additional study by Abu Alyan (2013) focused on the communication concerns experienced by 20 learners majoring in English at university in Gaza. This study revealed that the principal area of concern for learners revolved around pronouncing words incorrectly. From a technical standpoint, word stresses, different types of intonation and pronunciation difficulties can prompt an unwillingness from students to engage in language learning, meaning they stay quiet during lessons and miss the opportunity to improve their skills. Abu Alyan (2013) also found that diction can be a major hindrance for learners attempting to improve their fluency levels.

A limited stock of words can result in low linguistic skills, with students who find themselves in that situation experiencing difficulties when attempting to communicate in a second language. According to Abu Alyan (2013), lexical concerns often represent a major problem for students during the process of acquiring an additional language.

Hamouda (2013) expanded upon this idea by stating that restricted word bases can seriously hinder the learning process and harm learners' willingness to participate fully in lessons. For instance, not knowing the correct word may leave students anxious when they try to communicate orally in English. Consequently, they hold themselves back and take on a more silent, passive role rather than actively attempting to improve their speaking skills. Rabab'ah (2005) encountered such a situation and confirmed that a principal cause of communication struggles for Arab students learning English centres upon their limited vocabularies. This is particularly true of spoken and written communication and means learners lack the ability to adequately convey their thoughts and feelings. Conversely, having a wide vocabulary and strong comprehension can result in improved linguistic expertise, which, in turn, leaves speakers feeling more confident and prepared to deploy their language skills.

Methods

This research used a qualitative approach which afforded the opportunity to acquire in-depth data that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain using a quantitative approach. Both

MacIntyre (1994) and MacIntyre and Charos (1996) informed this study, particularly their viewpoints concerning the adoption of willingness to communicate as a conceptual basis for research.

Participants

Participants were chosen due to having finished numerous course programs over the course of their studies. The research saw the students grouped into five collectives of six individuals, while the individual interviews involved the trio of instructors and two learners.

In terms of sampling, the groups were chosen in a specific manner to acquire the maximum amount of information from limited resources (Creswell, 2008). Thus, the study could focus on different factors, such as the ages or genders of the participants, and create a more thorough information base. Additionally, the use of the opportunity sampling technique during individual interviews underwent consideration following the commencement of the research. Such a technique represents the opportunity to uncover additional elements that could have a potentially important role in the research process.

Thirty-three subjects took part in the research, of whom three were English language instructors and the remainder were third-year undergraduate EFL learners chosen from three English language classes.

Instruments

This study saw information collected via focus group discussions followed by individual interviews. The data-gathering process featured the usage of triangulation, which is a notable strategy incorporating numerous research techniques to evaluate a sole element. Furthermore, such a technique results in greater accuracy thanks to the ability to verify data from numerous perspectives.

Procedures

Due to the instructors' fluency, they were interviewed in English during the individual interviews. The students were interviewed in Arabic, their first language, in both group and individual settings. This allowed the participants to converse without any of the struggles that could potentially result when speaking a second language. The post-interview transcriptions were translated in English and certified by an individual who was fluent in speaking both Arabic and English.

The focus group discussion lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, while the individual interview typically took between 20 minutes and half an hour. Flexibility during the research process was provided by the use of semi-structured interview. This approach meant the researcher could alter the questions and expand on any particular points based on the content of the interviews. The discussions began with a set of specific questions but evolved into a more conversational setting.

Findings and Discussion

This segment involves an evaluation of the information obtained from the focus groups and the individual interviews during the research process. The information gathered from all the

interviewees was collated and any common thematic points established. Such universal themes include limited vocabularies, diction and articulation concerns and experience of the target language. All of the study's subjects stated that limited English skills represent a principal reason for learners' lack of willingness to try and engage or interact during lessons. According to Teacher A (TA), the students' proficiency in English can cause problems when they attempt to convey a message.

But, I think the problem is their ability, their strength in English...their ability to try to express and communicate their ideas. (Interview with TA)

TeacherT (TT) aligned with this viewpoint and backed the notion that limited English abilities constitute a primary reason for the hindrance of learners' attempts to fully take part in EFL classes. According to TT, the learners have a low level of English and because they have limited access to programs where they can speak and listen, they encounter barriers that mean they rarely have the chance to improve their linguistic abilities. For instance, they may not have a sufficiently large vocabulary, which, in turn, manifests in restricted use of the English language and subsequent interaction struggles. Although the learners may demonstrate a willingness to engage, they tend to do so in Arabic because of insufficient L2 abilities. Moreover, not enough time is given over to helping expand these skills.

Students' level is low. In our department, speaking and listening courses are few which is an obstacle for the students as they do not have enough opportunity to participate or to develop their speaking skills. They do not have enough vocabulary to assist them in discussion. This is the major problem they have; the linguistic level is low. We find them willing to participate and interact but their interaction is in Arabic because their English is weak. In addition, the time given for such activities is not enough. (Interview with TT)

Student five (S5) offered an additional interpretation by stating that learners' prowess in the classroom affects their ability to communicate verbally. Thus, if a learner demonstrates strong linguistic skills, the communication exponentially improves. However, limited oral abilities mean students may hesitate and not engage as fully as they otherwise might.

Students' academic level has an effect in their oral communication. If the student's language is good, it will help in that. For me, sometimes I hesitate to participate and communicate orally because of the low language level I have. (Interview with S5)

Numerous studies have supported this notion and dictate that limited English abilities can prove to be a hindrance in terms of communication (Assulamani and Alqurashi, 2021; Zhou, 2016).

Lack of Vocabulary

According to Abu Alyan (2013), a strong lexical base and language expertise result in improved oral skills and increased understanding. Thus, learners in possession of a less-thorough vocabulary can experience difficulties when they attempt to express themselves in a second language. From this perspective, an insufficient vocabulary can prompt concerns for students during the second-language acquisition process. This research uncovered a similar viewpoint when one of the instructors stated that such problems lead to students not taking part in lessons. Abu Alyan (2013) found lexical shortcomings can prove harmful and may prompt an

unwillingness by students to engage and interact with other learners or their teachers during classes. This viewpoint was shared by TT, who stated that learners do not have a sufficiently wide vocabulary, with the result being that their language abilities are correspondingly low.

They (students) do not have enough vocabulary items that assist them in discussion. This is the major problem they have; the linguistic level is low. (Interview with TT)

According to S5, learners' limited vocabularies can result in decreased engagement and interaction during classes, with the upshot being lower academic achievement. Moreover, learners are fearful that they may make pronunciation mistakes, and these fears drive them to participate less. A potential reason for this uncertainty revolves around certain instructors' teaching styles, which may be detrimental to improving learners' English language capabilities.

Based on my experience, I have a problem in my academic level caused by the lack of vocabulary. In addition to the fact that we habitually do not pronounce words correctly the fear of committing errors lessens my participation. It is attributed to the fact that the teacher does not use a suitable teaching style that helps in developing my level. (Interview with S5)

Such concerns were supported by Rabab'ah (2005), who determined that a reason for Arabic students' communication issues when learning English stems from their often limited vocabularies, which lessens their oral or written skills and hinders their ability to convey what they want to say. According to Hamouda (2013), students' vocabularies impact their readiness to engage in the learning process: the higher their vocabularies, the more likely they are to interact. Those with less-complete vocabularies can experience anxiety when they try to speak in English, which can leave them sidelined in a more passive listening role.

Lack of vocabulary remains a reason for many students not wanting to participate orally in lessons. In Focus Group one, some of participants expressed this opinion. FG1-1 and FG1-3 respectively said:

One of the things that hinders oral communication in the classroom is not having enough vocabulary items that may facilitate communication with the teacher. (FG1-1)

The things that hinder oral communication in the classroom are fearfulness, shyness, and lack of vocabulary. (FG1-3)

Additionally, a participant in the third focus group found that the use of Arabic in the classroom facilitates deeper interaction than using English. This is because native Arabic speakers can put ideas into words in a way that they might not be able to if they use a second language due to potential lexical and linguistic limitations.

Incorrect Pronunciation

Concern over pronouncing words contributes to an unwillingness to engage in EFL classes. During students' interviews, they shared their fears over being embarrassed in public or criticised by peers if they mispronounced a word during group activities. According to the learners, lower

academic levels can prove detrimental when speakers attempt to communicate in English during classes. Students are rarely afforded the opportunity by teachers to practice their diction and articulation skill, which leads to situations where learners actively step back from participating in oral activities. This reticence stems from the fact that students can be wary of critical reactions or inadequate communication if they mispronounce anything. The result of situations such as these is a lower academic level and the perpetuation of mistakes because students may not put themselves in the position where they are corrected. S4 and S5 said:

What hinders oral communication in English classrooms is the low academic level especially in pronunciation. We are weak in pronunciation because teachers do not give us opportunities to practice the correct pronunciation of words. Many times, I avoid participation and discussion fearing criticism and students' irony or from miscommunication caused by the incorrect pronunciation of a certain word. (Interview with S4)

Based on my experience, I have a problem in my academic level caused by the lack of vocabulary. This is in addition to the fact that we are in the habit of not pronouncing words correctly ... which lessen my participation. (Interview with S5)

The issue of pronunciation is a prevalent one and can impact learners' participation in learning. Fears over a critical response from peers in case of pronunciation difficulties are a common theme and lead to learners deciding to avoid situations where they might experience communication difficulties. This viewpoint has appeared in different studies, and the feedback provided by the students taking part in the research aligns with the interpretation of Abu Alyan (2013) following an assessment of learners in Palestine studying English. Moreover, Hamouda (2013) study shows that numerous students expressed anxiety about verbal communication, especially in terms of pronouncing words. According to Al-Saidat (2010), pronunciation not only represents a major area of concern for L2 learners but is also the primary issue they face when communicating in English.

The study's focus group engagements saw comparable sentiments being shared by the participants. For instance, one participant in the third focus group stated that low language skill levels, particularly in terms of pronouncing words, can act as a major obstacle when learning English.

The students' low academic level, especially in pronunciation, is one of the English oral communication obstacles. (FG3-6)

This anxiety was shared by the second focus group, who shared their fear of criticism resulting from mispronunciations. Such concerns are compounded by the fact that students may belittle those who make mistakes, or learners fear such an event taking place. Limited language abilities can prove a hindrance when learning English, with oral skills particularly suffering.

Some of the things that hinder our oral communication in the classroom include our low academic level in language in general and in speaking skill in particular. That is also, the fear of committing errors in the pronunciation of some words which lead to being made fun of by some students. (FG2-4)

Thus, learners' willingness to communicate can depend on diction and articulation, with fears over embarrassment or public shaming in case of mispronunciation dictating their involvement in classes. Such concerns can prove to be a significant hindrance to advancing language capabilities and developing overall English skills.

Conclusion

The present study focuses on the oral communication difficulties faced by Saudi EFL students in higher education. It investigates oral communication aspects between Saudi EFL students and their teachers in English classrooms. The focus of the study has been on the variables that impact students' desire to be engaged in communication inside the classroom, so it aimed to find out what encourages them to communicate and what hinders them from doing so. More specifically, this study is an attempt to investigate and establish relationships between variables elicited from the data and Saudi students' willingness to communicate in English classrooms at university level. This present article focuses on the role of language proficiency in students' WTC inside the English classroom. For data collection, the researcher used a triangulation method in which focus-group discussions and individual interviews were used.

Based on the analysis of the views presented by the participants, the results of the study revealed that students are unwilling to communicate in English classes because of their low level of language proficiency, not having a good inventory of vocabulary and knowledge, fear of making pronunciation errors, and a fear of being misunderstood because of these errors. This fear seems to be caused by the possible negative reaction of other students.

This perspective is in line with the views of MacIntyre (1994) and MacIntyre and Charos (1996) on WTC in their argument that communicative self-confidence is a construct that consists of two dimensions: state anxiety and state perceived competence. Finally, this study recommends conducting future studies in similar institutions investigating other factors that may influence students' WTC to be compared with the findings of this study.

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