Shyness and Willingness to Communicate: Levels, Correlations, and Perspectives of Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract
A primary effort has been exerted in the literature to examine how influential affective factors are in language learning. The present study extends these attempts and aims at reviewing the levels of shyness and willingness to communicate among EFL learners and the relation between these two affective factors and their impact on communication skills inside the class from the students’ perspectives. It sheds light on the need to consider the effects of these personal traits on students’ learning. 360 Saudi EFL learners at a Saudi public university completed the shyness and willingness to communicate scales. For further analysis, the researchers interviewed 27 students to explore their perceptions of how these two aspects affect their communication skills inside the class. Quantitative data analysis showed that most participants were at the mid-levels of both scales. Furthermore, there was a negative correlation between the participants’ shyness and their overall willingness to communicate and its subcategories, with the highest correlation value between shyness and these subcategories: strangers, meetings, and public speaking. Qualitative analysis exhibited the participants’ perceptions, misconceptions, correlations of the two variables, and determinants of the participants’ levels of shyness and WTC. The findings of this study shed light on the importance of considering these factors for more successful learning/teaching experiences.

Keywords: communication skills, Saudi EFL learners, shyness, willingness to communicate,

Introduction

A zeal for mastery of language structures characterized the middle decades of the last century (Brown, 2007), and scholars devoted greater attention to cognitive factors such as memory and processing at the expense of learners’ characteristics (Martinez, 2001). But more recently, emphasis was given to developing learners’ communicative competence and using the Foreign/Second Language (FL/SL) for successful communication. Hymes (1972), who coined the term communicative competence, argued that developing such competence enables learners to negotiate meanings in different contexts as a significant goal of successful language learning. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) believed that “communication is more than a means of facilitating language learning; it is an important goal in itself” (p.3).

FL/SL learning, with its interactive nature, involves considering numerous factors and their effects on learners. In addition to external factors such as teaching methodology, internal factors play a vital role in the learning process (Brown, 2007). Known as affective, they influence learners’ overall performance and responses to particular tasks and activities (Ellis, 1994). Such variables are considered one of the reasons behind the variations among FL/SL language learners (Bashosh et al., 2013). Accordingly, students can be distinguished by their characteristics reflected in their actions and behaviors (Sun et al., 2020). Learners show differences in their tendencies to communicate using the target language; some are more active in seeking opportunities, while others are primarily silent (Khajavy et al., 2016). Neglecting such differences may result in unsuccessful learning atmospheres (Spark et al., 2018).

Shyness and willingness to communicate (WTC) are two affective factors that can contribute to the understanding of variations among learners in their tendencies to share in the target language. Researchers have studied WTC in diverse settings with different focuses (e.g., Bensalem, 2022; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Khajavy et al., 2016; Khajavy et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021). Similarly, shyness has received the attention of researchers in different learning situations (e.g., Babapoor et al., 2018; Kong et al., 2023; Oflaz, 2019; Sadeghi & Soleimani, 2016). The relationship between shyness and WTC has also attracted researchers’ attention in various learning settings (Bashosh et al., 2013; Lan et al., 2021; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982; Mohammadian, 2013; Rebecca Chu, 2008).

Despite the extensive body of research on shyness and WTC, the relation between these two particular constructs in the Saudi context was not sufficiently examined in the literature. To the researchers’ best knowledge, no studies explored the relation between shyness and WTC and their effects on communication skills inside the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university class. To fill this gap, this study examines the levels of shyness and WTC among Saudi EFL learners and the relation between these affective factors. The study also focuses on investigating the effects of these factors on communication skills inside the class from the student’s perspectives. This study is significant in identifying the impact of these two factors on EFL learning. Because students vary significantly in these personal traits, this study follows the theoretical framework adopted by McCroskey and Richmond (1991), as these features are significantly involved in
communication, psychology, and education. Precisely, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the level of shyness among Saudi EFL university learners?
2. What is the level of WTC among Saudi EFL university learners?
3. What is the relation between shyness and WTC among Saudi EFL university learners?
4. What are the effects of shyness and WTC on communication skills inside the class from the learners’ perspectives?

5. Literature Review

Willingness to Communicate

The concept of WTC in First Language (L1) communication is a personality trait that reflects the stable predisposition to communicate consistently across different communicative situations (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). In an FL context, WTC is “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p 547). MacIntyre (1994) proposed a model that considers the relations among individual difference variables such as communication apprehension and shyness and their contribution to WTC.

Nevertheless, many other variables can affect the individual’s level of WTC, such as the relation between communicators and the topic under discussion. Perhaps the most dramatic one is the language used in communication because, compared to the L1, there is a greater variety in communicative competence in the L2. This led to proposing the pyramid model that considers the effects of linguistic, communicative, and contextual factors on L2 WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Because of the different communication opportunities in the target language and the competencies that learners should possess in such situations, FL/SL WTC was seen as more variable than L1 WTC (Khajavy et al., 2018).

The concept of L2 WTC has always been an affluent area of investigation that researchers have dealt with from different angles (Altunel, 2021; Bahremand & Saeid, 2023; Başöz & Erten, 2018; Chojimah & Widodo, 2023; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Karbakhsh & Ahmadi Safa, 2020; Lee & Lu, 2023; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Shahisavandi, 2023; Turjoman, 2016). Pawlak et al. (2016) believed in the importance of creating communicative classroom environments through a deeper understanding of the factors underlying L2 learners’ willingness and hesitancy to communicate, which in turn contributes to better linguistic achievements. They found that learners were more willing to speak in pairs or groups with familiar receivers than strangers to discuss their experience-related topics. Examining the within-person variability of WTC, Zhang et al. (2022) found a systematic variation in WTC among EFL learners affected by the psychological properties of learning settings, such as teacher support and level of task importance. Students with higher levels of WTC resulting from task interest accomplished higher scores at the end of the semester.

MacIntyre and Wang (2021) examined the impact of ESL learners’ prior experiences on levels of WTC. Learners’ tendency to communicate was affected by psychological and contextual
factors, some of which were immediate, such as their desire to speak and confidence, while others were distal, such as previous learning experience and communicative competence. In addition to perceived competencies, past, present, and future emotions shaped variations of levels of WTC. Lee et al. (2022) indicated that EFL learners with greater motivation and lower L2 speaking anxiety were more willing to communicate inside the classroom, while those with higher levels of self-confidence and risk-taking were more willing to share outside the classroom. Younger learners with higher levels of self-confidence in English and who engaged more in virtual intercultural experiences had higher levels of WTC in digital settings.

Khajavy et al. (2018) examined the relations between emotions, classroom environment, and WTC in an EFL context. They found that a positive classroom environment can enhance WTC and enjoyment, which in turn reduces anxiety among EFL learners. Turjoman (2016) showed a significant difference in the students’ levels of WTC in English based on their private and public-school education. Language proficiency can also influence WTC among Saudi EFL learners, as indicated by Alqurashi and Althubaiti (2021). They found that the participants were unwilling to communicate due to inadequate linguistic knowledge, a limited lexicon, and fear of making mistakes when speaking English.

**Shyness**

Numerous researchers have sought to describe shyness, what causes it, and what to do about it. McCroskey and Richmond (1982) clarified that shyness is the product of social anxiety, unimproved social skills, and low self-esteem. Shyness is a sustained attribute associated with tension, inhibition, discomfort when interacting with others, and an inclination to escape the probable feeling of uneasiness and worriedness in social contacts (Tong et al., 2011). The concept of shyness as an affective factor in the field of FL learning has been tackled from different angles (Ahsan et al., 2020; Alavinia & Salmasi, 2012; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; Jones et al., 1986; Liu, 2006; Marchand et al., 2023; Mohammadian, 2013; Poole & Schmidt, 2020; Tian, 2022).

In general, shyness is likely to restrict FL achievement. Learners may tend to remain inactive in the classroom because of the fear of making mistakes and being evaluated as non-proficient (Liu, 2006). As a part of his study, Oflaz (2019) investigated the effect of shyness on speaking proficiency and academic achievement of university students learning German as an FL. The findings indicated that shyness would predict nearly 25% of FL learners’ educational attainment. He further asserted that learners’ shyness increases as they reflect higher levels of anxiety to speak in the classroom.

Namaghi et al. (2015), after examining the relationship between EFL students’ shyness and speaking proficiency, attested that there was a moderate negative correlation between them and that scores of students were dependent on their degree of shyness. Since some students get low marks in EFL classes, teachers would wrongly regard them as not competent enough and would not consider probable affective factors such as shyness. These conclusions align with those of another study by Alavinia and Salmasi (2012).
In the same area, Babapoor et al. (2018) conducted a correlational study to explore adult EFL learners’ shyness and the accuracy and fluency of their performance. They concluded that this affective attribute was negatively associated with the fluent and accurate speech. Likewise, Khorambin et al. (2021) inspected the association between shyness and young learners’ language achievement. There was a negative relationship between shyness and language achievement, as non-shy young learners performed better on the placement test than shy young learners. Sadeghi and Soleimani (2016) conducted a study to identify the interplay between learner-affective factors, specifically, shyness and language learning strategies. The results showed that the shyest and the most anxious FL learners use more strategies (e.g., avoidance).

**Shyness and Willingness to Communicate**

Shyness is usually viewed as a constraining factor against making connections, initiating interactions, and participating in communicative situations (Tang & Schmidt, 2017). Thus, it provokes in communicative cases (Zimbardo, 1989). That is, it does not seem to be related to non-social settings. Shyness, hence, would involve communication apprehension and discretion as it is associated with individuals lacking confidence, thereby talking less. Such a personality trait might cause a lack of communication skills (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982).

The impact of shyness on EFL learners’ motivation and WTC was the main objective of Mohammadian’s (2013) research. The findings showed that shyness would mainly influence the participants’ intrinsic motivation. Non-shy learners reported having more inherent motivation than their shy peers, while the latter were less likely to initiate interactions. Similarly, Rebecca Chu (2008) examined the correlation between shyness of EFL learners and their WTC. The results reflected a relatively negative correlation between the two variables among the participants since shy students tend to remain inactive and avoid participating in conversations due to their worry about making mistakes or being judged by teachers and peers. On the other hand, Bashosh et al. (2013) examined the relationship between shyness, FL classroom anxiety, WTC, gender, and EFL proficiency. They found no correlation between the constructs of shyness and WTC. Despite the extensive research on shyness and WTC, examining these constructs constitutes a research gap in the Saudi context.

**Method**

**Participants**

The total population of the present study was randomly selected 360 EFL female students majoring in English at a Saudi public university located in Riyadh in the academic year 2023. The participants’ ages ranged between 20-22, and their years of experience as university EFL learners were 1-3 years. The participants expressed their agreement to take part in this study and be recorded and quoted for the survey only. They understood that their contribution was confidential and voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.
Research Instruments

This study followed a mixed-method approach and adopted both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Quantitative instruments involved two Likert-type questionnaires designed by McCroskey and Richmond (1991). The Shyness Scale is composed of 14 items. The WTC Scale consists of 20 items that measure the overall level of WTC in addition to levels of WTC in four familiar communication contexts (group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking) and with three different types of audiences (strangers, acquaintances, and friends). These two scales have generated high alpha reliability estimates (>.90) and excellent validity (McCroskey 1992; McCroskey & Richmond 1982). Hence, several researchers utilized these measures with sustaining validity and reliability (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2021). The qualitative measure was a semi-structured interview, conducted to obtain additional information about shyness and WTC (See Appendix A).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The Shyness Scale and WTC Scale were randomly administered to the students in the English department by the two researchers with the help of some instructors to ensure convenient sampling. Three hundred sixty responses were collected and regarded as suitable to fit the research objective. The researchers randomly selected a group of 27 participants for collecting subsequent qualitative data through a 45–50-minute face-to-face interviews. Statistical data analysis procedures were performed using SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 21. The tabulation form of data provides a clear representation of the statistical measures. The researchers used the Grounded Theory to analyze the interview data qualitatively. Through thematic analysis, they transcribed, coded, and categorized the data to create relationships between the categories to derive a theory.

Results

Reliability and Validity of Research Instruments

Using Alpha Cronbach Technique, the estimated reliability coefficients for the shyness and WTC scales were 0.82 and 0.87, respectively, which reflected high reliability. Also, the obtained Shyness/WTC correlation showed high reliability (>0.80). To test the interview questions’ validity, two professors, who were experts in the field, reviewed the questions and suggested some minor modifications. The researchers then piloted the interviews with nine students, and their responses reflected its appropriateness to the study’s objective. The editors revised the categorization of interview data and approved it as appropriate to the purpose of the study.

Descriptive Statistics

The quantitative data analysis aimed to answer the first three research questions. Means, standard deviations, and standard errors expressed the data. The statistical analysis provided frequency and percentage for all values in each variable in the study and Pearson coefficients showed the correlation between variables. Figure One shows both shyness and WTC frequencies
and percentages. Most participants were at the mid-levels of shyness (55.60%) and WTC (53.10%). As for the low/high levels (9.20%) of the participants portrayed themselves as non-shy students and (35.30%) as having a high level of shyness. However, (38.10%) were reluctant to communicate, and (8.90%) as very willing to speak.

Figure 1. Frequencies and percentages of levels of shyness and WTC

Table One also shows that the mean level of shyness was 47.2 with a standard deviation of 10.9, and the mean level of WTC was 57.2 with a standard deviation of 18.2. These classifications followed McCroskey and Richmond’s (1991) formula, where the overall score of shyness within the range 52-32 reflected a mid-level and, correspondingly, the overall score of WTC within the range 82-52 indicated a mid-level. As for the subcategories of WTC, most participants were in the mid-level, as indicated by the mean of each subcategory in Table Two.

### Table 1. Mean, Std. Deviation, and Std. error mean of shyness and WTC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>47.2083</td>
<td>10.90365</td>
<td>0.57467</td>
<td></td>
<td>46.0782</td>
<td>48.3385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>57.2421</td>
<td>18.21008</td>
<td>0.95976</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.3546</td>
<td>59.1295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Mean, Std. Deviation, and Std. error mean of subcategories of WTC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group discussions</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>66.3083</td>
<td>21.42321</td>
<td>1.1291</td>
<td></td>
<td>64.0878</td>
<td>68.5288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>45.577</td>
<td>24.21812</td>
<td>1.27641</td>
<td></td>
<td>43.0669</td>
<td>48.0872</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More importantly, Table Three illustrates the Pearson Correlation between the two factors under discussion. There was a negative correlation between the participants’ overall shyness and WTC, with a value of 0.491.

Table 3. Shyness/WTC Pearson correlation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Willingness to communicate</th>
<th>Interpersonal conversations</th>
<th>Public speaking</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Acquaintance</th>
<th>Friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>360</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>61.1436</td>
<td>55.7352</td>
<td>29.7139</td>
<td>60.4021</td>
<td>81.6097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-Value</td>
<td>0.95765</td>
<td>1.2867</td>
<td>1.23884</td>
<td>1.27795</td>
<td>1.00352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59.2603</td>
<td>53.2048</td>
<td>27.2776</td>
<td>57.8889</td>
<td>79.6362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63.0269</td>
<td>58.2656</td>
<td>32.1502</td>
<td>62.9153</td>
<td>83.5832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the correlations between shyness and subcategories of WTC, it could be shown in Table Four that there was a very high negative correlation with the highest value of correlation between shyness and strangers (-0.474), meetings (-0.469), and public speaking (-0.467).

Table 4. Correlations between shyness and subcategories of WTC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shyness Correlations</th>
<th>Group discussion</th>
<th>Meetings</th>
<th>Personal Interpersonal conversations</th>
<th>Public speaking</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Acquaintance</th>
<th>Friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>-0.341</td>
<td>-0.469</td>
<td>-0.316</td>
<td>-0.467</td>
<td>-0.474</td>
<td>-0.396</td>
<td>-0.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-Value</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Analysis

The interview data answered the fourth research question and yielded the following four categories.
Students’ Perspectives of Shyness and WTC

The interviewees perceived shyness and WTC as standard features among EFL learners. Shyness was a personality trait that hindered them from interacting actively with classmates and sharing knowledge with teachers and peers. Being afraid to be negatively judged in class was another manifestation of shyness. Conversely, they view WTC as the readiness to initiate/lead interactions and demonstrate active listening. Working cooperatively in teams and being predisposed to offer help were other features of students’ WTC. Interviewee One believed that “shyness is losing confidence; willingness to communicate is starting conversations and helping others.”

Most participants believed that they were, to some extent, shy and unwilling to communicate. Still, the levels of shyness and WTC varied according to the situation, relations with interlocutors, type of task, and course difficulty. WTC increased with positive attitudes towards the course’s nature. For example, Interviewee Two noticed that group size was an essential predictor of shyness and WTC, where students found themselves less shy in small circles than in presentations and class discussions. Interestingly, interviewee Three said that she always preferred to wear a mask when she had to do a presentation as it gave her a sense of security. Also, the inside-classroom contexts were more encouraging than outside-the-class settings as they involved fixed topics and required extra effort. Moreover, the students claimed that higher L2 proficiency levels developed greater self-confidence and, in turn, caused them to be less shy and more willing to communicate.

For many students, shyness was not the only reason for their unwillingness to communicate. The nature of the course also played a role in their readiness to speak. For interviewee Four, class participation was usually better in speaking and literature courses since they offered more opportunities to express their opinions and viewpoints. The type of class activity also could facilitate interaction for shy students. Interviewee Five suggested that in group work tasks, students can discuss and negotiate, yet, interviewee Six asserted that such tasks usually took more effort, especially when working with timid students who would remain unenthusiastic to work collaboratively.

There was, sometimes, a misconception of shyness and WTC with other affective variables. Teachers may consider some students as shy and non-willing to communicate simply because they were not verbose. Conversely, the teachers would regard other students as relaxed and unshy in class who would hide feelings of anxiety and nervousness due to their fear of the teacher’s negative evaluation. For interviewee Two claimed that sometimes the reason for being viewed as shy was social anxiety/phobia. “It is about being anxious, not shy. Sometimes I don’t want to speak because I am nervous, not shy”, interviewee Five said. Also, the social status of interlocuters would influence feelings of shyness and, hence, their disposition to communicate. Interviewee Eight found it more difficult, on a psychological basis, when she interacted with professors than when she did with friends and acquaintances.
The Correlation between Shyness and WTC

Some interviewees identified shyness and WTC as two inseparable factors since non-shy pupils were usually more ready to interact with others than their shy peers. Interviewee Nine indicated that “shy people are not sociable. They cannot communicate normally in normal situations”. Interviewee Six recognized herself as an unshy person capable of initiating conversations in academic and non-academic contexts. Instead, WTC gave her a sense of self-confidence even when making mistakes as long as she utilized these opportunities to improve her language performance and widen her experience. Likewise, Interviewee Ten affirmed that she, as a shy student, often struggled to participate in class, although being passive might negatively affect her grades. When class participation was part of the course requirements, the classroom created a stressful atmosphere for shy students. Moreover, shyness would sometimes cause students to mandate their peers to play their roles in class, such as asking their instructor to explain a course requirement or an unclear point in the material.

Yet, the correlation was not always vivid. While possessing distinguished communicative skills, interviewee Five, for instance, thought she was a shy person; however, this did not stop her from interacting with people, especially family and friends. For some participants, it was fear of making mistakes, incapability of delivering information appropriately, and others’ misjudgment as an incompetent speaker of English that hindered their WTC.

The Effect of Online Communication on Levels of Shyness and WTC

Some students struggled more in face-to-face discussions than in virtual ones. Online learning was more accessible for them simply because they did not have to face others. However, recording lectures would set them back from participating as they felt more nervous since online tools may record inaccurate or wrong answers. Additionally, less formal online contexts, such as social media tools and applications, were preferred by most interviewees because they felt more relaxed and comfortable. Interviewee One stated, “One of my close friends never speaks in class and is always silent, but she is the first to create online groups and chat.”

On the other hand, some interviewees did not prefer tech-based learning and were hesitant to interact online with teachers and classmates. Interviewee 11, for instance, described herself as less enthusiastic in online classes as she struggled to focus and comprehend the learning material due to a lack of physical attendance. For interviewee 12, inadequate opportunities for interaction, lack of self-confidence, as well as feeling a sense of unreachability were the main reasons for favoring offline classroom settings.

The Effect of Communication in English on Students’ Communication Skills

All participants agreed that communication in English with people of different relations, such as friends, acquaintances, and strangers in various situations, helped them improve their communication skills in general and in class in particular. Interviewee 13 worked as a beauty artist and had to speak English with staff members and found herself more fluent and confident and
more WTC in English. This, in turn, made her more active in class. Interviewee Nine portrayed herself as a professional debater in business meetings where she could develop communication skills. She stated, “I usually have meetings with my boss, and I feel comfortable speaking in English, and I love to communicate more.” Interviewee Five believed that it was communicating with strangers, in formal/informal situations, which helped expand her communication skills. In a similar regard, interviewee 12 thought that via communication with others, she could improve her English-speaking skills, and that, in turn, raised her self-confidence and WTC and reduced levels of shyness. In general, those interviewees agreed that developing communication skills outside the class positively affected their communication skills inside the class.

In summary, all interviewees affirmed that a communicative classroom atmosphere offers greater interaction opportunities and positively affects their English proficiency. Regardless of being shy or non-shy students, such context was of great value in enhancing their communication skills such as active listening, verbal and non-verbal skills, initiating/engaging in conversations, observing, giving/receiving feedback, critical thinking, respecting, and empathizing.

Discussion

To answer the first and second research questions, data analysis revealed that most participants were at the mid-levels of shyness and WTC. Precisely, all participants were in the mid-level of each subcategory of WTC: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, public speaking, strangers, acquaintances, and friends. As for the third research question, the results also showed that shyness was highly negatively correlated with the participants’ overall WTC as well as with each subcategory of WTC with the highest value of correlation between shyness and strangers, meetings, and public speaking. Related studies are broadly similar in this regard, suggesting moderate levels of WTC, whether inside or outside the classroom (Basöz & Erten, 2018) and remarking mid-levels of overall shyness (Namaghi et al., 2015). These findings, however, are incompatible with those of Babapoor et al. (2018), who reported the participants as being within the shyness range.

Since FL classrooms are principally based on teaching/learning practices of a communicative nature, students’ personality attributes, feelings, and other affective variables are critical elements of a fruitful teaching/learning experience (Brown, 2007). Regarding the fourth research question, shyness and WTC were perceived as standard features among EFL learners. According to the participants, shyness was a personality trait that hindered them from interacting actively and sharing knowledge. Indeed, it was the difficulty in communication and the fear of negative judgment in class. These conceptions align with those of Jones et al., (1986), who described shyness as the distress and reticent state of individuals in the presence of others. It is a feeling of uneasiness in sittings that require social interactions (Zimbardo, 1989) and a restricting factor against initiating conversations and making relationships (Rebecca Chu, 2008). In other words, it is the experience of restraining and anxiety, which obstructs the attainment of communication goals. It is, hence, associated with the use of avoidance strategies when they have
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Some shy students would even rely on their classmates in expressing their thoughts and needs to avoid confronting classroom social conventions (Tong et al., 2011).

On the contrary, WTC was the readiness to initiate interactions, lead conversations, and listen actively. In the FL setting, WTC also manifested itself in cooperation with team members, a tendency to ask questions, and offering help (MacIntyre et al., 1998). A similar definition was provided by McCroskey and Richmond (1987) as a constant personality feature noticed among beginners and advanced EFL learners across different learning situations. A rich body of research has proved that this variation is due to linguistic and contextual factors. (Joe et al., 2017; Khajavy et al., 2016). For instance, Shahisavandi (2023) substantiated the association between learners’ WTC and their fluency, as the latter was a reliable determinant of learners’ WTC in the classroom. Khajavy et al. (2018) added that psychological factors such as motivation, attitude, and anxiety could also be predictors of students’ WTC. Reinders and Wattana (2014) advocated the idea and believed that the tendency of FL learners to communicate could be decreased or increased due to anxiety and perceived communicative competence.

Levels of shyness and WTC can also be affected by the environment. The participants argued that they were more ready to interact in classes full of positive attitudes toward teachers and peers. A positive L2 classroom atmosphere was vital in getting students to talk (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) and predicting learners’ basic psychological needs, and satisfaction of such needs contributed positively to learners’ WTC (Joe et al., 2017). Results provided by Khajavy et al. (2018) indicated that a positive L2 environment did not only foster WTC, but could also increase learning enjoyment, which reduced anxiety among students. Similarly, Al-Murtadha (2023) reported that setting optimistic goals, creating action plans, and performing them led to a noticeable increase in learners’ WTC.

Other factors affecting such levels were relations with colleagues, group size, course difficulty, and L2 proficiency levels. Chenet al. (2021) found that L2 flow led to more WTC and psychological satisfaction in general. In this regard, MacIntyre et al. (1998) argued that learners’ WTC varies considerably over time and across contexts. Yet, in addition to shyness, there were other reasons for unwillingness to communicate, such as the nature of the course and the type of task. FL students may remain shy and apprehensive throughout the course, and these feelings would be intense when faced with a demanding and interpersonal activity in the language classroom (Liu, 2006). Ahsan et al. (2020) contended that such negative psychological factors might adversely affect learning, particularly the use of the learned content. Karbakhsh and Ahmadi Safa (2020), concluded that essential psychological needs satisfaction increased levels of WTC among EFL learners; yet, they found no relation between WTC and achievement in FL learning.

Shyness was likely to hinder language learners’ attainment. Engaging in classroom verbal interactions was more likely to develop a challenge among shy language learners. For some participants, a strong negative relationship existed between shyness and WTC. As suggested by Brodt and Zimbardo (1981), some individuals are easily affected by teachers’ and classmates’
comments and reactions to their attributes and practices in the classroom. As an avoidance strategy, they may remain reticent in class due to the fear of making mistakes and being assessed as non-proficient or inattentive (Liu, 2006). Hence, these individuals continuously avoid interacting with others, where they may be subject to severe assessments or undesirable remarks (Ostovar Namaghi et al., 2015).

Some participants claimed that they could not easily distinguish shyness and WTC from other affective variables. Khajavy et al. (2018) concluded that experiencing fewer negative emotions when performing L2 activities helped in increasing levels of WTC. Similarly, Dewaele and Dewaele (2018) found that the level of WTC was highly affected by classroom anxiety, positive attitude towards the FL, and social enjoyment.

Online communication had an impact on levels of both shyness and WTC. Saunders and Chester (2008) believed that the online environment reduces inhibitions experienced in face-to-face interactions. According to McKenna et al. (2002), physical appearance and shyness symptoms can trigger such inhibitions. In the same vein, Chester and Bretherton (2007) argued that online contexts optimize control of self-presentation as people choose which aspects of self to show or hide, allowing them time to plan and revise their responses. Many participants preferred social media tools, with their less formal nature. Kissau et al. (2010) found that online instruction helped develop students’ WTC by reducing L2 anxiety and increasing perceived L2 competence. Technology has played an essential role in enhancing WTC (Reinders and Wattana, 2014) as students were more enthusiastic about communicating spontaneously online, where they perceived that they had a less social presence (Le et al., 2018).

Yet, some participants found it challenging to speak online, which aligns with findings provided by Alawamleh et al. (2020), who showed that students preferred offline classes over online courses due to a lack of motivation, poor understanding of the material, limited communication opportunities, and feeling of isolation. As confirmed by Altunel (2021), learners were unwilling to communicate in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic for the following reasons: personality, the nature of online education, and lack of self-confidence in speaking skills.

Communication skills, in general, and in class, in particular, could be improved via communication in English in different contexts with people of diverse relations. Professional meetings and interaction with strangers in formal or informal situations could also contribute to the development of students’ WTC and the reduction of shyness. Improving communication skills and fluency outside the classroom could help the students improve their skills inside the class. Wood (2016) reported a complex connection between WTC and L2 speech fluency and resolved that WTC and fluency are “linked and influence each other” (p. 25) in the sense that high levels of WTC mirror high levels of fluency and vice versa.

**Conclusion**

The present study explored the students’ levels of shyness and WTC in an EFL context and the relation between these two variables and their impact on communication skills inside the class.
The study makes a noteworthy contribution in highlighting the need for FL educators to pay close attention to the effect of students’ attributes on their language learning journey. The findings indicated that shyness hinders language development, particularly when students are supposed to communicate with their teachers and peers. Precisely, this study confirmed a highly negative correlation between levels of shyness and WTC. Consequently, the study theorized that the shyer the students, the less willing to communicate, and vice versa.

Based on the obtained results in this work, it is vital for EFL teachers to enhance students’ communicative competence and inspire them to use their English knowledge despite potential errors. Oflaz (2019) suggested that teachers reduce the effects of shyness in FL learning. Educators should employ teaching strategies that meet students’ differences and needs in the language class. To solve any shyness-related obstacles, activities that decrease shyness and increase WTC levels should be utilized to match students’ skills, preferences, and interests. Teachers need to support their students to achieve their learning objectives and master the FL efficiently by creating friendly and enhancing learning settings where shy and non-shy students are involved in different classroom tasks. For Babapoor et al. (2018), there is a need to consistently assist learners to overcome restricting variables and enhance their inexact performance. This will, of course, be vastly influential for those with higher levels of shyness. Because such students tend to be reticent in class and avoid taking part in cooperative activities, FL teachers may utilize appropriate tasks to help these students overcome this negative affective attribute so that they can enjoy learning and using the FL in a supportive and inspiring environment. Kissau et al. (2010) believe that L2 teachers need to focus on improving student communication skills besides language proficiency. A more general implication would involve curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers to improve the current learning context in a way that guarantees the ultimate advantage of language classroom communication for both shy and non-shy students.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. Findings cannot be generalized to all students since a limited sample of EFL female students at the university context composed the participants. Only two affective variables, shyness and WTC, were under investigation, leaving out other personal attributes that might influence the learning process. Research instruments involved questionnaires and interviews only; hence, using different instruments for further research can verify and enrich the outputs of this study by considering these limitations and expanding the research scope.

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Shyness and Willingness to Communicate Levels, Correlations

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**

**Interview Questions**

1. From your own perspective,
   a. What is shyness?
   b. What is WTC?
2. Do you think that you are a shy student? Why?
3. Do you think that you are willing to communicate in class? Why?
4. Do you like to participate in class? Why? What types of participation do you like more? Why?
5. How can levels of shyness affect communication skills inside the class?
6. How can levels of WTC affect communication skills inside the class?
7. Do you think that communication with others helps you improve your English?