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Impact of Anxiety on Willingness to Communicate in the Iranian EFL Setting

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Abstract

Anxiety, characterized by worry and emotional reactions, can significantly affect learning. In the context of learning a foreign language, it can impede the learning process and lead to a fear of communication. This research explores the impact of anxiety on the willingness to communicate among Iranian eighth-grade EFL students in a private school in Tehran. Observations and interviews were conducted with twenty students and two teachers. The data analysis from these observations revealed that most students were hesitant to engage in English class activities, with only an average of 10% expressing a willingness to participate in all observational categories. The interview results indicated that anxiety negatively influenced students' willingness to communicate in class. Factors contributing to increased anxiety included fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism from peers and teachers, and fear of negative evaluations by teachers. Additionally, cultural beliefs about participating actively or speaking in public were identified as sources of anxiety. The study offers recommendations for teachers to create a classroom environment that minimizes anxiety and encourages student participation.

Keywords:" anxiety". "cultural beliefs". " fear of making mistakes". " Iranian EFL learners". "willingness to communicate".

Introduction

Achieving fluency in oral communication in a second language (L2) is often the primary objective for many L2 learners. Successful language acquisition is frequently marked by the learner's ability to communicate effectively in the target language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Oral performance remains a significant challenge for foreign language learners, regardless of their knowledge of the target language. Pedagogical strategies aim to enhance learners' willingness to communicate, as this is crucial for language acquisition, particularly for communicative functions; communication serves as both a facilitator of language learning and an essential objective (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Hence, it is important to focus on both language competence and language performance. Extensive research in second language acquisition highlights the role of affective factors—such as learners' attitudes towards the L2 and its culture, anxiety, and motivation—in language achievement and proficiency (Yashima, 2002). For example, Krashen (1982) identified anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation as key affective factors influencing the success of second language acquisition. Similarly, Oxford (1990) emphasized several affective factors, including self-confidence, shyness, peer pressure, motivation, and anxiety, as critical to the development of L2 learners' speaking skills. Tuan and Mai (2015) argued that factors like performance context, affective variables, and feedback from incidental listeners impact L2 speaking.

Significance of English

English is prevalent globally, with over a billion speakers worldwide. While native English speakers make up about a quarter of this number, the majority use it as a second or foreign language (Alqurashi, 2022; Crystal, 1997). As a result, English has evolved into the world's lingua franca, an international language essential for communication, particularly in business, science, and technology. Consequently, people from diverse regions and linguistic backgrounds can easily converse using English (Wang & Tseng, 2020; Zughoul, 2003).

In Iran, similar to many Arab countries, English is introduced as a foreign language (EFL) at both primary and secondary levels in public and private schools. Classroom instruction is the primary source of English language learning due to limited opportunities for practice outside of school (Drbseh, 2013; Huwari, 2019). This limitation poses significant challenges for most Arab learners of English, especially Iranians, with speaking being the most difficult skill to master (Huwari, 2019). Various factors contribute to these challenges, including a lack of exposure to the target language. For example, Jdetawy (2011) identified several reasons for students' struggles with oral communication, such as the use of their first language (L1) and an exam-focused teaching approach that neglects oral skills. Al Hosni (2014) similarly noted that students' reliance on L1, in this case, Arabic, hampers their oral proficiency. Furthermore, Huwari (2019) and Al Batineh (2019) highlighted the difficulties Iranian students face in mastering English, particularly speaking. Thus, proficiency in English is increasingly vital for Iranian learners, especially as speaking skills become crucial in sectors like tourism, foreign affairs, and higher education (Batiha et al., 2018). This necessity inspired the researchers to conduct the present study. Additionally, no prior research has explored the relationship between anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) from the perspectives of Iranian private school students and teachers.

Willingness to Communicate

The concept of 'willingness to communicate' (WTC) was initially introduced concerning a person's first language (L1) and later incorporated into communication studies by McCroskey and Richmond in 1987. WTC is defined as the likelihood of an individual engaging in communication (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). MacIntyre and colleagues (1998) noted that WTC in a second language (L2) is unlikely to be a straightforward extension of WTC in L1. They described WTC in L2 as the learner's readiness to engage in conversation at a specific time with particular people, using L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

WTC is understood as a cognitive process that entails the decision to communicate, influenced by one's personality traits (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Research on WTC in the context of L1 has paved the way for understanding WTC in L2, which is considered more complex (MacIntyre et al., 1998). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), WTC is a crucial component of contemporary language education. Learners with a strong desire to communicate are more likely to use the target language in real-life situations, striving to learn the language independently and becoming autonomous learners. High WTC enables students to practice L2 both within and beyond the classroom environment.
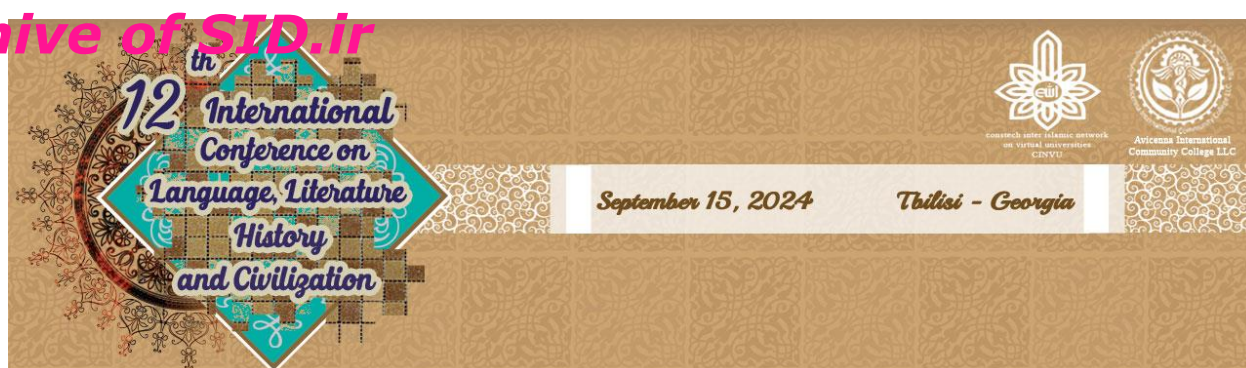
WTC and Anxiety

In the realm of education, anxiety is seen as a state of worry and an emotional response that accompanies the learning process (MacIntyre, 1999). When it comes to acquiring a foreign language, anxiety can serve as an indicator of success. Consequently, anxious students may achieve less than those who learn under relaxed conditions. Anxiety generally obstructs the language learning process (Horwitz et al., 1986), leading to communication apprehension. Research has examined the connection between communication apprehension and willingness to communicate (WTC) in the target language, revealing a negative correlation: learners with higher communication apprehension tend to be less willing to communicate (Althubaiti & Alqurashi, 2022; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Clement, 1996; Shaffer, 2019).

Three prevalent types of anxiety have been identified. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), these are: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation (p. 127). Communication apprehension describes the discomfort and shyness learners feel when communicating in front of others. Thus, quiet students in classrooms might not necessarily be good learners; they could be experiencing communication apprehension. Test anxiety stems from the fear of failing exams, tests, or assignments, involving evaluative situations. Fear of negative evaluation is similar to test anxiety but extends to anxiety about being judged negatively in spoken or written language activities. Unlike test anxiety, it can involve broader issues.

This study aims to investigate the impact of anxiety on Iranian EFL learners' WTC and to find ways to mitigate anxiety if present. The researchers aim to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How does anxiety influence Iranian EFL eighth-grade students' WTC?
RQ2. What are effective strategies for addressing anxiety-related challenges faced by Iranian EFL eighth-grade students?

Literature Review

Recently, willingness to communicate (WTC) has garnered significant attention in EFL/ESL research. Investigations in this field have centered on the various factors influencing learners' WTC, aiming to understand why some learners are reluctant to engage in L2 communication and seeking solutions to enhance their L2 acquisition process. Studies have examined multiple factors affecting learners' WTC, including fear of negative evaluation (e.g., Karnchandachari, 2019; Subasi, 2010), confidence (e.g., Aksak & Cubukcu, 2020; Al-Jarrah et al., 2019; Hamouda, 2013; Peng & Woodrow, 2010), fear of making mistakes (e.g., Aksak & Cubukcu, 2020; Al Nakhalah, 2016; Hamouda, 2013; Said et al., 2021), and fear of criticism (e.g., Aksak & Cubukcu, 2020; Al Nakhalah, 2016; Yaseen, 2018), among others.

Fear of negative evaluation involves teachers' reactions when students make errors in using L2. Researchers have explored this factor to determine its impact on students' willingness to participate in L2 activities. For example, Subasi (2010) investigated the influence of fear of negative evaluation (FNE) on the oral communication of 55 Turkish EFL learners at Anadolu University, finding a strong positive correlation between students' FNE and their anxiety levels, which hindered their participation in oral communication. Similarly, Karnchandachari (2019) identified FNE as a factor affecting the WTC of Thai EFL learners, with findings indicating that personality, experience, interest in the topic, self-perceived competence, and motivation influenced WTC.

In the Iranian context, Zrekat et al. (2016) studied anxiety levels among Iranian EFL undergraduates in oral communication at Jerash University, using questionnaires and interviews with 351 students and five lecturers. The analysis revealed that over half of the participants (60.7%) experienced difficulty in oral communication due to anxiety. Interview results suggested that collaboration between parents, lecturers, and students, along with changes in teaching methods and stress-free learning environments, could reduce anxiety. Additionally, self-confidence was found to influence EFL learners' WTC. Peng and Woodrow (2010) examined factors affecting WTC in 330 Chinese university students majoring in non-English disciplines, finding that WTC was influenced by confidence, communication anxiety, and cultural beliefs. Hamouda (2013) similarly reported that lack of self-confidence, proficiency, and fear of making errors hindered Saudi EFL learners' participation in English classrooms.

Al-Jarrah et al. (2019) explored Iranians' experiences with social networking sites as tools for learning English, interviewing 12 participants to understand how these platforms enhance language learning. The study found that most participants preferred reading and observing discussions rather than participating, with factors such as context, audience, self-confidence, and interests influencing their practices. Teachers' tolerance of errors and interesting topics increased learners' desire to communicate in L2 activities.

Teacher support and attitudes also play a crucial role in enhancing learners' L2 performance. Al Nakhalah (2016) examined speaking difficulties among EFL learners at Al Quds Open University, finding that anxiety and lack of teacher support were significant barriers to oral communication. Aksak & Cubukcu (2020) reported similar findings in their study of 100 Turkish EFL university learners, where environmental factors, affective factors, and teacher-related factors influenced WTC. Said et al. (2021) studied WTC in online learning at an Indonesian university, finding that

group discussions reduced students' nervousness and increased WTC. Weda et al. (2021) also highlighted the importance of interesting discussion topics in motivating Indonesian EFL learners.

Fear of criticism from peers is another factor negatively affecting learners' willingness to speak English. Yaseen (2018) found that anxiety, lack of motivation, fear of criticism, and L1 use in classrooms hindered EFL learners' speaking skills in two Iranian private schools. The study suggested that more English lessons and incorporating technology, such as YouTube videos, could reduce speaking anxiety and fear of criticism, as demonstrated by Saed et al. (2021) in their study on using YouTube videos to teach speaking to Iranian EFL learners at a private university. The results indicated that the experimental group showed significant improvement in speaking, coherence, oral fluency, and lexical choices.

Methodology

This research was carried out at a private school in Tehran, Iran. The study targeted private schools due to the predominance of previous research focusing on public schools, leaving private institutions underexplored. All participants were male students, adhering to the male-female segregation policy starting from the fourth grade in Iranian schools. The study deliberately excluded gender differences, which were beyond its scope. The participants were native Persian speakers, with English as their primary foreign language. Twenty Iranian EFL eighth-grade students were involved in this study because they had completed multiple English courses at this educational stage. Additionally, two English language teachers participated in the study. English is a mandatory subject in this school, as it is in other Iranian schools. Prior to data collection, the school principal granted permission. Participants were briefed on the study's objectives and assured that their participation was voluntary and not graded. Their anonymity was preserved to ensure confidentiality. Data collection involved direct observation and semi-structured interviews, based on Horwitz et al. (1986) communication apprehension and MacIntyre et al. (1998) WTC frameworks.

Direct observation involved the researcher being present to note behaviors relevant to the research. This method is crucial as it provides insights into participant behavior that might not be accessible through recordings or interviews. An observational scheme adapted from Cao (2009) was used, which included:

Volunteering an answer: A student responds to a question posed by the instructor.
Volunteering a comment: A student offers a comment.
Asking a question: A student questions the instructor.
Giving an opinion in class: A student shares their own opinion.
Responding to an opinion: A student reacts to another's opinion.
Two researchers observed four English classes to comprehensively understand the classroom dynamics and students' oral communication behaviors. The observer sat unobtrusively to avoid disrupting interactions, solely observing and recording WTC behaviors without participating to maintain objectivity.

Interviews are a vital data collection method in qualitative research, facilitating systematic dialogues to uncover participants' views, experiences, and attitudes that might be challenging to

obtain otherwise. Maxwell (2005) highlights interviews as a valuable method for describing actions and events, especially those in the past or inaccessible for direct observation. This study employed semi-structured interviews, allowing deeper probing into the topic with flexible questioning and the ability to clarify queries. This method also enabled participants to elaborate on their responses, providing richer insights into their WTC in English classes.

Individual interviews with the two teachers and all student participants were conducted over five days after obtaining signed consent. Teacher interviews were in English, while student interviews were initially in Persian to avoid language barriers and then translated into English. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. The Persian data were manually translated into English, and NVivo software was used for data analysis. The study identified three main factors: fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and fear of negative evaluation (FNE).

Results and Discussions

As indicated in the literature, willingness to communicate (WTC) is significantly hindered by anxiety, a condition associated with experiences of tension, trepidation, uneasiness, and worry (Spielberger, 1983). To mitigate such negative feelings, it is crucial to identify their root causes. This section analyses data in relation to the study questions, examining the factors leading to anxiety in EFL communication (RQ1) and solutions for anxiety-related difficulties (RQ2) based on participants' insights.
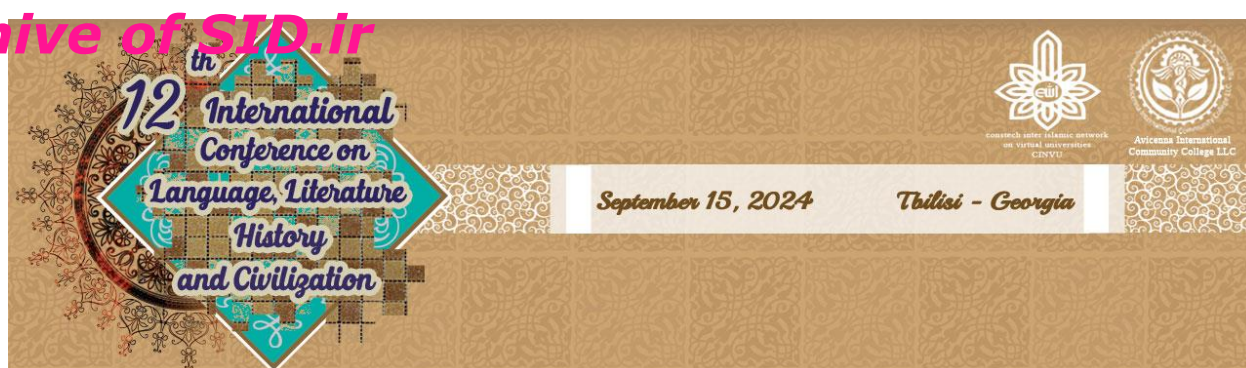
RQ1: How Does Anxiety Affect Iranian EFL Eighth-Grade Students' WTC?

Class observations revealed that only 10% of the participants were consistently interested in engaging across all observational categories. Specifically, around 25% of students raised their hands to answer questions posed by the instructor, about 20% asked questions for clarification or repetition, 5% expressed their opinions in class, but none commented on or responded to others' opinions. These low participation rates suggest that most students were hesitant to participate in English classes. Interview analyses indicated several factors contributing to their anxiety, which may reduce or hinder their WTC in EFL, including fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and fear of negative evaluation (FNE).

Fear of Making Mistakes

Participants reported a reluctance to engage in oral communication due to fear of making errors. For instance, one student (S4) mentioned, "I don't like to participate because I fear making mistakes in pronunciation, and students will laugh and make fun of me." Similarly, another student (S2) stated, "I fear making mistakes in pronunciation and prefer keeping silent." This fear of errors, often coupled with anxiety, was linked to classroom dynamics where speaking occurred in front of teachers and peers. The reactions of other students also contributed to this anxiety. For example, S1 noted, "The large number of students inside the classroom reduces our desire to participate, and we hesitate to ask questions." These findings align with previous research, such as Aksak and Cubukcu's (2020) study on Turkish EFL learners and Hamouda's (2013) study on Saudi EFL learners.

Participants also associated anxiety and shyness in making errors with factors like academic level and self-confidence. Higher academic levels were seen as reducing anxiety and fear of errors, but

some students, regardless of their academic performance, still avoided participation due to anxiety and fear of errors. Self-confidence was identified as another significant factor. One teacher (T2) remarked, "Fear of making errors weakened the self-confidence of many students, making them refrain from speaking." Similar observations were made in previous studies (Aksak & Cubukcu, 2020; Hamouda, 2013).

Fear of Criticism

Fear of criticism was another prevalent theme. Students expressed concern about being criticized or ridiculed by their peers, particularly when making pronunciation errors. S10 noted, "I fear being criticized and ridiculed by other students, especially when I pronounce a word incorrectly." This reluctance to stand out due to fear of criticism was linked to cultural beliefs, as explained by a teacher (T2), who stated, "Some students avoid participation to not appear distinguished and be ridiculed by others in the class." Cultural factors were also highlighted by S19, who said, "Cultural beliefs such as respecting elders made a barrier between the teacher and us, affecting our desire to communicate verbally." These cultural influences on WTC have been discussed in previous research, including studies on EFL Chinese learners (Peng & Woodrow, 2010) and Turkish and Jordanian EFL learners (Aksak & Cubukcu, 2020; Yaseen, 2018).

RQ2: What Are Suitable Solutions for Anxiety-Based Difficulties Encountered by Iranian EFL Eighth-Grade Students?

Data suggested that many difficulties, especially those related to classroom situations, could be alleviated by teachers acting as classroom supervisors. For example, S15 mentioned, "I minimize my participation because I feel anxious about making errors, and the teacher does not give us enough opportunity." Teachers' roles are crucial in minimizing student anxiety; participants highlighted the need for teachers to tolerate errors and provide motivation. S14 said, "Fear of committing errors hinders me from participation. If the teacher motivates us, the desire to participate will be greater." Teachers acknowledged these issues and suggested ways to overcome them, such as encouraging participation without fear of errors (T1). These findings align with Aksak and Cubukcu's (2020) investigation.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE), involving nervousness about how others evaluate them, was another factor contributing to students' unwillingness to communicate. Students expressed reluctance to participate due to fear of negative reactions from teachers and peers. For instance, S8 stated, "I hesitate to participate because of my fear of negative evaluation by the teacher and other students." Similar sentiments were expressed by other students (S5, S16, and S20). Teachers also recognized this issue; one teacher highlighted, "FNE affects students not only in learning English but also in other public activities." These findings are consistent with previous research on EFL learners in Turkey and Thailand (Karnchandachari, 2019; Subasi, 2010).

In conclusion, addressing the root causes of anxiety and creating a supportive classroom environment can significantly enhance Iranian learners' WTC in EFL contexts.
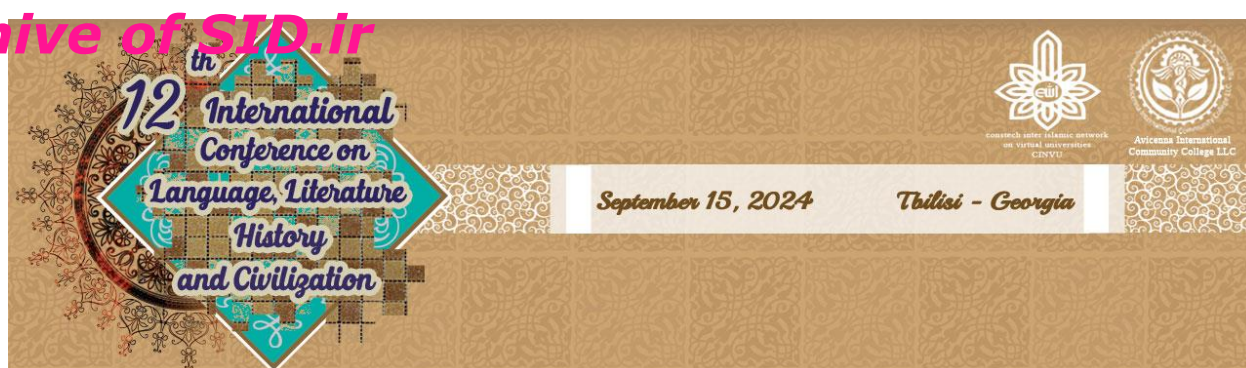
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Conclusion

This study explored the impact of anxiety on the willingness to communicate (WTC) among eighth-grade EFL students at a private school in Tehran, Iran. The research aimed to examine the role of anxiety in WTC and how anxiety could be alleviated among students. In response to the first research question, several factors were found to influence students' anxiety. Three main factors were identified as contributing to anxiety in speaking: a) fear of making mistakes, b) fear of criticism, and c) fear of negative evaluation. Participants reported that their anxiety and reluctance to engage in speaking activities were due to fears of making errors in front of peers and teachers. The fear of criticism was linked to cultural beliefs regarding "being distinguished in front of others," while fear of negative evaluation was largely attributed to teachers' reactions.

Regarding the second research question, results indicated that teachers play a crucial role in reducing students' anxiety levels. Teachers can i) encourage students to participate in oral interactions and ii) explain how such activities enhance the learning process, particularly in speaking skills, through improvements in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Increasing opportunities for interaction and the frequency of L2 use can positively affect learners' WTC in the second language (Althubaiti & Alqurashi, 2022; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Mahmoodia & Moazamb, 2014; Said et al., 202). Therefore, teachers should strive to create an anxiety-free learning environment by incorporating interactive classroom tasks that are less cognitively demanding and psychologically safer. Activities such as debates or role-plays can demonstrate teachers' tolerance of errors. By motivating and encouraging students to engage in conversation, error corrections can occur naturally as students gain confidence.

The findings of this study are expected to be useful for curriculum development, foreign language teaching and learning, and teacher education, particularly in addressing factors that influence foreign language anxiety and supporting L2 learners' self-confidence. As communication is the primary goal of language teaching, emphasis should be placed on developing communication skills and strategies that enhance learners' WTC by reducing L2 anxiety (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Rambe, 2017). Promoting low-anxiety classrooms can help learners benefit more from language instruction. It is also important to research WTC in other languages, such as Arabic, and compare the results with findings from studies on English learners to examine the influence of target languages on such conditions. Future research could also investigate the role of anxiety in students' WTC in L2 outside the classroom in various situations, including public meetings and social gatherings with friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

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