Willingness to communicate in English, communication self-confidence, motivation, shyness and teacher immediacy among Iranian English-major undergraduates: A structural equation modeling approach

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ABSTRACT

This study takes the initiative to test a model of L2 communication that examines the potential connections among willingness to communicate in English (L2WTC), three individual differences (shyness, motivation, communication self-confidence) and one situational variable (teacher immediacy). A number of 252 Iranian English-major university students filled in a questionnaire survey. The collected data were then tabulated and analyzed via SPSS and structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings revealed significant positive paths from motivation and communication self-confidence to L2WTC, from immediacy to motivation and from motivation to self-confidence and negative paths from shyness to self-confidence and motivation and from teacher immediacy to shyness. Further, it was shown that shyness and teacher immediacy could indirectly affect L2WTC through the mediation of self-confidence and motivation. The implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of communicative and conversational approaches to second language pedagogy, communication has been accentuated not only as an indispensable process but also as goal of second/foreign language education. For many learners language learning means being able to speak the language. This is apparent in Dörnyei's (2005, p. 207) argument that the aim of language learning is to enhance "the learners' communicative competence in the target language". Moreover, in second/foreign language education programs learners' academic achievement is judged based on their ability to communicate effectively in the target language (Riggenbach & Lazaraton, 1991).

Apropos of this issue, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) advanced a heuristic model of communication to delineate the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 context and its potential causes and anticipants. Based on its original conceptualization (see McCroskey & Baer, 1985), they defined WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse, at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (p. 547). In this model WTC was deemed a situational variable which could be affected by various linguistic, communicative,

and social variables. Further, MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) proposed that the main objective of second/foreign language learning should be to "engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them". Since this pioneering work of MacIntyre, et al., L2WTC has been studied extensively in different ESL (English as a second language) contexts (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006; Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre, Babin, & Clément, 1999; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002, 2003; Peng, 2007, to name a few).

However, despite the emphasis put on communication and the importance of willingness to communicate as a key concept in L2 education, a review of the related literature shows that L2WTC has not been studied sufficiently in EFL (English as a foreign language) setting (see Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2009; Nagy, 2007; Yashima, 2002). Therefore, in order to shed further light on L2WTC and its potential association with other factors, this study set out to test a model of L2 communication by examining the interrelationship among L2WTC and a few individual and situational variables (communication self-confidence, motivation, shyness and teacher immediacy) among Iranian EFL learners majoring English.

It is hoped that this quest, at least to some extent, would answer the question prevalent among practitioners and researchers alike as to why many learners in EFL context lack the intention to initiate communication in English and tend to remain uncommunicative even if there are opportunities to use English in or outside of the classroom.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Communication self-confidence

L2 communication self-confidence is defined as a combination of perceived communication competence in L2 and lack of anxiety over learning or using the language (Clément & Kruidenier, 1985). Self-confidence can inspire and enhance one's desire to communicate (Jeffrey & Peterson, 1983) and the capacity to achieve goals via communication (DeVito, 1986). Perception of self-confidence has been found to affect second language learning (see Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). Clement (1980) noted that, in comparison with their self-confident peers, learners with low levels of self-confidence tend to be less motivated to learn a foreign language. Further, research has shown that self-confidence is positively related to L2 proficiency, communication frequency, L2 motivation, willingness to communicate, extraversion, and openness to experience and negatively to communication anxiety in EFL context (e.g., Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2009; Ghonsooly, Khajavy, & Asadpour, 2012; Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002).

2.2. Motivation

Motivation, as a major individual factor, incontrovertibly plays a key role in second/foreign language learning, and has therefore become a popular subject pool for scholarly research worldwide (e.g., Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

Gardner (1985) conceptualized motivation as a "combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language" (p. 10). In his socio-educational model of L2 acquisition Gardner postulated that when we discuss the motivation to learn a second language, we should take into account both cultural context and educational context, which are named as integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation, respectively. The integrative motive as a key element of Gardner's model accordingly covered both of these concepts along with motivation. He defined integrativeness as "a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community" (p. 7). Attitudes toward the learning situation then referred to people's reactions to anything related to the immediate context where learning takes place. Finally, motivation as the focal point of the integrative motive was further broken down to three constituents, namely desire to learn the language, motivational intensity (the amount of effort put into learning the language) and attitudes toward learning the language (Gardner, 1985).

Research has shown that higher levels of integrative motive facilitate interaction among learners (Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2009; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Motivation has also proved to be a significant predictor of different variables such as communication self-confidence, L2 communication frequency, L2 proficiency, perceived communication competence, and L2WTC in EFL context (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002).

2.3. Teacher immediacy

The immediacy construct, as communication behaviors which improve psychological and physical closeness with others, was introduced by Mehrabian (1971). Inspired by approach–avoidance theory suggesting that "people approach what they like and avoid what they don't like" (Mehrabian, 1981, p.22), he noted that immediacy and liking are bilaterally connected with one another in that liking engender greater immediacy and immediacy enhances liking. Further, Andersen (1979) stated that immediacy behaviors play an important functional role in communication by conveying positive attitudes of the sender to the receiver.

Christophel and Gorham (1995) then conceptualized teacher immediacy as "nonverbal and verbal behaviors, which reduce psychological and/or physical distance between teachers and students" (p. 292).

Verbal immediacy behaviors include praise, self-disclosure, humor, continuing student initiated topics, speaking with learners outside of class, raising questions that encourage them to talk and ask for different viewpoints, encouraging communication through phone calls (Gorham, 1988) and using "we" and "our" in class (Frymier, 1993). Nonverbal immediacy then includes behaviors such as gestures, smiling, proximity, eye contact, directing a body position toward students, relaxed body position, movement and vocal expressiveness (Andersen, 1979).

The findings of previous research have revealed positive relationships between teacher immediacy and classroom variables such as student motivation (Christophel, 1990) cognitive learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Christophel, 1990), student affect (Gorham, 1988), positive student evaluations (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), perceived teacher competence, trustworthiness and caring (Thweatt, 1999), interpersonal attraction (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999) and student attendance in class (Rocca, 2004). Immediacy behaviors were also viewed as a means of developing affinity, liking, and control with learners (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000).

Notwithstanding, research on teacher immediacy is extremely scarce in the TESOL field. A library search for this subject yielded only a few studies.

Examining a model of L2 communication among Chinese EFL learners, Yu (2009), for instance, found that teacher immediacy could significantly and directly affect communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence. The findings also showed that teacher immediacy could exert indirect effect on L2WTC through the mediation of these two constructs.

In another study, Hsu (2005) explored Thai EFL learners' perception of how the immediate relationship influences their WTC. The findings showed significant relationships between immediacy behaviors and the learners' WTC in English.

Therefore, given the importance of classroom atmosphere in EFL/ESL context (Krashen, 1982) and the potential role of teachers in establishing classroom climate conducive to learning and interpersonal communication (Witt & Wheeless, 2001), further research is warranted to investigate teacher immediacy behaviors in Iranian EFL context.

2.4. Shyness

Shyness as an inclination for eschewing social interactions and not being able to take part appropriately in social situations (Pilkonis, 1977) has been widely researched and discussed in the literature (e.g., Buss, 1980; Carducci, 1995; Cheek & Buss, 1981; Pilkonis, 1977; Zimbardo, 1977).

Shyness has been studied in relation to several individual and socio-emotional variables. Buss (1980), for example, argued that shy people are always preoccupied with other people's evaluations, and fear rejection. They tend to have less self-confidence, low self-esteem, and too much self-focused attention. This excessive self-consciousness, and being irresistibly preoccupied with negative opinions from others, will make shy individuals lose confidence and be timid about attending social functions (Crozier, 2001; Woody, Chambless, & Glass, 1997). Their lives, as Carducci (1995, p.35) noted, are entrapped between two fears: "being invisible and insignificant to others, and being visible but worthless". Furthermore, shy people tend to be excessively aware of themselves as social objects (Cheek & Buss, 1981). This may lead to strong criticism of the self, which in turn results in lower self-esteem. Further, shyness can be a hindrance for shy individuals on their interpersonal relationships (Prisbell, 1991) and makes them feel discontented with their social lives (Neto, 1993). Unlike their less-shy peers, shy individuals disclose themselves less, and are more reluctant to make