Insights into EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate in Online English Classes during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study from Turkey

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Abstract

Among all the affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, learner beliefs, and many more, willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 has undoubtedly become a crucial factor in foreign language learning. This case study investigates the underlying factors behind Turkish EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English, specifically in distant education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants consist of 12 university students who are currently enrolled in English Preparatory School at a state university in Turkey and who have just started their one-year compulsory English education through distance education. A qualitative research design was used in the study, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using the thematic content analysis technique. Findings showed that there were three factors that negatively affected EFL learners' WTC in second language (L2) in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) personality, (2) the nature of online education, and (3) lack of self-confidence in speaking skills.

Keywords*: Willingness to communicate; EFL learners; online education; covid-19 pandemic; qualitative research

Introduction

After the outbreak of Covid-19, which is an unexpected deadly virus originating from China, people's lives have tremendously changed in many aspects. Its impact on how education is indisputable as many universities, colleges, and institutions have canceled face-to-face classes and rapidly shifted from face-to-face education to distant education to avoid the spread of the virus as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, examinations are conducted online, campuses and libraries are closed, and postponed study abroad programs. During these challenging and extraordinary days, it is important to better understand how EFL learners are affected by this particular and new type of life, and specifically, how they are psychologically affected by online teaching and learning.

With the rise of communicative teaching approaches to second language pedagogy, it is really crucial to improve learners' communicative competence in L2 in language classes. Swain and Lapkin (2002) also indicate that languages are learned through interactive meaningful communication in a pragmatic setting. Hence, determining the underlying factor(s) that both limit and promote EFL learners' opportunities to use L2 more authentically is extremely important. As a result, a good deal of research has focused on EFL learners' WTC, which is a vital construct in the field of foreign language learning.

Although various studies have explored the factors that influence WTC of EFL learners in different contexts (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2005; Demirezen, & Pourfeiz, 2015; Lu, 2007, Peng, 2007), there is still a research gap in the related literature regarding the underlying factors behind EFL learners' willingness to communicate in L2 in distant education, and to the best of researcher's knowledge, no study has been conducted regarding this issue in the Turkish context. Within this regard, the present qualitative case study aims to investigate the underlying factors which influence Turkish EFL learners' WTC in L2, specifically in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature review

WTC, which is an affective psychological variable based on Burgoon's (1976) work on unwillingness to communicate, was initially developed by McCroskey and Baer (1985) in the first language. Then, WTC was applied to the case of second language by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clement, & Noels (1998), and they defined WTC as a learner's ''readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). These scholars introduced a heuristic model of variables of WTC. In this model, there are six layers − the first three of them, namely communication behavior, behavioral intention, and situated antecedents, refer to situational influences on WTC, and these are more related to a specific context. On the other hand, the latter three layers, namely motivational propensies, affective, cognitive context, and social and individual context, refer to enduring influences on WTC, which are fixed, long-term effects of the environment on the person, and it is not situation-specific (MacIntyre et al., 1998). What can be understood from this model is that a great number of factors and variables might potentially influence WTC in a second language, resulting from both external and internal factors. MacIntyre et al. (1998)'s model shows these components in the following way:
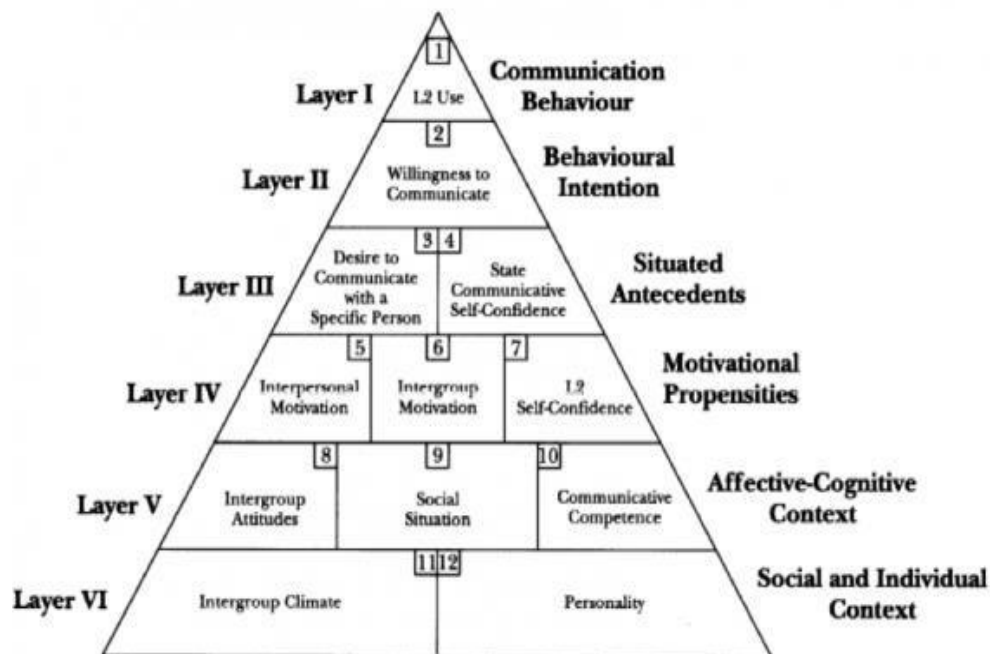

Figure 1: The heuristic model of WTC in L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998)

When the literature regarding WTC in L2 is reviewed, it can be clearly seen that a number of studies have been conducted to determine these external and internal factors affecting WTC in learning a second language. To begin with, MacIntyre et al. (2002) investigated the impacts of age and gender on WTC and other variables including apprehension, perceived competence, and L2 motivation. The findings suggested that EFL learners' WTC and communication apprehension differed depending on their age and gender. EFL learners' WTC in a second language, perceived competence, and the frequency of communication in French was higher from grades 7 to 8 and was stable between grades 8 and 9, but their level of communication apprehension remained stable in grades 7,8, and 9 whereas their L2 motivation decreased between grades 7 and 8.

In the Turkish EFL context, Öz et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to determine EFL learners' perception of WTC and its relationship with communication and affective factors. The participants

were EFL learners of a teacher education program at a state university in Turkey. The results suggested that both communication apprehension and communication competence strongly predicted WTC. However, motivational factors indirectly influenced WTC. In the Japanese EFL context, Matsuoka (2006) carried out a study so as to determine how individual difference variables, such as integrativeness, communication apprehension, and motivation, were correlated with willingness to communicate in a second language and English proficiency. The sample consisted of 180 Japanese college students. The findings showed that four independent variables greatly contributed to the prediction of WTC in learning a foreign language, and self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) was found to be the number one factor which predicts WTC (22%). In line with the aforementioned study, Lu (2007) tried to investigate the relationship between willingness to communicate and motivation among American and Chinese students. The findings were different from what the researcher expected, and in both cultures, it was found out that willingness to communicate was negatively correlated with motivation. In another study, Cetinkaya (2005) claimed that a learner's personality, specifically being extrovert or introvert, is a crucial factor that predicts his/her willingness to communicate. The results proved that extrovert students had a higher degree of willingness to communicate as they had a higher perception of their communication competence.

To conclude, the aforementioned empirical studies show that there are various factors that can be related to willingness to communicate in L2, but the current study will specifically focus on investigating the underlying factors which affect EFL learners' WTC in L2 in online English classes during Covid-19 pandemic. The following research question will guide this study:

- What are the underlying factors that affect Turkish EFL learners' willingness to communicate in L2 in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Method

This case study adopts a qualitative research design by using semi-structured interviews to collect data to understand EFL learners' perceptions and views on WTC in L2 and the underlying factors that affect their WTC in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, as George and Bennett (2005) stated, case studies have various advantages, such as achieving high ecological validity, generating an in-depth and detailed understanding of a complex issue, and being useful for formulating hypotheses. Secondly, since this study will focus on figuring out EFL learners' perceptions on WTC rather than numeric correlations, collecting data by using qualitative methods is assumed to be more beneficial. Last but not least, most of the past studies focusing on WTC have been conducted quantitatively by mostly using scales or self-report questionnaires. Thus, the researcher intends to contribute to the literature by collecting detailed data and focusing on the underlying factors behind EFL learners' willingness or unwillingness to communicate in L2.

Sample

The participants of the current study were 12 university students who were enrolled at various departments but currently studying at the English Preparatory School at a state university in Turkey during the 2020-2021 Fall Semester. 6 of the participants were female, whereas 6 of them were male. Their ages ranged from 17 to 25. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they never had the chance to experience face-to-face education, and instead, they started their one-year compulsory English education through online classes. They were taught via an online tool named Perculus, in which they attended online English classes delivered by their instructors. Their cameras and microphones might be opened at any time only by the instructor. In case of absenteeism during an online class, students could watch the recorded online class later, which made asynchronous learning possible. They had 10 contact hours per week in online English classes. Furthermore, it was their responsibility to do

online assignments regularly on a digital platform. As well as online classes and assignments, students were assessed and evaluated by three midterm exams, four quizzes focusing on speaking and writing skills, two short-story quizzes, and online assignments. All assessment and evaluation procedures were conducted online by using Zoom or Perculus platforms.

Instrument

In line with the purpose of the current study, semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument. Participants were asked six open-ended questions to explore the underlying factors behind their willingness to communicate in L2 in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic and health concerns stemming from it, all the interviews were conducted online.

Data collection and analysis procedures

For the present qualitative case study, to obtain in-depth information, participants were interviewed in a semi-structured fashion by the researcher to determine the factors influencing their willingness to communicate in online English classes. The interviews were conducted in participants' mother tongue, Turkish, to feel more comfortable and relaxed while answering the questions. Before the interview, the researcher explained the main aim of the interview, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. To analyze the qualitative data, thematic content analysis was utilized. As qualitative researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994) propose, the first step was to collect data and transcribe it. Then, the data were analyzed for thematic contents by the standard content analysis framework. Finally, sample extracts were presented for each category to show students' views and perceptions regarding their willingness to communicate in L2 in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, data analysis processes were crosschecked by two colleagues as external auditors. Furthermore, three colleagues who had been doing a Ph.D. degree in ELT checked the interview questions before the interview was administered to students.

Findings

During data analysis, three major themes were identified as the underlying factors affecting WTC in L2: 1. personality, 2. the nature of online education, and 3. lack of self-confidence in speaking skills.

Personality

As the first underlying factor influencing EFL learners' willingness to communicate in L2 in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic, personality, and its problems were discovered based on participants' answers. Most of the participants stated that they were talkative only when they were with their friends or family members, in other words, with the people that they felt close. Apart from that, they considered themselves as 'silent' and 'shy' in general, which might be the result of 'communication apprehension' (McCroskey, 2001) that they were experiencing. Thus, as students did not personally know their classmates and did not feel close to them, they were inclined not to be willing to communicate in English in online classes. The following extracts can illustrate this:

> *"I am generally very talkative and affectionate for the people that I know, but I might be quite self-enclosed for those whom I do not know or do not feel close." (S1)*

"I am a quiet person except for the times I am with my friends. I am shy and not comfortable with communication and innovation." (S6)

The nature of online education

The nature of online education was found to be another factor that affected students' willingness to communicate in L2 in online classes. The majority of participants' responses showed that online education made the language learning process more difficult and less productive than traditional learning due to limited interaction opportunities between student-teacher and student-student and the fact that they could easily get distracted at home for various reasons. To clarify further, according to students, they could not frequently communicate in English in online classes compared to face-to-face classes, and they could speak twice or three times per week. Furthermore, they generally spoke in English not because they volunteered by themselves but because they were chosen to speak English or to answer something in English by the instructor. Here are some instances:

"Except for the last week, I was speaking in English at least twice in online classes, but this only resulted from the fact that my teacher chose me to speak, and I never asked for speaking." (S6)

"I try to speak English as much as possible, but I can only do it once in 3 hours of classes. I do my best not to use any Turkish words." (S10)

"I don't believe that I am really good at learning English and I think online education made it much harder to learn English language, and especially the opportunities to speak decreased a lot." (S11)

Lack of self-confidence in communicating in L2

The third underlying factor affecting students' WTC was found to be a lack of self-confidence in L2 speaking skills. Most students stated that their speaking abilities were not good at all as they could not speak English fluently and felt shy while speaking in public. What is more, their self-confidence for speaking in L2 was not high due to the fear of making mistakes, the lack of speaking English experience before, the fear that people would laugh at them if they made a mistake, and the concern what if they could not understand the question asked or the sentence uttered in English when they interacted with someone. In the end, inescapably, these thoughts made them feel unwilling and unenthusiastic to communicate in English. To give some examples:

"My speaking ability in English is Beginner level. I believe it is a bit worse than other students. I have trouble in speaking in English fast." (S5)

"From time to time, I feel nervous when communicating in English as there was no focus on speaking skills while we were preparing for university entrance exam last year." (S4)
"I generally feel excited. While speaking, I do not want to make grammar and pronunciation mistakes. I make very weird pronunciation mistakes, and sometimes, I myself cannot even understand what I am saying." (S11)

"I cannot help being anxious… I do not generally hear what I am saying. It just comes to my mind and I am saying that. Then, I tell myself 'I cannot believe! I used the grammar structure in such a wrong way!" (S6)

Conclusions and Discussion

The objective of the current study was to discover the underlying factors that influence EFL learners' willingness to communicate in L2 in online English classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results showed that EFL learners were unwilling to communicate in English in online classes mainly for two reasons: personal reasons and reasons stemming from the nature of online education. To begin with personal reasons, they noted that they saw themselves 'talkative' only when it comes to interacting with people they know. As students did not have the chance to meet their classmates due to the Covid-19 pandemic, speaking in English with people they did not actually meet before made them more 'stressed', 'nervous', and 'shy'. Another personal reason for not being willing to communicate was the fear of making mistakes during spoken interaction, which, in turn, made them anxious for communicating in L2. Specifically, they were afraid of making grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary mistakes which hindered them from interacting in L2. They mostly believed that if they made mistakes, they would be judged or laughed at by others, so they simply escaped from communication situations in L2. Furthermore, some students believed that their background information was not sufficient for speaking English because Turkey's education system did not give enough importance and attention to improving students' speaking skills in high school and primary school contexts. When it comes to other reasons resulting from the nature of online education that made them less willing to communicate, the findings indicated that students were easily distracted at home and felt much more isolated and individualized, which eventually resulted in less enthusiastic and willing to communicate in English. This result is similar to what Alawamleh et al. (2020) founded out in their study. Even though few students felt eager to communicate, they believed that they had less chance to interact with their teachers and peers in online classes. So, this finding is also in line with Boling et al. (2012)'s study. One reason why participants in the current study felt so might be because of the fact that they could not open their microphones and not talk whenever they wanted, and only the instructor could do it, which was a significant disadvantage of the learning platform that their university used.

This study has some pedagogical implications for making students more willing to communicate in English in online classes. To start with, universities must be more selective and careful when choosing their online platforms to enhance, facilitate, and improve students' speaking skills and opportunities in online classes. That is, these platforms must be suitable for giving students equal and enough chances to speak. Second, teachers must be aware of the learner differences. For instance, a student may be too shy and anxious to express himself/herself in English, whereas another student may be very confident. So, teachers must create a more positive and stress-free learning environment, especially for those who feel anxious and nervous while communicating in L2. Furthermore, it is wise for teachers to ask insightful questions and start conversations on various topics that students are particularly interested in and have ideas on, and by doing so, students might be more willing and comfortable to talk about engaging and familiar topics. Last but not least, making use of different types of interaction such as pair work, group work, whole-class discussion, or individual speaking rather than sticking into only one type may be much more effective to increase EFL learners' willingness, motivation, and confidence in communicating in L2.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

- What kind of personality do you have in general? (quiet vs. talkative, anxious vs. relaxed)

- Is learning English important for you? Why/Why not?

- Do you think you are good at learning English in general? How about in online education: Do you think it is the same, more or less?

- What do you think your level of speaking ability in English is? Do you think there is a significant difference between your speaking abilities and the other students?

- How often do you participate and communicate in English in an online class?

- How do you feel in general while you are speaking in English in online classes? What factors make you -if so- afraid or shy to communicate in English in online classes?