THE EFFECT OF CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT ON TURKISH EFL LEARNERS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Language classrooms provide the most suitable environment for practicing speaking abilities in EFL contexts. In spite of this fact, very few studies have investigated the effect of the language classroom context on Willingness to Communicate in Second Language (L2WTC). Thus, this study investigated the relationship between classroom environment and willingness to communicate in the Turkish EFL context. Classroom environment was dealt with in three parts which were teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. Quantitative data of the study were collected from 711 preparatory school students at Hacettepe University. The results indicated that the students highly appreciated their language classrooms and classroom environment had a strong impact on EFL learners' willingness to communicate. Pedagogical implications of the study were discussed based on the findings of the study.

Introduction

The use of target language in classrooms can be affected by various variables such as the effects of language class discomfort, motivation, language class risk-taking, concern for grade, and language class sociability (Horwitz & Young, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In addition to these variables, the construct of "willingness to communicate" has been proposed recently. Willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally introduced for L1 communication and defined as a fixed personality trait that is stable across situations (McCroskey, 1992). Later, MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualized WTC in L2 and proposed a theoretical model in which social, affective cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioral intention are interrelated in influencing WTC in L1 and L2 use.

During the last decades, many studies have been conducted to determine different factors affecting L2 WTC. L2 WTC and its relation to different variables such as personality, attitudes, motivation and linguistic self-confidence were investigated by many researchers by means of different statistical techniques (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2002; Oz, 2014). Most of them utilized self-report data to investigate trait-like WTC, whereas only a few of them examined state-level WTC through qualitative techniques such as obsevations and interview data. Also, many of these studies investigated L2WTC in the English as a second language (ESL) learning environments. English as a foreign language (EFL) context differs from the ESL context with regard to finding a chance to use L2 in a real

conversation during daily life (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). While language learners can find a chance to practice their speaking abilities in ESL contexts, this situation is almost impossible for learners who learn a language in EFL contexts. Due to this reason, the language classroom provides the most suitable environment for testing speaking abilities in EFL contexts. In spite of this fact, very few studies have investigated the effect of the language classroom context on L2WTC (e.g., Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Cao, 2011; Peng, 2012; Khajavy et al., 2014) and most of them were conducted in the Chinese EFL context. Turkey is also an EFL context, but the L2WTC in the language classroom context of Turkey was not investigated by any of the researchers.

Literature Review

In Turkey, Bektaş (2005) investigated university-level EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English and tested the path model that she proposed to investigate the relation of WTC with different social-psychological, linguistic and communication variables such as motivation, communication confidence. Şener (2014) also investigated L2WTC with university students studying at the English language teaching department in the Turkish context. She deeply examined the relationships of the same variables which were examined in Bektaş's (2005) study through correlation and regression analyses instead of a path analysis. Although she carried out classroom observations, she did not look into the interaction of WTC and classroom context.

From the ecological perspective, a language classroom, which is the microsystem level of L2WTC, is defined as a social environment where learners and teacher negotiate as social members. Tudor (2003) emphasizes the complex nature of a classroom and the necessity of suitable pedagogical decisions for this complex nature. He suggests that classroom dynamics should be explored through learners' perceptions about English learning and the methodological preferences inside the classroom.

Dörnyei (1994) suggests that classroom dynamics are closely related to the teacher, learners, and tasks which are the main components of a language classroom. As one of the most well-known pioneers in classroom environment research, Moos (1979) listed three underlying constituents of the classroom environment; relationship, personal growth or goal orientation, and system maintenance and change. The relationship component deals with to what extent students are willing to participate in class activities, student cohesion and the level of support from teacher. The personal growth or goal orientation component includes task orientation and competition among students. The system maintenance and change dimension evaluates to what extent the environment is suitable for expectations, keeps control and embraces changes (Moos, 1979).

In order to investigate the complex nature of the classroom environment, a group of scales (e.g. The Classroom Environment Scale (CES), the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire (ICEQ), My Class Inventory (MCI), What Is Happening In This Class (WIHIC) were developed and implemented all around the world. Especially, the scales developed by Fraser and his associates were the most popular ones among them. Many SLA researchers reported the implications of their classroom environment studies which were conducted by means of these scales.

In most educational settings, Fraser's (2002) *What Is Happening In This Class* (WIHIC) questionnaire which was validated across cultures is employed to assess seven aspects of the classroom environment which are student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. For this research, three aspects of this scale which are related to classroom WTC are investigated: teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. These aspects refer to three underlying concepts of language classroom environment (teacher, learner and tasks) as suggested by Clement et al. (1994) and Williams and Burden (1997).

Teacher support is defined as the teacher's help, friendship, trust, and interest shown to students (Dorman, 2003). Wen and Clement (2003) suggest that teacher support, particularly teacher immediacy, is a strong element which directly affects learners' WTC.Teacher immediacy is defined by Christophel and Gorham (1995) as "nonverbal and verbal behaviours, which reduce psychological and physical distance between teachers and students" (p. 292). Verbal immediacy involves behaviours such as praise, self-disclosure, humor, asking questions which give learners an opportunity to talk, whereas non-verbal immediacy icludes behaviours such as gestures, smiling, eye contact (Gorham, 1988).

In many studies, it was found that teacher immediacy positively influences cognitive and affective variables such as motivation (Christophel, 1990), cognitive learning (Christophel, 1990; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001), positive student evaluations (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), and student attendance in class (Rocca, 2004).

In Iran, Fallah (2014) looked into the relationships between teacher immediacy, shyness, motivation, communication self-confidence and willingness to communicate with a group of 252 Iranian EFL learners. Results of the structural equation modeling (SEM) showed that motivation and communication self-confidence directly affected L2WTC, and there were significant positive paths from immediacy to motivation and from motivation to self-confidence. It was concluded that teacher immediacy indirectly influenced L2WTC through the constructs of self-confidence and motivation. Hence, special attention was given to teachers' immediacy behaviors in terms of providing learners with relaxing atmosphere in a classroom which, in turn, encourages them to speak more.

Wen and Clement (2003) suggest that teacher support, particularly teacher immediacy, is a strong element which directly affects learners' WTC.Teacher immediacy is defined by Christophel and Gorham (1995) as "nonverbal and verbal behaviours, which reduce psychological and physical distance between teachers and students" (p. 292). Verbal immediacy involves behaviours such as praise, self-disclosure, humor, asking questions which give learners an opportunity to talk, whereas non-verbal immediacy icludes behaviours such as gestures, smiling, eye contact (Gorham, 1988).

Student cohesiveness refers to the collaboration and support among students (Dorman, 2003). Clement et al. (1994) point out that interaction and learning in the classroom are greatly affected by student cohesiveness. Dörnyei (2007) also indicates that the elements which shape the atmosphere of a language classroom such as support for each other or competitiveness are the main antecedents of the quality of teaching and learning. He defines group cohesiveness as "the closeness and "we" feeling of a group, that is, the internal gelling force that keeps the group together." (p. 721). It is claimed that this feeling could be very strong in some groups which is based on intermember acceptance. Two factors are very effective in affecting the strength of group cohesiveness: members' adherence to the purpose of the group and group pride and the prestige of being a member of a group (Dörnyei, 2007).

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) put forward some suggestions in order to promote cohesiveness in a language classroom such as learning about each other, proximity, contact and interaction, investing in group, extracurricular activities and cooperation toward common goals. In language classrooms where most of the learning activities are carried out in groups or pairs, it is important that learners feels encouraged enough to carry out learning tasks. Thus, it is strongly emphasized by many researchers that group cohesion constitute a vital element for effective language learning (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

Wen and Clement (2003) indicate that the main element which is related to group cohesiveness is class size. Especially in large classrooms, affective problems may occur due to the lack of intimacy and belongingness. Students could easily get lost in crowded classrooms because they cannot catch teacher attention, which prevents them from participating in class activities. Wen and Clement (2003)

state that Chinese classrooms are too crowded, so most of the Chinese students in these classes are unwilling to communicate due to the lack of cohesiveness and encouragement. As a result, they prefer to speak only when they are asked to speak by their teachers. It is clear that class size is a significant element which influences the effectiveness of a group cohesiveness in a classroom.

Baker et al. (1991) conceptualize group cohesiveness on a continuum which ranges from low to high. It was found that high group cohesiveness positively affects various factors such as group productivity, satisfaction, and social influence in the group (Shaw, 1981). Shaw's theory implies that high group cohesiveness produces engagement and reduces anxiety in a classroom setting, which supports willingness to communicate if the group members are satisfied with task orientation.

Task orientation implies the signifance of completing activities and the usefulness of the tasks (Dorman, 2003). The more useful and attractive the tasks will be, the more engaged the students will be during the process. Perceived usefulness of tasks refers to whether the emphasis of a task is on meaning or form. The main purpose of meaning-focused tasks is to exchange message in an authentic context, whereas form-focused activities aims at teaching structural knowledge of a language. Meaning-focused activities were encouraged for the purpose of natural language acquisition, while some researchers claim that form-focused activities should also be integrated into meaning-focused lessons (Ellis, 2002; Long,1998).

Many researchers found that there is a positive relationship between students' engagement and task orientation. Kubanyiova (2006) found that meaningful, personally related and moderately difficult activities would increase the quality of performance. Wu (2003) also suggested that moderately difficult tasks are effective in supporting perceived competence and increasing motivation. Peng's (2009) also suggests that learners in a cohesive group will be more willing to conduct learning tasks.

As can be seen, language classroom provides the most suitable environment for testing speaking abilities in EFL contexts. In spite of this fact, very few studies have investigated the effect of the language classroom context on L2WTC (e.g., Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Cao, 2011; Peng, 2012; Khajavy et al., 2014) and most of them were conducted in the Chinese EFL context. Turkey is also an EFL context, but the studies related to the L2WTC in the language classroom context of Turkey is very limited. This study aims to fill in this gap by investigating L2WTC in the Turkish EFL context. Thus, Turkish EFL learners' WTC in English in classroom setting was investigated in light of WTC frameworks proposed byMacIntyre et al. (1998) and Peng and Woodrow (2010).

To this end, the following research questions were specified as in the following:
      1-What are the Turkish university students' perceptions of their environmental factors contributing to the WTC in L2 class?
      2- Is there any significant relationship between classroom environment and willingness to communicate in L2 class?

Method

This study combined a quantitative technique with a descriptive strategy to explore whether the classroom environment and students' willingness to speak are related in any way. According to Creswell (2012, p. 13), a quantitative technique is employed when identifying a research problem based on the trends in the area or the requirement to explain why something occurs. According to Creswell, describing a trend indicates that the optimal study to address the research question is one in which the researcher identifies the general pattern of respondents' responses and notes how this pattern differs across respondents.

Since the goal of this study is to examine the relationship between the variables, the correlation method is employed. Correlation coefficients are used to categorize how closely two variables correlate. According to Creswell (2012, p. 338), researchers employ the correlation statistical test to define and gauge the degree of association (or relationship) between two or more variables or sets of scores in correlational study designs. According to this viewpoint, the researchers in this study did not try to control or modify the variables as they would in an experiment; instead, they compared the results using correlation statistics.

Setting

The study was conducted at School of Foreign Languages at Hacettepe University at the end of the Fall Semester of the 2016-2017 Academic Year. Hacettepe University offers bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorate degrees in several areas of study.Hacettepe University provides English preparatory program which is both compulsory and voluntary and this program lasts for one year. This one-year preparatory program helps students whose level of English is below proficiency level to gain basic language skills and to become individuals who can follow academic and scientific developments. To achieve this goal, a two-semester program is organized to foster students' listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities.

Participants

Quantitative data of the study were collected from 746 preparatory school students at Hacettepe University. Due to the incomplete data, quantitative data from 711 students were taken into consideration in the study. Cluster random sampling was adopted in order to select the participants from four different proficiency levels.

Table 1: Nationality, Level, Age and Gender Distribution of the Participants

		n	*%*
Nationality	Turkish	707	99.4
	Other	4	0.6
	Total	**711**	**100.0**
Level	ADV	147	20.7
	INT	165	23.2
	PIN	180	25.3
	ELE	219	30.8
	Total	**711**	**100.0**
Gender	Female	429	60.3
	Male	282	39.7
	Total	**711**	**100.0**
Age	17-19 ages	614	86.4
	20-22 ages	83	11.7
	23-25 ages	7	1.0
	26-28 ages	2	0.3
	28-above	5	0.7
	Total	**711**	**100.0**

Instruments

Two scales were adopted for his study. Both translation and back translation methods were conducted to prevent any semantic loss during the translation of surveys (Brislin, 1980).

1. Willingness to Communicate: Ten items (Cronbach's alpha= .94) adapted from Peng and Woodrow (2010) served to assess Turkish preparatory students' willingness to communicate in English. Peng & Woodrow's (2010) study indicated a two-factor solution for WTC: WTC in meaning-focused activities (e.g., giving a speech in the classroom) consists of six items and WTC in form-focused activities (e.g., asking the meaning of a word) consists of four items.

*2. Classroom Environment:*Thirteen items **(**Cronbach's alpha= .88) used by Peng and Woodrow (2010) were utilized to assess classroom environment. Three subcomponents of the scale were teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. Students evaluated their classroom environment on a 6-point scale from 1 (never) to 6 (always).

Data Analysis

As a first step, descriptive analysis (e.g. maximum and minimum scores, mean, and standard deviations) was carried out through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated after the preliminary statistical analyses (e.g. control of normality and linearity).

Results

Findings about the First Research Question

For the first research question, the levels of willingness to communicate and learners' perceptions about classroom environment among preparatory school EFL learners were investigated on a 6-point scale.

It was found that the participants in this study were moderately willing to communicate in English in a classroom setting. This finding is in line with the findings of Bektaş's (2005) and Şener's (2014) study which also showed that Turkish EFL students were moderately willing to communicate in English.

Table 2:Willingness to Communicate

Items	Total Mean	SD
1- I am willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English (e.g., ordering food in a restaurant).	2.95	1.46
2- I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.	3.58	1.46
3- I am willing to give a short speech in English to the class about my hometown with notes.	3.44	1.45
4- I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Turkish into English in my group.	3.64	1.47
5- I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn't understand.	3.97	1.47
6- I am willing to do a role-play in English at my desk, with my peer (e.g., ordering food in a restaurant).	3.47	1.55
7- I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.	4.25	1.52
8- I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of word I do not know.	3.93	1.52
9- I am willing to ask my group mates in English how to pronounce a word in English.	3.96	1.52
10- I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thoughts in my mind.	3.92	1.48
Total WTC Score	3.71	1.49

Three dimensions of classroom environment (teacher support, student cohesiveness, task oritantation) were examined with the related scale items. Table 3 given below presents the descriptive statistics of these items. On a 6-point scale which consists of 13 items, the mean scores found for each dimension were above the midpoint value: 4.98 for teacher support, 4.56 for student cohesiveness, and 4.06 for task orientation. These results reveal that the students highly appreciate their language classrooms. Especially, the dimension with the highest mean score (mean=4.98) was found to be teacher support which implies that the students in this study are very glad with their English teachers. The highest mean score (mean=5.08) of the scale belonged to the scale item "The teacher smiles at the class while talking". As can be seen in the Table 3, 88% of the participants reported that their teachers were patient in teaching and asks questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions. Also, 82% of them indicated that their teacher provides a timely response to students' concerns. Overall, it can be concluded that English teachers at Hacettepe University are very friendly towards their students, respect their opinions and try to provide them with a relaxing learning atmosphere with their smiling faces.

With regard to student cohesiveness, 85% of the participants reported that they are friendly to class members and 82% of them indicated that they make friends among students in this class. Also, 72% of the participants stated that they can help other class members who are having trouble with their work. 68% of the participants, which was a little bit lower compared to other items in this dimension, agreed with the item "I work well with other class members". Although the mean score for this item was still above the midpoint value, lower mean score showed that the participants were cautious about working with their classmates.

Table 3: Classroom Environment

Classroom Environment Items	Mean	SD
1- Tasks designed in this class are useful.	4.01	1.20
2- Tasks designed in this class are attracting	3.46	1.23
3- I know what I am trying to accomplish in this class.	4.34	1.38
4- Activities in this class are clearly and carefully planned.	3.91	1.25
5- Class assignments are clear so everyone knows what to do.	4.62	1.24
Task Orientation	*4.06*	*1.26*
6- I work well with other class members.	4.22	1.28
7- I am friendly to members of this class.	4.84	1.88
8- I make friends among students in this class.	4.78	1.17
9- I help other class members who are having trouble with their work.	4.41	1.33
Student Cohesiveness	*4.56*	*1.41*
10- The teacher provides a timely response to students' concerns.	4.71	1.25
11- The teacher is patient in teaching.	5.02	1.16
12- The teacher smiles at the class while talking.	5.13	1.12
13- The teacher asks questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions.	5.08	1.15
Teacher Support	*4.98*	*1.17*
Total	4.50	1.28

On the other hand, the comparatively lower mean score for task orientation dimension shows that the participants were not quite pleased with the tasks in their language classes. Especially, the lowest mean scores for the item 2 (mean=3.46) and item 4 (mean=3.91) in this dimension show that the

participants have hesitations about to what extent the tasks designed in their classes are attracting and carefully planned.

Generally, they find tasks designed in their classes useful (mean=4.01) and know what they are trying to accomplish in their classes (mean=4.34). They reported the highest mean score (mean=4.62) for the clarity of class assignments.

Findings about the Second Research Question

The nature of the relationship between L2WTC and classroom environment

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated after the preliminary statistical analyses (e.g. control of normality and linearity) and it was found that both of the variables were correlated positively with each other at a statistically significant level.

It was found that there was also a medium size correlation between L2WTC and classroom environment (r(711) = .373, p <.01). This correlation also implies that classroom environement in the process of language learning would have a positive effect on learners' willingness to communicate in L2.

Table 4: Relationship between L2WTC and Ideal L2 Self

	1	2	3	4
L2WTC	1			
Classroom Environment	.373**	1		

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, it was found that the participants were moderately willing to communicate in English in a classroom setting and the students highly appreciate their language classrooms. Also, the relationship between learners' willingness to communicate in L2 classroom and their perceptions about classroom environment was investigated. A positive and highly significant relationship was found between these two constructs. Findings showed that the participants highly appreciate their language classrooms. Especially, the dimension of teacher support received the highest mean score, which indicates that the participants are very glad with their English teachers. However, they were found to have some hesitations about the attractiveness of the tasks utilized in their classrooms.

The findings of the study supported the findings of two previous studies which investigated the effect of classroom environment in Iranian and Chinese settings. Peng and Woodrow (2010) were the first to investigate the effects of classroom environment on students' willingness to communicate in a Chinese setting. They found that classroom environment exerted a direct impact on WTC, communication confidence, learner beliefs and motivation. The findings revealed that classroom environment not only directly affected communication confidence and WTC, but also indirectly influenced them through the mediating roles of individual variables; learner beliefs and motivation. In Iran, classroom environment was found to be the strongest predictor of WTC by Khajavy (2016). There was a direct relationship between classroom environment and WTC although classroom environment also indirectly affected WTC through communication confidence, motivation and attitudes.

Thus, it can be stated that the pleasant classroom environment has an important role in increasing learners' motivation, which, in turn, increases their WTC in English. So, it is suggested that classroom environment should have a pleasant atmosphere by means of effective teacher support, student cohesiveness and careful selection of tasks. It was found that teacher support is an important factor which affects learners' opinions about classroom environment. For a pleasant classroom atmosphere, language teachers should build a good rapport with their learners. Teachers could strengthen their bond with their learners through their encouraging, supportive, and patient teaching styles. Their positive attitudes and gestures such as smiling will certainly encourage learners and increase their motivation. It is also crucial for language teachers to be tolerant of mistakes, which makes learners feel safe while speaking English. As well as teacher immediacy, building a good cooperation among class members is also a indispensible aspect of a pleasant classroom environment.

Considering that a classroom is a small community where learners continuously interact with each other, establishing a friendly atmosphere in a language class, where learners are friendly to each other, helpful to other class member and tolerant of mistakes, would definitely make learners feel more relaxed and express themselves easily in their classrooms.

The findings of the study also revealed that they are more willing to communicate in small groups or with their peers sitting next to them instead of the whole class activities. There are many advantages of group works such as learning from each other, sharing workload. Therefore, language teachers give place to group work or pair work activities in their classrooms in which learners work together to achieve a learning goal, which will definitely increase their motivation level to a great extent.

In addition to teacher support and student cohesiveness, task orientation also has an important role in affecting the atmosphere in the classroom. However, the results indicated a lower mean score for task orientation dimension compared to teacher support and student cohesiveness dimensions, which implied that learners are not completely pleased with the tasks in their language classes. Although they generally find the class assignment clear, they have hesitations about to what extent they are attracting and carefully planned. In the light of these findings, it is suggested that English teachers should be able to integrate intellectually meaningful and challenging tasks into their classes at some points instead of strictly following English books because university level EFL learners are mature enough to critically evaluate the quality and value of English activities with respect to their beliefs or expectations.

Considering that this is one of the first studies which investigate the relationship between classroom environment and WTC, similar studies should be conducted in different Turkish contexts such as other universities, high schools or primary schools. Thus, we could gain deeper insight about Turkish EFL learners' WTC in language classes. Also, this study dealt with only WTC in speaking mode. Future studies should also investigate learners' WTC in other modes such as writing, reading, listening through different instruments which are designed for these purposes.

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