Willingness to Communicate in English: A Case Study of EFL Students at King Khalid University

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Abstract

The main purpose of learning a foreign language is to use it for meaningful and effective communication both inside and outside the classroom. This paper is devoted to identifying the main communication difficulties faced by EFL students at King Khalid University (KKU) and exploring the reasons that lie behind these difficulties. The paper investigates the participants' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English when they have an opportunity and highlights the personality traits that affect students' oral communication in English. To this end, two types of instruments were used: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Both the questionnaire and the interview attempted to measure four types of communicative contexts (public speaking, meetings, group discussions and interpersonal conversations) and three types of interlocutors (strangers, acquaintances and friends). The findings reveal the EFL students' WTC in English at KKU and how their personality traits affect their WTC. Moreover, the paper suggests some recommendations for overcoming EFL students' unwillingness to communicate in English.

Keywords: communicative contexts, EFL students, interlocutor types, KKU, L2, personality traits, WTC

1. Introduction

The main purpose of learning a foreign language is to use it for meaningful and effective communication both inside and outside the classroom. The notion of "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC) is a model that integrates psychological, linguistic and communicative variables in order to describe, explain and predict second language (L2) communication. MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2002) define WTC as a state of readiness to enter a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using an L2. Many factors influence Arab EFL learners' WTC in English, which in turn predicts Arab students' actual use of the second language.

The study aims to explore EFL students' willingness to communicate in English at King Khalid University and how their personality traits affect their WTC. The following section is a brief review of the relevant literature on WTC and personality traits.

1.1 Willingness to Communicate in an L2 Context

Many linguistic and non-linguistic factors play major roles in communication. Specifically, psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors are quite relevant to WTC, especially in an L2. A few studies have investigated the factors that affect L2 learners; however, few studies have been conducted on the effect of personality traits on L2 learning, particularly in the Arab context. English is spoken worldwide, and it is the language of business communication. According to Grubbs et al. (2009), "It is the language to compete in the global economic environment." Saudi Arabia is one of the top destinations for international labor and foreign investment in the world; therefore, there is a need to use English as a tool for international and intercultural communication, which may explain the interest in WTC. According to MacIntyre et al. (2002), WTC is a state of readiness to enter a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using an L2. This researcher believes that WTC represents the willingness to speak freely, without fear. The degree of WTC depends on context, the receivers and personality traits and indicates whether individuals choose to speak or avoid having a conversation.

MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrad (2001) studied the relations among WTC in L2, social support and language learning orientations. In (2002), MacIntyre et al. studied WTC, perceived competence, French anxiety, integrativeness and motivation in terms of sex and age among junior high school students in a French immersion

program. Hashimo (2002) conducted a study with Japanese ESL students to investigate the effects of WTC and motivation on actual L2 use.

A recent study by L. McCroskey, Fayer, J. McCroskey, and Richmond (2007) investigated communication traits in Puerto Rico in both Spanish and English, including a discussion of relations among communication traits in each language and the differences and similarities of those traits in both languages.

A more recent investigation was conducted by Kamprasertwong (2010), who examined how individuals' factors affect and interact with WTC in English oral production. Another purpose of the study was to determine whether there were any differences in individual backgrounds that influence individuals' WTC in L2 speech. The study was conducted with Thai, Chinese and Dutch speakers of English in order to determine whether cultural and personality traits affected their WTC.

The most recent studies have been conducted by Zarrinabadi and Addi (2011) and Barjesteh, Vaseghi, and Neissi (2012). Zarrinabadi and Addi investigated the relation between Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate inside and outside the classroom and their language learning orientations. The authors concluded that language orientations correlate more closely with WTC outside rather than inside the classroom. The study by Barjesteh et al. explored Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of their willingness to initiate communication across four types of contexts and three types of receivers. The study concluded that Iranian EFL learners are willing to initiate communication in familiar situations such as group discussions or when communicating with their friends; they are less willing to communicate in unfamiliar situations such as public speaking. The only study on Saudi students observed was by Hamouda (2013). Hamouda investigated the causes of the non-participation of students in EFL classrooms at Qassim University. He noted some causes such as poor English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, shyness, lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. He conducted his study with first-year, non-English EFL majors at Qassim University. The questionnaire used in his study comprised 66 items extracted from instruments used in previous studies. The subjects responded to the English version on a 2-point Likert scale (1 = disagree; 2 = agree).

To the best knowledge of this researcher, the WTC model has not been investigated in the Arab EFL context. However, some of its components have been conducted with Arab EFL students. The researcher believes that no study has yet been conducted to investigate personality traits and how they affect students' WTC in English as a foreign language.

1.2 Personality Traits

Personality traits are considered the antecedents of WTC in both first and second languages. McCroskey & Richmond (1990) claimed that introverted individuals are introspective, less sociable and feel less need to communicate, whereas extroverted individuals are people-oriented and value communication. In other words, introverts prefer to be silent, whereas extroverts are quite willing to communicate.

MacIntyre's (1994) study noted that introversion influences WTC by communication apprehension and perceived competence. In 1996, MacIntyre & Charos used a path analysis to examine the effect of personality, attitudes, and effect on the frequency of second language communication. Their results noted direct and significant paths from WTC, motivation, competence, and the opportunity to have contact with an L2 speaker to frequency of second language communication. MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) proposed that personality influences one's WTC in his/her second/foreign language. Moreover, MacIntyre, Babin & Clement (1999) observed the relation between WTC and personality variables and stated in their findings that personality traits influence WTC.

Based on this researcher's observations, extroverted students have a high WTC and like to participate in classroom activities, whereas introverted students are less willing to communicate and prefer not to speak freely or participate actively.

This paper seeks to identify some of the communication difficulties faced by EFL students at KKU and focuses on investigating the relation between their WTC and personality traits that affect their oral communication in English. Based on the researcher's observations, students differ in their communication behavior. Some students like to speak actively and freely, whereas others prefer to speak only with particular interlocutors, and some would rather speak only when necessary. Some speakers may suddenly stop talking to others because of certain personal traits. It is therefore hypothesized that these personality characteristics are important antecedents of WTC even in one's native language. This study suggests some solutions to overcoming these problems and boosting students' WTC in English.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

2.1 Objectives

This paper poses three primary objectives: (i) to investigate whether EFL students at KKU are willing to communicate in English when they have the opportunity, (ii) to explore the personality traits that underlie the lack of WTC in English as a foreign language and (iii) to suggest some recommendations to both teachers and learners to address the problem of unwillingness to communicate among EFL students at KKU.

2.2 Questions

The study seeks to identify the answers to the following two research questions to achieve the abovementioned objectives:

1) Do EFL students at KKU communicate in English as a foreign language when they have the opportunity?

2) Is there any relation between the students' willingness to communicate and their personality traits?

3. Research Methodology

The present study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and the resultant discussions. According to Creswell (1999), such a hybrid approach allows formore and better information to be gathered by combining the results of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Thus, conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews in addition to the quantitative questionnaire enabled the researcher to gaina deeper understanding of the complexities of EFL students' WTC in English at KKU and how their personality traits affect their willingness.

Briefly, the research design included the participants, the instruments and the data collection procedures used and data analysis.

3.1 Participants

The researcher gave the questionnaire to all students at levels 7 and 8 (i.e., final year) in the Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University. These students were about to graduate from the college. The total number of fully completed questionnaires was 105.

For the qualitative portion of this research, the researcher randomly selected 20 students from the students who completed the questionnaire to participate in semi-structured interviews. In this manner, both willing and less willing students would be interviewed.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

3.2.1 Questionnaire

For the quantitative data, the researcher used a questionnaire comprising two parts: WTC and a personality traits scale. The first section of the questionnaire contained 12 items from McCroskey (1992) to evaluate EFL students' WTC in English at KKU, with a few changes made to render it more appropriate for a Saudi context. The 12 items were designed to investigate four different communicative contexts (group discussions, speaking in meetings, interpersonal conversations and public speaking) and three different types of interlocutors (friend, acquaintance andstranger). The second portion of the questionnaire included 11 items adapted from Goldberg (1992) to examine the effect of personality traits on WTC in English. Items 7 and 11 were stated negativelyto render the instrument more reliable and valid.

To avoid students' misunderstanding, the questionnaire items regardingWTC were translated into Arabic utilizing the back translation method to establish the accuracy of the translation. Furthermore, the items of the personality traits questionnaire were not only translated but also paraphrased in Arabic to ensure comprehension. The translation was shown to a bilingual colleague as an additional check, was deemed to be equivalent (Newmark, 1988) and waspilot tested to ensure accuracy. All ofthe questionnaire items were clear and bilingual. The students were requested to rate their level of agreement with each statement using a 3-point Likert scale.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interview

To obtain in-depth information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students in their mother tongue, i.e., Arabic. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and translated into English. Before conducting each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the interview and the use of the audio-recorder. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and the protection of their identities. Each student's interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes.

3.3 Data Analysis

After administering the questionnaire, the obtained data were analyzed using SPSS. To compute the total WTC score for the first section of the questionnaire, the researcher added the average scores for each of the four types of communicative situations and divided them by 3; then, he added the average scores of each of the three types of interlocutors and divided them by 4. All computed data are tabulated and presented below. The interviews were transcribed and verified. The researcher consulted colleagues with experience in transcribing data in the field of language research, and an analysis of the content was conducted on the qualitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

The following two sections and their subsections report the findings obtained from the two instruments of the study.

4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

4.1.1 Results of Research Question (1): "Do EFL Students at KKU Communicate in English as a Foreign Language When They Have an Opportunity?"

The following tables list the findings:

Table 1. Communicative situation types (Mean and SD Table)

Dimension/Scale		No.	Mean	SD
Communicative Situations	Public Speaking	105	1.8320	0.5333
	Meetings	105	1.6863	0.6051
	Group Discussions	105	1.9702	0.5857
	Interpersonal Conversations	105	2.0919	0.4904

The figures in Table 1 show that EFL students at KKU were quite willing to communicate in the interpersonal conversation context (mean = 2.09, SD = 0.49), followed closely by the group discussion context (mean = 1.97, SD = 0.58); however, the studentswere less willing to communicate in the public speaking context (mean = 1.83, SD = 0.53), followed by the meeting context (mean = 1.68, SD = 0.60). It appears that the majority ofthe Saudi community generally feels confident enough to initiate communication and be talkative rather than be shy and silent. The students who participated in this study were thus quite willing to communicate in an interpersonal conversation context. They were also to some extent willing to communicate in group discussions and public speaking contexts. Their reduced willingness to communicate in the meeting context was because of their own perspective of meeting-context formality, as stated in their semi-structured interviews.

Table 2. Relation between WTC in English and personality traits with regard to communicative situation types

Model	Sum of Squares	D. F.	Mean Square	Correlation R	R Square	F	Sig
Regression	4.413	4	1.103				
Residual	9.504	100	0.095	0.563	0.317	11.608	0.05
Total	13.917	104					

The figures in Table 2 show statistical significance between students' WTC and their personality traits with regard to communicative situationtypes. This correlation (r = 0.563) is statistically significantat the5% level of significance. The F statistic test is (F = 11.61), which indicates a statistically significant relation between students' WTC and their personality traits in various communicative situations.

Table 3. Interlocutor types (Mean and SD Table)

Dimension/Scale		No.	Mean	SD
	Strangers	105	1.8320	0.5333
Interlocutors	Acquaintances	105	1.6863	0.6051
	Friends	105	1.9702	0.5857

With regard to interlocutortypes, as shown in the table above, the students' WTC was high with respect to the friendsub-dimension (mean = 1.97, SD = 0.58), followed by the strangersub-dimension (mean = 1.83, SD = 0.53). Students reported less WTC in English with acquaintances. The standard deviations were less than 1.0 for all dimensions. This finding demonstratesthe homogeneousness of the sample of this study. The researcher expected the WTC to be affected by social contextual support, as in the case of the friend interlocutor type. According to MacIntyre et al. (2001), social support, particularly from friends, influences WTC outside of the classroom; surprisingly, however, WTC with a stranger was higher than that with an acquaintance. The findings of the semi-structured interviews could explain this observation, as presented below.

Table 4. Relation between WTC in English and personality traits with regard to interlocutor types

Model	Sum of Squares	D. F.	Mean Square	Correlation R	R Square	F	Sig
Regression	4.050	3	1.350				
Residual	9.867	101	0.098	0.539	0.291	13.817	0.05
Total	13.913	104					

Table 4 shows the relation between students' WTC and their personality traits with regard to interlocutortypes. The statistical analysis shows a correlation (r = 0.539) that indicates a statistically significant relationat the 5% level of significance. The F statistic test is nearly (F = 13.82), which indicates a statistically remarkable correlation between students' WTC and their personality traits with reference to interlocutortypes.

4.1.2 Results to Question (2): "Is There Any Relation between the Students' Willingness to Communicate and Their Personality Traits?"

To compute the overall relation between the personality traits and WTC in English in various communicative situationsand with different types of interlocutors, the effect of the personality traits was determined to be greater than average ona 3-point Likert scale, i.e., mean = 2.11 and SD = 0.37. The following table correlates the relation between personality traits and each sub-dimension of communicative situationand interlocutortype.

Table 5. Relation between WTC in English and personality traits (Correlation Matrix)

WTC in English	Communicative Situation Types				Interlocutor Types		
	Public Speaking	Meetings	Group Discussions	Interpersonal Conversations	Strangers	Acquaintances	Friends
Personality Traits	0.485*	0.507*	0.448*	0.379*	0.469*	0.514*	0.445*

*sig. at 5% (level of significance)

Table 3 lists the specific correlations for the relation between students' WTC sub-dimensions and personality traits. A level of significance of 0.05% indicates a statistically significant relation between students' WTC and their personality traits.

Results revealed the correlation coefficient between personality traits and types of communicative situations and interlocutors. Particularly, the scores and sub-scores for communicative situation types and interlocutor types were as follows: for public speaking (r = 0.49), for meetings (r = 0.51), for group discussions (r = 0.45), for interpersonal conversations (r = 0.38), for strangers (r = 0.47), for acquaintances (r = 0.51) and for friends (r =

0.45). The strongest sub-dimensiontotal correlation for the communicative-situationtypeswas indicated by the scores on the meetings and the public speaking sub-dimensions (r = 0.51 and r = 0.49, respectively), and for the interlocutor types, the strongest correlation was indicated by the scores on the acquaintance and the stranger sub-dimensions (r = 0.51 and r = 0.47, respectively). In short, these findings clearly show that the personality traits strongly affect WTC in two communicative situation types (meetings and public speaking) and two interlocutor types (acquaintances and strangers). Similarly, the effect of personality types was moderate with regard to group discussions and interpersonal conversation contexts on the one hand and friend-interlocutor on the other. Further research is required to determine whether the results observed in this study are consistent with relations between personality traits and WTC in the students' mother tongue, i.e., Arabic. The majority of previous studies have examined WTC in different contexts and with different types of interlocutors, mainly utilizinga quantitative method that is not sufficiently insightful for generalization. Moreover, acorrelation between personality traits and WTC in English has scarcely been identified. The following section addresses the qualitative data and the above-mentioned quantitative findings to render this study more insightful.

4.2 Results of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The following portion of this study examines the findings gathered from semi-structured interviews on the students' opinions concerning WTC across communicative situationand interlocutor types and the effect of personality traits on students' oral production. The data collected from the participants were organized into the following three subsections, consistent with the research questions for in-depth understanding and information.

4.2.1 Communicative Situation Types: (Public Speaking, Meetings, Group Discussions, Interpersonal Conversations)

Many students (60%) stated that the most preferable communicative situation for them was the interpersonal conversation sub-dimension, and they expressed their willingness to initiate communication in such contexts. For example, six students (S 8, S 9, S 13, S 15, S 16 and S 18) said, "We do not like to be dumb; we like to initiate talking about anything, even it is rubbish or nonsense." Conversely, the majority of them (70%) expressed less willingness to communicate in English in the meeting sub-dimension. More than (50%) of the interviewees justified their unwillingness to talk in meetings, stating, "Meetings are formal so better to listen and not to talk unless you are experienced." Other students(S 3, S 8, S 15, S 18 and S19) showed positive reactions toward group discussions, especially with their classmates in classrooms. Notably, some students expressed positive feelings regarding public speaking. For instance, four students (S 2, S 9, S 13 and S 20) said, "We are in the habit of speaking in public since we were in primary schools."

4.2.2 Interlocutor Types: (Stranger, Acquaintance, Friend)

The majority of the participants (70%) were quite willing to initiate communication with friends and less willing to initiate a conversation in English with an acquaintance. When twostudents (S 6 and S 17) were asked, each one said, "I do not want to show my reality before others, i.e., if one commits a mistake, they would laugh at me." Other students (S 2, S 4, S 7 and S 16) said, "I would rather talk in English to a stranger than to an acquaintance, i.e., if I make mistakes, he does not know me."

4.2.3 Relation between WTC in English and Personality Traits

Fourteen students agreed that positive personality traits affect their WTC not only in English but also in the mother tongue in different types of communicative situations and with various types of interlocutors. More than (30%) of the interviewees attributed their reluctance to communicate in English to not having many opportunities to practice English in their daily lives. Furthermore, they were reluctant to speak in English because of a lack of English proficiency. Many students appeared to be less willing to speak in English because of a lack of confidence. For example, two students (S 14 and S 17) stated, "When I start speaking, my heart starts beating."Other students (S 12 and S 16) said, "My legs get shaking and my body starts sweating."

In general, students who were inhibited and introverted were less willing to communicate not only in English but also in their mother tongue. Moreover, those who were extroverted, talkative, bold, assertive and sociable were quite willing to communicate even in unfamiliar contexts. The majority of the studies conducted on WTC have used questionnaires to investigate the various variables that quantitatively affect WTC. This researcher wanted to render this study more insightful by exploring the effects of personality traits on WTC and the role of various situational variables of WTC.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The above-mentioned types of communicative situations and interlocutors, as assessed by the participants on the questionnaire and in the semi-structured interviews, demonstrate that EFL students at KKU prefer to

communicate more in interpersonal conversations and group discussions than in other contexts, such as public speaking and meeting situations. The students also showed greater WTC with friends than with strangers or acquaintances. In addition, the findings of this study convincingly demonstrate that there is a significant positive correlation between personality traits and WTC in some communicative situations, such as meeting and public speaking contexts, and with some interlocutor types, such as acquaintances and strangers. Thus, the findings show that personality traits greatly affect WTC in two communicative situation types, meetings and public speaking, and two interlocutor types, acquaintances and strangers. Similarly, the effects of personality traits were moderate with regard to group discussions and interpersonal conversation situations and friends as a type of interlocutor.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is necessary for English instructors to find a way to help their students overcome their fear of speaking in a group or in public. The findings of this study provide some insights and guidelines for some communicative situations and interlocutor types. Moreover, positive personality traits play a major role in seeking opportunities to use English in various situations and with different interlocutors.

Based on the researcher's experience, this study offers some recommendations for teaching and enhancing students' willingness to communicate in English. The researcher has been teaching EFL students at KKU a Speech Workshop Course, i.e., an advanced speaking course, for many years. This course includes theoretical and practical components. The purpose of the theoretical component is to help students build confidence by addressing personal questions and participating in short conversations and group discussions. The practical component prepares students to debate and deliver successful presentations.

Instructors should generate situational and familiar topics of interest for students to motivate their WTC in English. During group discussion activities, the instructor should assign tasks to individual group members, such as a facilitator or leader, a recorder and a presenter. It is preferable to allow students to choose their own partners or group members. What is more important during this phase is that the instructor should not focus on students' mistakes or errors but should be a sympathetic listener providing positive responses and guidance. When students are delivering presentations, the instructor should begin with mock presentations by student volunteers. The researcher provides students with various topics and allows them to choose any topic that interests them and begin preparing as a group or individually. On the day the presentations are delivered, he encourages other students to participate in evaluating their classmates by using a checklist that assesses the content and art of the presentation, followed by open discussion.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

In a broader context, research on WTC should consider the Saudi culture, the social background of students and their proficiency in English with respect to different types of communicative situations and interlocutors. Further investigation is recommended to examine the effect of personality traits on WTC in different Saudi communication contexts. A longitudinal study is also highly recommended for further research to observe transient and enduring personality traits. Moreover, future research must explore the relation between the effect of personality traits and WTC in the students' mother tongue.

Acknowledgements

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