

Relationship between Willingness to Communicate in English and Classroom Environment among Libyan EFL Learners

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Abstract Oral communication skills can be regarded as core and significant skills in foreign language learning. English language teaching (ELT) educators have always been concerned with finding appropriate ways that can help English as a foreign or second language learners (EFL/ESL) to improve their oral communication skills. Such skills are closely related to the learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Currently, researchers in ELT have focused their attention on the significance of classroom environmental factors in developing learners' WTC. Therefore, this study examines the association between classroom environmental factors and Libyan EFL students' WTC. The results of the descriptive analysis indicated that the individual's level of WTC and classroom environment among Libyan EFL students is at a moderate level. Analysis using correlations indicated a positive relationship between WTC, students' cohesiveness, and task orientation. Multiple regressions analysis revealed that only students' cohesiveness and task orientation were significant predictors of WTC. However, for teacher support, there was no apparent correlation and prediction relationship between teacher's support and learners' WTC. The study has implications for EFL university instructors and the academic authorities who are concerned with enhancing the oral communication skills of undergraduate students and enable them to become better communicators in the future.

Keywords Classroom Environment, WTC, Libyan EFL Students

1. Introduction

In a foreign language learning context, learners of English are inevitably concerned with developing their oral communication which they view as a critical requirement for

enhancing their academic performance (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In this regard, WTC has been considered as one of the factors that can help in motivating students toward improved oral communication (Wen & Clément, 2003; Yashima, et al., 2004). According to MacIntyre, et al. (2003), the principal goal for language learning should encourage WTC among students, since high WTC increases opportunities for students to practice the target language and real language use. However, it is evident that when the opportunity to communicate arises in the classroom, some language students avail of this chance to practice using the target language, while others cannot or are unwilling to initiate or interact in the target language. Most Libyan EFL major students face obstacles in communicating in the English language despite spending several years of learning the language. This constitutes one of the difficulties among university EFL major students (Orafi, 2008; Shteivi & Hamuda, 2016). Since Arabic as a native language is spoken as the first language in Libya and English is used as a foreign language, many Libyan students are unable to converse in the target language. Although, the students' first language is a factor that cannot be changed since the native first language is acquired from childhood, the classroom environment, however, is a factor that can be enhanced to increase WTC among Libyan learners in a foreign language context. For this purpose, this paper aims to highlight the significance of the classroom atmosphere as a key factor influencing Libyan EFL university candidates' WTC in the classroom context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Willingness to Communicate in English

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is defined as the probability of initiating a conversation when given the

freedom to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). It was first introduced with reference to the first language (L1) representing a personality trait by (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). In the target language of ESL or EFL, WTC was measured in terms of trait and state predisposition (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The trait L2 WTC predisposition designates a stable tendency toward communication while state L2 WTC predisposition designates a situational perspective. MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that it is almost impossible to parallel first language WTC with second language WTC. Accordingly, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a pyramid model for the L2 WTC in which psychological, linguistic and contextual variables affect L2 WTC. After the introduction of the model, many studies were carried out to investigate L2 WTC in different contexts (Yashima, 2002; Valadi, et al., 2015; Peng, 2012; Khajavy et al., 2016). Empirical researches on L2 WTC have revealed that among the different predictors of the L2 WTC, the classroom environment has been identified among the strongest predictors (e.g. Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Furthermore, as MacIntyre and Charos (1996) maintain, "recent trends toward a conversational approach to second language pedagogy reflect the belief that one must use the language to develop proficiency, that is, one must talk to learn" (p. 3). In other words, according to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), if an individual would not be able or is not willing to use the target language in the classroom, he/she will face difficulties in becoming a proficient speaker. Moreover, Oxford and Shearin (1994) postulate that a foreign language is usually gained inside the classroom entirely. Therefore, learners who attempt to learn a foreign language inevitably miss the opportunity to practice the foreign language in their daily lives. They also lack the opportunities to use the language for practical communication. This provides evidence that WTC can be used as one of the tools to increase students speaking skills and the ability to communicate in the classroom.

2.2. Classroom Environment

Recent studies have demonstrated the significance of the classroom environment as a vital element affecting L2 WTC. According to Peng and Woodrow (2010) classroom has a critical role in L2WTC similar to other affective and cognitive factors. Furthermore, with a foreign language (EFL), language learners considered the classroom environment as a vital element that further enhances their WTC. The language classroom contains essentially all of the teachers, learners, and tasks and consequently all these components have an influence on language learning in the classroom (Dornyei, 1994). "These three components mirror the dimensions of the classroom environment identified in educational research" (Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p, 843). Teachers' support was described as the degree to which teachers were helpful encouraging, positive and interested in making friendships with their students (Dorman, et al., 2006).

Students' cohesiveness refers to their learning community cohesiveness in terms of collaborating and supporting each other (Dorman et al., 2006). Task orientation highlights the importance of activity completion in the classroom (Dorman et al., 2006). Quantitatively, there is little empirical research in EFL WTC in relation to contextual classroom elements (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). In fact, insufficient attention has been given to investigate the classroom elements that impact learners' WTC in the EFL classroom context. One study conducted by Peng and Woodrow (2010), examined the association between WTC and classroom environment among students in China. WTC was measured by two factors which were meaning-focused activities and form-focused activities. The results showed a significant positive association among classroom environment components which were teacher support, students' cohesiveness, and task orientation. The results also showed that the relationship between the two WTC factors (meaning-focused and form-focused) were $r = .27$, $.27$, $.33$ and $r = .25$, $.23$, $.23$ respectively at $p < .01$. Ghonsooly et al. (2014) reached a similar result among EFL Iranian learners. Their findings showed that all classroom components were positively correlated with WTC, teacher support, student cohesiveness ($r = .15$ and $r = .17$, $p < .05$) respectively and task orientation ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). These findings confirmed the importance of classroom elements in enhancing students' WTC.

Similarly, two more additional studies that investigated WTC and classroom environment relationships were conducted by (Khajavy et al., 2016, 2017). The first study was performed among English major EFL students in a classroom context. They measured WTC in two factors: Meaning-focused and Form-focused the same as Peng and Woodrow's study above. Correlation analysis showed a positive relationship between two factors of the classroom environment (student cohesiveness and task orientation, $r = .27$, $r = .19$) with WTC as Form-focused at $p < .01$. However, with WTC as Meaning-focused, there was a correlation relationship between task orientation and teacher support ($r = .29$, $r = .14$) and WTC respectively at $p < .01$. In their second study in 2017, they selected secondary school learners in rural and urban places in Iran as a case study. They measured WTC as a single factor, and the findings revealed a positive significant correlation relationship among all classroom environment components (teachers, students and tasks, $r = .48$, $r = .28$, and $r = .41$) with WTC respectively at $p < .01$. Once again these results confirmed the significance of classroom elements enhancing students' WTC.

From the above discussion, we can see a few studies have examined classroom environment variables that influence learners' WTC in a foreign language context. Further studies need to be carried out regarding how L2 WTC can be influenced by classroom environmental factors. In other words, the novelty of this study is that it addresses the predictive influence of classroom environment subscales on WTC. In the Libyan context, for example, there is a huge number of students who engaged in learning English and the

number is steadily rising. Thus, it is necessary to explore the factors that have effects on Libyan EFL students' WTC.

2.3. Research Questions

Q1. What are the students' levels of WTC and their perception of classroom environment variables?

Q2. Is there any correlation relationship between students' level of WTC and their perception of Classroom environment variables?

Q3. Is there any predicting relationship between students' level of WTC and their perception of Classroom environment variables?

3. Method

The descriptive and correlational design was applied to conduct this study to investigate the Libyan EFL individuals' WTC in addition to their classroom variables. A survey was used to identify the individuals' WTC level and to test the correlation relationship between WTC as the dependent variable and classroom environment as an independent variable.

3.1. Participants

The study was carried out in the English department at a university in Libya in the academic year of 2018/2019. A questionnaire was administered for two hundred and nine Libyan EFL students. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 25 years old.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Classroom Environment

The classroom environment was measured through sixteen-item questions. Thirteen items were chosen from Peng and Woodrow's (2010) study and three items were chosen from Matsubara (2007). The three items were chosen due to the importance of students' group communication. Overall, the questionnaire had five items for task orientation, five items for teacher support and six items for students' cohesiveness. The participants gave their answers based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree".

3.2.2. Situational Willingness to Communicate

Twenty-eight items from Gol et al. (2014) were used to measure the WTC. The items represented students' degree of WTC in the classroom in various situations. Students show how frequent their WTC in several different situations. The five-point Likert-scale rates from "never willingness = 1" to "always willingness =5".

3.2.3. Instrument Reliability

The reliability of the present instrument of WTC and classroom environment questionnaire was tested. The

reliability for all items of the questionnaire was determined through the use of Cronbach's Alpha. The values of 0.82 for WTC and 0.83 for the classroom environment obtained were higher than the statistically accepted value of (0.60) as stated (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.3. Data Analysis

Bbb Relationships between Libyan EFL learners' perceptions of their foreign Language classroom environment and their WTC outcome were studied using three analyses, namely descriptive, correlation and multiple regressions. First, learners' perceptions of the classroom environment and WTC were determined by computing the means and standard deviation of the overall perception scores. The perception scores on each of the three subscales were task orientation, students' cohesiveness, and teacher's support. Second, Pearson Product Moment correlation r was calculated to explore the relationship between the foreign Language classroom environment and learners' WTC in English. Third, the multiple regression was also carried out for deeper analysis. In this analysis, the WTC score was used as the dependent variable and the set of three environment subscales were used as the independent variables. Further, in this analysis, the standardized regression coefficient (β) illustrates the relations between WTC and each classroom subscales in the regression equation. The R-squared which indicates the sum of variance in the WTC of students was accounted for by the classroom environment variables. The three statistical methods were used to answer the three research questions respectively.

4. Findings

Table 1 below shows the descriptive analysis of the Libyan English major students' WTC and classroom environment in an EFL context. It shows the descriptive statistics of Classroom Environment and WTC.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	SD
Task orientation	3.43	0.73
Student cohesiveness	3.83	0.93
Teacher support	3.59	0.89
Overall	3.63	0.70
Willingness to communicate(WTC)	3.31	0.57

The table illustrates the variables that showed the participants' degree of perception to classroom environment variables and willingness to communicate in the classroom. The table illustrates the mean score and the standard deviation of task orientation (3.43/0.73), student cohesiveness (3.83/0.93), and teacher support (3.59/0.89). The total mean score for the three variables was 3.63 and the standard deviation was (0.57). Moreover, the table also

illustrates the level of the participants' WTC variable. The mean of WTC was 3.31 with a standard deviation of 0.57.

Table 2. Correlation between WTC and Classroom environment variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
WTC				
Task orientation	.475**			
Student cohesiveness	.448**	.535**		
Teacher support	.247	.405**	.535**	

The above table shows that the correlation relationship between WTC and classroom environment. Correlation analysis demonstrated that there was a moderate correlation relationship between WTC and the classroom environment. It was confirmed that WTC did not show any correlation relationship regarding teachers' support ($r = .247$) variable and positively with students ($r = .535$, $p < .01$) and tasks ($r = .405$, $p < .01$).

Regression analysis was run to evaluate the influence of the classroom variables on the WTC variable. Table: 3 shows the findings of the regression analysis for classroom environment factors to answer the third research question.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis

Variables	Standardized Coefficient		
	β		Sig
Teacher's support	-.047		.514
Students' cohesiveness	.293		.000
Task orientation	.337		.000
F		26.726	
R ²		.280	

Table 3 shows the results for predictors of WTC, a multiple linear regression was significant and approximately 28% variations of WTC can be explained by classroom environment variables ($R^2 = 0.280$, $F(3,205) = 26.726$, $p = .000$). WTC is significantly positively predicted by students' cohesiveness and task orientation ($\beta = .293$, $\beta = .337$, $p = .000$) respectively. Teacher's support was an insignificant predictor of WTC ($\beta = -.047$, $p = .514$) These findings indicate that if students are more cohesive and work together during communication tasks, they are more likely to be more willing to communicate using the target language in the classroom.

5. Discussion

With regard to the first question which explored the students' level of WTC in English and their perception of classroom environments, it was found that the level of WTC of the students was at a moderate level (mean = 3.31) which

means that the Libyan EFL students were willing to communicate using the English language in the classroom. Moreover, the means for teachers' support and task orientation, were (mean= 3.59, 3.43 respectively) indicated moderate levels of teacher and task variables, but a fairly high level of student cohesiveness variable (mean=3.83) in the classroom. Generally, the learners' perceptions of the classroom environment reflected a moderate level (mean=3.63), and this result is consistent with previous findings by Khajavy et al. (2017). This reflects that the students were interested in and enjoy their English communication in their classrooms.

Correlation analyses showed a significant correlation between task orientation, students' cohesiveness and WTC in English. Learners in the current study seem to be more likely to speak in an environment where they feel restful, coherent, and comfortable. In such an atmosphere, learners' communication increases as they know and support each other (Peng, 2009). This outcome is similar to Peng and Woodrow's (2010) results, which showed that learners' participation rate rises as they feel relaxed. Data analysis also revealed a significant correlation relationship between the two variables WTC and task orientation. If the tasks are interesting and exciting, the Libyan students would cooperate more in the classroom. Also, the findings revealed that WTC was positively correlated with student cohesiveness. It is clearly obvious that offering a collaborative learning approach would encourage students to communicate more in English. A supportive and coherent group allows students to develop and achieve more by speaking English and working cooperatively. This enhances and increases cohesiveness, participation, and interaction. This finding is also consistent with Khajavy et al, (2016, 2017), Ghonsooly et al., (2014), and Peng and Woodrow (2010). However, the results indicated that WTC had no correlation with teacher support, which was inconsistent with previous studies (Peng & Woodrow; 2010; Ghonsooly et al., 2014; Khajavy et al., 2017) and consistent with Khajavy et al. (2016). They did find that the correlation between teachers' support and WTC as a form- focused. However, unlike the previous studies' findings, conducted a more in-depth analysis to examine the predicting relationship between the classroom environment with its sub-factors (task orientation, students' cohesiveness, and teacher's support) and situational WTC. The results showed that only task orientation and students' cohesiveness variables had positive significant predictors on WTC. In contrast, the teacher's support was an insignificant predictor of WTC. This outcome reflects the passivity role of EFL Libyan teachers. They have had a passive role in motivating students to participate in oral communication activities. The reason behind this is the bigger classroom size which makes the involvement of students in speaking activities quite difficult. Dewaele, et al. (2014) noted that "smaller groups are more conducive to closer social bonds, a positive informal atmosphere, and to the more frequent use of the FL" (p. 264).

6. Conclusions

The result of the current study showed that the classroom environment plays a vital role in enhancing Libyan EFL students' willingness to speak. It is clear that having a pleasant and favorable university classroom has a positive influence on the students' willingness to communicate in the classroom. Hence, the conclusion of this study is as a result of minimal research attention towards the related factors classroom factors that are related to willingness to communicate in English among Libyan EFL learners. The study yielded important results towards filling an empirical and conceptual gap between the classroom environment factors and willingness to communicate in the EFL context. However, this study is novel in the sense that it is the first study that predicts the classroom environment factors. In fact, the results of this study revealed that the task orientation and students' cohesiveness can increase WTC by twenty-eight percent which was not studied by others. As we predict the relationship between these factors, teachers can be in the best position to provide an environment that increases students' willingness to communicate in English. However, the teacher support does not significantly contribute to WTC as regard to the perceptions of respondents of the current study. Therefore, there is a need to develop a program for improving the support of teachers systematically, thus may improve the WTC in English and classroom environment among EFL learners.

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