

## The relationship between personality traits and WTC in EFL context

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### Abstract

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language has recently become an important concept across disciplines of second language acquisition (SLA). WTC in a foreign language which refers to the tendency to orally communicate may be caused by situational variables. Moreover, personality traits of individuals may also be a determining factor in WTC. The main aim of this study is to explore the relationship between different personality traits and WTC in EFL context. Also, the role of gender in the level of WTC is investigated. In this study, two questionnaires of NEO Five Factor Model (NEO-EFM) of personality and WTC scale for WTC were used to collect data from 80 participants. Then, the data was analyzed by Smart PLS software. The Bootstrap method was used to determine T-values and the significance of path coefficients. The results indicated that neuroticism had a positive and significant relationship with WTC, while agreeableness and conscientiousness had negative and significant relationship with WTC from the five factors of personality. Also, there was no significant relationship of gender on WTC via big five personality factors between the two groups of female and male language learners observed.

**Key words:** Personality Traits, Willingness, Communicate, EFL Learners, Iranians.

### Introduction

More than one and a half billion native and nonnative speakers use English all around the world as the first, second, or foreign language (Strevens, 1992). While fraction of all English end users are native speakers, the rest of the majority use English as being a second or foreign language to get in touch with both native and nonnative audio speakers of English (Strevens). Two thirds of these nonnative speakers have learned English in past twenty years, and the number of people who use the English language continues to increase. Today, English is used in areas from diplomacy, overseas trade, and tourism to international media, air-traffic handle, and technology. All these suggest that English has become a global language that is for communication among different nations and cultures (Alptekin, 2002; Norton, 1997; Smith, 1992; Strevens, 1992). In the past, the aim of teaching English was the mastery with the structure of the language. However, in this age of

communication, English seems to play a major role, and the purpose of teaching the language has shifted from the mastery of structure to use the language intended for communicative purposes.

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In spite of the importance of WTC, several researchers (Barraclough, Christophel, & McCroskey, 1998; Ellis, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Noels & Clement, 1996; Noels, Pon, & Clement, 1996) in SLA have attempted to explain what factors can easily effect individual differences in the success of SLA. Such researchers have identified many affective variables including personality, attitude, motivation, self-esteem, self-confidence, identified competence, and language anxiety as influencing individual distinctions in SLA. Among these variables, personality differences have attracted much attention during last years (e.g., Goldberg, 1993; Griffiths, 1991).

Personality is a complicated concept that has had several distinct meanings over the course of history. Within psychology, however, it refers to "individual differences in psychological dispositions: that is enduring ways in which people differ from one another in their typical ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling" (Halsam, 2007, p.15). Costa, et al. (1995) has defined personality as "the relatively enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual" (p.124). Many psychologists think that the best unit for describing personalities is the trait, and "the structure of personality is the organization of traits" (Halsam, 2007, p.18). According to McCrae & Costa (1992) personality structure is typically summarized in terms of a relatively small number of factors, and a factor is a form of statistical evidence that a trait exists. In fact, one of the basic assumptions of the studies on personality is that personality structure involves the investigation of the covariation among traits. "Traits seem to be vital for the study of personality because any science involves detecting and explaining some consistent patterns" (Halsam, 2007, p.18). "Traits may change over time, but they shouldn't change rapidly or chaotically; they should tend to be stable attributes of the person" (Halsam, 2007, p.18). In general, the stronger the trait is in a person, the more likely that person is to manifest behavior related to that trait. Thus, the trait is more likely to be observed (McCrae & Costa, 1992).

Although still there are some arguments against the concept of trait

claiming instead for situationally-specific patterns of behavior (e.g. Kenrick & Funder, 1998), many scholars (e.g. Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996; Johnson, 1997) justify the trait concept to imply consistent reaction to similar situations over time, not consistent reactions across different situations. According to Carducci (1998) "concern with the consistency of behavior are at the heart of some of the most controversial debates in personality psychology. The degree of behavioral consistency is influenced by the extent to which situational factors, as well as one's personality, determine thoughts, feeling, and behavior" (p.5)

As declared above, personality has been defined as "the relatively enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual" (Costa, McCrae, & Kay, 1995, p. 124) that in language use has actually vital importance. Moreover, the literature on WTC has referred to personality as a quite relevant factor (e.g., MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998; MacIntyre, Babin & Clément, 1999).

### **Theoretical Principles**

For long time before the inception of communicative language teaching, the primary purpose of language learning was to produce linguistic competence in order to master the structure of the language. However, in recent decades, the purpose of teaching English has shifted from the mastery of structure to the opportunity to use language regarding communicative purposes. Therefore, the communication part of teaching English received more focus. Furthermore, the ultimate target of language learning is defined as "authentic verbal exchanges between persons involving different languages and cultural backgrounds" (MacIntyre, et al, 2002, p. 559).

The rise of communicative approaches to L2 (L2) pedagogy has highlighted the importance of cultivating communicative competence in L2 learners (Green, 1995). Moreover, it is suggested that language is learned through interactive meaningful communication in a pragmatic setting (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). According to Swain (2000), language use and language learning co-occur, and it is language use that mediates language learning. Thus, it is crucial to determine the factors which both

constrain and promote language learners' opportunities to use language to communicate and to acquire language through meaningful interaction and communication.

According to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), communication is an important goal in itself, which focuses on the authentic use of L2 as an essential part of L2 learning. This authentic use of language has led to a growing amount of research into the WTC. The WTC construct an important construct in the field of L2 learning.

Furthermore, variability in human behavior is a factor which distinguishes social sciences from natural sciences. General theories in social sciences do not apply to all human beings even when all the environmental factors have been identical. Individual differences (IDs) among people play an important role beyond general theories which are advanced by social scientists. IDs are defined as "characteristics or traits in respect of which individuals may be shown to differ from each other" (Dörnyei, 2005, p.1). IDs seem to be nuisances which prevent formulation of general principles to account for human behavior in psychology (Dörnyei, 2005).

In order to account for the differences in learners' rate and degree of success in learning an extra or foreign language, L2 researchers have also think of a series of individual differences.

One of the ID variables which has been introduced in SLA research is WTC. MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan (2003) define WTC as "...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice" (p.538). Supposing that many factors influence a person's willingness to communicate, such as fear of speaking, lack of self-esteem and the issue of introversion and extroversion (McCroskey, 1992), the importance of evaluating the degree of the effect of WTC in success in SLA becomes clear.

In order to estimate the level of WTC in communicating in second language (L2), it is necessary to identify the people's reactions to speaking situations. When presented with an opportunity to use their L2, some people choose to speak up and others choose to remain silent. WTC represents the psychological preparedness to use the L2 when the opportunity arises. It is assumed that the degree of WTC is a factor

in learning a L2 and the ability to communicate in that language. The higher WTC a speaker has the more likely he is to succeed in SLA. High WTC is associated with increased frequency and amount of communication (Richmond & Roach, 1992). The choice to speak or to remain silent seems to be a factor in the success of a L2 learner. When the opportunity to use the L2 arises, it is not unusual to be 'of two minds'; one mind wishes to approach the opportunity and the other wishes to withdraw from it (MacIntyre & MacKinnon, 2007). So if we can determine the contributing factors in the learner's choice of the first alternative: that is approach the use of the L2, we have in fact created a successful learning situation.

According to MacIntyre (2007), we can identify both individual factors (anxiety, motivation, attitudes, interpersonal attraction, etc.) and social contextual factors (ethno linguistic vitality, language contact, etc.) that either enhance or reduce WTC. These factors interact at the moment a person chooses to speak in L2.

WTC model of communication as a new trend of the study of SLA has brought about a lot of controversy in the field (Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, Conrod, 2001; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2002).

If we take it for granted that WTC plays an important role in L2 acquisition, we have to go a step further and determine the factors that contribute to the enhancement of it. One of these factors is the learner's motivation. It has been recognized that students' motivation is directly (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovan, 2003; Yashima, 2002) or indirectly (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) related to their WTC.

Some studies have focused on the role of personality traits on the degree of WTC. MacIntyre, Babin, and Clement (1999) have illustrated that personality traits of introversion/extroversion and emotional stability are related to WTC through communication apprehension and perceived language competence. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) have demonstrated that while personality traits of intellect, extroversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are related

to WTC through perceived language competence, communication apprehension, and motivation, the personality trait of agreeableness is directly related to WTC.

However, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) treat WTC as a personality trait and define it as

“variability in talking behavior”. They argue that even though situational variables might affect one’s WTC, individuals display similar WTC tendencies in various situations. Moreover, they identified introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension and cultural diversity as antecedents that lead to differences in WTC. Therefore, the study of the contributing factors in WTC leads to a sort of integrative motivation which includes all of the factors in a unified whole.

In 1998, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels developed a comprehensive model of WTC in L2. They integrated linguistic, communicative and social psychological variables to explain one’s WTC in her L2. By following McCroskey and his colleagues, MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC as “the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so” (p. 546). However, MacIntyre et al. (1998) did not treat WTC in L2 as a personality trait but as a situational variable that has both transient and enduring influences. Moreover, they theorized that WTC influence not only speaking mode but also listening, writing and reading modes.

Consequently, the study of the role of WTC in L2 learning necessitates a close examination of it in the real language use environment. Hashimoto (2002) conducted a study with Japanese ESL students to investigate the effects of WTC and motivation on actual L2 use.

Another controversy is the investigation of the components which are more important in WTC in L2 learning. In their WTC in L2 model, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) propose that personality has an influence on one’s WTC in second/foreign language. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (1998) maintain that certain personality types may predict one’s reaction to a member of second/foreign language group. MacIntyre et al. (1998) hypothesized that authoritarian personality types would not be willing to communicate with a member

of an ethnic group who is believed to be inferior. Similarly, they argue that an ethnocentric person, who believes that her ethnic group is superior to other ethnic groups, would not be willing to communicate in a foreign language.

Having considered lacking comprehensive research, this study tried to conduct a more thorough analysis on the role of Big Five personality factors in predisposing the university students for distinct patterns of WTC in the foreign language. The role associated with gender on the students’ WTC was also another motivating issue for this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When the objective of teaching English is defined in terms of communication, the issues of whether the learners will communicate in English when they have the chance and what will affect their WTC gain importance. Recently, the actual WTC model, which integrates psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables to go into detail, explain, and estimate L2 communication, has been developed by MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998). They define WTC while “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2” (p. 547).

It has been recognized that there is relationship between the language learners’ personality and their WTC (MacIntyre, Babin, & Clement, 1999; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). MacIntyre et al. (1999) have illustrated that personality traits of introversion/ extroversion and emotional stability are related to WTC through communication apprehension and perceived language competence. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) have demonstrated that while personality traits of intellect, extroversion, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are related to WTC through perceived language competence, communication apprehension, and motivation, the personality trait of agreeableness is directly related to WTC.

Modern language teaching and learning, has emphasized the significance of enlarging communicative competence in L2 (L2) learners (Canale & Swain, 1980). “With the advent of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, classroom organization has been increasingly characterized by authenticity,

real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks" (Brown, 2001, p.42). The traditional teacher lecture mode has been complemented by more teacher-student and student-student interaction. Therefore, learners' willingness to talk in order to learn (Skehan, 1989) is crucial to their SLA.

According to Farhady (2005), Iranian students who learn English as a foreign language in universities are not intended to speak and have interaction during a class time in universities. He

believes in that most of them have studied English in a system of education in high schools. On the other hand, he indicates that even some of them who studied English in language institutes also have problems. They do not consider themselves as competent to English speaking.

Therefore, this research investigated the relationship between personality differences and WTC among EFL students at B.A. level in Iran, as a central concept. Previous researches in SLA have not examined the convergence of psychological processes underlying communication at a specific moment.

### Research Hypotheses

**H01:** There is not a relationship between extroversion and WTC among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

**H02:** There is not a relationship between agreeableness and WTC among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

**H03:** There is not a relationship between conscientiousness and WTC among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

**H04:** There is not a relationship between neuroticism and WTC among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

**H05:** There is not a relationship between openness to experience and WTC among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

**H06:** There is not a significant relationship of gender on WTC via big five personality factors among Iranian EFL learners at B.A. level.

### Methodology

The initial human subjects of study as the participants included 120 Iranian EFL learners studying English as their foreign language at B.A. level in

universities of Tehran that were randomly selected. Most of the participants were undergraduate students of either English literature or English translation (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors). They were all native Persian speakers. The age of participants varied from 19 to 24. Both male and female learners were selected to participate in this study. After administering Oxford Placement Test, 100 homogenized students selected to answer the questionnaires; finally, 80 of 100 participants completed the questionnaires out of which the research was done. So, the data gathered from 80 samples were used for further processes.

### Instrumentation

The present study employed a quantitative research method using questionnaires. Perry (2005) stated that there were two advantages of using a questionnaire: (1) they are useful for collecting data from larger numbers of people in a comparatively short amount of time, and (2) they are economical to use. Considering the purpose and scope of the study, questionnaires were utilized as the primary approach so as to collect data from a large group of participants in a fairly short amount of time. All of the measures employed were self-report scales. McCroskey (1997) pointed out that self-report measures were the most commonly used ones for measuring matters of affect and/or perception. Because affective and perceptual constructs were directed toward the cognition of individuals, they were well suited to self-report measurement if care was taken to avoid causing respondents to provide false answers.

Four different instruments were used in this study for different purposes.

**Oxford placement test (OPT).** Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004) which is a standardized test of Oxford University to determine EFL learners' proficiency level and make the participants homogenized. It conducted to measure the general language proficiency of the original pool of subjects. The mean and standard deviation of the participants' scores on the OPT were used as the criteria for choosing the basis for the homogeneity of them. It included 60 items with 80 minutes time to answer. Each correct answer received the point 1.

**Background information form.**

The background information form was specifically designed to collect background information concerning the participants' gender, age, and educational levels. It

was assumed that the participants should have enough years of English learning experiences to be aware of their communication avoidance and approaching tendencies in English.

Other demographic information obtained through this instrument would assist a better understanding of the participants in terms of the generalizability of the findings.

**The neo five factor inventory (NEO-FFI).** NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) is the reduced version of 240 item NEO Personality Revised (NEO PI-R). The NEO PI-R is a concise measure of the five major domains of personality; and the researcher used this version because the 240 item version of questionnaire was too lengthy. McCrae and Costa (1992) designed NEO PI-R that included 60 items based on item factor analysis. The NEO-FFI contains 60 statements which provide the five domains of the personality: (a) neuroticism (N), the tendency to experience negative emotions; (b) extroversion (E), the degree of sociability and general activity; (c) openness to experience (O), levels of curiosity; (d) agreeableness (A), sympathetic and cooperative tendencies; and (e) conscientiousness (C), one's level of self-control in planning and organization. Each of the five domains is assessed by 12 statements. The result of the pilot study among 20 EFL learners showed the reliability of 0.75 for the questionnaire.

**Willingness to communicate scale.** The current study used the WTC scale published in McCroskey's (1992) study. This scale was designed as a direct measure of the respondent's predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication. The scale has 20 items of which 12 items were related to four types of communication contexts (i.e., public, meeting, group, and dyad) and three types of receivers (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, and friends). The other 8 items were filler items.

Participants were asked to indicate the percentage of time they would choose to communicate in each type of situation

when completely free to do so using a number between 0 and 100. An example item is "Talk in a large meeting of friends". The Cronbach alpha of this instrument was 0.97.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The collection of data in this research was done using questionnaires. A form and two questionnaires, 1) Background information form was designed to collect background information concerning the participants' gender, age, and educational levels; 2) NEO-FFI with 60 items; 3) WTC with 20 items were used to collect the data from the participants.

The whole items were written in English and no any mother tongue equivalent was used. The background information form and the questionnaires were given to the participants at the same time at the end of the second semester of the 2015 academic year. The researcher also held a session with the educational supervisors of the universities, describing the procedure in detail for them. The educational supervisors agreed to help the researcher in the research process.

The reason to choose university students who were majoring in English was because they represented a population which could receive the maximum amount of and exposure to English available in country. English is one of the core subjects in the College Entrance Examination (CEE) for the university candidates to pass in order to receive admission. Specifically, students who intend to major in English Program have to obtain a comparatively high score in the English exam in CEE compared to their peers to be accepted by the Department of English Language at the university.

Before the delivery of the questionnaires, researcher explained the basic concepts involved in this research to the participants. The intention and purpose of this study is also clarified at the beginning. Then, the students were given the following instruction before filling out the questionnaires: 'a) Please don't leave any item blank, b) There is no right or wrong answer, the items are just about your personal view. Therefore, mention what you truly believe'. The researcher informed the participants that the participation was voluntary and their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential. The questionnaires were

given to the students who were willing to participate in the project. The approximate time of the data collection for each class was about 40 minutes.

Also, in the background information form which was written in Farsi, the participants were asked to select one point on a five-point Likert-scale of NEO Five Factor Inventory items and on five-

point Likert-scale of WTC. They should have selected from among the following options: SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N/A: Neither Agree nor Disagree, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree.

It should be mentioned that some minor changes were made in the wordings of the questionnaire by using synonyms to make it more comprehensible for the Iranian students. All of the data collection was conducted during the class time inside the classroom.

### **Data Analysis**

Sample size is closely related to sampling error. Generally speaking, results derived within larger samples have less sampling error than within smaller samples. In order to analyze the collected data from the questionnaires, first of all descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were computed to summarize the students' responses to the checklists. The data gathered was analyzed through calculating qu-efficiency. The Smart PLS software was also used to process the data. The Bootstrap method was used to determine T-values and the significance of path coefficients. Moreover, the demographic characteristics describe the reliability and validity of instrument through measurement model and structural model.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Theoretical exploration and pedagogical application throughout the current decade have primarily promoted the important role of using language to communicate in second and foreign language learning and teaching. Moreover, MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) argued that the ultimate goal of second or foreign language learning should be to “engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them” (p. 547). Based on this argument, MacIntyre et al. (1998)

proposed that to create WTC should be a proper objective for L2 education.

Ones et al. (2007) contend that plenty of the initial researches carried out since the mid-1980s have demonstrated high support for employing personality measures in staffing decision. In addition, they stated that personality constructs is capable of predicting and explaining attitudes, behaviors, performance, and other outcomes in organizational settings.

In this study, extroversion has no relationship with learners' WTC. According to Eysenck (1967) extroverted type people are social, impulsive and optimistic so that they show a rapid change in the case of environmental changes. Extroverted people lose their composure quickly, become easily angry and can be considered as instable human type.

Based on the researches conducted by Eysenck (1985), he also concluded that introverted people have a lot of sociability and impulsivity and in order to achieve the optimal arousal level, they are engage to do more risky behavior rather than normal people. Therefore, it can be concluded that since extroverts need excitement and emotional stimulation, they are reluctant to communicate via talking. For example, they are not eager to speak in foreign language, but prefer to follow the activities and issues that seem stimulating and exciting to them.

Since, the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between Big Five Personality Factors and WTC in EFL context, the result of the study indicated that agreeableness had a direct and negative correlation with WTC in foreign language. To explain these findings, it could be said that in the view of people with high compatibility, compromise with other people is a value. As a result, they are friendly, considerate, generous, helpful and interested in sharing their interests with the others. These people have an optimistic view of human nature, and believe that people are inherently honest and trustworthy. However, because of having no conflict and criticism with the others, people with high compatibility do not have a great desire to talk. Because in their view a lot of talking and communicating may cause incompatibility and disagreement and thus can lead to lowering of their association levels with other people.

Findings of the research indicated

that there was a direct and negative relationship between conscientiousness and WTC in foreign language. To explain this finding, it could be said that conscientiousness is accompanied by characteristics like discipline, desire to progress and restraint, loyalty, caution, honesty and prospective. In other words, people who get a high degree of this factor, have a great desire toward progress, discipline, responsibility and success. Thus, those who get a high degree of this factor, has the above characteristics and instead of being involved in a relationship, they

try to follow their own personal development. These people consider other people as an obstacle to their growth and personal development, and as a result do not tend to communicate with the others. Therefore, it can be concluded that in view of these people, even if the relationship is conducted to learn a 12, they are less likely to be involved and try to make their development based on their own efforts.

Also, the result of the study indicated that neuroticism has a direct and positive relationship to WTC in foreign language. To explain these findings, it could be said that people with high neuroticism are activated in the case of emotional response. They show an emotional reaction to the events that may not affect the others, so that their reaction is more severe than normal. As a result, these people are more willing to be involved in relationships

Furthermore, in this study, openness to experience had no relationship with learners' WTC. It shows that, people with high openness are intellectually curious, respect the art and are sensitive to beauty. In relation to the people with no openness toward the experience, they are more aware about their own emotions. They are more eager to practice individualism and conformity in the case of thinking and acting.

Another characteristic of this factor is concerned with the ability to think in terms of symbols and abstract concepts so independent from sensible experiences. Therefore, people possessing an individualistic thinking style for thinking and try to think in terms of symbols and abstract concepts, have a little interest to communicate with the others.

In general, extroversion was shown to have no relationship with

learners' WTC. Agreeableness has a direct and negative relation to WTC in foreign language. Conscientiousness had a direct and negative relationship with WTC While neuroticism had a direct and positive relationship with WTC. Also, openness to experience did not have relation with learners' WTC. Finally, it can be conducted that personality traits can relate to people's WTC with the foreign language; however, the results of study showed no significance difference between the two groups of male and female participants on WTC in foreign language.

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