



Assessment of Secondary School Students' Willingness to Communicate in English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

One of the crucial components of learning a foreign language can be willingness to communicate (WTC). Language learning and competency are enhanced considerably when learners are motivated and willing to establish communication in the target language. Accordingly, it is critical in the development of EFL learners' foreign language skills since it promotes active engagement, boosts confidence, and fosters cultural awareness, all of which contribute significantly to their overall proficiency in the target language. Based on these explanations, this current study attempts to explore the WTC among secondary school students. Adopting a quantitative methodology, 86 students from a secondary school were included in the study according to convenience sampling. For data collection, the Willingness to Communicate Scale was utilised to assess the students' levels of WTC. Despite the predominantly low-level emergence of the WTC, findings demonstrated a range of WTC among individuals, suggesting varied possible approaches to learning a foreign language. The implications of the findings for language educators, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers are discussed, emphasizing the importance of creating an environment that fosters and supports students' willingness to communicate.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, English as foreign language, secondary school students

Article History:

Received: April 11, 2023

Accepted: October 25, 2023

Recommended Citation: Kaplan, Y. U. (2023). Assessment of secondary school students' willingness to communicate in english as a foreign language. *International Journal of Excellent Leadership (IJEL)*, 3 (2), 55-64.

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Introduction

This current study attempts to explore the inclination of communication (referred to as Willingness to Communicate or WTC) among students in secondary education, specifically in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The motivation for this inquiry arises from the researcher's deep curiosity about this particular concept, influenced by a thorough review of existing academic literature. The main objective is to provide an in-depth examination of the historical background and issue at hand, which will enable the study's particular goals to be clearly stated. Following this, the research inquiry and the importance of this investigation will be clearly expounded upon.

Given the global importance of the English language, its acquisition is deemed essential for enhancing professional opportunities, academic achievements, and societal advancement (Johnson, 2009). Proficiency in English is perceived as a gateway to diverse career prospects, a point emphasized by Doğançay-Aktuna (2005), who underscores the escalating business demand for English proficiency among candidates vying for advantageous positions. Khan (2011) notes the prevalence of English as the primary language for global information retention, further solidifying its emergence as a *lingua franca*. Additionally, Genç and Bada (2010) assert that access to international literature and information through English publications is instrumental in facilitating awareness of global developments—a crucial asset in contemporary society. Consequently, the study of English assumes a pivotal role in synchronizing with societal progress and advancements, aligning with the growing acknowledgment of its significance.

The increased emphasis on employing English corresponds with Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985), which underscores the imperative role of learners actively generating language to enhance learning. Long (1985) reinforces this concept by highlighting the essential nature of communication in the process of acquiring a second language, emphasizing the interconnectedness of input, output, and the iterative exchange of feedback. Canale and Swain (1980) additionally underscore the importance of meaningful participation, whether within classroom settings or extracurricular pursuits, in nurturing consistent and proficient language interaction.

Vygotsky's work (1978) adds to this discussion by exploring the significant correlation between interaction and the acquisition of knowledge, illustrating how meaningful interaction can act as a driving force behind learning processes. These scholarly viewpoints collectively emphasize the critical importance of actively participating in and utilizing a second or foreign language to attain competence and fluency.

All these indications collectively emphasize the crucial importance of meaningful interaction as a fundamental necessity for achieving proficiency in a foreign language. In essence, language learners must actively participate in interactions within that language to attain mastery. The emphasis on students' active use of language has given rise to a significant concept known as willingness to communicate (WTC). While effective interaction in the target language is deemed critical, an intriguing question arises: why do some learners demonstrate less proficient communication skills despite apparently similar learning circumstances? Altner (2018) proposes that differing levels of WTC among second language (L2) learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms can be seen as a primary barrier to successful L2 interaction and learning.

Nevertheless, mastering a language necessitates the cultivation of strong communication abilities. Consequently, the objective is for students to attain fluency that encompasses understanding the speaker's meaning, syntax, phonetics, and para-linguistic elements of the language (Harmer, 2004). Various factors affect the acquisition of a foreign language, with some impacting the overall learning process and others specifically targeting particular skills. Emotional factors notably influence speaking practice and long-term advancement in language acquisition. As achieving proficiency in the target language remains the primary aim of language acquisition, effective interaction and involvement play pivotal roles in accomplishing this objective. Hence, educators should conscientiously design a learning atmosphere that fosters the improvement of their students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Moreover, teachers' understanding of their students' WTC levels can encourage increased

engagement in communicative activities within the EFL context. Given these considerations, it is advisable to promote an investigation into students' WTC within the Turkish EFL setting.

Acquiring a new language has evolved from being an optional skill to a requisite one in contemporary society. Proficient communication in a second or foreign language demands active engagement and application of that language. Hence, regular practice in speaking emerges as a crucial element for language learners aiming to achieve proficiency and functional competence. Studies such as Schutz and DeCuir (2002) indicate that strong emotions significantly influence how both language instructors and learners engage with a foreign language. These emotions experienced by learners can notably affect their involvement and motivation, particularly in communication-centered exercises. The diverse range of emotions encountered during the language learning process can either stimulate or hinder learners' participation in classroom communication. Consequently, these emotional factors may hinder the speaking abilities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and diminish their inclination to engage in active conversation, or conversely, foster increased participation. Addressing this prevalent concern in foreign language classrooms necessitates educators and institutions to propose practical and effective solutions to aid students in improving their willingness to communicate proficiently.

The current study seeks to reveal the WTC among students in secondary education. The central goal is to understand the levels of WTC perceived by students in Turkish secondary school environments. Therefore, this research is specifically focused on addressing the ensuing research inquiry.

RQ1: What is the degree of WTC among Turkish EFL secondary school students?

The initial purpose of this research is to enhance the understanding of WTC in the context of teaching EFL in Turkish secondary schools. The study aims to provide valuable insights for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications regarding WTC levels among learners. Additionally, the study's findings are anticipated to aid EFL instructors in secondary school settings by pinpointing the crucial role of perceived WTC in language acquisition.

The implications derived from the study's outcomes are pivotal in enabling EFL teachers to adapt their teaching methodologies. This adaptation might involve potential adjustments to lesson plans, teaching strategies, methods, activities, and materials to accommodate learners' perceived levels of WTC. Importantly, these insights extend beyond teacher adaptations and could also guide developers in creating new educational resources. These materials could be specifically tailored to address language learning aspects associated with WTC, thus catering to the diverse learning needs in this field.

While this inquiry provides valuable insights into how secondary school students perceive themselves as language learners regarding their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) levels, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations within the study. Primarily, the study involved over 80 participants sourced exclusively from a single secondary school. The inclusion of a more diverse range of students from various schools could enhance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the reliance predominantly on quantitative data might benefit from supplementing with interviews or qualitative data collection methods to offer a more detailed interpretation of the construct under inquiry.

Additionally, this study focuses on WTC within the domain of spoken language. The absence of an exploration into WTC across other language skills restricts the extent to which the findings can represent the entirety of WTC behaviors across different linguistic abilities.

Literature Review

The primary goal of second language (L2) learners often centers on attaining proficiency in their L2, necessitating a continual state of preparedness and openness to engage in L2 communication whenever opportunities arise (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) initially emerged within the framework of first language, defined as a

predisposition to either initiate or avoid communication when presented with the opportunity (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). In the 1990s, WTC research in the first language domain gained attention among second language scholars. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) conducted the first investigation of WTC in L2 contexts, refining MacIntyre's (1994) WTC model by incorporating motivation, personality, and contextual elements influencing WTC in the second language.

This refined model scrutinized the interrelationships among L2 WTC, self-perceived L2 competence, L2 speaking anxiety, integrativeness, and attitudes toward the learning context. It also acknowledged the role of personality factors in indirectly affecting motivation and L2 WTC through attitudes, perceived competence, and L2 anxiety. Notably, the study's outcomes illustrated that perceived communication competence had a direct impact on the frequency of L2 communication.

MacIntyre et al. (2001) conducted a study examining the dynamic interactions among L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC), social support, and language learning orientations among students enrolled in a French immersion program. Their research assessed learners' WTC across speaking, writing, reading, and comprehension within an L2 French immersion context. Data were gathered from 79 ninth-grade participants using a questionnaire. The findings highlighted a consistent correlation between WTC, both in and out of the classroom, and learners' orientations concerning friendship, knowledge acquisition, and academic achievement. Notably, the study emphasized the significant impact of social support, especially peer support, on learners' WTC.

Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2003) examined the connection between WTC and perceived competence, French language anxiety, integrativeness, and motivation. This study involved 268 high school students learning French in an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment. Using an eight-scale questionnaire, the study revealed a notable association between WTC and perceived competence, frequency of communication, and language-related anxiety.

It is arguable that Bektaş-Çetinkaya (2005) pioneered the examination of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the Turkish context. Her study aimed to elucidate the applicability of the WTC model within this English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, involving 356 Turkish university students. Employing questionnaires and interviews, the research investigated the interconnections among various factors. The findings underscored that students' attitudes toward the global community, alongside their perceived language confidence, directly influence their willingness to communicate. Conversely, students' motivation for English learning and their personality indirectly affected WTC through linguistic self-assurance.

Additionally, Atay and Kurt's (2009) inquiry, which engaged 159 intermediate-level Turkish EFL students, revealed a strong association between perceived communication competence and WTC. While the desire to learn English did not emerge as a significant factor influencing WTC, a direct relationship was observed between a global perspective and the readiness of Turkish EFL students to engage in communication. Qualitative insights from this study indicated the impact of situational variables, such as teachers, peers, and thematic elements, on WTC.

In a similar vein, Öz (2014) investigated the impact of personality traits on L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among 168 potential English learners, revealing a moderate level of willingness to communicate. The study established a positive correlation between three components of personality traits and learners' L2 WTC, implying that considerations of these traits should guide the organization of learners in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

On a different perspective, Kanat-Mutluoğlu (2016) examined the influence of the ideal L2 self, academic self-concept, and intercultural communicative ability on WTC. The findings exhibited positive connections among these motivational aspects. Additionally, both the ideal L2 self and academic self-concept emerged as predictors of WTC, with the ideal L2 self-displaying stronger predictive capability.

These studies collectively represent a limited number of inquiries in Turkey specifically investigating students' levels of WTC in English within secondary school settings. Consequently, the current study aims to fill this research gap identified in the existing literature.

Method

This section commences by delineating the research design utilized in the study. It furnishes comprehensive details regarding the study's context and participants, the instrument for data collection, the procedure employed for data collection, and the subsequent methodology applied for data analysis.

Research Design

The use of quantitative research methodologies has numerous significant advantages, including the capacity to generalize findings to larger groups, give objective measurements, and utilize statistical tools for reliable analysis. Furthermore, quantitative data provides evidence-based decision-making since it offers objective, generalizable and reliable findings while measuring variables. Based on these explanations, this current inquiry was planned as a survey design (Nardi, 2018) which is a kind of quantitative research methods.

Participants and Materials

The study was conducted at a secondary school located in Türkiye, specifically during the fall semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. A group of 86 secondary school students, aged between 13 and 14, participated in the research. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants based on their accessibility and ease in completing the questionnaires.

McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to Communicate Scale, consisting of twelve items, served as the data collection instrument in this study. This scale exhibits strong internal consistency, evident from a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.92. It evaluates participants' readiness to engage in communication across various scenarios and with three distinct types of individuals (stranger, acquaintance, and friend) in diverse communication contexts like group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking.

For clarity, the scale underwent translation into Turkish through a process involving back-translation and was employed in a study conducted by Bektaş-Çetinkaya (2005). The adapted version of the scale demonstrated robust reliability with a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.94. Participants express their willingness to communicate in line with the specified circumstances in each item by providing a rating on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 100 (always), following the format outlined in the original work by McCroskey (1992).

Procedure

The researcher obtained verbal consent from the school administration and further secured approval to distribute the questionnaires. Before completing the questionnaires, participants and their parents were provided with a consent form detailing the questionnaire's content and the study's goals. Following this, data collection took place over the course of a week. Participants, under the guidance of the researcher, completed the scale during their regular class sessions as arranged.

Data Analysis

The gathered data was analyzed using Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Descriptive statistical techniques, encompassing standard deviations, percentages, and measures such as frequencies, means, minimums, and maximums, were utilized in the data analysis procedures for this study.

Findings

Willingness to Communicate in English Levels of the Participants

The main objective of this study is to provide an understanding of the levels of willingness to communicate among Turkish EFL secondary school students, focusing on the research question: "What is the extent of willingness to communicate among Turkish EFL secondary school students?" Participants completed the WTC scale to assess their willingness to communicate in English.

Descriptive statistics were employed for data analysis. Consequently, the study presents comprehensive findings concerning participants' levels of willingness to communicate in various communication contexts—group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking—across three recipient categories: strangers, acquaintances, and friends.

Table 1.
Overall Scores of WTC

Willingness to Communicate	N	Max	Min	Mean
1-Have a small-group conversation in English with acquaintances	86	100	0	44,76
2- Give a presentation in English to a group of strangers	86	100	0	28,84
3- Give a presentation in English to a group of friends	86	100	0	42,34
4- Talk in English in a large meeting among strangers	86	100	0	25,25
5- Have a small-group conversation in English with strangers	86	100	0	30,36
6- Talk in English in a large meeting among friends	86	100	0	38,37
7- Talk in English to friends	86	100	0	50,72
8- Talk in English in a large meeting with acquaintances	86	100	0	31,84
9- Talk in English to acquaintances	86	100	0	45,69
10- Give a presentation in English to a group of acquaintances	86	100	0	36,19
11- Talk in English to a stranger	86	100	0	27,55
12- Talk in English to a small group of friends	86	100	0	49,79
TOTAL				37,64

Table 1 provides an overview of the collective Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English among the participants. The mean score for general WTC, depicted in the table, falls below the threshold indicating a moderate level established by McCroskey & Richmond (2013), suggesting a notably low willingness among secondary school students to communicate in English (\bar{x} =37.64). Analysis of Table 1 indicates a higher willingness among participants to engage in English communication with friends (\bar{x} =50.72), converse in English within a small group of friends (\bar{x} =49.79), communicate with acquaintances (\bar{x} =45.69), and participate in small-group conversations with acquaintances (\bar{x} =44.76). Conversely, there was notably less willingness observed among participants when communicating in English in large meetings with strangers (\bar{x} =25.25), engaging in conversations with strangers (\bar{x} =27.55), and delivering English presentations to groups of strangers (\bar{x} =28.84). These findings suggest a clear preference among participants for interacting with friends and acquaintances in smaller settings, displaying less inclination towards engaging in English communication with strangers in various face-to-face or group settings.

Furthermore, the WTC Scale assesses an individual's inclination to communicate across diverse contexts (e.g., group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations) and with various recipient types (e.g., strangers, acquaintances, friends). Subsequent tables present and discuss mean scores concerning participants' willingness to communicate across four contexts and with four recipient types, considering these distinct perspectives.

Table 2.
Mean Scores Regarding Four Communication Contexts

Communication Contexts	N	Max	Min	Mean
Interpersonal Conversation	86	100	0	41,38
Group Discussions	86	100	0	41,16
Meetings	86	100	0	32,55
Public Speaking	86	100	0	35,68
TOTAL				37,69

As presented in Table 2, participants demonstrated a higher inclination for engaging in interpersonal conversations (\bar{x} =41.38) compared to other types of contexts, with meetings (\bar{x} =32.55) exhibiting the least willingness among the evaluated contexts (group discussions, \bar{x} =41.16; public speaking, \bar{x} =35.68). This finding highlights participants' increased willingness to communicate during

interpersonal exchanges, irrespective of the individuals involved—strangers, acquaintances, or friends. Conversely, their willingness to communicate notably declined when engaged in meetings across these recipient types.

An analysis of participants' mean scores across context types suggests a stronger inclination for communication in informal settings, like conversing with friends in daily interactions or participating in group discussions with acquaintances. Conversely, their willingness to communicate appeared lower in formal settings, such as delivering presentations to strangers or engaging in discussions during meetings.

Table 2 presents an examination of the four context types concerning participants' overall WTC mean scores, indicating distinct preferences. Additionally, Table 3, provided below, outlines participants' overall scores based on various recipient types, offering further insights into their willingness to communicate across diverse interpersonal scenarios.

Table 3

Mean Scores Regarding the Total of Stranger Type of Receivers in Four Context Types

WTC	N	Max	Min	Mean
Stranger	86	100	0	28,09
Acquaintance	86	100	0	40,37
Friend	86	100	0	45,22
Total				37,89

Table 3 illustrates the participants' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) across diverse recipient categories within four specific contexts: public speaking, meetings, group discussions, and interpersonal conversations. For instance, the data reveals that participants demonstrated a lesser inclination to communicate with strangers ($\bar{x}=28.09$) in comparison to acquaintances ($\bar{x}=40.37$) and friends ($\bar{x}=45.22$). These findings across receiver types within the four contexts highlight participants' reduced willingness to engage in communication instances involving strangers—such as speaking to strangers, participating in meetings with strangers, delivering presentations to groups of strangers, and conversing in English within small-group settings involving strangers—contrasted with similar situations involving acquaintances or friends.

When examining Tables 2 and 3 together, it becomes apparent that secondary school students displayed an increased readiness to communicate with friend-type receivers, particularly within interpersonal conversations, such as engaging in daily conversations with friends. Conversely, they exhibited a diminished willingness to communicate with stranger-type receivers, particularly noticeable within contexts involving meetings with groups of strangers, revealing varying preferences across different recipient categories and communication scenarios.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, an examination into the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among Turkish EFL students in a secondary school context was conducted. McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to Communicate Scale was utilized to gauge participants' willingness to communicate across four communication contexts (group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, public speaking), involving three receiver categories (stranger, acquaintance, friend). The overall WTC level observed approximated a moderate level ($m=37.64$), suggesting a low willingness among participants to engage in English communication. This finding aligns with prior WTC studies (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2005; Başöz, 2015; Hişmanoğlu & Özüdoğru, 2017). Participants displayed higher willingness to communicate with known individuals in small groups, indicating more comfort in face-to-face communication but less willingness in English communication in larger groups. Additionally, the study found that secondary school students demonstrated a high willingness to communicate in English in interpersonal contexts, followed by small-group communication, and least in public

speaking. This underscores students' preference for direct person-to-person conversations, with lower inclination toward larger group interactions.

Consistent with Bekteř-Çetinkaya's (2005) findings, this study revealed students' heightened willingness to communicate with friends and acquaintances in interpersonal conversations and meetings, contrasting with reduced inclination toward communication with strangers in public speaking and group discussions. Insights from MacIntyre et al. (1998) indicated a tendency to communicate more with close acquaintances, further supporting this pattern. MacIntyre et al. (1998) found that students tended to view English as an academic subject rather than a communication tool, linked to lower WTC levels tied to extrinsic motivations like passing exams. The educational context in Turkey, where English proficiency is evaluated primarily through grammar, vocabulary, and reading in the 8th-grade national exam (SBS), may contribute to perceiving English merely as a subject, limiting its holistic development and subsequently impacting WTC among 8th-grade students.

The study delved into second language willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) concerning different communication partners—friends, acquaintances, and strangers—highlighting higher inclination to converse in English with friends compared to acquaintances and strangers. This emphasizes varied levels of L2 WTC based on familiarity, indicating a stronger desire to communicate with known individuals. Consistent with prior research (Kim, 2004; Yang, 2015; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2016; Bulut, 2017; Barlas, 2019; Bursalı, 2019; Kurt, 2019), learners exhibited varying WTC levels influenced by anxiety and familiarity with conversation partners. Studies also indicated learners' preference for interacting with friends over delivering presentations to unfamiliar groups. These outcomes underscore the significance of familiarity with both context and conversation partners in determining learners' WTC in English.

The study regarding secondary students' willingness to communicate (WTC), which found a moderate degree and a preference for interaction with friends in small groups and dyads over larger groups and in public settings, has important implications for educational practitioners. First, teachers may find it beneficial to plan classroom activities around students' preferred communication settings, so creating an atmosphere which is favorable for students to participate. Following this, material and coursebook designers may enhance engagement by incorporating small group and dyadic tasks, as well as content that reflects students' preference for friend-centered interaction. Also, syllabus developers are encouraged to incorporate progressive exposure to a variety of communication contexts, taking into account students' various comfort levels. Last but not least, to increase students' willingness to communicate in language learning contexts overall, policy makers are advised to plan and carry out teacher training programs that emphasize and supply with techniques for effective communication in smaller groups and to support inclusive classroom policies that promote mutual peer interaction.

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