

Investigating the Relationship of Willingness to Communicate with Learning Styles in Iranian EFL Learners

By

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate can be regarded as part of individual differences that has attracted a lot of attention in recent years in the domain of second language learning. In fact, the issue of willingness to communicate is considered as a complicated construct and is under the effect of other individual differences like learning styles. In general, having the ability to start the process of communication in educational situations of learning a second language is regarded to be a critical factor for successful learning. There are various learning styles considering individual differences. Different learners bring with themselves their special learning styles and preferences. In order to reach a good result in educational contexts, it seems necessary for the instructor to be familiar with learning styles that each learner brings with him/herself to the class. This study attempted to investigate the relationship between willingness to communicate and learning styles of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 78 EFL learners who studied English in Iran Language Institute, Karaj Branch. Two questionnaires including Ehrman and Leaver's questionnaire of learning style (2003), and Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire were used as instruments for gathering data. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between the willingness to communicate and learning styles of the Iranian EFL learners.

Key words: *Learning styles, willingness to communicate, and individual differences.*

1. Introduction

Recently, the issue of individual differences in language learning contexts has received a great deal of attention. Learning styles can help learners to understand and choose strategies which work best for them. As individuals are very complex and sophisticated beings comprised of unique and specific collection of genetics, experiences, learning environments, and attitudes, thus any assessment is regarded only as a beginning point for better understanding of individuals' preferences and needs.

O'Connor (1997) argued that learning styles research is related to studies about the psychological, social, and physiological aspects of the educational process. It still needs to be defined comprehensively. He states that the goal of learning style research is to find groups of learners who use similar methods for perceiving and interpreting educational contexts. Based on this information, we should be able to adjust educational environments to make them more efficient and successful places.

In addition to that as we know one of the basic needs of every individual in any community is the communication need. According to some researchers like MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998), the purpose of communication among people is that they need the service and help of other people who live in the same society. Considering the issue of willingness to communicate in second language learning, it means the learners who tend to be willing to communicate in the second language. In fact it refers to the learners who are eagerly searching for chances to communicate. MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that the final purpose of L2 learning is to help learners gain more willingness for communication. So, in order to be successful in reaching the goals of second language learning, it is the duty of instructors to use strategies which reinforce and improve willingness to communicate and make learners involve themselves in verbal communication.

Significance of the Study

This study is going to investigate the possible co-relationships between EFL learners' willingness to communicate and their learning styles with the hope of getting a better understanding of the interaction existing among these variables and predicting about them. Although there is a large amount of emphasis on communication in recent studies of language teaching (MacIntyre et al., 2003), some of learners still remain reluctant for communicating.

According to Blackmore (1996), students who engage actively in the learning context will be more likely to achieve success. Once learners engage actively in their own learning environment they begin to feel empowered and their personal achievement increases.

A key factor for actively involving learners in learning process is to get a better understanding of learning styles, which can have positive or negative influence on learners' performance. It has also been shown that adjusting teaching materials to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles benefits all students. Therefore, it would be helpful to understand different learning styles, and the way to address them in time of preparing instructional materials.

Blackmore (1996) discussed that just like the existence of differences in the way people learn and process information, there are important differences in how learning styles are defined and measured. Perhaps the most important thing a teacher can do is to be aware of the issue that there are diverse learning styles in the educational contexts. We should also keep in mind that for effective language learning and teaching, both learner skills and learner assumptions should be given special attention. Students should be provided with the opportunity to clarify and assess their styles, particularly in reference to definition of objectives in general and awareness of strategies in learning.

Statement of the Problem

MacIntyre (2007) argued that one of the important goals of English teaching is communicating and this important issue sheds light on willingness of the learners to communicate and the factors which affect it. Considering this situation the issue of willingness to communicate that in fact constitutes the intention and will to start communication receives a critical role in the field of second language learning.

MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) discussed that the ultimate purpose of second language learning is achieving fluency in a language which in turn is directly related to the issue of willingness to communicate.

Burgoon (1976) stated that second language learners commonly gain good proficiency in grammatical issues but they are usually weak in oral and communicative skills. In educational environments in which English is thought as a foreign language, there is not a chance for learners to speak English in society. So, it is the responsibility of teachers to engage learners in activities which give the learners the chance to communicate and practice their oral skills.

Actually a lot of factors affect the issue of willingness to communicate. For instance we can point to the individual differences of learners and their use of different strategies.

Research Question

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following question was raised:

RQ#Is there a significant relationship between EFL learners' willingness to communicate with their learning styles?

2. Review of Literature

Willingness to Communicate

According to Dörnyei (2003), considering second language acquisition L2 competence might not be enough. The second language learners not only should be able to communicate but also they must be willing to communicate in the L2. MacIntyre (2007) also pointed to the volitional choice of learners to speak the language when there is an opportunity.

To be in line with the beliefs of De Saint Léger & Storch (2009) and considering the importance of the active use of L2 in the second language acquisition atmosphere has given rise to the emergence of willingness to communicate (WTC).

We can chase the trace of the construct of willingness to communicate in Burgoon's (1976) concept of *unwillingness to communicate*. Burgoon (1976) pointed to the construct of unwillingness to communicate as a kind of tendency to avoid oral communication. According to Burgoon (1976), anxiety could have negative effects on the communication among L2 learners.

As MacIntyre (2007) stated willingness to communicate can create a kind of opportunity for the combination of linguistic, psychological, educational and communicative trends in L2 studies. MacIntyre also views willingness to communicate as both an individual difference factor which can facilitate L2 acquisition, and as a non-linguistic product of the language learning process.

Learning Styles

There is a distinction between those who can use their grammatical sensitivity and those that can use memory. Moreover, there are other individual differences that interact with kinds of teaching. These individual differences are called learning styles or preferences. Learning styles or preferences are terms used to define individual approaches to learning situations. Spolsky (1989) defines them as the cognitive, affective and physiological traits that are indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment. He believes that learners vary in their preference for learning style and mode. As a result, learning is best when the learning opportunity matches the learner's preferences.

According to Willing (1987), learning styles can reflect 'the totality of psychological functioning'. We can distinguish them from abilities because they constitute preferences or styles that orient learners to how they follow the learning task rather than abilities that define how well they learn.

Oxford (2003) defines learning styles or preferences as the general approach preferred by the students when learning a subject, acquiring a language, or dealing with a difficult problem. Learning style or preference is an overall pattern that provides broad direction to learning and makes the same instructional method which is beloved by some students and hated by other students. Within the area of learning styles or preferences, each student reflects student also has preferences along cognitive style dimensions like concrete/sequential, abstract/intuitive, and analyzing/synthesizing.

Cohen (2003) defines the language learning styles as the general approaches to language learning. He believes that style differences would include being visual, auditory, or hands-on. They are also more abstract and intuitive versus being more concrete and thinking in step by step sequence and more global versus more particular. According to Reid (1998) learning styles are internally based characteristics, often not perceived or consciously used by learners, for the intake and comprehension of new information. In general, students retain these preferred learning styles despite the teaching styles and classroom atmospheres they encounter, although the students may, overtime, acquire additional styles.

3. Methodology

As it was mentioned before, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between willingness to communicate and learning styles of EFL learners. In this part the steps which needed to be taken for reaching the purpose of the study are demonstrated. The participants section describes the population which was selected as the sample of this study. The instrumentation section reveals the instruments or data gathering devices used to describe participants behavior. The procedures section outlines the research plan. It describes what was done, what data was needed, etc.

Participants

A minimum of 78 EFL learners who studied English in Iran English Institute, Karaj branch served as the participants of this study. This sample was selected through the cluster random sampling. The participants were both male and female, and they were between 17 to 23 years old. They were studying in advanced level of Iran Institute. After selecting the sample, they were asked to answer two questionnaires including willingness to communicate questionnaire, and learning styles questionnaire.

Instrumentation

The data for this study was collected through a "Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire" which was based originally on Weaver's (2005) willingness to communicate questionnaire. It included 34 items. It consists of 17 questions which focus on the amount of willingness to perform orally-oriented tasks in the classroom setting and 17 questions which target learners' willingness toward written-oriented tasks. This questionnaire is intended to measure second language learners' willingness to communicate in EFL settings. The reliability of this questionnaire was calculated in a pilot study and it showed high reliability about 0.87 Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. This questionnaire is in the form of "Likert Scale" asking the participants to select from five options:

- (1) Never true of me,
- (2) Usually not true of me,
- (3) Sometimes true of me,
- (4) Usually true of me and
- (5) Always true of me

The other questionnaire was adapted from Ehrman and Leaver (2003). This instrument measures the cognitive style of learners. It is based on general distinction between ecstasis and synopsis, which addresses ' the degree of conscious control of learning desired or needed by learners (p.395). Thus ecstatic learners prefer to learn by exerting conscious control over the learning process while synoptic learners prefer an unconscious approach. The questionnaire presents learners with two statements and requires them to respond on a 9-point scale which statement most reflects their way of learning. The characteristics of ecstatic learners are field independent, random, global, inductive, synthetic, analogical, concrete, leveling, and impulsive. Synoptic learners are characterized as field dependent, sequential, particular, deductive, analytic, digital, abstract, sharpening, and reflective. Face validity and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by English teachers and researchers of Karaj Azad University.

Design

This study was almost based on the descriptive research design. The descriptive design was considered appropriate since, as Adams and Schvaneveldt (1985) states, in this kind of research the main goal is to show an accurate profile of persons, events, or objects. The approach used for data collection was the survey approach. The main characteristic of survey is the gathering of data from a sample or specific population by means of questionnaires or interview. In this approach the researcher does not manipulate independent variables or apply control conditions to the subjects under study.

Procedure

After completing the sampling state, the EFL learners were asked to answer the two above mentioned questionnaires. The questionnaire related to willingness to communicate was based on a 5-point Likert scale. The score assigned to each item ranged from 1 to 5. The students were told that there was no right

or wrong answer, and that the items just asked about their personal views. They were assured that their scores and responses would be used solely for research purposes. Descriptive Statistics were run to determine the mean score of EFL students on willingness to communicate.

The data collected from the learning styles questionnaire was classified in the tabular form in order to count the number of synoptic learners versus ecstatic ones. In this 9-point scale the participants are required to choose between two statements which reflect the way they learn.

After collecting all the data from participants the data were categorized in the tabular form. The data collected were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. A frequency analysis, namely the chi square frequency analysis, was carried out in order to define significance of dispersion of the choices, and to estimate the likelihood that the variables tend to be systematically related.

4. Results and Discussion

After data were collected the EFL learners were classified into two groups of synoptic learners versus ecstatic learners. From 78 participants 32 of them were categorized as ecstatic learners and 46 of them were classified as synoptic learners. Ecstatic learners are characterized as field independent, random, global, inductive, synthetic, analogue, concrete, leveling, and impulsive. Synoptic learners are on the other point field dependent, sequential, particular, deductive, analytic, digital, abstract, sharpening, and reflective.

Table 1: Classification of learning styles

Learning styles	N	Total N
Synoptic learners	46	
Ecstatic learners	32	78

Then the mean for the two subscales of willingness to communicate of each group was determined. If the mean score of each group is 3.5 or higher = High, 2.5 – 3.4 = Medium, 2.4 or lower = Low.

Table 2: The mean of willingness to communicate

Learner types	Orally-oriented tasks	Written-oriented tasks	Overall mean
Synoptic	3.4	3.2	3.3
Ecstatic	3.7	3.5	3.6

As the results of table 2 suggest the synoptic group showed medium mean in both orally-oriented tasks and written-oriented tasks. The results obtained from ecstatic group determined that they got high mean in both types of tasks.

As shown in table 3 below the chi-square test determined that there was a significant relationship between willingness to communicate and learning styles, $\chi^2(1, n= 78) = 6.65, p > .05$ (Table 3).

Table 3) Result of Chi-Square Test for Willingness to communicate and learning styles

Learner types	willing to perform orally-oriented tasks	willing to perform written-oriented tasks	total	Chi square χ^2
Ecstasic	21	11	32	
Synoptic	1630	466.65		
Total	3741	78	3819	

5. Discussion

The obtained results from the present study indicated that there is a significant relationship between the willingness to communicate and learning styles of the EFL learners. The means calculated showed that ecstatic learners are highly willing to communicate (Mean=3.6) and synoptic learners are moderately willing to communicate (Mean=3.3).

Although there have been lots of studies conducted on language learning styles, there seems to be lack of research on the classification of learning styles into two groups of ecstatic and synoptic.

There are some beliefs that having access to more learning strategies and being aware of different learning styles help learners to be more willing to communicate. Oxford (1990) stated that different levels of language competence may lead to different degrees of willingness to communicate.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study presented some of the differences of learning styles of EFL learners (synoptic vs. ecstatic) and they also presented some information about the learners' willingness to communicate. It indicated that the ecstatic learners are slightly more willing to communicate orally-oriented tasks than written-oriented tasks. The results also revealed that these students mostly believe that communication is very important even if they don't use correct grammar, watch films or T.V programs in English, and use gestures to express themselves better.

To be in line with other researchers beliefs awareness-raising sessions on language learning styles are regarded as a useful solution. Awareness on language learning styles can pave the way for the learners to become more confident and self-directed language learners. So, it will be a beneficial suggestion that teachers try to make their students familiar with different language learning styles and give them the helpful awareness needed for their learning. They can explicitly teach and talk about the styles useful for orally and written-oriented tasks.

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