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## Turkish EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate in English

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### Abstract

Willingness to communicate in a second language has gained importance recently with the increasing popularity of communicate language teaching. However, different factors which influence learners' willingness to communicate have not been widely investigated in the Turkish classroom context. Thus, this study investigated English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in Turkish EFL context and its interaction with different factors such as gender, proficiency levels. 711 preparatory school students at a state university in Turkey participated in this study. For data collection, willingness to communicate scale adapted from Peng and Woodrow (2010) was utilized in order to investigate Turkish preparatory students' willingness to communicate in English. Firstly, descriptive analysis of the scale was carried out through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Then, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to investigate the effects of gender and language proficiency variables on learners' willingness to communicate. The results of the study indicated that the learners in this study were moderately willing to communicate in English. It was found that learners were more willing to communicate in controlled situations compared to more meaning-focused situations. With regard to the effect of gender on Turkish EFL learners' WTC, it was found that female EFL learners are more willing to communicate in English in the classroom compared to male EFL students. Lastly, learners who have higher language proficiency levels were found to have higher WTC level compared to learners who have lower language proficiency levels.

**Key words:** Willingness to communicate, EFL learners, gender, proficiency level

### Introduction

“Willingness to Communicate” (WTC) was originally introduced with reference to communication in the native language and it was defined as a predisposition to initiate or avoid communication when free to do so (McCroskey and Baer, 1985). WTC was also considered as a personality-based trait (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991) and it was indicated that people's tendencies to talk change significantly from one another. Likewise, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) propose WTC as a trait-like predisposition which implies that individuals show similar WTC tendencies regardless of different contexts or receivers. McCroskey and Richmond (1991) conducted a cross-cultural comparative study to investigate the relations among WTC, communication apprehension, self-perceived communicative competence, and introversion in Micronesia, Australia, Sweden, Puerto Rico and the United States. They found significant differences in the mean scores of the U.S., Swedish, Australian, and Micronesian students. It was reported that American students had the highest willingness to communicate, whereas Micronesian students had the lowest willingness to communicate. Swedish students had the highest self-perceived communicative competence and Micronesian students had the lowest. However, McCroskey and Richmond (1991) stated that there is a need to broaden data from different cultures for any kind of generalization regarding the effect of culture on willingness to communicate.

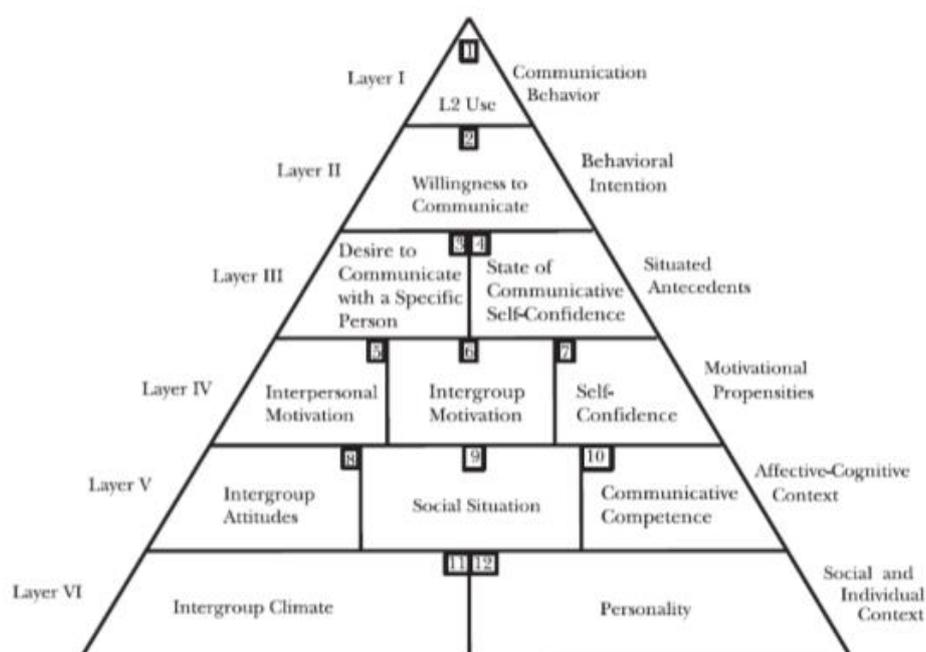
In the 1990s, WTC research in L1 received the attention of the researchers in the second language research area. Based on Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, some studies were carried out in the Canadian contexts to investigate WTC model in a L2. MacIntyre & Charos (1996) investigated WTC in a second language. MacIntyre's (1994) L1WTC model was broadened in L2 by adding motivation, personality, and context to the structural model as the determinants of WTC. The results showed that L2 communication frequency is directly

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affected by perceived communication competence. Both perceived competence and anxiety had direct influence on WTC and personality traits influenced motivation and WTC.

In 1998, a comprehensive model of L2WTC was suggested by MacIntyre et al. taking into consideration that WTC should be treated as a situational variable instead of a trait-like variable. A pyramid figure which has twelve constructs was developed to illustrate the probable determinants of willingness to communicate in L2. Figure 1 displays six categories of the model; communication behavior (I), behavioral intention (II), situated antecedents (III), motivational propensities (IV), affective cognitive context (V), and social and individual context (VI). While WTC is directly affected by the layers I, II, III, the last three layers (IV, V, VI) have enduring effects on WTC. In this pyramid, WTC was put into layer II and it was defined as the final step before speaking in a second language. In the layer III, state communicative self-confidence and desire to communicate with a specific person are placed as situational variables. At the bottom of the pyramid, there are intergroup climate and personality as enduring influences. Intermediate layers consist of motivational propensities and affective-cognitive context, which involve motivation, intergroup attitudes, L2 self confidence, communicative competence, and social situation (See Figure 1). This model has gained importance since its proposal because it is "the first attempt at a comprehensive treatment of WTC in the L2" (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 552). Different aspects of this model have been investigated by many researchers since its proposal in 1998.



**Figure 1. Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, Kimberly, & Noels, 1998)**

In the Turkish context, research on willingness to communicate is quite limited. In 2005, Bektaş investigated to what extent Turkish university students are willing to communicate and the WTC model that she proposed can explain the relations among different variables in this EFL context. Participants consisted of 356 university students in Turkey. The results of the structural equation model (SEM) analysis indicated that students' attitude toward the international community and their perceived linguistic self-confidence are direct indicators of students' L2WTC. On the other hand, it was found that students' motivation to learn English and their personality had an indirect effect on learners' WTC. Lastly, it was found that their personality directly influenced learners' attitude toward the international community. Similar to Bektaş's (2005) study, Atay and Kurt (2009) also investigated the willingness to communicate in the Turkish context through the data collected from 159 intermediate level Turkish EFL students in Istanbul. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were utilized. A strong correlation as found between perceived communication competence and WTC supporting the results of the previous WTC studies (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Also, it was found that international posture directly affects the willingness to communicate of Turkish EFL students. However, desire

to learn English was not found to be an important determinant of WTC. On the other hand, qualitative findings indicated that situational variables such as teacher, peers, topics have also influences on WTC.

Considering that the variables which affect the willingness to communicate of prospective English teachers have not been investigated before, Şener (2014) looked into L2WTC with university students studying at the English language teaching department in the Turkish context. As a first step, 274 university students at English department took the questionnaire. For qualitative data analysis, 26 students and 11 instructors working at the ELT department were interviewed. The quantitative data were calculated through T-test, ANOVA, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis. The regression results showed that self-confidence was the most important antecedent of WTC and it directly affects WTC in English. The results of Pearson correlation coefficients which were calculated for the variables anxiety, motivation, attitude, communication competence, personality, and willingness to communicate showed a strong correlation among these variables.

Oz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015) were the first to investigate the relationship between the ideal L2 self and L2WTC in a Turkish context. Interrelationships among communication competence, communication anxiety, integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation, motivation, instrumental orientation, ideal L2 self and L2WTC were investigated in their study. Participants of the study consisted of 134 English as a foreign language learners in an EFL teacher education program. Structural equation modeling was utilized for data analysis and the results of the analysis showed that communication competence and communication anxiety were found to be the strongest determinants of willingness to communicate while other variables had indirect effects on learners' WTC. It was also found that there was not a significant direct path from integrativeness and the ideal L2 self to motivation and WTC while they directly influenced self-perceived communication competence and communication anxiety. Hence, Oz et al. (2015) suggested encouraging learners' willingness to communicate through supporting their self-perceived communication competence by means of helping them have more positive perceptions of their ideal L2 selves.

### **The Purpose and Significance of the Study**

From the perspective of L2 acquisition theories, learners should use the target language to learn it. However, not all of the learners have the same level of willingness to communicate in a classroom setting which could prevent successful L2 acquisition. So, it is necessary to investigate learners' willingness to communicate in a classroom setting. The number of the studies on willingness to communicate should be increased to understand EFL learners' communication intentions. As can be seen in the literature section, many studies have confirmed the validity of the WTC model developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) in terms of explaining learners' L2WTC and its relation with different variables. However, most of them were conducted in Canada where French is taught as a second language (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002). Only a limited number of studies were carried out in English as a second language (ESL) learning context (Hashimoto, 2002; Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003), or English as a foreign language (EFL) learning environments (Yashima, 2002; Kim, 2004; Bektaş, 2005). In the Turkish context, research on willingness to communicate is also quite limited. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to determine to what extent EFL learners are willingness to communicate in the Turkish context, and to find out different individual factors that can influence learners' willingness to communicate.

Accordingly, the research questions of the study are as in the following:

- 1- What is the Turkish EFL learners' perceived level of their L2WTC in a classroom setting?
- 2- Does Turkish EFL learners' L2WTC differ with regard to proficiency levels and gender variables?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

711 preparatory school students at a state university in Turkey participated in the study. Most of these students were recent graduates of high schools and they started university based on their exam scores they acquired from nationwide university selection and placement test (YGS) which was administered by Higher Education Council Students Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM). The majority of the 711 survey participants were Turkish citizens (99%), while only four of them had other nationalities. The age of 614 participants ranged from 17 to 19, while 83 of them were between ages 20-22 which indicates a young group of learners. Majority of the participants were female (60%) while males consist of less than half of the participants (39%).

English proficiency levels of the participants varied from elementary (ELE) to advanced (ADV). Slightly more than half of the students (56%) were at pre-intermediate and elementary levels, while 43% of the students were at advanced and intermediate levels. Considering these percentages, it can be stated that levels of the participants were fairly distributed. In order to understand the willingness to communicate of students studying at School of Foreign Languages at Hacettepe University, including students from different levels is very significant because this fair distribution will present a more realistic picture of the situation.

Table 1. Nationality, Level, Age and Gender Distribution of the Participants

|             |            | <i>n</i> | %     |
|-------------|------------|----------|-------|
| Nationality | Turkish    | 707      | 99.4  |
|             | Other      | 4        | 0.6   |
|             | Total      | 711      | 100.0 |
| Level       | ADV        | 147      | 20.7  |
|             | INT        | 165      | 23.2  |
|             | PIN        | 180      | 25.3  |
|             | ELE        | 219      | 30.8  |
|             | Total      | 711      | 100.0 |
| Gender      | Female     | 429      | 60.3  |
|             | Male       | 282      | 39.7  |
|             | Total      | 711      | 100.0 |
| Age         | 17-19 ages | 614      | 86.4  |
|             | 20-22 ages | 83       | 11.7  |
|             | 23-25 ages | 7        | 1.0   |
|             | 26-28 ages | 2        | 0.3   |
|             | 28-above   | 5        | 0.7   |
|             | Total      | 711      | 100.0 |

### Instrument

In the study, data were collected by means of a questionnaire and a scale. In order to understand students' background, a questionnaire with 14 items was utilized in the study. It consists of questions that give information about students' background such as age, gender, class, nationality, how long they have been studying English.

The scale was designed with ten items to investigate learners' WTC levels. Both translation and back translation methods were conducted to prevent any semantic loss during the translation of surveys (Brislin, 1980). The match between the original English and its Turkish translation was rated by five bilingual raters who have at least Master's degree in English on a scale of 10. The main goal of this step was to reduce the risk of item

translation difference (Şireci & Berberoğlu, 2000). Secondly, a different set of five raters who have the same qualifications examined the synonymy between the original English version and the back-translated English version on a scale of 10.

For WTC scale, ten items (Cronbach's alpha= .94) adapted from Peng and Woodrow (2010) served to assess Turkish preparatory students' willingness to communicate in English. Peng & Woodrow's (2010) study indicated a two-factor solution for WTC: WTC in meaning-focused activities (e.g., giving a speech in the classroom) consists of six items and WTC in form-focused activities (e.g., asking the meaning of a word) consists of four items. After adapting the questionnaire items in accordance with the research goals and the context, a pilot study was conducted to examine the existence of factors that the questionnaire is assumed to measure, check the reliability, and to see any problems regarding the data collection procedure, clarity, layout. The data of the pilot study were analyzed through SPSS and the reliability coefficient of the WTC (Ten Items) scale was found as .87.

### Data Analysis

Data was collected from preparatory students at Hacettepe School of Foreign Languages through willingness to communicate scale. As a first step, descriptive analysis of the scale (e.g. maximum and minimum scores, mean, and standard deviations) was carried out through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Then, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to investigate the effects of variables on learners' willingness to communicate in the classroom.

## Results and Discussion

### Turkish EFL Learners' Perceived Level of L2WTC in English in a Classroom Setting

The first research question in this study aims at finding out to what extent Turkish EFL students are willing to communicate in their language classes. For this purpose, the summated score of 10 WTC items were calculated and Table 2. presents the descriptive statistics of summated score for WTC in English.

For the evaluation of the WTC scores of students, the ratio of the mean WTC score was compared with the full score. The full score of the scale was 60. Following Liu & Jackson (2008), the mean score which was above 48 was classified as high WTC, the mean score between 36 and 48 represented a moderate WTC, and the mean score below 36 was interpreted as low WTC.

In this study, the mean score (37.16), along with the median (37.00) and mode (34.00), was between 36 and 48. This finding revealed that the participants in this study were moderately willing to communicate in English in a language class. This finding supports the findings of Bektaş's (2005) and Şener's (2014) study.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of summated score for WTC in English

|                    | <i>Min</i> | <i>Max</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Median</i> | <i>Mode</i> |
|--------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Summated WTC score | 10         | 60         | 37.16       | 1.02      | 37.00         | 34.00       |

Participants' WTC levels were also examined at items levels. Table 3 displays descriptive statistics in detail. WTC scale includes items for meaning-focused activities and form-focused activities. Items WTC1, WTC2, WTC3, WTC4, WTC5, and WTC6 measure students' WTC level for meaning-focused activities. As the Table 4.2 shows, 60% of the participants were unwilling to do a role-play standing in front of the class (WTC1), while 47% of them reported unwillingness for doing role-plays at their desk (WTC6). Similarly, 46% of the participants stated that they were unwilling to give a short self-introduction without notes (WTC2), while 48% of them reported unwillingness for giving a short presentation about one's hometown with the help of notes (WTC3). However, when asked to translate a spoken utterance from Turkish into English in a group (WTC4), 55% of the participants reported willingness to do it. Also, a large group of participants (65%) reported high level of willingness for asking a teacher to repeat what he/she just said in English (WTC5).

Scale items WTC7, WTC8, WTC9, and WTC10 were designed to explore participants' WTC for form-focused activities. Compared to meaning-focused activities, participants reported higher willingness for form-focused activities (ranging from 63 to 71). A large proportion of participants (71%) indicated that they were willing to ask their peers sitting next to them in English the meaning of an English word (WTC7). For asking group mates in English the meaning of the word they do not know (WTC8), they (63%) also reported willingness.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of WTC scale items

| <i>Willingness to Communicate</i>  |                   |           |
|--|-------------------|-----------|
| <i>Items</i>   | <i>Total Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| 1- I am willing to do a role-play standing in front of the class in English (e.g., ordering food in a restaurant).             | 2.95              | 1.46      |
| 2- I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.                                       | 3.58              | 1.46      |
| 3- I am willing to give a short speech in English to the class about my hometown with notes.                                   | 3.44              | 1.45      |
| 4- I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Turkish into English in my group.   | 3.64              | 1.47      |
| 5- I am willing to ask the teacher in English to repeat what he/she just said in English because I didn't understand.          | 3.97              | 1.47      |
| 6- I am willing to do a role-play in English at my desk, with my peer (e.g., ordering food in a restaurant).                   | 3.47              | 1.55      |
| 7- I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.                                   | 4.25              | 1.52      |
| 8- I am willing to ask my group mates in English the meaning of word I do not know.  | 3.93              | 1.52      |
| 9- I am willing to ask my group mates in English how to pronounce a word in English.   | 3.96              | 1.52      |
| 10- I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thoughts in my mind. | 3.92              | 1.48      |
| Total WTC Score  | 3.71              | 1.49      |

More than half of the participants (64% and 63% respectively) also indicated that they were perhaps, probably, definitely willing to ask their group mates or peers sitting next to them how to pronounce a word (WTC9) or how to say an English phrase (WTC10).

Overall, results of the WTC scale indicated that participants reported higher level of willingness to communicate in controlled situations such as pronunciation, vocabulary learning compared to less-controlled situations such as giving a speech, doing a role-play. Findings also revealed that participants were less willing to communicate in activities which are performed in front of the class and require more complicated language use such as giving a speech without notes. This situation may result from higher possibility of making mistakes in these activities and fear of negative evaluation of their peers or teachers, which could pose a threat their face.

### The Comparison of the Turkish EFL Learners' L2WTC with regard to the Proficiency Levels Variable

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted in order to explore the impact of proficiency levels on EFL learners' L2WTC. Subjects were divided into four groups according to their proficiency levels (Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Advanced). There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level in WTC levels for the four proficiency levels:  $F(3, 710) = 14.69, p = .00$ .

Table 4. One-way ANOVA for learners' WTC in terms of their proficiency levels

|                                     |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F      | p    |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|------|
| WTC levels in the classroom context | Between Groups | 4412.136       | 3   | 1470.712    | 14.695 | .000 |
|                                     | Within Groups  | 70759.611      | 707 | 100.084     |        |      |
|                                     | Total          | 75171.747      | 710 |             |        |      |

Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Elementary level group ( $M=36.82, SD=9.42$ ) was significantly different from both Pre-intermediate ( $M=34.09, SD=9.23$ ) and Advanced level groups ( $M=41.44, SD=9.93$ ). However, it did not differ significantly from Intermediate level group ( $M=37.15, SD=11.50$ ). Similarly, the mean score for Pre-intermediate group ( $M=34.09, SD=9.23$ ) was significantly different from Elementary level ( $M=36.82, SD=9.42$ ), Intermediate level ( $M=37.15, SD=11.50$ ), and Advanced level groups ( $M=41.44, SD=9.93$ ). Also, the mean score for Intermediate level group ( $M=37.15, SD=11.50$ ) was significantly different from Pre-intermediate level ( $M=34.09, SD=9.23$ ) and Advanced level groups ( $M=41.44, SD=9.93$ ). Lastly, the mean score for Advanced level ( $M=41.44, SD=9.93$ ) significantly differed from other three proficiency level groups.

Table 5. Tukey HSD test on four proficiency levels

| Level   | Level   | Mean Difference | Std. Error | p    |
|---------|---------|-----------------|------------|------|
| Ele     | Pre-int | 2.727*          | 1.006      | .035 |
|         | Int     | -.335           | 1.031      | .988 |
|         | Adv     | -4.620*         | 1.066      | .000 |
| Pre-int | Ele     | -2.727*         | 1.006      | .035 |
|         | Int     | -3.063*         | 1.078      | .024 |
|         | Adv     | -7.347*         | 1.112      | .000 |
| Int     | Ele     | .335            | 1.031      | .988 |
|         | Pre-int | 3.063*          | 1.078      | .024 |
|         | Adv     | -4.284*         | 1.134      | .001 |
| Adv     | Ele     | 4.620*          | 1.066      | .000 |
|         | Pre-int | 7.347*          | 1.112      | .000 |
|         | Int     | 4.284*          | 1.134      | .001 |

### The Comparison of the Turkish EFL Learners' L2WTC with regard to the Gender Variable

Independent samples t-tests were conducted in order to investigate possible significant difference between female and male Turkish EFL learners with regard to their willingness to communicate in English in the classroom context.

Table 6. t-test results for Turkish EFL students' WTC with regard to the gender variable

|  | Gender | N   | Mean  | SD    | t    | p    |
|--|--------|-----|-------|-------|------|------|
| WTC levels<br>in the<br>classroom<br>context | Female | 429 | 38.03 | 10.07 | 2.77 | .006 |
|  | Male   | 282 | 35.84 | 10.48 |      |      |

Table 6 indicates that there is a significant difference between WTC levels of female and male Turkish EFL learners in a learning setting ( $p < .05$ ). The results revealed that female EFL learners are more willing to communicate in English in a learning environment compared to male EFL learners.

## Conclusion

Overall, the students in this study were found to be moderately willing to communicate in a classroom setting. Students' willingness to communicate for form-focused and meaning-focused activities was evaluated through different scale items. According to the results, it was found that students were more willing to communicate in controlled situations compared to more meaning-focused situations. For the meaning-focused activities, a great majority of them reported unwillingness to do a role-play in front of the class, whereas they were found to be more moderate for role-play activities at their desks. Compared to role-play activities, the mean scores of their willingness for giving a self-introduction or a short presentation about hometown were slightly higher. This finding supported the findings of Bektaş's (2005) and Şener's (2014) study which also showed that Turkish EFL learners had moderate level of willingness to communicate in English. All these studies which were conducted at different state universities in Turkey revealed that Turkish EFL learners are willing to communicate in English to some extent, but none of them revealed a high level of willingness to communicate. From the perspective of L2 acquisition theories, learners should use the target language to learn it. However, the findings reveal that this is not the case in the Turkish EFL classroom context which could prevent successful L2 acquisition. So, it is necessary to investigate different factors which may affect learners' willingness to communicate. More studies on willingness to communicate and individual difference factors should be conducted to understand EFL learners' communication intentions which could help practitioners to foster their learners' WTC in English in their classroom.

With regard to the effect of gender on Turkish EFL learners' WTC, it was found that female EFL learners are more willing to communicate in English in the classroom compared to male EFL students, which conformed to other findings of some researchers in SLA area (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovan, 2002; Maftoon & Sarem, 2013). On the other hand, this result contradicted another group of researchers whose studies revealed that there is no significant difference between female and male EFL learners' willingness to communicate (Afghari & Sadeghi, 2012; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Valadi, Rezaee & Baharvand, 2015). This result is important in terms of offering more insights towards the current literature because there are different findings related to the effect of gender on learners' WTC in English. Taking into consideration this result, language teachers should be careful about their male EFL learners' active participation into their lessons. Male learners should be encouraged to speak more during language classes through different methods such as group work, pair work in a positive learning environment.

In terms of the comparison of the Turkish EFL students' WTC in English with respect to their proficiency levels, significant differences were found among four proficiency levels. Learners who have higher language proficiency were found to have higher WTC level compared to learners who have lower language proficiency. The result of this study conformed to other finding found by Matsuoka and Evans (2005). In their study, language proficiency as well as some other motivational factors were found to be a strong indicator of learners' WTC in English. The finding of this study was also verified by Yashima et al. (2004) study which revealed that language proficiency and frequency of communication are directly related with the active participation in the community of practice. This finding indicates that self-confidence in communication is a strong indicator of one's willing to communicate in L2. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (1998) supported the view that WTC may serve as a situated model where different factors such as language proficiency may have different effects on learners' WTC in English.

All in all, the findings of this study offered more insights towards the current literature about Turkish EFL learners' WTC in a learning setting and its interaction with some variables such as gender, language proficiency levels. In this study, cluster random sampling method was utilized and the population consisted of students at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey. Considering this specific group of learners and learning context, any generalization from this study should be carefully done. The participants of the study were selected from only one university due to different constraints, so it may not be appropriate to generalize the findings of the study to all university level students in Turkey. Thus, more research is needed to broaden the current understanding of the EFL learners' WTC in English. Secondly, this study dealt with only WTC in speaking mode. Future studies should also investigate learners' WTC in other modes such as writing, reading, listening through different instruments which are designed for these purposes.

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