

## Uncovering the Influence of EFL Students' Perfectionism and Anxiety on Their Willingness to Communicate in Language Classes

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### Abstract

The study aims at investigating the influence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perfectionism and anxiety on their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in EFL classes. To do so, a set of questionnaires, namely "Willingness To Communicate" (MacIntyre et al., 2001), "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety" (Horwitz et al., 1986) and "Multidimensional Perfectionism Scales" (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) were distributed among 120 (50 males and 70 females) Iranian EFL university students. Stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to indicate the extent to which each independent variable (perfectionism and anxiety) could predict the dependent variable (WTC). The results showed that both EFL students' anxiety ( $B = -.586, p < .05$ ) and their perfectionism ( $B = -.224, P < .05$ ), had a significantly negative influence on their WTC in language classes. These two independent variables could explain .456 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (WTC). The results of the study were discussed and the implications were made.

**Keywords:** Willingness to Communicate, Anxiety, Perfectionism, EFL Students

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## **1. Introduction**

With the emergence of the Communicative Approach, the main goal of language teaching was believed to be helping the learners to develop their communicative competence (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). It was argued that effective communication needs not only ‘linguistics competence’ but also ‘communicative competence’ (Hymes, 1971). Accordingly, EFL teachers and educators have tried to design many activities and tasks to help students develop their communicative skill. However, one problem that teachers usually encounter is that some students in the class do not have the Willingness to Communicate (WTC), a concept which is believed to be so important in the process of language learning (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998; Riasati, 2012; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004; Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011). The EFL students’ unwillingness to communicate which is considered an important obstacle in the development of their communicative competence may be the result of some personal factors such as students’ anxiety and perfectionism.

Anxiety was believed to be “associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry” (Scovel, 1978, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 151). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). A number of studies in different contexts have verified the relationship between anxiety and language learning and performance (Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Fariadian, Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2014; Gresgersen & Horwits, 2002; Lian & Budin, 2014; McIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Na, 2007; Rassaei, 2015; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Woodrow, 2006). Many researchers also believe that “foreign language anxiety

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can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on the language learning process" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 151); especially it is shown that anxiety can hinder the oral production of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Woodrow, 2006).

Horwitz et al. (1986) made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the significance and measurement of anxiety in language learning. In their conceptualization, anxiety consists of three components: "communication apprehension," "test anxiety," and "fear of negative evaluation." As cited in Brown (2000) 'communication apprehension', is the result of "learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas", 'fear of negative evaluation' is caused by "a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others", and 'test anxiety' is the result of "apprehension over academic evaluation" (p. 151).

Another variable that is proved to be significant in language learning is students' level of perfectionism (Alemi, Tajeddin, & Mesbah, 2013; Chen, Kuo, & Kao, 2016; Fahim & Noormohammadi, 2014; Gresgersen & Horwits, 2002; Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011). Pacht (1984) defines perfectionism as "holding standards that are beyond reach or rationality, straining to reach those impossible goals, and defining one's worth by the accomplishment of those standards" (p. 386). Perfectionist students strive for excellence in the classroom, and they may be reluctant to talk or participate in the classroom dialogues/conversations unless they are sure about the accuracy of their production. When it comes to language learning process in which making errors and mistakes is its integral part, this tendency may have a debilitating effect on learners' improvement.

Considering the importance of students' WTC in EFL classrooms as a prerequisite for the development of their communicative competence, and the

paucity of research addressing the personal dimensions of WTC in EFL context, the goal of the present study is to investigate the influence of EFL students' perfectionism and anxiety on their willingness to communicate in EFL classes. Accordingly, in line with the objective of the study, the following research question was raised:

1. To what extent can EFL students' perfectionism and anxiety influence their WTC in EFL classes?

## **2. Review of Literature**

The concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was first proposed in L1, and then it was extended to L2. It was defined as an "individual's volitional inclination toward actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to the interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables" (Kang, 2005, p. 291). According to MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2002) psychological, linguistic, communicative, and educational approaches should be integrated to explain why some individuals have willing for L2 communication, whereas others escape from it. Likewise, MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Kang (2005) maintain that a number of personal and contextual factors can influence individuals' WTC. The previous studies have tried to examine learners' WTC in different contexts and explore factors influencing it.

In a qualitative study, Kang (2005) used interview, stimulated recalls, and videotaped conversations in order to explore the situational and dynamic nature of WTC. The findings indicated that three interacting psychological factors of security, excitement and responsibility, combined with some contextual variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context influence students' WTC. Therefore, the author proposed the 'dynamic situational'

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conceptualization of WTC as they believed that WTC could be changeable based on many variables such as the time and context.

In another study, Cao and Philp (2006) examined the consistency between 'trait-like' WTC and situational WTC of L2 learners. Comparing students' self-report survey regarding their WTC, and their actual WTC behavior in the class, the authors observed that the trait-like WTC can predict students' tendency for communication, and the contextual factors can influence students' decision to participate in the conversation with their partners. The findings of this study also indicated that some factors such as "the group size, familiarity with interlocutor(s), interlocutor(s)' participation, familiarity with topics under discussion, self-confidence, medium of communication and cultural background" can influence students' WTC (p. 480).

Furthermore, Alemi, Daftarifard, and Pashmforoosh (2011) examined the relationship between 49 Iranian EFL university students' WTC and its interaction with their anxiety and language proficiency. The findings indicated that the students' WTC is directly related to their language proficiency. However, students' anxiety did not have significant interaction with their WTC. Therefore, the authors concluded that the linguistic factors could be more predictive of Iranian students' WTC compared with the affective factors.

In another study, Ghonsooly, Khajavy, and Asadpour (2012) examined willingness to communicate in the second language and its underlying variables among 158 non-English major students in the Iranian context. They used WTC and socio-educational models for investigating L2 communication and learning. The findings indicated that L2 students' self-confidence and their attitudes toward the international community were two predictors of WTC in L2 in the Iranian context.

In a study with 194 EFL learners studying in private language institutes,

Aliakbari, Kamangar, and Khany (2016) examined the effect of anxiety, self-confidence, communicative competence, and international posture on students' WTC. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the proposed model. The findings indicated that students' WTC is directly related to their attitude toward the international community, their self-confidence, and their perceived linguistic competence.

In addition, Kazaei, Moin Zadeh, and Ketabi (2012) examined the effect of class size on the WTC of Iranian EFL students among three different class sizes. The data of this study were collected through observation of three classes in terms of students' turn of talk and talk time. The findings indicated that the class size had a considerable effect on the students' WTC. Students were more eager to communicate in small classes where they had more chances of communication.

In another study in the Australian context, Yoshida (2013) found that perfectionism can have a debilitating influence on students' language production. It was particularly found that the students who described themselves as perfectionists did not speak the foreign language because they were too obsessed with the accuracy. Similarly, Liu (2007) found that Chinese students' reluctance to participate in conversation classes stems from their fear of making a mistake and losing face. The findings of these two studies concurred with the results of Coryell and Clark's (2009) study with language learners in a Spanish course, showing that the main reason behind students' anxiety was their perfectionistic perspective towards correctness.

However, despite these studies, experimental studies investigating the effect of EFL university students' perfectionism and anxiety on their WTC in the Iranian context are lacking. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining the influence of students' perfectionism and anxiety on their WTC.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of this study were 120 BA students (50 male and 70 female) enrolled in the English Language Departments at three Iranian universities. They were selected through convenience sampling procedure. All of them were contacted and visited for the purpose of data collection.

#### **3.2. Instrumentation**

##### **3.2.1. Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTCS)**

A modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Conrod (2001) was used for measuring students' willingness to communicate inside the classroom. The scale contains 27 Likert items ranging from 1 to 5 (1=almost never willing, 2=sometimes willing, 3=willing half of the time, 4=usually willing, and 5=almost always willing). Students were asked to indicate how much willing they would be to communicate during the class tasks. Alpha reliability estimates for this instrument have ranged from .85 to well above .90. The items were written in a way that involved students' willingness to communicate inside the classroom in all four skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening).

##### **3.2.2. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)**

The most well-known instrument during the last decades for measuring foreign language classroom anxiety has been Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) due to its high validity and reliability. A five-point Likert scale use for this questionnaire, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The scale has

demonstrated internal reliability, achieving a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .93 with all items producing significant correlated item-total scale correlations.

### **3.2.3. The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS)**

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) is a 45-item self-report measure that assesses perfectionism over three distinct scales. Respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). According to Hewitt and Flett (1991), the test-retest reliability of the subscales were 0.88, 0.85, and 0.75 for self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism, respectively.

### **3.3. Procedure**

The data for this study were collected from undergraduate university students. At first, the students' consent for participation in the study and the official permission for doing the research were granted. Then, a set of questionnaires, consisting of WTC, FLCAS and MPS, was distributed among the participants. The data collection was conducted during class time inside the classrooms. The participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researchers explained the purpose of the research and also about the scales to the participants. Then the participants were asked to answer all items of the questionnaires carefully. The completed questionnaires were then collected for data analyses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Reliability of Instruments

To make sure that the questionnaires administered to the participants were reliable, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated using SPSS version 20.

**Table 1. Reliability of the Instruments**

Questionnaire	N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
WTCS	27	.855
MPS	45	.770
FLCAS	33	.806

As Table 1 shows, the three instruments used in the study enjoy relatively high reliability ( $\alpha = .85$  for WTC;  $\alpha = .77$  for MPS and  $\alpha = .80$  for FLCAS).

### 4.2. Test of Normality

In order to ensure the normality of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted for all data (Table 2). The null hypothesis of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is the normality of data. If the obtained p-value is more than 0.05, then the null hypothesis is accepted.

**Table 2. Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for the Instruments**

		WTCS	MPS	FLCAS
N		120	120	120
Normal Parameters <sup>a</sup>	Mean	86.74	210.57	104.27
	Std. Deviation	14.839	20.282	13.579
Most Extreme	Absolute	.056	.075	.063
Differences	Positive	.053	.054	.063
	Negative	-.056	-.075	-.040
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.611	.818	.694
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.850	.516	.722

a. Test distribution is normal.

Since p-values calculated for the three questionnaires, i.e. WTCS, MPS and FLCAS are more than .05, the null hypothesis is accepted, and therefore, the results show the normality of the data.

### 4.3. Descriptive Statistics of the Questionnaires

The descriptive statistics of all three instruments namely WTCS, MPS and FLCAS are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for the all 3 Instruments***

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D
WTCS	120	46	120	86.74	14.839
MPS	120	120	250	203.43	23.927
FLCAS	120	70	125	101.16	12.711

As Table 3 shows the mean of WTCS, MPS, and FLCAS are 86.74, 203.43 and 101.16, respectively.

### 4.4. Inferential Statistics

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to answer the research question of the study (To what extent can EFL students' perfectionism and anxiety influence their WTC in EFL classes?)

However, before conducting the regression, the degree of correlation among the variables of the study was calculated. As indicated in Table 4, both EFL students' anxiety and perfectionism had a significantly negative correlation with their WTC ( $p\text{-value} < .05$ ). The correlation coefficients between WTC and anxiety and perfectionism were  $-.575$  and  $-.426$ , respectively. This means that EFL students with higher level of perfectionism and anxiety had a lower level of WTC.

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**Table 4. Correlations between WTCS, FLCAS and MPS**

		FLCAS	MPS
WTCS	Pearson Correlation	-.575**	-.462**
	p-value	0.000	0.000

At the next step and in order to examine the extent to which each independent variable can influence the dependent variable, Stepwise Multiple Regression analysis was conducted with the scores on FLCAS and MPS as the predictor variables and the scores on WTCS as the criterion variable, Table 5 shows the summary of the regression model.

**Table 5. Model Summary for Regression**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.575 <sup>a</sup>	.331	.325	12.191
2	.675 <sup>b</sup>	.456	.446	11.042

a. Predictors: (Constant), Anxiety

b. Predictors: (Constant), Anxiety, Perfectionism

According to the coefficients of FLCAS, (B= -.586,  $p < .05$ ) and MPS (B= -.224,  $P < .05$ ), the two independent variables of anxiety and perfectionism significantly and negatively predicted EFL students' WTC (Table 6). According to the R square statistics, the two independent variables of anxiety and perfectionism could explain .456 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (WTC) (see Table 5).

**Table 6. Multiple Regression Analysis for Independent Variables Predicting the WTC**

The dependent variable	Independent variables	B	Beta	t	p-value
WTC	ANX.	-.586	-.502	-7.211	0.000
	PERF.	-.224	-.361	-5.180	0.000

## **5. Discussion**

The study tried to investigate the influence of EFL students' anxiety and perfectionism on their willingness to communicate (WTC) in EFL classes. The results of the Stepwise multiple regression indicated that both EFL students' anxiety and their perfectionism had a significantly negative influence on their WTC. These two independent variables could explain .456 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (WTC).

Previous studies have also indicated that anxiety can negatively affect students' second language learning, particularly their eagerness to communicate. For example, Fariadian, Azizifar, and Gowhary's study (2014) tried to explore the relationship between anxiety and speaking in English language learning context. The results of their study indicated that students' anxiety had a significant negative correlation with their performance. Woodrow (2006) also found that anxiety can unfavorably affect oral communication of English language learners. In another study on 200 EFL students, Lian and Budin (2014) found that 93.5% of the participants experienced a moderate level of English language anxiety in the oral English tests, and only 6.5% of them experienced low levels of language anxiety in these tests. Furthermore, they found a moderately significant correlation between language anxiety and oral English test achievement.

Furthermore, Young (1990) maintained that speech communication research has shown that anxiety might affect a person's communication or willingness to communication. The level of anxiety is higher when it comes to foreign language communication because students may not have enough competency in the foreign language or maybe afraid of making errors in front of the teacher and other students. Therefore, EFL teachers should try to provide a nonthreatening classroom environment in which students can talk

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without much fear of committing mistakes and errors.

Perfectionism, the next independent variable of the study also significantly influenced EFL students' WTC. As a matter of fact, perfectionist students would not be satisfied with only communicating in the target language; they want to speak properly, with no structural or pronunciation errors (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). As they want to attain perfection in everything they do, failure in getting that can lead to anxiety and stress. Therefore, even if they are sure of their abilities, they may avoid to participate in communication. Therefore, as communicating in a foreign language most often involves making mistakes and errors, the perfectionist students may deliberately avoid speaking in the class.

The findings of the present research are in line with the studies conducted by Yoshida (2013), Liu (2007), and Coryell and Clark (2009), all showed that perfectionist students are too obsessed with language accuracy, which can negatively affect their language production. The results also supported the findings of Moradan, Kazemian and Niroo's study (2014). They explored the relationship between Iranian EFL students' listening comprehension and perfectionism. The Pearson correlation coefficient between these two variables was found to be -0.76. This negative correlation might be linked to their efforts to understand every single word. The researcher came to the conclusion that learners who attempted for being perfect might miss some points during the listening section.

The results also provide further supports for Pishghadam and Akhondpoor's (2011) findings. Their results indicated that among the four skills of reading, speaking, listening, and writing, the first three were significantly correlated with perfectionism. Since the value of correlation coefficients was negative, it was concluded that more perfectionist students had

lower performance in the skills of reading, speaking, and listening.

According to Gregerson and Horwitz (2002), perfectionist students would want to speak perfectly, with no grammatical or pronunciation faults. Instead of presenting less than perfect language skills and exposing themselves to the possible negative reactions of others, perfectionist students would prefer to remain quiet, waiting until they are certain how to express their opinions. Hence, it seems that rather than concentrating on communication, perfectionist students spend their energy on avoiding mistakes and faults.

Therefore, as making errors and mistakes are an inseparable part of language learning in the process of interlanguage development, perfectionist students may have a low level of risk taking in the class and instead prefer to postpone language production until the time that they are sure that everything is correct. This, for sure, reduces their willingness to communicate in the classroom.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of EFL students' anxiety and perfectionism on their WTC in EFL classes. The results indicated that anxiety and perfectionism had a significantly negative influence on students' WTC. The results provided further support for the importance of paying attention to the role of personal factors and individual differences in language teaching and learning.

As the main purpose of language teaching is to help learners develop their communicative competence, EFL teachers should try to create a classroom environment in which students can participate in different communicative activities. According to some researchers including MacIntyre et al. (1998), the ultimate goal of the second or foreign language learning should be to

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“engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them” (p. 547). This is only possible when the teachers take into consideration students’ anxiety and their individual differences.

Creating a classroom environment which is not anxious and stressful has been the focus of some psychologists and language teaching methodologists. In Rogers’s Humanistic Psychology, for example, he focuses on the importance of “affective factors” and a “non-threatening environment,” and he believes that “if the context for learning is properly created human being will, in fact, learn everything they need to” (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 90). The same focus on creating a relaxing classroom environment has been focused in some language teaching methods such as ‘Community Language Learning’ and ‘Desuggestodia’ (Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Furthermore, perfectionist students should be informed by their teachers that making errors and mistakes is an integral part of language learning process. The error correction techniques that the teachers use in the class should not kill the motivations of perfectionist students for participation in the class dialogues/conversations. Perfectionist students are not good risk takers in the class, in fact they want to postpone their production until they are sure, so the way they are treated after making an error or mistake can have a significant effect on their latter productions.

The present study tried to shed some lights on the relationship among EFL students’ anxiety and perfectionism, and their WTC. However, as the data collection instruments used in this study were questionnaires, the results are limited by the participants’ willingness to respond honestly and accurately to the items of the questionnaires. Considering the importance of WTC, it is suggested that future studies replicate this study with a larger sample, and/or

use triangulation or other more qualitative methods of data collection in order to explore the influence of anxiety and perfectionism on EFL students' WTC more deeply. Besides, the interaction of contextual and personal factors in shaping the learners' WTC in EFL classes can be examined in the future research.

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