

A Model of Willingness to Communicate in English in Iranian EFL Classroom Context

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Abstract

The present study aimed to propose a model of willingness to communicate in English (WTC) in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom context in Iran considering four trait-like variables: confidence, motivation, anxiety, and grit. An online questionnaire measuring the five variables was sent to eight classes of non-English majored university students in two public and two private universities in Iran. 488 questionnaires were returned and analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) using Amos. The key findings were as follows. First, the finalized model showed motivation, confidence, and anxiety to be the predicting variables of WTC in Iranian EFL classroom context whereas grit served as a mediator. Second, among the four variables, motivation was the best predicting variable, having both direct and indirect effects on WTC. Based on the key findings, to promote Iranian university students' English communication behaviors, English teachers are recommended to design their lessons to enhance students' motivation in learning English, to build their confidence in using English while keeping their anxiety optimal, and to promote grit. The new path that shows grit as a mediating variable in this model should be further explored. Qualitative data should be considered for future research to gain insights into the path from motivation to WTC.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate in English, confidence in using English, English learning motivation, foreign language anxiety, grit

1. Introduction

Willingness to communicate in a second language has become an interest of educators since it was found to affect second language learners' communication behaviors. Studies have shown that learners, despite their language proficiency, may not be willing to use the second language they are studying (Bergil, 2016; Husna, 2019; Karnchanachari, 2019). These studies identified willingness to communicate as a variable that encouraged or suppressed learners' communication behaviors. Researchers have, therefore, been interested in investigating the variables that may affect willingness to communicate (Jongsermtrakoon & Vibulphol, 2010; Knell & Chi, 2012; Lee & Drajiati, 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Wu & Lin, 2014; Yashima, 2002).

To understand the relationships among various variables and willingness to communicate, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed the most comprehensive willingness to communicate model, which identified two groups of variables, namely trait-like variables and situational context variables. The original model has been tested in several second language teaching contexts, for example, in China (Kun et al., 2020), Iran (Aliakbari et al., 2016), Japan (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020), Pakistan (Bukhari et al., 2015), Poland (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016), Taiwan (Lin, 2019), Thailand (Jongsermtrakoon & Vibulphol, 2010; Pattapong, 2015), and Turkey (Basöz & Erten, 2019). Recent development of the willingness to communicate model was influenced by the study of positive psychology which focused on positive internal and external variables such as emotion, grit, flow experience, and enjoyment (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021; Lee, 2020; Lee & Drajiati, 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2019). The findings from those previous studies suggest the dynamic nature of WTC. The relationship between WTC and affective variables was found to vary in different contexts.

In Iran, the relationship between WTC and confidence, motivation, and anxiety have been explored. The three variables were found to influence WTC of Iranian EFL students (see Ghanbarpour, 2016; Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2016); however, no study has examined the causal effects of these trait-like variables on WTC nor the interaction among them. Considering the contexts of English language learning and teaching in Iran, the interaction between WTC and other variables may be different from other contexts. In Iran, English is used as a foreign language and is not much needed for most people in their day-to-day life. Specifically, for most Iranian university students, their use of English is limited to the opportunities in classrooms, in which oral communication is minimal (Avanaki & Sadeghi, 2013). Lack of exposure to communication in daily life and little chance to communicate in English in classrooms seems to affect Iranian students' use of English (Avanaki & Sadeghi, 2013). Unsurprisingly, previous studies have found Iranian students to have a low level of WTC (Alemi, 2012), or had no tendency to start or continue a conversation in English by themselves (Goldoust & Ranjbar, 2017). Noting that merely exposing to language "input" is not adequate for second language learning but producing "output" is essential (Wanlu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018), the promotion of oral English production is crucial, especially in EFL classrooms (Wanlu, 2021).

Therefore, the present study aimed at developing a model of WTC in Iranian EFL university classroom context to describe how WTC interacted with four affective variables, namely confidence, motivation, anxiety, and grit. Grit was included in this study since it was found to correlate with WTC in some countries (Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019). Besides, it aimed at specifying which variable was the best predictor of WTC of Iranian EFL students. The findings will help Iranian EFL instructors design English lessons that can promote learners' WTC effectively, which will in turn enhance students' oral communication behaviors. Two research questions were explored in this article.

What is the model of WTC in Iranian EFL classroom context?

Which variable is the best predictor of WTC among Iranian EFL students?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Willingness to Communicate in L2*

Willingness to communicate was conceptualized as a personality trait for the first time by McCroskey and Baer (1985) referred to as an act of talkativeness or reluctance to talk in the classroom (MacIntyre et al., 1998). MacIntyre et al. (1998) later defined WTC in L2 as a "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using the second language" (p.54). The concept of WTC in L2 was extended by MacIntyre and his colleagues using the theoretical framework in their heuristic model associated with two groups of variables-trait-like and situational variables. In recent years, trait-like willingness to communicate and situational willingness to communicate have been considered complementary (Amirian et al., 2020). In other words, a trait-like variable helps language learners be ready to communicate while a situational variable explains why the learner decides to start a communication in a specific situation (Amirian et al., 2020).

It is believed that using or interacting in a second language (L2) could assist learners to develop their language proficiency (Kang, 2005; Zhang et al., 2018) and the goal of language learning and teaching should be to promote learners' willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998); however, the result of investigations have shown that not all L2 learners were willing to communicate in L2 regardless of language proficiency (Bergil, 2016; Husna, 2019; Karnchanachari, 2019; MacIntyre, 2007). Therefore, the significance of enhancing willingness to communicate among learners has been emphasized by various scholars in the field (Bergil, 2016; Darasawang & Reinders, 2021; Husna, 2019; Karnchanachari, 2019). In this regard, finding the variables that could affect the learner's willingness to communicate or interact in the language they learn has become a topic of interest for investigations.

Studies have used various research methods and different instruments to study willingness to communicate including questionnaires in quantitative studies, interviews, observations, diary, and focused essays in qualitative research, and a combination of instruments in mixed-methods studies. Peng and Woodrow (2010) conducted a study using a questionnaire adapted from Weaver (2005) to measure different affective variables and willingness to communicate among Chinese students. Their instrument focused on speaking skill with two types of activities, form-focused and meaning-focused. They explained that the former referred to activities in the classroom which required the learners to attend to language forms such as learning words in the aspects of pronunciation and meaning, and the latter referred to activities that engaged the learners with the meaning of language such as role plays or skits.

The findings on the level of willingness to communicate among EFL learners in Iran have been mixed. While some showed a low level of WTC (Alemi, 2012; Goldoust & Ranjbar, 2017; Riasati, 2012, 2018), other studies found that Iranian EFL students were willing to communicate in English in the classroom, owing to some situational variables (Alemi et al., 2013; Goldoust & Ranjbar, 2017; Kamdideh & Barjesteh, 2019; Khatibi & Zakeri, 2014; Khazaei et al., 2012; Yousefi & Ahmad Kasaian, 2014). A few studies were also conducted based on MacIntyre's model to examine the effects of both situational variables inside the classroom (Modirghameneh & Firouzmand, 2014; Riasati, 2018; Shirvan & Taherian, 2016; Zarei et al., 2019; Zarrinabadi, 2014) and trait-like variables such as individual differences (Alemi, 2012; Amirian et al., 2020; Ghanbarpour, 2016; Rastegar & Karami, 2015; Riasati, 2018; Saeedakhtar et al., 2018). These studies focused merely on the correlation between the variables and WTC and were conducted mostly at language institutions, not in degree programs.

In sum, in Iranian context, the results reported students with a higher level of self-confidence showed more WTC (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Ghanbarpour, 2016), both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were related to WTC (Azmand, 2014; Karimi & Abaszadeh, 2017; Khajavy et al., 2016; Saeedakhtar et al., 2018), a negative relationship was reported between anxiety and WTC (Aliakbari et al., 2016; Ghanbarpour, 2016; Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Rastegar & Karami, 2015; Riasati, 2018), and a significant relationship of grit on WTC (Sharifi & Hamzavi, 2021) and a direct path from grit to WTC were found (Fathi et al., 2021).

2.2 Willingness to Communicate Models

Considering the importance of willingness to communicate in second language learning, several models have been developed to explore the variables that may affect willingness to communicate using path analysis (Khajavy et al., 2016; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Robson, 2015; Yashima, 2002; Zeng & Tan, 2014). For example, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) studied six variables including global personality traits, motivation, attitude, perceived communicative competence, anxiety, and L2 frequency of communication among French learners in Canada. The results showed that personality trait could indirectly affect willingness to communicate. Thus, based on their model, an indirect path was found from personality traits to willingness to communicate through motivation and anxiety. They also found that anxiety could directly affect willingness to communicate and indirectly through perceived communicative competence. Relying on MacIntyre and Charos (1996), Yashima (2002) developed a model in a Japanese university classroom setting. In this study, he investigated the causal relationship between willingness to communicate and motivation, confidence, international posture, and L2 proficiency. According to their findings, confidence directly affected willingness to communicate. He also found that confidence was the significant predictor of willingness to communicate. Finally, Peng and Woodrow (2010) investigated the impact of four variables on willingness to communicate among Chinese students using Yashima (2002)'s findings and other investigations on path analysis. In their study, communication confidence, motivation, classroom environment, and learners' beliefs were explored. The findings in Peng and Woodrow's study were in line with Yashima (2002). Confidence was found to have a direct effect on willingness to communicate and motivation affected willingness to communicate through confidence. The studies mainly revealed the causal effect of the three variables naming confidence, motivation, and anxiety with willingness to communicate in different contexts.

In recent years, studies on willingness to communicate have evolved based on different viewpoints, especially in the light of positive psychology and positive internal in personality traits or external variables. In this line, Lee and his colleagues conducted a series of studies on willingness to communicate model (Lee & Draji, 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019) and added grit as a personality trait as a positive internal variable in the social and individual context layer of the model. Specifically, they examined the relationships between willingness to communicate and four variables, namely confidence, motivation, anxiety, and grit in three different settings: in the classroom, out of the classroom and in digital settings. The results of the investigations revealed that willingness to communicate was correlated with other variables; however, the significant predictors of willingness to communicate were not the same in different settings and in various contexts. The findings in these studies showed grit to be one of the significant variables affecting willingness to communicate. Nevertheless, the studies only investigated the correlation between the variables. Thus, to understand the causal interactions between willingness to communicate and the affective variables in this study, three main studies were used to develop a hypothesized model (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002).

3.4 Hypothesized Model of Willingness to Communicate

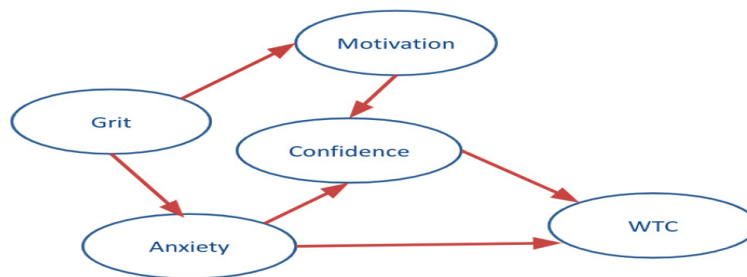


Figure 1. Hypothesized Model of WTC in Iranian EFL University Classroom Context

Considering the findings from previous studies both in Iranian EFL contexts and elsewhere, the hypothesized model of willingness to communicate in Iranian EFL university classroom context was developed. The model included four variables that may affect willingness to communicate, either directly or indirectly. The paths in the model were developed based on the findings of three main path analysis studies, i.e., MacIntyre and Charos (1996), Peng and Woodrow (2010), and Yashima (2002). As shown in Figure 1, first, a direct path from confidence to willingness to communicate was hypothesized based on MacIntyre and Charos (1996) and Yashima (2002). Second, the direct paths from anxiety to willingness to communicate and to confidence were hypothesized based on MacIntyre and Charos (1996). Third, motivation was hypothesized to have an indirect effect on willingness to communicate through confidence, as revealed in Yashima (2002) and Peng and Woodrow (2010). Lastly, direct paths from grit to motivation and to anxiety were hypothesized based on MacIntyre and Charos (1996).

3. Methodology

3.1 Population and Participants

Considering the number of Iranian university students, approximately 3.2 million (Razavi, 2021), a minimum of 400 participants was needed to ensure representativeness (Yamane, 1967). The participants were randomly selected from two private and two public universities in one of the five regions in Iran. The four universities were selected to participate in the study because their English instructors agreed to help distribute the online questionnaire to their students. Eight classes of non-English majored students in the participating universities were given a link to an online questionnaire. The students who received the questionnaire and agreed to participate in the study were informed about the study objectives, the confidentiality of their personal information, and their rights to consent or dissent to take part in the study. In total, 488 completed questionnaires were returned.

The participants were studying in various majors, including geology, psychology, management, accounting, and engineering. Their age ranged between 19 and 21 years old and most of them were females (68%, $n = 333$). Their English proficiency was diverse. Most of them (62.8%, $n = 306$) rated themselves as independent users (B1 level of English proficiency using CEFR levels) while one fourth of them (25%, $n = 122$) considered themselves to be basic English users (A1).

3.2 Questionnaire

An online questionnaire with two sections was employed to measure the five variables. Section I, Part I consisted of the information sheet and the consent form, and Part II included the demographic information of the participant. Section II consisted of five parts to measure WTC, confidence, motivation, anxiety, and grit, which were adapted from previous studies (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988; Noels et al., 2000; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Two modifications were made, without changing the content in the items. First, all the questionnaire items, originally in English, were translated into Persian to ensure comprehensibility. Second, the rating scale in all parts was modified to be a 5-point Likert scale to create consistency in the response format. Details about the items in each part were as follow:

The willingness to communicate items were adapted from Peng and Woodrow (2010). The participants were asked to indicate their level of willingness to communicate in English in ten different communication situations

in a classroom using the 5-point rating scale ranging from “Definitely not willing to” to “Definitely willing to”. For example,

I am willing to ask my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.

I am willing to give a short self-introduction without notes in English to the class.

The confidence items were adapted from McCroskey and McCroskey (1988). The participants were asked to rate their agreement to the 12 statements using the 5-point rating scale ranging from “Almost never true about me” to “Almost always true about me” to indicate their perception of their English communication competence. For example,

In the language classroom, I feel confident when I talk with a friend.
talk in a large meeting of friends.

The motivation items were adapted from Noels et al. (2000). The participants were asked to rate 21 items using the 5-point rating scale ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree” to indicate their level of motivation in an English learning context. For example,

I can't come to understand what I am doing studying a second language.

Because I think it is good for my personal development.

The anxiety items were adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). The participants were asked to rate 33 items using the 5-point scale ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree” to indicate their level of anxiety in English in various EFL situations in classrooms. For example,

I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.

I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.

The grit items were adapted from Duckworth and Quinn (2009). The participants were asked to rate 8 items using the 5-point rating scale ranging from “Very much like me” to “Not like me at all” to indicate their level of passion and perseverance for their long-term goal. For example,

I am a hard worker.

I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

3.3 Questionnaire Validity and Reliability

To ensure the content validity of the translated items, back translation was employed. In the first step, one Iranian English university instructor was asked to translate the items from English to Persian. Then another Iranian English university instructor translated the Persian items back to English, without discussing it with the first translator. Lastly, two English native speakers who were in the field of English language teaching were asked to check the congruency of the items in the original English questionnaire and the translated English version. The native experts reported some items problematic in terms of grammar, word choice, and meaning in the translated version. The changes were made according to the native speakers' suggestions, and they were double checked with the native speakers after the translation. The finalized Persian version of the questionnaire was then piloted with 49 EFL university students sharing similar characteristics with the participants of the study. The Cronbach's Alpha for WTC ($\alpha = 0.877$), confidence ($\alpha = 0.962$), motivation ($\alpha = 0.882$), anxiety ($\alpha = 0.895$), and grit ($\alpha = 0.803$) were acceptable. The results of Cronbach's Alpha for all the items ($\alpha = 0.847$) suggested that the adapted questionnaire had a high level of reliability so it could be used to measure the intended variables.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was administered electronically by four EFL instructors in four cooperating universities in Iran. The link to the online questionnaire was shared with eight classes of non-English majored university students in the four universities in the second semester of 2020. All submitted questionnaires were used in the data analysis.

Before analyzing the data, three steps were taken: reversing the value of the negatively worded items, managing the missing data, and running confirmatory factor analysis. Firstly, reversed coded items were identified and the data were reversed coded using IBM SPSS 22. Nineteen items were reversed coded including 6 motivation items (Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9), 9 anxiety items (Items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, 32), and 4 grit items (Items 1, 3, 5, 6). Secondly, the data was checked to identify the missing data. The results showed that 13.09% of the total cases and 1.429 % of the total values were missing. They were considered acceptable since the cutoff range was found to be within 5% and 20% (Bennett, 2001; Peng et al., 2006; Schafer, 1997). The results also showed that the

missing values in this study were not random; therefore, the maximum likelihood (ML) was employed to manage this type of missing data (Schlomer et al., 2010).

The model was then fitted using ML in IBM SPSS Amos 26, and the model parameters were set to their maximum likelihood estimates. Next, the linear regression was analyzed to predict the missing values according to their maximum likelihood estimates (Arbuckle, 2019). Thirdly, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run with latent variables to measure the construct of the latent variables and show the variance-covariance matrix input. The cutoff criteria were found not to be lower than .30 or .40 (Eaton et al., 2019; Swisher et al., 2004). The results of the CFA indicated two items in the anxiety questionnaire (items 30 and 32) with a low loading; therefore, the two items were removed. Twelve cases were found as outliers, so they were removed from the data set and the total number of cases became 476. Lastly, assessing the normality also showed the presence of multivariate non-normality. Bollen-Stine Bootstrap was applied to address the problem; therefore, all the measurement fitted the assumptions.

Finally, the data was analyzed using structural equation model (SEM) to examine the fitness of the hypothesized model of WTC in Iranian EFL classroom context. To test the model, the cut off points of χ^2/df , GFI, NFI, TLI, CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR proposed by Hooper et al. (2008) were employed (see Table 1). The hypothesized paths in the model were first tested, and the statistical criteria were considered to check if the model was fit. To identify the best predicting variable for WTC in classroom setting, Beta weights (R^2) in path analysis and Cohen's f^2 ($f^2 = R^2 / 1 - R^2$) were taken into consideration to interpret the effect size (ES). According to Cohen (1992), f^2 equals or greater than 0.02 indicates a small effect size, f^2 equals or greater than 0.15 shows a medium effect size, and f^2 equals or greater than 0.35 represents a large effect size. The larger the effect size is, the stronger the effect could be.

Table 1. Model Fit Cut Off Indices Proposed by Hooper et al., 2008

Indices	Acceptable
χ^2/df	> 2 < 5
GFI	> .90
NFI	> .90
CFI	> .90
TLI	> .90
RMSEA	< .80
SRMR	< .80

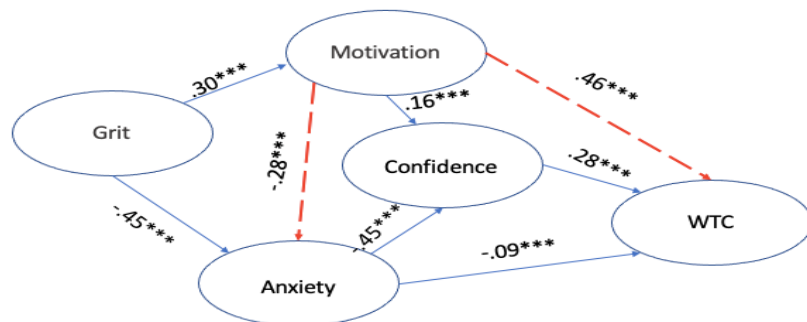
4. Results

In the first analysis, the hypothesized model did not show a good fit (see Table 2). Since χ^2/df was above 5, GFI, NFI, TLI, CFI fit indices were less than .90, and RMSEA and SRMR were greater than .08, three steps of modification were taken to improve the model. First, residual error was chosen as a rule of thumb in model modification. Residual error terms of motivation items were correlated. The items were negatively correlated because they belonged to different motivation subscales. Residual error terms of anxiety items were positively correlated. The items were correlated because they asked about the fear that learner experience while communicating. As a result, the model was improved; however, the good fit of the model was not achieved yet. Second, a path was drawn from each variable to another checking the theoretical background and the model indices in every step. A path from motivation to WTC was found to be significant so it was added to the hypothesized model. Lasty, a path from motivation to anxiety was added to the hypothesized model. After the three steps of modification, the model showed an acceptable fit (see Table 2).

Table 2. Revision Steps for the Hypothesized Model of WTC in Iranian EFL University Classroom

	X2	df	χ^2 /df	GFI	NFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Hypothesized model	653.68	129	5.06	.86	.88	.90	.88	.09	.11
Modified residual error	549.10	123	4.46	.88	.90	.92	.90	.08	.10
Path from motivation to WTC	452.14	122	3.70	.90	.91	.93	.92	.07	.07
Path from motivation to anxiety	427.32	121	3.53	.91	.92	.94	.92	.07	.07

The finalized model is presented in Figure 2. The solid lines were drawn based on previous studies and the dotted lines were the added path based on the results of the data analysis. In order to identify the best predicting variable of WTC, R^2 in path analysis and f^2 were used (see Table 3). The model in this study accounted for 45% of the variance of WTC, 29% of the variance of confidence, 9% of the variance of motivation, 35% of the variance of anxiety, and finally 1% of the variance of grit. The ES for three variables were large while for the other two were weak. This shows that the model moderately but practically explains the variance of WTC and the effective variables. The results showed motivation to be the strongest predictor of WTC in Iranian classroom context as it affected WTC both directly ($B = .46$, $R^2 = .09$, $f^2 = .09$, small ES) and indirectly through confidence ($B = .16 \times .28$, $R^2 = .09$, $f^2 = .09$, small ES) and anxiety ($B = -.28 \times -.09$, $R^2 = .09$, $f^2 = .09$, small ES). Confidence ($B = .28$, $R^2 = .29$, $f^2 = .40$, large ES) and anxiety ($B = -.09$, $R^2 = .35$, $f^2 = .53$, large ES) were direct predictors of WTC. Anxiety was also an indirect predictor of WTC through confidence ($B = -.45 \times .28$, $R^2 = .35$, $f^2 = .53$, large ES). Lastly, grit was found to be the weak predictor of WTC indirectly through motivation and anxiety ($B = .30 \times .46 + -.45 \times -.09$, $R^2 = .01$, $f^2 = 0.1$, small ES).

Figure 2. The Final Model of WTC in Iranian EFL University Classroom Context (Notes. *** $p < .001$)

In sum, all the paths in the hypothesized WTC model were confirmed at p -value smaller than .001 with two additional direct paths, one from motivation to WTC and the other from motivation to anxiety. The final model showed that motivation, confidence, and anxiety were predicting variables of WTC in Iranian university classroom context. Apart from having a direct effect on WTC, motivation and anxiety also had a mediating effect through confidence. Lastly, grit was a mediating variable in the model through motivation and anxiety. Among the four independent variables, motivation was found to be the strongest predictor of WTC, and have direct effects on two other variables, confidence and anxiety, in the model.

Table 3. Standardized Parameter Estimates for the Model of WTC in Iranian EFL University Classroom

Latent variables	R2	f2
WTC	.45	.81
Confidence	.29	.40
Motivation	.09	.09
Anxiety	.35	.53
Grit	.01	.01

5. Discussion

First, the findings about the effects of confidence and anxiety on WTC are consistent with previous studies. Confidence was found to be the direct predictor of WTC in Iran (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2016) and elsewhere (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002). Thus, EFL learners with a high level of confidence have been found to be more willing to communicate in English than those with less confidence (Compton, 2007; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In addition, the direct negative effect of anxiety has been revealed in previous studies in other countries (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010), and in Iranian university context (Fathi et al., 2021). It can be concluded that the less anxious students are, the more willing they are to communicate in English in the classroom setting. Relying on the findings, EFL university instructors should build confidence in using English through more communicative activities (Ho, 2020) that can assist using language more authentically, pleasantly, and frequently in the classroom. Besides, to facilitate learners' anxiety or protect the learners from anxiety, Iranian EFL instructors at university should create a friendly, relaxing, and enjoyable learning environment (Khajavy et al., 2018). As a result, students can experience less anxiety and more confidence which can affect their level of WTC in a classroom setting.

Second, motivation was found to be the strongest predictor of WTC among Iranian university students in the classroom setting with direct and indirect positive effects. The direct path from motivation to WTC was not found in some studies in Iran (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2016) and elsewhere (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002). In those previous studies, motivation only played a mediating role through confidence while it was found to mediate between WTC and confidence and anxiety in the present study. The direct effect of motivation on WTC found in this present study was in line with Karimi and Abaszadeh (2017) who studied motivation from self-determination theory. Although Karimi and Abaszadeh (2017)'s direct path of motivation on WTC was not found at university level, the path in this study was not a surprise as recent studies have started to show that Iranian university students were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn English (Khajavy et al., 2016; Saeedakhtar et al., 2018). The reason could be, in the recent years, Iranian university students studied English for various communicative reasons such as for pursuing higher degree abroad as well as for entertaining themselves with English-language media (Shahriari, 2017). Therefore, English teachers in Iranian universities should design lessons that can boost and maintain the students' motivation. Designing activities considering learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness by using approaches such as project-based (Rodríguez-Peñarroja, 2022) or task-based techniques (NamazianDost et al., 2017) can provide a more meaningful use of English to enhance learners' level of motivation. The indirect path from motivation to anxiety was in line with Khodadady and Khajavy (2013). In their study, anxiety was associated with amotivation, lower level of identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Based on this path, the more motivated learners are the less anxious they could be to communicate in English.

Lastly, grit was hypothesized as a mediating variable in the WTC model in the present study and the results were confirmative with MacIntyre and Charos (1996) who found personality traits could affect motivation and anxiety as the two contributors to WTC. Considering the direct relationship between motivation and anxiety and WTC and the degree of prediction of motivation revealed in the present study, grit should be considered as another important factor in enhancing WTC of Iranian university students as discussed in previous studies in Iran (Sharifi & Hamzavi, 2021) and elsewhere (Lee, 2020; Lee & Drajeti, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019). Therefore, gritty learners are likely to communicate in English more than those without grit. However, the paths were not in line with Fathi et al. (2021) who found a direct path from grit to WTC among English majored university students. As explained in their investigation, it might be because English majored learners could have a higher level of interest and perseverance towards learning English as their long-term goal; therefore, they seek to communicate more in English in the classroom setting. Based on the findings, Iranian university EFL instructors should promote grit through providing more support in case of facing difficulty in the learning process which may increase the learners' passion and persistence in their learning process (Keegan, 2017).

6. Conclusion

Noting that WTC can impact the communication behavior of language learners and that Iranian EFL learners had low interest in communicating in English, the present study developed a model to figure out the causal relationship of trait-like variables on WTC in the classroom setting in Iran. The findings showed motivation to be the most predicting and mediating affective variable for WTC among Iranian EFL learners while anxiety, confidence and grit could affect the WTC directly and indirectly. In other words, the findings depicted that Iranian university students with high motivation, confidence, and grit, and low level of anxiety would be willing to communicate in English in the classroom context. The results could hopefully bring new insights for Iranian EFL instructors at university level and others to promote communication behavior among EFL learners.

7. Limitations and Further Study

The findings in the present study should be discussed with two considerations. First, the present study relied mainly on self-reported data on the questionnaire using Likert-scale. This may risk the effects of the participants over-rating or under-rating the responses. In addition, the questionnaire consisted of five scales, measuring different variables, the responses may risk a method bias. Second, the data collection was conducted at the beginning of a semester which means that the students might not have had much experience in EFL classrooms at the university level. Since the present research attempted to study the WTC model in the classroom context, the time of the data collection should then be noted.

To further explore the relationships of the variables that may affect WTC, a few suggestions for future studies are as follows. First, since this research relied only on quantitative data from a questionnaire, mixed method research which employs qualitative data will provide a more in-depth understanding of the interactions among the five variables. Second, future studies may investigate the relationships among the five variables at the end of the semester to have a better understanding of the relationships in the classroom setting. Thirdly, future studies may investigate the relationships among the five variables in other settings in Iran such as outside of the classroom or especially in online settings which has been in trend in recent years. Finally, the new path from grit, as a personality trait, to motivation and anxiety needs further investigations as it was found for this first time in this study. Thus, other researchers are encouraged to study the causal effect of this variable in various EFL contexts to provide more insights of the findings.

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