Willingness to Communicate in English among Saudi Female University Students

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Abstract

Since the English Language teaching system differs from public schools to private ones, it is presumed that this would have a great impact of students' willingness to communicate in English in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the effect of private and public school education on WTC in English among Saudi Female English major students. Second, the researcher considered the degree of WTC in English among the Saudi Female English major students based on their private and public school education. Results indicate there is a significant difference between Saudi Female English major students' willingness to communicate in English based on their private and public school education. Further studies would be recommended to investigate why WTC is suppressed and English language not used among these students.

Keywords: willingness to communicate in English, Saudi students, public school, private school

1. Introduction and Background

English has become the language with the most number of speakers in the world. However, out of all the people who speak English, only one fourth are English native speakers (Strevens, 1992). The rest are either second or foreign speakers of the language. For the past decades, the number of English speakers has been increasing dramatically mainly due to the increasing popularity of the language worldwide. In the non-native contexts, the English language has become the preferred choice of communication in various sectors, such as the workplace and academic institutions. The ability to communicate well in the language has also become a coveted skill, as this would allow people to make themselves more marketable to the job market.

In academic institutions, the focus on the English language has expanded as many see the significance and advantages of speaking English. Despite the realized significance, some students are eagerly willing to communicate in the second language (L2), in this case English, while many others avoid using the language. Many reasons have been put forth, such as shyness, identity , or simply low proficiency (Strevens,1992). Another reason which may underlie all reasons is the speaker's willingness to use the language. Willingness is an inherent characteristic of a person that implies a desire to want to do something. We can only do something, and do it well, if we are willing to do it. The theory of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) was first introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985) to refer to communication in the first language (L1). WTC was defined as the possibility to engage in communication when having the choice to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985), thus the concept of WTC strictly referred to speaking. This is due to the fact that the key purpose for teaching English changed from mastering the four skills to mere communicating in English.

Based on McCroskey and Baer's theory of WTC, MacIntyre et al. (1994) proposed a heuristic pyramid model to illustrate the many factors for WTC to take place in the first language. In their study, MacIntyre et al., stated factors such as personality, apprehension, relationship between the speakers and self-esteem that may affect a student's willingness to communicate. One of the most striking factors MacIntyre et al. included in their theory was language change. They also applied these factors not only to speaking but also to reading and writing. So instead of viewing the factors of WTC in the first language, they extended the theory to L2 as well. MacIntyre et al. (2003) also stated that factors affecting WTC in L1 may differ from those in L2 and would probably not transfer. The suggestion that WTC in L1 would not be transferred to WTC in L2 is basically due to the differences in speakers' communicative competence in their L1 and L2 in addition to how L2 is viewed socially

(MacIntyre et al., 1998).

The model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1994) is divided into six tiers representing social and individual context, affective-cognitive context, motivational propensities, situational antecedents, behavioral intention, and communication behavior. Communication behavior is set at the very top of the pyramid to indicate the end result of the intricate aspects that influence the WTC process where an individual is willing to communicate. At the end of their article, MacIntyre et al. (1994) propose further research to be conducted that may provide additional variables to the ones proposed in their modal or "differences between language learning in the classroom and language acquisition in informal settings may engender differences in WTC …" (p. 559). Graph 1 shows the Heuristic Model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998)
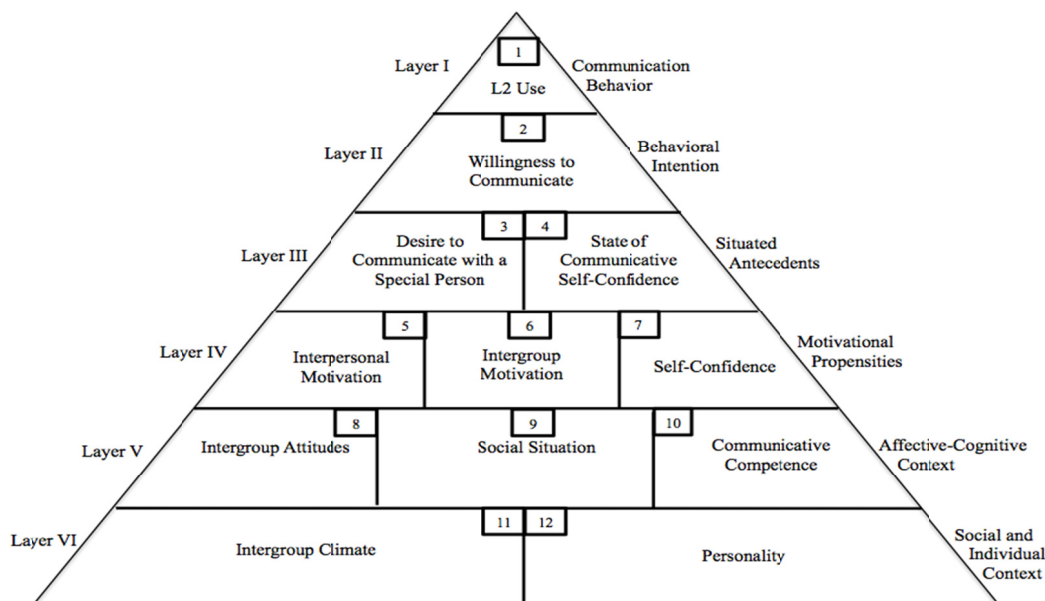
Graph 1. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998)

In the current study, the researcher accepted MacIntyre et al.,'s WTC proposal in L2 and added to the variables they set forth by conducting a study that is twofold; first, the researcher investigated the effect of private and public school education on WTC among Saudi female English major students. Second, she considered the degree of WTC of Saudi female English major students based on their private and public school education in Saudi Arabia.

The first part of the study would be appropriately matched with box 10, "Communicative Competence" of the heuristic model. The term *communicative competence* was developed by the anthropological linguist Hymes (1972) as an objection to Chomsky's (1965) limited understanding of grammatical knowledge outside the context. Thus, much attention was given to this term and as a result, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) suggested five possible "competencies making up communicative language abilities." Linguistic competence, which consists of simple information of phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules to identify a communication act whether spoken or written, was the first to be presented. Discourse competence followed the linguistic competence as a means to organize words and sentences in a cohesive text. Next, the actionable competence is required to match the linguistic form with the communication intended. Sociocultural competence follows due to the importance of being able to express what is culturally appropriate. Finally, the strategies used to communicate are referred to as strategic competence. These are the strategies used when one is faced with a language problem, such as not being able to understand what is being said or is unable to retrieve certain words. Thus, since this study deals with the impact level proficiency has on WTC, it would only be appropriate to place it on tier V of the pyramid proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) who define communicative competence as "One's degree of L2 proficiency …" For the current paper, the main interest is the linguistic competence of box 10.

Although previous research deals with speakers of different languages, none have touched upon the WTC of Arabic speakers. MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan's (2003) study shows the difference between immersion and non-immersion university level students of a French course on WTC, among other variables. The results of the study show that there is a significant difference between immersion and non-immersion students on WTC. The immersion group was more willing to communicate in French than the non-immersion group. In a similar study, MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrod (2001) studied the WTC of L2 French immersion 9th grade students. All four language skills were used to measure WTC in the light of five reasons for studying L2. The results show that there is a positive correlation between the five orientations and WTC inside and outside the classroom. Niknejad and Nazari (2015) examined the effect of peer assessment on willingness to communicate (WTC) among Iranian advanced EFL learners in the context of classroom. Two groups of advanced learners participated in this study. Primarily, a pre-test was administered to both groups, then the participants of experimental group received a treatment of 10 sessions. In these sessions the participants assessed their peers according to the peer assessment form. On the other hand, the participants of control group did not receive any treatment. The quasi-experimental, pre-test, and post-test were applied to these two groups. The obtained data was analyzed with two sample independent t-test statistical methods. The results revealed a meaningful significant difference among Iranian advanced EFL learners' willingness to communicate of the participants who assessed their peer's performances, so peer assessment significantly affected their achievement in oral communication. Teachers deal with learners that are willing to communicate orally in their foreign language, while some learners do not use their foreign language, even with high linguistic competence. Peer assessment can be a good form of assessment to enhance willingness to communicate among EFL learners.

Roach and Olaniran (2002) report that International Teaching Assistants showed high international WTC and low communicative apprehension, in a study of 44 participants. Cao and Philp (2006) consider trait-like WTC and situational WTC in their study of eight intermediate level international students who were enrolled in a General English program at the university level. Results show that there is a discrepancy between the interrelationships of L2 WTC as indicated by self-reports and observed L2 WTC behaviors in the classroom. But since no studies have been carried out comparing the proficiency level to WTC, it would be interesting to see the results of such a study.

The research question for the current paper is: Does studying in a private school affect Saudi female students' WTC in English? To be able to answer this question a brief background of the Saudi English educational system follows as a background to the study.

When looking at the English educational system in Saudi Arabia, it is realized that there are basically two systems not one. One belongs to the public schools, while the other to the private schools. English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia has a completely different teaching approach and focus in public schools than it does in private schools. In addition, private schools introduce EFL from kindergarten, while public schools introduce it from grade six. Public schools are required to use a set of curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education and give students three hours per week of English (Al-Seghayer, 2011). Private schools, on the other hand, have the freedom to use additional textbooks and offer English classes at least one period every day if not more. The number of students in a private school classroom is much lower than the number of students in a public school classroom. Private schools normally do not have more than 20 students, while public schools may have up to double that number. It could also be said that English is spoken more in the private schools than the public schools, providing more opportunities for students to be exposed and use the language.

2. Method

The present study is a combination of a qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis study. The qualitative interviews were developed to complement the quantitative questionnaires to provide, support and supplement further information.

2.1 Participants

Participants of the study are 118 Saudi female students of the English Language and Literature Department, College of Human Sciences at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Only females participated in the study due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is a gender segregated society. Thus, all social and educational functions are segregated. Of the 118 participants, 52 attended public schools while the rest attended private schools. In terms of the Heuristic Model, the participants should possess sufficient communicative competence, given that they are English majors. They should have enough self-confidence to allow them to proceed to the higher tiers and be willing to communicate.

2.2 Instruments

A questionnaire, which consisted of three parts: personal background, English educational background, and willingness to communicate situations, was distributed to 118 participants. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant to obtain further data. Classroom observation was also utilized to authenticate participants' information. Confidentiality of participants' information was kept and used only for the purpose of the current research.
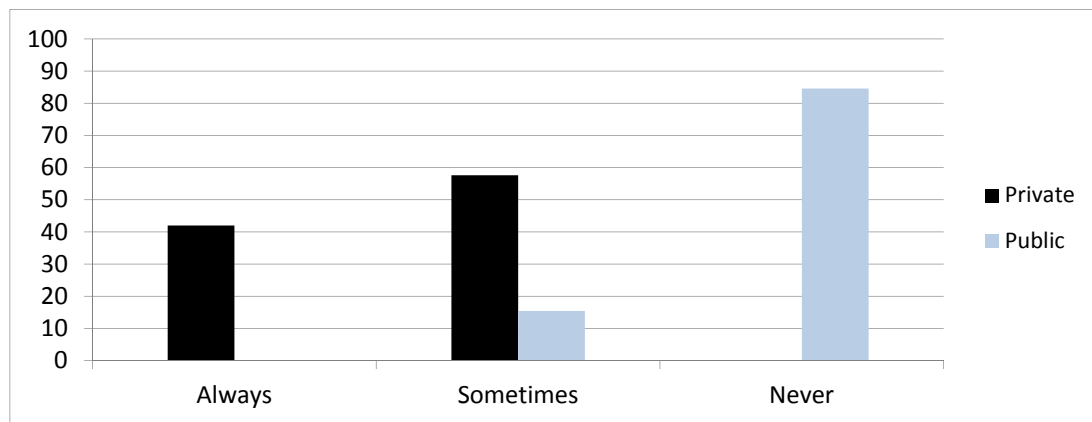
3. Results

This section presents the results of the four items on WTC of the questionnaire. Table1 and Graph2 are utilized to illustrate the findings clearly.

Table 1. Percentage of willingness to use English to answer a question in class

Q1	Always		Sometimes		Never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Public	0	0%	8	15.4%	44	84.6%	52	100%
Private	28	42.4%	38	57.6%	0	0%	66	100%
Total	28	23.7%	46	39%	44	37.3%	118	100%

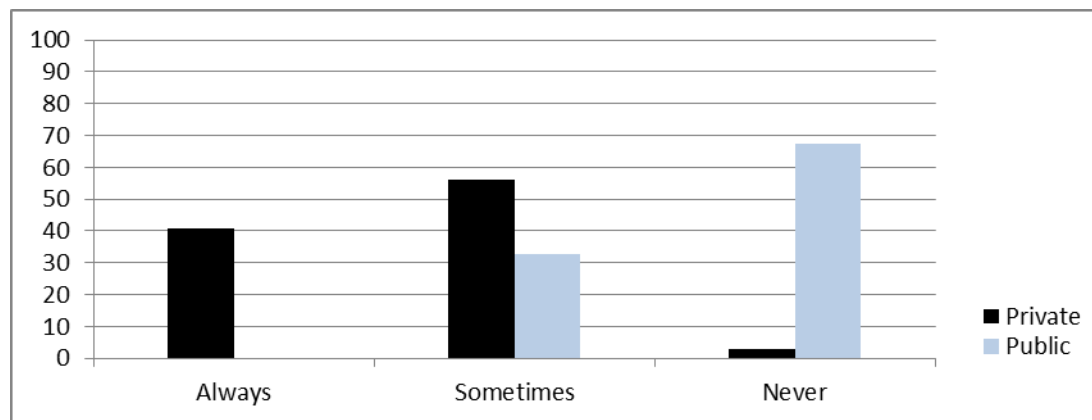*Note*. df=2; p<0.001; X^2=91.18779771.

Graph 2. Willingness to use English to answer a question in class

Firstly, there is a significant difference between students attending public schools and private schools at p<0.05 (p<0.001). The results show that participants who attended public school would not *always* use English when they have to answer questions during class (0%), compared to private-school participants at 42.4%. Nonetheless, 15.4% of the public-school participants indicated that they *sometimes* would answer questions in English during class, but this number is small compared to the 57.6% of the private-school participants. Finally, 84.6% of the public-school participants indicated that they were *never* willing to answer to use English to answer questions during class. The results could also mean that if they had to use English to answer questions, they would not be willing to communicate at all. With the private-school participants, no one said they were *never* willing to use English to answer questions during class.

Table 2. Percentage of willingness to use English with the instructor outside the class

| Q2	Always		Sometimes		Never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Public	0	0	17	32.7%	35	67.3%	52	100%
Private	27	41%	37	56%	2	3%	66	100%
Total	27	23%	54	45.7%	37	31.3%	118	100%

Note. df=2; p<0.001; X^2=63.06657415.

Graph 3. Willingness to use English with the instructor outside the class

There is a significant difference between students attending public schools and private schools in the second item on WTC, using English to talk to the instructor before or after class, at p<0.05 (p<0.001). Similar to the previous WTC item, none of the public-school participants indicated that they were *always* willing to use English to talk to their instructor outside class. However, 32.7% of them would do so sometimes. As in the previous item, a high 67.3% indicated that they would *never* use English to talk to their instructor outside class. On the other hand, 40% of the private-school participants said they would *always* be willing to use English to talk to the instructor outside class, with no one stating that they would *never* be unwilling to use English to talk to their instructor before or after class. 56% percent of the private-school participants indicated that would *sometimes* be willing to talk to their instructor outside class.

Table 3. Percentages of heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998)

Q3	Always		Sometimes		Never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Public	1	2%	14	27%	37	71%	52	100%
Private	31	47%	33	50%	2	3%	66	100%
Total	32	27%	47	40%	39	33%	118	100%

Note. df=2; p<0.001; X2=66.49104607.
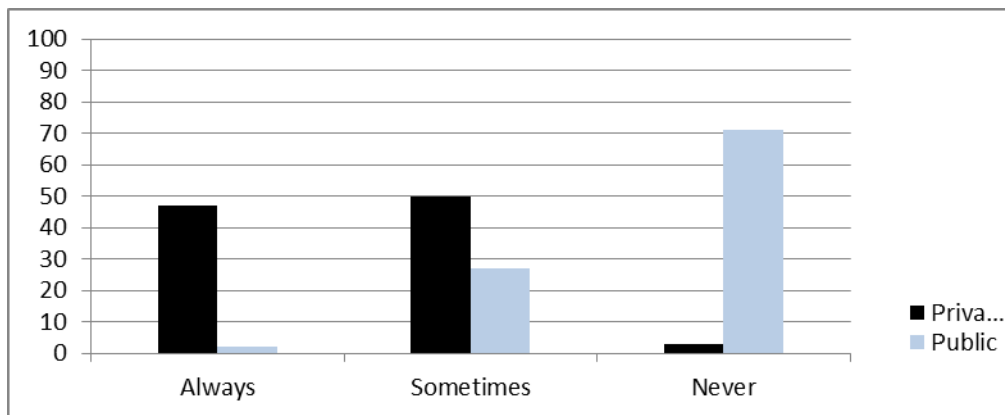
Graph 4. Willingness to use English to ask questions during class

There is a significant difference between students attending public schools and private schools, in terms of willingness to use English to ask questions during class, at p<0.05 (p<0.001). Public-school participants are rarely willing to *always* use English to ask questions during class, at 2%. Nonetheless, 27% of them indicated that they would *sometimes* use English to ask questions during class. A majority of them, 71%, indicated that would *never* be willing to ask questions in English during class. On the other hand, the private-school participants were *always* willing to ask questions in English during class, at 47%, *sometimes* willing to ask questions in English, at 50%, and were rarely unwilling to use English to ask questions during class, at 66%.
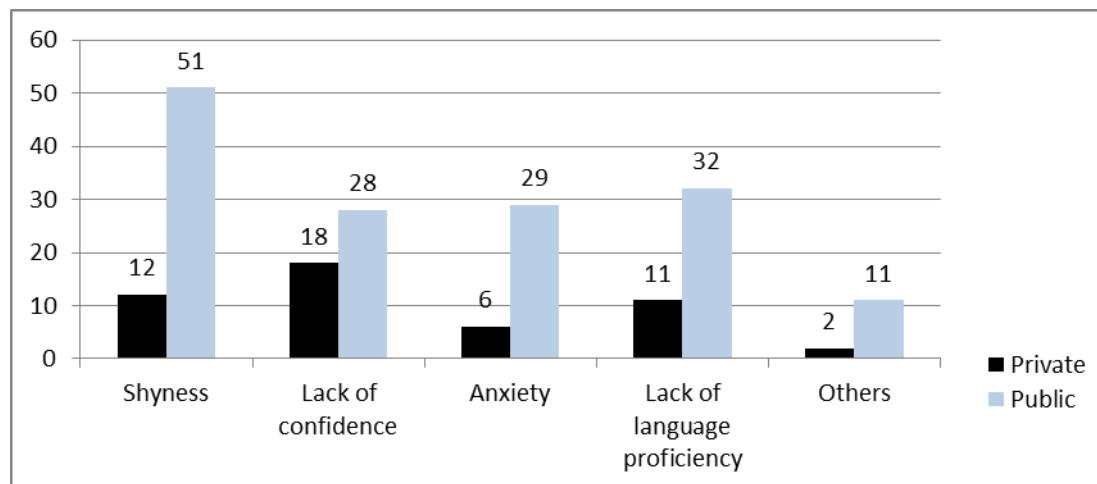
Graph 5. Willingness to use English to ask questions during class

The participants were also asked to indicate the reasons for their unwillingness to communicate in the English language. The public school participants stated *shyness* as the main reason for the unwillingness, at 51 per cent. This is followed by perceptions of lack of language proficiency, *anxiety* and *lack of confidence*. The private school participants, on the other hand, gave *lack of confidence* as the main factor, at 18 per cent, followed by *lack of proficiency* and *lack of confidence*. They also gave *shyness* as a reason at 12 per cent, which is way lower than the 51 per cent of the public school participants. Overall, the public school participants gave many more reasons for their unwillingness to communicate in the English language compared to the private school subjects.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study clearly show that students who studied English in private schools are more willing to communicate in English than students who studied English in public schools. The demographic findings also indicate that students who have lived abroad are more willing to communicate in English in certain situations

than those who have not. This indicates that the amount of exposure received to the use of the English language is a factor to willingness to communicate, for the probable reasons that the speakers have higher confidence in themselves in the use of the English language as well as the believe that they are proficient. Private schools in Saudi Arabia tend to use more English than public schools, as the latter must adhere to Ministry regulations pertaining to language use. At the same time, the teachers in private school would be more diversified in terms of nationality, unlike the public schools that would certainly have only locals as the teaching staff.

Since the results show unwillingness to ask questions in English during, before and after classes, this could mean two things: the first is that if the participants did ask questions, it would be in the native language, Arabic, and second, they would just avoid asking questions entirely. This means complete lack of communication. According to the Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998), the results of the current study show that two things stand out among the factors of unwillingness to communicate, the first being perceived lack of communicative competence and the second self- confidence. This causes the willingness to communicate factor to be suppressed, and thus very little L2 production resulted, at the topmost tiers. WTC, as seen earlier, refers to the possibility to engage in communication when having the choice to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). However, the public school subjects were lacking in this factor and thus the choices were also not really available.

The study was carried out to investigate if studying in a private school affected Saudi female students' WTC in English as opposed to those in public school. The results confirmed that the type of school (private) produced WTC among students enabling them to choose to use the language more. This is despite the fact that the subjects were, at time of study, English major students, and thus were expected to possess higher proficiency level and self-confidence. Further studies would be recommended to investigate why WTC is suppressed and English language not used among these students.

Acknowledgements

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