Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Willingness to Communicate among Undergraduate Iranian EFL Students with regard to their Vocabulary Knowledge

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To My Beloved Brother "Majid"

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ELT: English Language Teaching

ESL: English as a second Language

FL: Foreign Language

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

PVLT: Productive Vocabulary Levels Test

TOEFL: Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

UWL: University Word List

VLT: Vocabulary Levels Test

WTC: Willingness to Communicate

WTL: Willingness to Listen

WTR: Willingness to Read

WTS: Willingness to Speak

WTW: Willingness to Write

ABSTRACT

The present study sought to explore the level of willingness to communicate in English among EFL learners and the potential relationship it might have with their vocabulary knowledge. In other words, the purpose was to find out whether students were more willing to communicate when they possessed a high level of vocabulary knowledge. The sample of 730 participants for this study was drawn from 6 educational centers of Mashhad. The participants were asked to respond to instruments used to measure their willingness to communicate and their vocabulary knowledge. Analysis of data (in order to answer the research questions proposed in this study) was carried out via regression analysis and ANOVA. The results indicate that students' willingness to communicate in English was associated positively with their vocabulary knowledge. Also it was revealed that students' vocabulary knowledge was suitable predictor of students' willingness to communicate in English and regression models proposed in this study could account for some variability of the students' willingness to communicate. It was shown that scores on vocabulary test could account for 13 percent of the variance in students' willingness to communicate. The results further demonstrated that vocabulary accounted for more variance in students' willingness to communicate as a whole in comparison with each of its parts. Among WTC components, vocabulary had the least contribution to students' willingness to write and the most contribution to students' willingness to read. The results of ANOVA indicated that there were significant differences among the means of high, mid and low vocabulary groups, regarding students' willingness to communicate. However, the difference between high and mid groups was not statistically significant regarding students' willingness to speak and willingness to write.

Key terms: Willingness to communicate, Vocabulary knowledge, Vocabulary breadth, Productive Vocabulary knowledge

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction

In the field of language teaching, the effectiveness of teaching English is determined by students' participation (Hashimoto, 2002). But learners are different from one another in the degree to which they actually use their second language (L2) in or outside the classrooms (MacIntyre, 2007). When presented with an opportunity to use their L2, some of them choose to speak up and use any chance to communicate although they may not be proficient enough. Others choose to speak only when they are spoken to and sometimes not even then (MacCrosky & Baer, 1985). The present study was conducted to find the reason for these situations. This study seeks to explore one of the factors which seems to be influential in the quantity of learners' communication, i.e., vocabulary knowledge.

1.1. Background

Language researchers have attempted to explore what factors can determine individual differences in the success of second/foreign language learning. They have hypothesized that affective variables cause individual differences in SL/FL learning behaviors, which in turn produce individual differences in the success of language learning (Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008; MacIntyre, 2002; Politzer & Mcgroarty, 1985; Rubin, 1975). Several important affective factors, such as

personality, attitudes, motivation, self-confidence, and language anxiety, have been identified to explain individual differences in second language learning (Dewaele et al., 2008; Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lalonde, 1985; Gardner, Day & MacIntyre, 1992; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre, & Gardner, 1989; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2000).

However, it appears that none of those identified affective variables can alone explain individual differences, seemingly because those factors may be interrelated with one another in affecting individual differences in being successful in language learning. For example, less anxious L2 students appear to have more self-confidence and positive attitudes toward learning their target language, which in turn leads to more successful outcomes of second language learning In addition, less anxious FL students tend to have stronger motivation to learn their target language (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 2000; Onwuebuzie et al., 2000; Yashima, 2002). Given the interrelations among these affective variables, it is probably inappropriate to explain individual differences in second/foreign language learning based on a single affective variable. Thus, a more comprehensive theoretical model that can account for the interrelations among affective variables is needed to explain individual differences in second language learning more comprehensively (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998).

In an effort to institute a more comprehensive theoretical model to describe the interrelations among affective variables influencing individual differences in the success of language acquisition, language researchers have conceptualized and introduced the notion of "willingness-to-communicate" (WTC) (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al, 1998; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001; Yashima, 2002).

Willingness to communicate is an affective variable that has impact on L2 acquisition (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovon, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004). WTC was first introduced into the literature by McCroskey and Baer (1985) with reference to native language use which is defined as one's intention to initiate communication when he/she is free to do so. They conceptualized and introduced

WTC to first language (L1) education for the purpose of explaining individual differences in L1 communication behaviors.

Given the personality trait of WTC, McCroskey and his associates, (McCroskey, & Baer, 1985; McCroskey, & Richmond, 1987), suggested that WTC reflected a stable predisposition to talk, which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) adapted the theoretical concept of WTC to explore individual differences in L2 communication behaviors and to explain contextual influences in the choice to initiate L2 communication. MacIntyre et al. (1998) asserted that the occurrence of communication behaviors, which is the goal of language class, is contributed by learners' willingness to seek communication opportunities and by their willingness to actually engage in or initiate a communication. There are many factors that might influence learners' WTC. MacIntyre et al. (1998) insisted that one's WTC is not always stable; it changes with different person, time and situation.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) state that the fundamental goal of language instruction should be to foster WTC in the L2, and a language program that fails to induce a WTC in the L2, is simply a failure. This statement has very wide implications for L2/FL courses and programs. If the ultimate purpose of learning another language is authentic communication between persons of different languages and cultures, as MacIntyre et al. (1998) have suggested, language teaching professionals must better understand the role that WTC, a key factor underlying learners' actual use of English, plays in the process of learning English.

Vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency and provides the basis for learners' ability to speak, listen, read, and write (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001). Without an extensive vocabulary, learners often do not achieve their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, using the language in different contexts, reading, or watching television (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In their study Schonell, Meddleton, Shaw, Routh, Popham, Gill, Mackrell, and Stephens (1956) state that, knowledge of the most frequent 2000 words in English provides the bulk of the lexical resources required for basic everyday oral communication (as cited

in Schmitt et al., 2001).

The role of vocabulary has long been underestimated in EFL education (Prince, 1996; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Over years, second language vocabulary acquisition has been an increasingly interesting topic of discussion for researches, teachers, curriculum designers, theorists and others involved in second language learning (Nattinger, 1980; Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, Watts-Taffe, 2006; Hermann, 2003).

Having been in the field of English teaching as a prospective teacher and an English student for five years, the researcher was led to be in stress, facing the students' failure in using English as a means of communication. Based on personal experiences, it was postulated that one possible factor contributing to the unsuccessful phenomenon could be the students' lack of sufficient vocabulary. The existence of vocabulary is very important in language learning. It is one of the vital elements in constructing meaningful communication. It cannot be imagined how learners can speak and write well if they do not possess the words needed to convey their ideas and feelings.

The present study seeks to explore the level of willingness to communicate in English among EFL learners and the potential relationship it may have with their vocabulary knowledge, a subject which has been neglected in the area of research on WTC.

1.2. Statement of the problem

WTC has been proposed both as an individual difference variable affecting L2 acquisition and as a goal of L2 instruction by MacIntyre et al. (1998). Compared to research that has been conducted on other individual difference factors, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategy, and personality, the understanding and research on WTC concept is still comparatively limited. Given the insufficient number of studies on WTC in second language communication, most of the previous studies on WTC in L2 are carried out in a particular setting where the target language is learned and communicated as a second language rather than as a foreign language.

Oxford and Shearin (1994) suggested language learners who are learning a target

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language as a foreign language rarely have the opportunity to practice the language on a daily basis. Therefore, they lack the opportunities to use the language for pragmatic communication. On the other hand, a second language learner may have many more opportunities to use the language in a practical daily communication context because the language is used as the main vehicle of communication in settings outside the classroom.

In the same direction, MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002) argued that when examining relationships between variables influencing L2 communication behavior, it is important to take into consideration the learner's experience and engagement with the target language. Therefore, studies on WTC in foreign language communication settings are needed to enrich the theoretical foundation of the WTC research.

Few studies have been carried out on WTC in a foreign language learning context. For example Wen and Clément (2003) gave an account of linguistic, communicative, and social psychological variables that might affect the students' WTC in a Chinese setting. Yashima (2002) investigated variables underlying the WTC in Japan where English is learned as a foreign language. In her study foreign language proficiency, attitude toward the international community, confidence in FL communication, and FL learning motivation were hypothesized to affect the WTC in the FL.

However, to the best knowledge of the researcher, up to now no studies on the construct of WTC have been conducted in the context of Iran, where a large number of individuals are learning English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, WTC in learning a second/foreign language has been studied in relation to variables such as motivation, sex, attitude, anxiety and perceived competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Hashimoto, 2002;Leger &Storch, 2009; MacIntyre, et al. 2001; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). It is well known that perceived competence is predictive of language learning and communicative behaviors, and it can be considered important outcome of language learning as well (MacIntyre 2003). MacIntyre et al. (2002) talked about sex and age effects on WTC, anxiety, perceived competence, and L2 motivation among junior high school French immersion students. But what is the relationship between WTC

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and vocabulary knowledge?

Experience teaches us, and research abundantly confirms the indispensable role that words play in human communication. Without words, language for us would be reduced to a mere discourse of iconic gestures and symbols. This dependency on the lexicon requires that even a novice communicator in a language build up a repertoire of thousands of words. (Herman, 2003)

Second or foreign language teachers can come across all kinds of students. Some students do badly in their vocabulary tests although they are very active in communicating with teachers and other students in class. On the other hand, some students who are quiet in class do reasonably well in vocabulary tests. Why do some students like to communicate more while others tend to be quiet? Do a student's good results in vocabulary test mean higher degree in willingness to communicate? According to Ediger (2002), a person can communicate more accurately by possessing a rich vocabulary. Wide vocabulary is essential for students to be able to express themselves. Vermeer (1992, as cited in Prince, 1996), stated that effective communication relies less upon the mastery of grammatical rules than on possession of an adequate and appropriate vocabulary.

Although there have been some studies examining relationships between vocabulary and skills, (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Templin, 1995; Horst, 2005; Webb, 2005), to the researcher's knowledge no studies have focused specifically and systematically on associations between vocabulary knowledge and WTC.

1.3. Significance of the study

In the present study the researcher attempts to investigate the possible relationship between Iranian students' willingness to communicate and their vocabulary knowledge. If a relationship is verified, teaching methods should be altered in a direction in which vocabulary is more emphasized.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that WTC is the final step in preparing L2 students for L2 use: That is, more willing-to-communicate students can be more successful in

second or foreign language learning. Due to the importance of WTC, MacIntyre et al. (1998) argue that it is essential for L2 educators to design L2 teaching pedagogy and programs that can enhance L2 students' WTC. According to Kang (2005):

> When we create WTC in L2 learners, it is expected that we can produce more active language learners. First, L2 learners with a high WTC are more likely to use L2 in authentic communication and facilitate language learning. Second, they can function as autonomous learners, making independent efforts to learn the language through communication, without teachers' help. Third, they can extend their learning opportunities, becoming involved in learning activities not only inside, but also outside classrooms (p.278).

The role of the vocabulary in language learning and communication is pointed out by psychologists, linguists and language teachers (Ediger, 2002; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). According to Seal (cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991, p.296), words are perceived as the building blocks upon which knowledge of the second language can be built. In the same direction, on the importance of vocabulary, Sener (2005) stated that without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.

So, on the one hand WTC has a crucial role in second language acquisition and researchers agree that L2 students who are more active with L2 use will have more potential to develop L2 communication competence (MacIntyre, et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 1999; Yashima, 2002; Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre, et al., 2003). On the other hand, vocabulary has been regarded as a vital component of communicative language ability and as a good indicator of second language proficiency (Nattinger, 1980; Ediger, 1999; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Ediger, 2002; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Sener, 2005). If an association can be verified between these two variables the resultant implication can be beneficial to our students, teachers and educational system. This study would enlighten foreign language teachers, teacher trainers, and material designers in terms of existence of an important variable that affects students' language use i.e. WTC. Moreover it would advise language teachers to improve their teaching methods and also guide material designers to modify their curriculum designs in terms of emphasis they may put on the importance of vocabulary knowledge. In other words, the result can lead to