

**IN HIS NAME**



*Ferdowsi University of Mashhad*

***Willingness to Communicate with Regard to  
Psychological Well-Being: The Case of  
Undergraduate Iranian Students Majoring in  
English Language***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this thesis was to evaluate Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' willingness to communicate and its relation to the learners' level of psychological well-being. In fact, this study was an attempt to explore whether students were more willing to communicate in English when they were in a better state of psychological well-being. A total of 100 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in English Teaching/Literature participated in this study. As for the instruments, two questionnaires of willingness to communicate and psychological well-being were used to collect the data. The data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis), Pearson correlation coefficient, T-test, and ANOVA. The results revealed that students' willingness to communicate in English was associated positively with their level of psychological well-being. The more they were psychologically well-being, the more they were willing to communicate in English. Among WTC components, psychological well-being had the most contribution to students' willingness to speak and the least contribution to students' willingness to listen. And among six psychological well-being components, willingness to speak well correlated with autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self acceptance. The study further expressed whether there were any significant differences between females and males with respect to WTC and psychological well-being. Besides, the comparison was made among the participants of different universities with respect to WTC. The results indicated no significant differences. The findings of this thesis led to some useful suggestions and pedagogical implications.

**Keywords:** Willingness to communicate, psychological well-being, individual differences

## Table of Contents

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Page</b>
Acknowledgements.....	I
Table of Contents.....	II
List of Tables.....	IV
List of Figures.....	VI
List of Abbreviations.....	VII
Abstract and Keywords.....	VIII
<b>1. Introduction</b>	
1.1. Background.....	2
1.2. Statement of the Problem.....	5
1.3. Significance of the Study.....	5
1.4. Purpose of the Study.....	6
1.4.1. Research Questions.....	7
1.4.2. Research Hypotheses.....	7
1.5. Definition of Key Terms.....	8
1.6. Limitations of the Study.....	8
<b>2. Review of Related Literature</b>	
2.1. Theoretical Framework.....	11
2.1.1. WTC in First Language.....	11
2.1.2. WTC in L2 and EFL.....	13
2.1.3. CLT.....	15
2.2. Empirical Framework.....	18
2.2.1. WTC in L1 and L2 Context.....	18
2.2.2. WTC in EFL Context.....	23

2.3. Psychological Well-being.....	27
2.3.1. Theoretical Background.....	27
2.3.2. Empirical Background.....	30
<b>3. Methodology</b>	
3.1. Participants and Setting.....	35
3.2. Instrumentation.....	36
3.2.1. Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire.....	36
3.2.2. Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-being.....	37
3.3. Procedure.....	40
3.3.1. Data Collection.....	40
3.3.2. Data Analysis.....	41
<b>4. Analysis of the Results</b>	
4.1. Descriptive Statistics .....	43
4.2. Internal Consistency.....	48
4.3. Correlations.....	49
4.4. Variability due to Gender.....	53
4.4.1. WTC and Gender.....	53
4.4.2. Psychological Well-being and Gender.....	56
4.5. Variability Due to Universities.....	60
<b>5. Conclusion, Discussion, and Pedagogical Implications</b>	
5.1. Findings.....	63
5.2. Applications and Implications.....	66
5.3. Suggestions for Further Research.....	69
<b>References.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
A. Willingness to Communicate Scale.....	82
B. Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-being .....	84

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1. Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Psychological Well-Being.....	28
Table 3.1. Subjects' demographic makeup.....	35
Table 4.1. Descriptive Statistics for willingness to communicate.....	44
Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics for psychological well-being.....	46
Table 4.3. Cronbach's $\alpha$ for all the subscales.....	48
Table 4.4. Correlation between willingness to communicate and total psychological Well-being.....	49
Table 4.5. Correlations between willingness to communicate for speaking and total psychological well-being.....	50
Table 4.6. Correlations between willingness to communicate for reading and total psychological well-being.....	50
Table 4.7. Correlations between willingness to communicate for writing and total psychological well-being.....	51
Table 4.8. Correlations between willingness to communicate for listening and total psychological well-being.....	51
Table 4.9. Correlations between WTC for reading and psychological well-being subscales.....	52
Table 4.10. Correlations between WTC for listening and psychological well-being subscales.....	52
Table 4.11. Correlations between WTC for speaking and psychological well-being Subscales.....	53

Table 4.12 Correlations between WTC for writing and psychological well-being.....	53
Table 4.13.Independent Samples Test for total willingness to communicate.....	54
Table 4.14. Independent Samples Test for willingness to communicate for Speaking.....	54
Table 4.15. Independent Samples Test for willingness to communicate for Reading.....	55
Table 4.16. Independent Samples Test for willingness to communicate for Writing.....	55
Table 4.17. Independent Samples Test for willingness to communicate for Listening.....	56
Table4.18. Independent Samples T-test for total psychological well-being.....	57
Table 4.19. Independent Samples T-test for autonomy.....	57
Table 4.20. Independent Samples T-test for environmental mastery.....	58
Table 4.21. Independent Samples T-test for personal growth.....	58
Table 4.22. Independent Samples T-test for positive relations.....	59
Table 4.23. Independent Samples T-test for purpose in life.....	59
Table 4.24. Independent Samples T-test for self-acceptance.....	60
Table 4.25. results of one-way ANOVA .....	61
Table 4.26. results of one-way ANOVA.....	61



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1. Mean of the WTC in different modes.....	45
Figure 4.2. Mean of the psychological well-being subscales.....	47

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AUM: Azad University of Mashhad

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ELT: English Language Teaching

ESL: English as a Second Language

FUM: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

ID: Individual differences

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

PWB: Psychological Well-being

RPWB: Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-being

TUM: Tabaran University of Mashhad

WTC: Willingness to Communicate

WTL: Willingness to Listen

WTR: Willingness to Read

WTS: Willingness to Speak

WTW: Willingness to Write

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**INTRODUCTION**

## **1.0. Introduction**

One of the most important ways in which social sciences differ from natural sciences is the existence of individual differences. According to Dornyei (2005), the tension between the individual and the collective also appears in language studies. Dornyei (2005) defines IDs as “enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree” (p.4). These IDs are active in domains such as learning styles and rates and strengths and weaknesses in the L2 acquisition process. As MacCrosky and Baer (1985) mentioned, in a given situation some L2 students seek any chance or opportunity to speak up even if they are not proficient enough to communicate while others prefer to remain silent and not to speak till they are addressed to. For these reasons, the current study tries to explore the contributory role of psychological well-being in the degree of Iranian EFL students' willingness to communicate.

## **1.1. Background**

IDs have been a major point of research in L2 studies and “one of the most thoroughly studied psychological aspects of SLA” (Dornyei, 2005, p. 6). Studies (Hernandez, 2008; MacIntyre & Chaos, 1996; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 2000; Taguchi, 2006) have been conducted to find the role of IDs in second language proficiency.

According to Ellis (2008), the study of IDs in SLA research seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways do language learners differ? What effects do these differences have on learning outcomes? How do learner factors interact with instruction in determining learning outcomes?

In three surveys (Dornyei, 2005; Robinson, 2002; Skehan, 1989) a number of factors were listed as influencing individual learner differences in language learning. For the first time, Dornyei (2005) categorized willingness to communicate as part of individual learner differences, along with personality, language aptitude, motivation, learning and cognitive styles, language learning strategies, anxiety, creativity, self-esteem and learner beliefs. Ellis (2004) called willingness to communicate as a latecomer to the field of second and foreign language learning. In Ellis's (2004) categorization, important factors for individual differences in L2 learning were classified under four groups namely, abilities, propensities, learner cognitions about L2 learning and learner actions. Willingness to communicate fell into the second category.

The current communicative approaches to second and foreign language instruction emphasize the importance of learners using the L2 in oral and written tasks. These approaches to instruction are based on the idea that performance develops and improves learners' competence in L2. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Swain's (2000) Output Hypothesis support this idea. Therefore, speaking more in class facilitates the learning process and leads to higher language proficiency. According to Crookes and Schmidt (1991) language teachers wish to see a language student who seeks out L2 communication and is willing to communicate when the opportunities arise, whether inside or outside the classroom. Seeking opportunities to communicate would greatly increase the chances for intercultural contact (Clement, 1986), L2 communication practice (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) and comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003).

Willingness to communicate has attracted much attention recently and is defined as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice"

(MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Conrad, 2001, p.369). In MacIntyre's research, WTC is a complex construct, influenced by a number of other individual difference factors such as 'communication anxiety', 'perceived communication competence' and 'perceived behavioural control'. MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1998) presented a schematic model of the WTC construct showing multiple layers of variables that are part of WTC. In this model, WTC is the immediate antecedent of communication behavior. According to Ellis (2008), WTC is very important to communicate language teaching. Learners who have a high degree of willingness to communicate may benefit more from this approach than others. Therefore, WTC is a featured area in second or foreign language speaking and communication.

Well-being is a dynamic concept that includes subjective, social, and psychological dimensions as well as health-related behaviors (Seifert, 2005). Psychological well-being is an essential concept in positive psychology. *It* is a model of well-being widely advocated by a psychology professor called Carol Ryff. Ryff analyzed many various approaches to happiness in different sub-fields of psychology and came to the conclusion that well-being should be seen as consisting of six components. These components are: *self-acceptance* (positive evaluation of oneself and one's life), *personal growth*, *purpose in life*, *positive relations with others*, *environmental mastery* (the capacity to effectively manage one's life and the surrounding environment) and *autonomy*. Although the construct has been investigated in many areas, such as medicine, spousal life, work performance, etc. it has rarely been investigated in the field of education and particularly, language learning.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

The construct of “psychological well-being” is new to the field of foreign language learning. Moreover, compared to research that has been conducted on other factors regarding individual differences, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategy, working memory, and personality, the understanding and the scholarship that have been built up on WTC concept are still limited. To the researcher’s knowledge, there has been no study which examines the relationship between willingness to communicate and psychological well-being in foreign language students. Thus, there is a real research gap in this respect.

As Cohen and Norst (1989) mention, research shows that “there is something fundamentally different about learning a language, compared to learning another skill or gaining other knowledge, namely, that language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other” (p.61). Therefore, psychological issues play a major role in foreign language acquisition. For instance, many teachers complain about students’ reticence and lack of participation in conversation classes. It stands to reason that psychological factors are at play here and one cannot blame it all on lack of English proficiency.

## **1.3. Significance of the Study**

The results of this study can shed light on the role of students’ psychological well-being in their willingness to communicate in English. The study of individual differences has been a highlighted research area in second/foreign language learning studies. Individuals differ in both the way they learn a second language and the outcome they achieve through this process (Williams, & Burden, 1997). Language teachers should identify and pay special attention to these individual differences among their students in order to maximize the efficiency of their instruction (Oxford, & Ehrman, 1993). Moreover, the significance of cultivating communicative competence in second or foreign language learners has been emphasized in modern

language teaching. Teacher-student and student-student interactions have become more and more important and as put by Brown (2001), language classrooms have become “increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation and meaningful tasks” (p. 42). Thus, students’ willingness to communicate in order to learn and the effect of their psychological characteristics cannot be overlooked.

The results of this study may help language teachers improve their teaching methods and curriculum design. On the other hand, because students who are learning English as a foreign language usually lack authentic language communication opportunities, a better understanding of students’ willingness to communicate in English may help language teachers to realize and implement instructional strategies that could create more opportunities to promote communication and student engagement, and as a result, facilitate students’ English learning and acquisition.

#### **1.4. Purpose of the Study**

This study was carried out to find out the level of WTC and psychological well-being among Iranian undergraduate EFL students and examine if there is any relationship between willingness to communicate and psychological well-being. In other words, to investigate whether EFL students are more willing to communicate for speaking, reading, listening, and writing in English when they are in a better state of psychological well-being.



### **1.4.1. Research questions**

1. What is the level of willingness to communicate of English-major students?
2. What is the level of psychological well-being of English-major students?
3. Is there any significant relationship between willingness to communicate and psychological well-being of English-major students?
4. Is there any significant difference between males and females with respect to WTC?
5. Is there any significant difference between males and females with respect to the level of psychological well-being?
6. Are there any significant differences between 3 groups of students studying at 3 different universities with respect to WTC?

### **1.4.2. Research Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between willingness to communicate and psychological well-being among Iranian university students majoring in English.
2. There is no significant difference between males and females with respect to WTC.
3. There is no significant difference between males and females with respect to the level of psychological well-being.
4. There are no significant differences between 3 groups of students studying at 3 different universities with respect to WTC

## **1.5. Definition of Key Terms**

**Individual differences (IDs):** “Enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree” (Dornyei, 2005, p.4).

**Willingness to communicate (WTC):** Learners’ willingness to engage in communication in the four language skills. “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using an L2” (McIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels, 1998, p. 547).

**Psychological well-being:** A model of well-being developed by Ryff (1989), consisting of six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.

## **1.6. Limitations of the Study**

The present study faces some limitations and delimitations which can be considered in future studies. First of all, this study was only conducted in Mashhad and in a formal university setting. Future studies could be done in the informal context of language institutes or other formal settings such as secondary schools.

The second limitation is related to the number and level of participants, who were 100 freshman students studying at the B.A. level at university. By taking them into consideration, the results cannot be generalized to all university students. Therefore, other similar studies could be done with students of other levels and more participants in order to collect a more representative sample.

The third limitation is the limitation of variables such as proficiency level of students that could not be controlled since intact group design was used in the current study.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**