

Relationships between Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate, Oral Proficiency, Autonomy, and Ambiguity Tolerance

Ali Asghar Naderifar¹, Rajab Esfandiari² (corresponding author)

¹Department of Management, Qazvin Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran. E-mail: alinadi91@yahoo.com

²Assistant professor at Imam Khomeini International University, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Qazvin, Iran. E-mail: esfandiari@hum.ikiu.ac.ir

Abstract

The present study investigated the relationships between willingness to communicate (WTC), oral proficiency (OP), ambiguity tolerance (AT), and learner autonomy (LA). The study also investigated whether WTC, AT, LA would predict OP. To those ends, two hundred language learners at Khavaran Cultural Center in Tehran were given three questionnaires, a placement test, and the Preliminary English Test. Convenience sampling was used to select participants in this study, and IBM SPSS STATISTICS (version 21) was run to analyze the data. The results of statistical analyses indicated that there was a strong, positive correlation between WTC and OP. However, the results revealed that there was no statistically significant correlation between WTC and AT. On the other hand, the findings showed that there was a positive statistically significant relationship between WTC and LA. The findings also revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between OP and AT. However, a positive statistically significant relationship between OP and LA was found. Finally, the results of standard multiple regression showed that WTC was a statistically significant predictor of OP. Implications for language teachers and material developers are discussed.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, Learner Autonomy, Ambiguity Tolerance, Oral Proficiency.

1. Introduction

According to McCroskey (1992), there is still a question as to what potential effects/relations willingness to communicate has on/with L2 learning. Based on the findings of some studies (e.g. Burgoon, 1976; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982), the extent to which learners are willing to communicate is impacted by multiple factors, including apprehension of speaking, having no self-esteem, language-related anxiety, gender, age, empathy, risk taking etc. MacIntyre et al. (2002) identified learners' gender and age as two factors influencing WTC. Later, they investigated the impact of other variables on learners' WTS (e.g. apprehension, perceived competence, and L2 motivation). In the same vein, Burgoon (1976) discussed the unwillingness to communicate as a long-term orientation to avoid and/or devalue oral communication. Burgoon (1976) took into account the following two factors to determine respectively how likely an individual is to take part in communication and whether or not a person finds communication rewarding: approach-avoidance and reward.

Concerning the first concept of WTC, McCroskey and Richmond (1982) examined the potential effect of shyness on individuals' WTC. Later, Leary (1983) noted that shyness as a concept of social anxiety consists of a discomforting feeling intrinsically experienced by the individual as well as the behavior that is extrinsically observable. McCroskey and Richmond (1982) characterized shyness as one's orientation to be timid, reticent, and most specifically, wordless. This study indicated that the shyness measurement scale could predict behavioral communication based on the amount of talk.

A lot of studies conducted on learner autonomy have sought to shed light on the extent of autonomy and responsibility learners enjoy (e.g., Chan, 2003; Little, 1991). Besides, a group of studies have examined the relationship between autonomy and language skills (e.g., Dafei, 2007; Haghi, 2009). According to Balçıkanlı (2010), the assumption underlying learner's autonomy is that if individuals are provided with an opportunity to make decision regarding their own language competence, they are more likely to display eagerness about learning. This makes learning more focused and purposeful.

Based on the above-mentioned findings, it can be concluded that previous studies have not examined the correlation, whatsoever, between each pair of WTC and ambiguity tolerance and WTC and autonomy. Therefore, more studies should be conducted to find if there is any relationship between the above mentioned variables. Moreover, although a rather large number of studies have been conducted on oral proficiency, a thorough picture has not been painted in this regard. Therefore, this study aims to investigate any possible relationship between oral proficiency, ambiguity tolerance, autonomy, and willingness to communicate.

1.1. Research Questions

The present study provides answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their oral proficiency?
2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their ambiguity tolerance?

3. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their autonomy?
4. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance?
5. Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy?
6. From among WTC, learner autonomy, and tolerance of ambiguity, which one is the best predictor of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency?

1.2. Research Hypotheses

In response to the above mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses are stated:

1. There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their oral proficiency.
2. There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their ambiguity tolerance.
3. There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their autonomy.
4. There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance.
5. There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy.
6. None of the WTC, learner autonomy, and tolerance of ambiguity is the best predictor of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Willingness to Communicate

It was Burgoon (1976) who defined the individual's lack of willingness to engage in communication as a construct related to the tendency to refrain from and/or attribute a low level of value to communicate orally with other people. A study carried out by Mortensen, Arntson and Lustig (1977) contributed to the deeper examination of this tendency towards communication behavior. The results of the study reported that the extent of an individual's communication across various communication settings was consistent. For the first time, McCroskey and Richmond (1985) put forth the notion of willingness to communicate (WTC) while MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, (1998) initiated the notion of effectiveness of WTC in the context of L2 learning. They asserted that WTC is concerned with and confined to particular circumstances and situations. In addition to its use in circumstance where verbal or written communication takes place, the idea of WTC concerns situations where the individual implies the willingness to take part in communication (MacIntyre et al. 1998) although actual communication does not take place.

Recently, the area of second language teaching and learning has put much emphasis on the meaningful communication (Brown, 2007). Therefore, the concept of an individual's willingness

to communicate has come to be considered more essential than ever in the field of L2 learning studies (Matsuoka & Evans, 2005).

Yousefi and Kasaian (2014) reiterate that willingness to communicate is considered one of the variables that seem to impact the learners' speaking ability considerably. As Munezane (2015) points out, WTC in the context of the L2 is generally expected to lead to more frequent use of the L2 both inside and outside the classroom. This tendency plays an essential role in enhancing learners' communicative performance. According to Zarrinabadi (2014), the previous research carried out on WTC shows that teachers' attitude, advocacy, and teaching style may influence learners' willingness to communicate.

As mentioned by Pawlak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015), empirical research conducted on second language learners' willingness to communicate may play an important role in uncovering yet another important dimension of the jigsaw of variables underlying L2 acquisition. The pedagogical implications of studies on willingness to speak in the context of foreign language are supported by the fact that being able to express the intended meaning in L2 is usually considered the main goal of L2 learning.

Based on the findings of studies (Cao & Philip, 2006; Kang, 2005), the way in which learners perceive topic and second language, the types of task, addressee' familiarity as well as the interaction between them impact the individual' willingness to engage in communication in second language classrooms. Cao and Philip's (2006) study reported that the effect of group size and the students' familiarity with the occurrence of WTC could be explained with respect to the situational nature of WTC. Kang (2005) asserts that 12 teachers should establish a friendly atmosphere for learners with the aim of minimizing their apprehension of making mistakes. This challenge can be ameliorated by paying thorough attention to what learners are saying as well as their smiling and dynamic response. Recently, a study carried out by Zarrinabadi (2014) showed that teachers can influence the learners' WTC and their participation in classroom activities through delegating more authority to students to negotiate topics. They can concentrate on students' knowledge to know errors more deeply. In another study, Khaki (2013) explored the possible relationship between autonomy and WTC among Iranian EFL learners. The participants of the study were 77 advanced English learners. The results of statistical analysis indicated that there was a positive, strong correlation between learners' autonomy and WTC.

2.2. Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy in the area of second language learning results from a study conducted by Holec's (1981) on lifelong language learning. Holec characterizes learner's autonomy as the individual' ability and responsibility to take on his/her own learning. As Benson (2010) says, the focal concept of autonomy involves the power of control over learning regarding the following: learning situations (Dickinson, 1987), social situation (Benson, 1997), cognitive/psychological circumstances (Little, 1991), and political-critical context (Oxford, 2003). Generally, scholars (Benson, 2010; Smith & Ushioda, 2009) have investigated autonomy as a complex, socially-mediated, learner-oriented construct.

Outside the classroom, learners can experience self-directed, independent learning in an "uncontrolled environment" (e.g. in the park or in other places such as cinemas) while teachers have no control (Miller, 2007). Holec (1981) described autonomy as the learners' ability to take on the responsibility for one's own learning. This characterization is usually referenced by the

researchers in their discussions of learner autonomy. As Boud (1988) and Smith (2008) point out, the attention to the personal autonomy roots in political and moral reasons in Ancient Greece when autonomy was viewed as a human right. Actually, the people possessing autonomy were more self-ruling and self-governing, breaking free from the control and shackles of others. Some studies are conducted to indicate how autonomy is related to the variables including critical thinking capability, visual and auditory learning styles, self-efficacy etc. The findings of a study conducted by Haghi (2009) showed a strong relationship between learners' self-efficacy and autonomy.

The findings of a study carried out by Sheykhi Behdani (2011) showed that Iranian EFL learners' autonomy is significantly related with critical thinking ability. In the same vein, the outcome of the study done by Nematipour (2012) indicated that the learner autonomy is significantly concerned with visual and auditory learning styles.

The findings of Kashefian Naeeni and Riazi's (2011) study revealed that age does not influence students' autonomy while professional situation and marital status impact their autonomy. In their study, Nematipour (2012) reported that females are not significantly different from males when it comes to autonomy level and learning style. Since the concept of autonomy in educational context in general and ELT contexts, in particular, is viewed as an important factor, some researchers in the Iranian context of ELT have focused on the issue in combination with some other variables.

According to Smith (2008), L2 instructors accept the essential role of learner autonomy in learning L2. Based on the findings of a study carried out by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), the majority of the participants reported that learner autonomy influenced their language learning positively, providing them with increased capability to make decisions.

2.3. Ambiguity Tolerance

L2 instructors should take into account diverse learner variables, which impact the learners' performance (Brown, 1994). Brown maintains that knowledge of these variables will allow the instructors and educators to choose the methods and techniques that lead to the best learning outcomes. One of these variables is ambiguity tolerance, which is concerned with a type of individuals' personality influencing different aspects of their life, e.g. their learning and proficiency (Ely, 1989).

Kazamina (1999) notes that the attributes including novelty, complexity, insolubility, and limited structure are the main features of ambiguity. Therefore, as Budner (1962) maintains, ambiguous state implies no or very few cues, resulting in poor reorganization or classification by an individual. Budner (1962) offers the following categorizes of ambiguous circumstances: (1) new, (2) complex, and (3) contradictory. As a result, as Erten and Topkaya (2009) commented, ambiguity tolerance makes important contribution to various aspects of L2 performance as well as learners' attitude to their learning.

Although there is ambiguity in learning any subject, L2 learning is particularly concerned with the emergence of different kinds of ambiguity, both negative and positive. Put it the other way, to some learners, ambiguity is very exciting and favorable while others experience it extremely disappointingly and unpleasantly.

The findings of a study conducted by Erten and Topkaya (2009) on Turkish L2 learners indicated that despite the EFL learners' low level of ambiguity tolerance, there was a significant

correlation between the participants' self-perceived accomplishment in second language reading comprehension and their strategy training. Erten and Topkaya came to the conclusion that there is a direct correlation between ambiguity tolerance and reading performance.

Keshavarz and Assar (2009) note that it is more likely for the learners with high tolerance ambiguity to be successful in reading comprehension than those with lower level. This is because the former use their metacognitive strategies, reporting higher perceived application of metacognitive reading strategies.

Kamran and Maftoon (2012) conducted a study on ambiguity tolerance in Iran, with the results showing significant correlation between L2 learners' level of ambiguity tolerance and their reading comprehension scores. In the same vein, a study carried out by Moallemi Sharabiani (2011) indicated a significant relationship between the L2 learners' level of ambiguity tolerance and their ability to guess meaning of unknown words. Finally, Karbalaee Kamran's (2012) study indicated no noticeable relationship between learners' ambiguity tolerance and their overall reading strategy use. Moreover, it yielded no statistically significant correlation between participants' tolerance of ambiguity and the variables such as their global use, problem solving, and support subscales of reading strategy, either.

An investigation done by Soleimani (2009) studied the effect of diverse ambiguity levels on L2 learners' listening performance. The results indicated that the participants with an average level of ambiguity tolerance display better performance on their listening. Similarly, Erten and Topkaya (2009) and Marzban, Barati and Moinzadeh (2012) reported a significant difference between boys and girls when it comes to their tolerance of ambiguity. In their study, girls outperformed the boys. However, some studies (Kissau, 2006; Kamran, 2011) have yielded no significant difference between boys and girls regarding their ambiguity tolerance.

2.4. Oral Proficiency

Bygate (1987) claims that speaking is related to two types of motor-perceptive skills and interaction skills. The first one is concerned with the sound and structure of language while the latter is related to linguistic choices for successful communication. According to Bygate, the review of literature reveals the following two main approaches to the definition of speaking:

- top-down approach
- bottom-up approach

Discussing the bottom-up position, Bygate emphasizes that the traditional approach to speaking regards speaking as the production of auditory signals to make differential verbal reactions in the listener.

Actually, it emphasizes the motor perceptive skills. In this context, speaking was characterized as an individual's efforts to piece together sounds systematically to produce meaningful utterances. This is possible by using principles specific to the target language. Audio-lingualism used this approach extensively. When it comes to teaching speaking, the bottom-up approach puts emphasis on initiating with the smallest units and moving on with gaining mastery over vocabulary and eventually discourse (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001).

Shin (2005) believes that the researchers have not come to an agreement over the way in which speaking proficiency can be accurately defined. Therefore, it is difficult to make generalizations about this construct. A large number of studies carried out on speaking proficiency have examined the relationships between the linguistic elements in speech samples

and human ratings of holistic speaking proficiency rated against a set of criteria (Crossley & McNamara, 2013). Zhou (2015) maintains that many researchers (e.g. Peng & Woodrow 2010; Pomerantz, 2001; Zarrinabadi, 2014) have investigated learners' levels of participation in EFL classrooms, aiming to find the influences preventing learners' active engagement in oral L2 activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Initially, two hundred Iranian language learners who studied English as a foreign language at intermediate level at Khavaran Cultural Center in Tehran participated in this study; however, three of the participants were removed because of being outliers. The participants for this study were both male and female and selected through convenience sampling. Their age ranged from 13 to 30. Table 1 details the information on the gender.

Table 1
Gender Breakdown of Language Learners

Gender	N	Percent
Male	107	54.3
Female	90	45.7
Total	197	100

3.2. Research Design

The researchers adopted a correlational design in this study. In fact, in all research questions of this study, the main purpose was to find correlation between the variables. More specifically, the study applied a descriptive research design in the sense that there was no manipulation of the variables in the research context. The participants were chosen based on convenience sampling due to availability and manageability reasons.

3.3. Instruments

In this research, four questionnaires were utilized to collect data as follows:

3.3.1. WTC Questionnaire

To measure learners' WTC levels, a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre, Baker Clement, and Conrod (2001) was distributed among the participants. The questionnaire includes 25 items relevant to the factors contributing to WTC in learning a second language. The questionnaire follows a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to

strongly agree (5). The learners were asked to indicate their answers to the items across the continuum. Cronbach's alpha for WTC in this study turned out to be .77.

3.3.2. Oral Proficiency Test

In order to measure students' speaking ability, the Preliminary English Test (PET) developed by Quintana (2011) was used. This test includes seven open-ended items; which language learners were required to answer during an interview. The interview lasted for about three minutes. The audio taped interviews were rated using a General Mark Scheme for Speaking (GMSS). This scheme is a holistic rating scale on 6 bands, with descriptors for each band. Cronbach's alpha for GMSS in this study turned out to be .83.

3.3.3. Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS)

To measure the degree of participants' ambiguity tolerance, the researchers utilized the second language tolerance of ambiguity scale (SLTAS) developed by Ely (1995). The SLTAS questionnaire has 12 items and the responses are in a Likert-scale format with a set of four items including strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Cronbach's alpha for ambiguity tolerance in this study turned out to be .83.

3.3.4. Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LA)

The Participants' autonomy was measured with a 21-item questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004). Cronbach's alpha obtained from piloting this questionnaire to 50 participants turned to be .49; Items 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, and 21 were deleted because they did not measure learner autonomy. The revised questionnaire was piloted again, and this time Cronbach's alpha for LA in this study turned out to be .70.

3.3.5. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

As a proficiency test, OPT contains 100 items which test the English learners' proficiency through grammatical items in 45 minutes. The participants' performance was measured through their scores which showed their level of language proficiency from beginners to upper-intermediate level as follows:

- 00-20 Below Elementary
- 21-35 Elementary
- 36-60 Pre-intermediate
- 61-85 Intermediate
- 86-100 Upper Intermediate

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

In order to study the null hypotheses of this research, and to investigate any significant relationship among variables, the study was conducted at Khavaran Cultural Center in Tehran. Initially, the Oxford placement test (OPT) was administered to all participants at Khavaran Cultural Center, and 200 participants whose scores fell within the range of 61 to 85 were selected as intermediate participants of this study. In fact, OPT was administered in order to guarantee the

homogeneity of the participants of this study and determine their level of proficiency. The three different kinds of questionnaires were administered to all language learners in three different days in order to obviate any possibility of boredom and tiredness among them. The researchers attempted to provide the participants with full clarification of the questionnaire items and relevant instructions regarding the procedures of administration in both forms of language, i.e. L1 and L2. In addition, they were given enough time (i.e., 30 min for each questionnaire) to try all the items. It is really important to mention that all instruments had to be filled out accurately and completely since they were used for scoring and analysis. To test oral proficiency on PET, normally every student was asked several personal questions by the interviewer. 200 interview results were scored by two raters based on GMSS. Pearson correlation for these two raters was .73, which is a satisfactory level of reliability coefficient. Finally, the researchers collected all data, computed and reported the mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean of the scores obtained on the all instruments. Cronbach's Alpha was applied in order to measure the reliability of all instruments.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The information on the main variables of this study is shown in Table 2 including mean values, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum values.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TAT	13	46	29.72	6.66
TWTC	72	121	97.40	9.50
TLA	39	75	55.67	7.14
TOP	6	13.5	9.72	1.26

Note. TAT = Total Ambiguity Tolerance; TWTC= Total Willingness to Communicate; TLT= Total Learner Autonomy; TOP= Total Oral Proficiency; N = 197

4.2. Investigation of Research Questions

4.2.1. Investigation of the First Research Question

The first research question of the present research is concerned with whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their oral proficiency. Using IBM SPSS, Pearson correlation was run. Table 3 presents the correlation coefficient.

Table 3
Correlation between TWT and TOP

		TWTC	TOP
TWTC	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.500*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	197	197

*, $p < 0.01$

Regarding Table 3, there is a strong, positive correlation between Learners' willingness to communicate and their oral proficiency ($r = 0.500$, $n = 197$, $p = 0.000$, $r^2 = 0.25$). Therefore, the first null hypothesis of the present study is rejected, implying that the more willing they are to communicate, the more orally proficient they are and vice versa.

4.2.2. Investigation of the Second Research Question

The second research question was aimed at establishing whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their ambiguity tolerance. Using IBM SPSS, Pearson correlation was run. The results are given in Table 4.

According to Table 4, there is no statistically significant correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and their ambiguity tolerance ($r = 0.013$, $n = 197$, $p = 0.856$). Therefore, the second null hypothesis of the present study is confirmed, suggesting that learners' willingness to communicate and their ambiguity tolerance are not related to each other.

Table 4
Correlation between TWTC and TAT

		TWTC	TAT
TWTC	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.013
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.856
	N	197	197

*, $P > .05$

4.2.3. Investigation of the Third Research Question

The third research question asked whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their autonomy. Using IBM SPSS, Pearson correlation was run. Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5
Correlation between TWTC and TLA

	TWTC	TLA
TWTC Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.547*
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
N	197	197

*, $P < 0.01$

Based on the results shown in Table 5, there is a statistically positive significant relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their autonomy ($r = 0.547$, $n = 197$, $p = .000$, $r^2 = 0.299$). Therefore, the third null hypothesis of the study is rejected, suggesting that the more willing language learners are to communicate, the more autonomous they are, and vice versa.

4.2.4. Investigation of the Fourth Research Question

The fourth research question asked whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance. Using IBM SPSS, Pearson correlation was run. Table 6 shows the results.

Based on the results shown in Table 6, there is no statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance ($r = 0.054$, $n = 197$, $p = 0.452$). Therefore, the fourth null hypothesis of the study is confirmed, suggesting that learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance are not related to each other.

Table 6
Correlation between TOP and TAT

	TOP	TAT
TOP Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.054
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.452
N	197	197

*, $P > 0.05$

4.2.5. Investigation of the Fifth Research Question

The fifth research question was aimed at establishing whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. Using IBM SPSS, Pearson correlation was run. Table 7 shows the results.

Based on the results shown in Table 7, there is a moderate, positive relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy ($r = 0.328^*$, $n = 197$, $p = .000$, $r^2 = 0.107$). Therefore, the fifth null hypothesis of the study is rejected, suggesting that Learners' oral proficiency and Learners' autonomy are positively related to each other.

Table 7
Correlation between TOP and TLA

	TOP	TLA
TOP Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.328*
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
N	197	197

*, $P < 0.01$

4.2.6. Investigation of the Sixth Research Question

The sixth research question asked which one of variables (WTC, learner autonomy, and tolerance of ambiguity) is the best predictor of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency. To answer the last research question, a standard multiple regression was run.

Based on Table 8, R square value is 0.255. Therefore, 25.5 percent of variance in oral proficiency (dependent variable) is explained by the model.

Table 8
Model summary for predictors

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.505	0.255	0.245	1.099

According to the ANOVA test in Table 9, the results show that the predictive power of the model is statistically significant ($F_{(3,193)} = 22.039, p < 0.001$).

Table 9
ANOVA test for Predictors

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	79.886	3	26.629	22.039	0.000
Residual	233.196	193	1.208		
Total	313.08	196			

In Table 10, the largest beta (0.457) value belongs to willingness to communicate, demonstrating that this factor makes the strongest contribution to explaining oral proficiency among the others. The researchers checked the Sig value for each independent variable. If it was less than 0.05, the variable was considered to make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable. According to the results, only WTC makes statistically significant contribution to the prediction of oral proficiency. It can be concluded that WTC is a statistically significant predictor of oral proficiency, while AT and LA are not.

Table 10
Coefficients for Predictors

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig
1 Constant	2.794	0.898		3.111	0.002
AT	0.008	0.012	0.045	0.719	0.473
WTC	0.061	0.010	0.457	6.146	0.000
LA	0.014	0.013	0.077	1.032	0.304

Dependent variable (Predicted variable): Oral proficiency (OP)

Independent variables (predictors): WTC (willingness to communicate), learner autonomy (LA), and tolerance of ambiguity (AT)

4.3. Discussion

The present study sought to find any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their oral proficiency. Moreover, the study was aimed at discovering any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their ambiguity tolerance. Additionally, the study was intended to explore any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their autonomy. Furthermore, the study was an attempt to investigate any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance. The study was also an effort in probing into any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. Finally, the study aimed to find whether WTC, AT, and LA would best predict Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency.

Based on the results of statistical analyses, there was a strong, positive correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and their oral proficiency. However, the results revealed that there was no statistically significant correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and their ambiguity tolerance. The findings also showed that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their autonomy. The results also showed that there was no statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance. Based on the results, it was also found that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. Finally, it was found that willingness to communicate made the strongest contribution to explaining oral proficiency among other variables.

Concerning the findings of the first research question indicating a strong, positive correlation between Learners' willingness to communicate and their oral proficiency, the results of the current study are in line with Riasati's (2012) investigation. Riasati found that oral skills were positively correlated with the participants' WTC level. Moreover, as Bygate (1998) asserted, the definition of speaking should include the social and interaction skills used for engaging in communication, which is in line with Eckard and Kearny (1981), Florez (1999) and Howarth (2001) who characterized speaking as a mutual process in which ideas and information as well as emotions are communicated. Therefore, a positive correlation between oral proficiency and WTC could possibly be justified based on the grounds that the two variables seem to share the same underlying construct.

Regarding the results of the present study that there was no statistically significant correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and ambiguity tolerance, the findings of the study can be explained on the basis that ambiguity tolerance and WTC are seemingly two variables which measure disparate constructs. On the one hand, WTC, as the term implies, tends to assess the learners' inclination towards communication, while ambiguity tolerance tends to evaluate the learners' attitude towards a situation which is not straightforward. According to Erten and Topkaya (2009), some students find ambiguity very exciting and appealing whereas some other learners find it extremely disappointing and unpleasant, a fact which might have contributed to the findings of this study.

With respect to the third research question, the results of this study indicated that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their autonomy. The findings of the present study for this research question are in line with Khaki's (2013) study in which a significant and strong relationship between learner autonomy and WTC was revealed. The findings of the present study also seem to be partially in line with a number of studies showing the relationship between autonomy and variables encompassing critical thinking ability and self-efficacy. For instance, the results of Haghi's (2009) investigation showed a strong relationship between learners' self-efficacy and autonomy. Moreover, Sheykhi Behdani's (2011) study revealed that there was a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and critical thinking ability.

The results also indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance. The findings of the present study for this research question are in contrast with some studies (e.g., Chapelle, 1983; Khajeh 2002; Mori, 1999) in which there was a significant correlation between ambiguity tolerance level and students' scores on general English. Moreover, contrary to the findings of this study, Chapelle (1983) indicated that the tolerance of ambiguity is positively related to successful performance on grammar tests, dictation exams, speaking tests, and listening comprehension tasks. As Lori (1990) concluded, ambiguity tolerance was correlated significantly with L2 achievement. In the same vein, Liu's (2006) study indicated that EFL learners experience intolerance of ambiguity, resulting from their inability to convey their ideas in writing and speaking.

The results of the present study also indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. The findings of the study for this research question are partially consistent with Heidari's (2010) study in which the degree of relationship between EFL learner autonomy and reading comprehension turned out to be positive. According to Smith (2008), ELT teachers recognize the important role of learner autonomy. Moreover, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) carried out a study on university-level EFL teachers in Oman in which most of the participants maintained that learner autonomy had a positive effect on language learning in general.

The findings of the sixth research question revealed that willingness to communicate made the strongest contribution to explaining oral proficiency among other variables. The finding for this research question confirms what Yousefi and Kasaian (2014) emphasize regarding the fact that WTC is one of the variables that appear to influence the speaking ability of the learners significantly. Moreover, according to Munezane (2015), WTC in the second language is generally believed to result in more frequent use of the target language both inside and outside the classroom, which plays a crucial role in improving learners' communicative proficiency.

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1. Conclusions

The current study set out to find any statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their oral proficiency as well as learners' WTC and their ambiguity tolerance. Moreover, the study was aimed at examining any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' WTC and their autonomy as well as EFL learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance. The study also attempted to explore any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. This study, finally, sought to find which variable (WTC, LA, AT) was the best predictor of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral proficiency.

The results of statistical analysis indicated that there was a strong, positive correlation between Learners' willingness to communicate and their oral proficiency. However, the results revealed that there was no statistically significant correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and their ambiguity tolerance. On the other hand, the findings showed that there was a statistically positive significant relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their autonomy. The findings also revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their ambiguity tolerance while there was a positive statistically significant relationship between learners' oral proficiency and their autonomy. Finally, it was found that willingness to communicate was a statistically significant predictor of oral proficiency.

Learner autonomy, willingness to communicate, oral proficiency and ambiguity tolerance are not uncommon ideas any more. However, shifting the classroom perspective so that these important attributes can be enhanced is of great significance. One way to do so is paying attention to the way these variables are connected. Given the findings of the present study, we are further reminded of the fact that these important constructs have connections with one another and enhancing one can lead to an improvement in the other.

Attention needs to be paid to the association between teachers and learners in countries such as Iran where L2 learning occurs mainly in formal classroom settings. In fact, teachers, as the main source of language input to learners, influence their learning directly. L2 teacher trainers have started recognizing that teachers, regardless of the method or material they use, play a pivotal role in understanding and improving the quality of English language teaching (Kemp & Hall, 1992). Therefore, it can be concluded that through the improved practice of teaching, we can help learners enhance the constructs which can lead to better learning in the long run.

5.2. Implications

In line with the findings of the current study, the following implications can be made. Teacher educators and trainers may devise and plan courses through which teacher trainees become familiar with how the concepts of learner autonomy, WTC, oral proficiency and ambiguity tolerance are related to one another and how these relationships could help teachers to foster the positive constructs of learner autonomy, WTC and oral proficiency. Moreover, the results of this research make both students and teachers aware of the way the variables of the present study are related to one another. Therefore, there could be some sessions where both teachers and students

participate so that they get familiar with the concepts and how they can possibly be improved in line with the objectives of the EFL learning. Material developers are also encouraged to include materials in their books so that learners come into contact with the concepts of learner autonomy, ambiguity tolerance, and WTC in an attempt to help learners become more successful language learners.

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