

Age, Gender, and Anxiety as Antecedents of Willingness to Communicate: Turkish EFL Context

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Abstract

Individual differences in language learning have been under close scrutiny for several decades. However, there seems to be research ground to be filled in with new research to understand how and to what extent these differences relate to/effect language learning process. Both foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and second language willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) have been key individual differences research paradigm in educational psychology and applied linguistics. To this end, the current study aims to disclose secondary school EFL learners' FLCA/ L2 WTC levels and their relations and predictions by comparing and relating participants' age and gender differences. The participants were 131 secondary school students in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Statistical results pointed out moderate levels of FLCA and WTC among participants. When age and gender difference were compared, it was observed that both of the variables made significant difference on participants FLCA and WTC scores with females surpassing males in their mean values. Also, regression analysis indicated age and gender as the significant predictors of WTC. It is clear from the study results that both age and gender are significant factors intervening in language learning process. Teachers should be aware of these differences so that they approach each difference satisfactorily to create a positive learning environment in their classrooms.

Keywords: *Age, EFL learners, foreign language anxiety, gender, willingness to communicate*

INTRODUCTION

Communicating in another language is one of the key components of the 21st century skills, and plays a vital role in becoming a global citizen today (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002). This has heightened the need for learning L2. In this sense, being a competent communicator in a L2 have emerged as the primary concern in the language education field. Therefore, improving learners' communicative abilities has been attracting a lot of interest. Within this direction, investigation of affective factors may provide useful account of how to improve students' oral communication competences. The role of individual differences is a long-established topic of study inclusively in second language research, and both anxiety and willingness to communicate keep a pivotal position in learners' proficiency levels as seen in variety of studies (e.g. Rastegar & Karami, 2015). To this end, the present study aims at focusing on secondary school EFL learner's WTC and FLCA levels to better understand how willing and anxious they are during their learning process. Focusing also to their biographical differences of age and gender would reveal significant and valuable source data for researchers, teacher educators and more importantly for teachers on how to understand and value individual

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differences in their classroom. Even though the research on WTC and FLCA is vast and various, focusing exclusively on young English learners in a foreign language context would reveal valuable data for existing literature, learners and practitioners. This study, therefore, set out to assess WTC and its associations with age, gender, and anxiety.

Willingness to Communicate

Thus far, a number of studies has been published on factors affecting learners' communicative competence (Hernández, 2010; Saito, 2015). Previous literature presented various affective and cognitive variables such as anxiety, age, and motivation which determine students' oral proficiencies in L2. The findings indicated that WTC has contributed to development of learners' oral language skills. According to Cao (2014) WTC "concerns a person's intention to communicate with someone when free to do so" (p. 791). In this sense, while some interactants tend to be more verbal, others prefer to speak minimally and this difference was attributed to WTC by researchers.

Research into WTC has a long history. WTC is a concept, first proposed as a "personality-based, trait-like predisposition" by McCroskey and Baer (1985) to explain individuals' tendency to initiate communication in their first language. The concept was applied to L2 education by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) to better understand language learners' communication behaviors. MacIntyre (2007) drew our attention to the issue that "WTC may be seen as both an individual difference factor facilitating L2 acquisition, especially in a pedagogical system that emphasizes communication, and as a nonlinguistic outcome of the language learning process" (p. 564). MacIntyre et al. (1998) published a paper on a WTC model for L2 education. Their model indicated that both internal and external variables shape the learners' WTC.

A seminal study on WTC was the work of Baghaei et al. (2012) who offered that "the higher WTC a speaker has the more likely he is to succeed in second language (L2) acquisition" (p. 55). Hence, to increase students' success in L2, investigating the factors associated with WTC is still a continuing concern among the researchers. Previous studies indicated that motivation was among the most important determinants of WTC (Asmalı, 2016; Lin, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). These studies illustrated that high-motivated students had high level of WTC. The existing literature emphasized that other individual differences such as age, gender, self-confidence, communication apprehension, and anxiety were partially responsible for learners' WTC (Altın, 2018; de Saint Leger & Storch, 2009; Manipuspika, 2018). Earlier research into WTC focused on gender differences (Afghari & Sadeghi, 2012; Alavinia, & Alikhani, 2014; Ekin, 2018). For example, Ekin (2018) used a survey to identify determinants of WTC and noted that WTC appeared to be unaffected by gender. This result accorded with an earlier study, none of differences between gender and WTC were statistically significant (Afghari & Sadeghi, 2012). When it comes to age effect on WTC, Dewaele and Dewaele (2018) indicated that older learners were more willing to communicate. These results reflect those described by Uyanık (2018) who stated that older students tend to be more willing to communicate in language classes. This data must be interpreted with caution as the ages of participants were in close range. To date, while plenty of literature exist on WTC, much less is known about casual role of age in WTC in Turkish context. Therefore, the findings of present study could make an important contribution to the language education field.

Foreign Language Anxiety

The effects of anxiety on language learning has been a controversial subject among researchers because of the inconsistency in used survey methods and instruments. It is only since the work of Horwitz et al. (1986) that the study of FLCA has gained momentum. The development of FLCA scale by Horwitz et al. (1986) has led to a proliferation of studies on FLCA. A number

of factors associated with FLCA have been explored in several studies (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Özer & Yetkin, 2022; Zhang & Zhong, 2012). In this sense, Young (1991) broadly classified the sources of FLCA as learner's factors, teacher's factors, and the instructional practice. Above all, Horwitz et al. (1986) classified FLCA as "communication apprehension", "test anxiety" and "fear of negative evaluation (FNE)" to understand FLCA more broadly. Communication apprehension defined as "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people" (p. 127). Test anxiety is generally defined as the fear of failure in situations in which learners' performances are evaluated (Wu, 2010). Finally, FNE refers to concerns about negative evaluations of other people.

Previous research focused on the impact of anxiety on achievement (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). A number of authors indicated a negative relationship exists between FLCA and achievement (Aida, 1994; Liu, 2006; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Earlier studies on FLCA and gender offered contradictory findings. Some studies suggested that females are more anxious than males (e.g. Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Wu, 2010). On the other hand, Aida (1994) and Özer and Yetkin (2022) put forward that males tend to experience high level of FLCA. Various studies assessed the link between age and FLCA (Aydın et al., 2017; Dewaele, & Al-Saraj, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2008; Er, 2015) and those studies revealed that age plays an important role in FLCA. For example, Er (2015) showed that older learners were more anxious in the language classes. Others (Aydın et al., 2017; Dewaele et al., 2008) highlighted that youngers experience low level of FLA.

Previous Research on Willingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Anxiety

Having discussed WTC and FLCA in language learning contexts, this section addresses to the studies on the relationship between WTC and FLCA. In their pioneering examination of Chinese EFL learners' FLCA and unwillingness to communicate (UC), Liu and Jackson (2008) concluded that a positive significant correlation between FLCA and UC was detected. This finding was also reported by Birjandi and Tabataba'ian (2012) and Dewaele (2019) who noted that students with high level anxiety had less WTC. This result was contrary to the that of Rastegar and Karami (2015) who carried out a study to reveal the relationship among anxiety, WTC, and achievement of students. The researchers found a negative correlation between anxiety and WTC.

Bashosh et al. (2013) conducted a study with university students to identify WTC and its predictors. Their results showed no evidence of significant associations between WTC and FLCA. It can be inferred that the predictors of WTC are not fully understood. This study attempts to show the Turkish EFL learners' WTC and also analyze the impact of variables such gender, age, and FLCA on their WTC. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the participants perceived levels of L2 WTC and FLCA?
2. What are the main and interaction effects of gender and grade over participants L2 WTC and FLCA scores?
3. How much of the variance in L2 WTC scores can be explained by the following set of variables: age, gender and FLCA?

METHODS

Research Design

The study was designed based on quantitative research design and procedures. Quantitative research, as stated by Dörnyei (2007), “is systematic, rigorous, focused, and tightly controlled, involving precise measurement and producing reliable and replicable data that is generalizable to other contexts” (p. 34). In this sense, the priori purpose of the study to reach as many participants as possible, focus on the variable instead of single cases, and able to generalize study results objectively similar to Creswell’s (2013) definition of quantitative research as primarily focuses on the variables to acquire information about the objective theories. As noted by Dörnyei (2007), there are some characteristics of quantitative research. These are using numbers, a priori categorization, variables rather than cases (common features of groups of people), statistics and language of statistics, standardized procedures to assess objective reality and quest for generalizability and universal law (p. 33). Quantitative data is numerical and deals mostly with large data and several variables, so the data in the present study were collected through questionnaires. As pointed out by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), “the main attraction of questionnaires is their unprecedented efficiency in terms of (a) researcher time, (b) researcher effort, and (c) financial resources” (p. 6). The questionnaires are also “very *versatile*, which means that they can be used successfully with a variety of people in a variety of situations targeting a variety of topics” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 6).

Setting and Participants

The setting for the study was chosen as secondary level state schools in a Turkish lower secondary education context. Participants were selected through convenience sampling methods. Convenience sampling was used when the researcher found the participants that were closest and accessible to take part in the study (Crossman, 2020). A total number of 131 participants voluntarily participated in the study. Table 1 presents detailed information about the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Information about the Participants

Variables	n	Min.	Max.	%
Age	130	9	15	
Gender	Male	57		55.7
	Female	73		43.5
Grade	5	46		35.1
	6	42		32.1
	7	20		15.3
	8	22		16.8
Missing	1			0.8
Total	131			100

Instruments

In the present study, the data were collected through two questionnaires, and a demographic information form as listed below in detail;

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, which was originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was used to measure participants' FLCA scores. In the original scale, there were 33 items in 5-point Likert scale. In the scale, low scores given by participants to each item indicated their low level of participation to the relevant statement and vice versa. In the scale, the items were categorized under 3 subscales; communication apprehension, test anxiety and FNE. The Turkish version of the scale was used considering low English level of the participants. Aydın et al. (2016) adapted into Turkish. For the reliability of the scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated as .83.

The L2 Willingness to Communicate Scale, which was validated and adapted by Peng (2013) to EFL context, originally adopted from Yashima (2009) to measure participants L2 WTC scores. In Peng's (2013) scale, there were 7 items in 6-point Likert type ranging from "definitely not willing" to "definitely willing." There were two subscales measuring L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom. In this study, the Turkish version of the study was utilized, translated into Turkish by Ekin (2018). In the Turkish version, 7 items in 6-point Likert scale format with 2 subscales were preserved as seen in the original scale. The reliability check indicated .80 Cronbach alpha coefficient score.

Personal information form was produced by the researchers and attached to aforementioned main questionnaires to obtain participants' demographic information. In this form, participants were asked to disclose their names, ages, gender, and grade levels.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected from two different secondary schools via two questionnaires and a personal information form as explained in instruments in detail. Ethical permission from institutional review board for each school was taken. Before the administration of the questionnaires, participants were informed on how to fill out the questionnaires, the purpose of the study, confidentiality of the study, and expected results and implications. Moreover, a written consent form was delivered to participants and unwilling participants were exempted from completing the questionnaires. All the obtained data were categorized and entered to Statistical package for Social Science (SPSS 25) software for further analysis. The data were first subjected to test of normality to determine data analysis tests between parametric and non-parametric tests. Kolmogorov-Smirnov results (WTC= .055, FLCA= .081), Mean/Trimmed Mean values (WTC= 4.41/4.46, FLCA= 2.78/2.78) and Histogram and Q-Q Plot graph result indicated a normal distribution of the data. Then, reliability of the scales was checked separately. Descriptive results were run to reveal participants (dis) agreement levels on the (sub)scales. In order to see main and interaction effects of grade and gender over L2 WTC and FLCA scores, a two-way MANOVA test was applied. A standard multiple regression analysis was performed to see the predictor variables of the L2 WTC including gender, grade and FLCA score.

RESULTS

The findings of the study were tabularized and explained by statistical terminology in this section. Initially, descriptive analysis was used to measure participants perceived levels of

FLCA regarding communication apprehension, test anxiety and FNE scores as listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants Perceived Levels of FLTA

	n	M	SD
Communication apprehension	128	2.81	.61
Test anxiety	128	2.59	.80
Fear of negative evaluation	128	2.85	.55

As seen in Table 2, participants displayed a moderate stance towards FLCA variables in their classrooms. When sorted according to their mean values, fear of negative evaluation ($M = 2.85$) was followed by communication apprehension ($M = 2.81$), and test anxiety ($M = 2.59$).

Participants perceived levels of L2 WTC concerning their willingness inside and outside the classroom were identified by using descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Participants Perceived Levels of L2 WTC

	n	M	SD
L2 WTC inside the classroom	128	4.32	1.16
L2 WTC outside the classroom	128	4.48	1.17

Table 3 indicated that participants were willing to communicate in English both inside and outside the classroom. For both of the variables, participants demonstrated “perhaps willing” according to L2 WTC scale points. Participants willingness outside the classroom ($M = 4.48$) slightly surpassed their willingness inside the classroom ($M = 4.32$) and this probably occurred due to their anxiety in the classroom.

In order to see whether participants L2 WTC and FLCA scores were stable across different grade and gender groups, a two-way MANOVA analysis was performed. In the gender analysis, it was seen that gender exercised main effects on participants L2 WTC and FLCA scores as presented in Table 4. Descriptive statistics indicated that significant gender difference was in favor of female participants for L2 WTC ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .88$), male participants ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.08$) and for FLCA; female participants ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .47$), and male participants ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .62$). After the Bonferroni adjusted level of .25, L2 WTC was the only variable reached at statistical significance between gender (males = $M = 4.22$; females = $M = 4.66$; $F = 7.648$; $p = .007$, partial eta squared .060).

Table 4. Main and Interaction Effects of Gender and Grade over L2 WTC and FLCA Scores

Variables	Two-way MANOVA									
	Main effect					Interaction effect				
	λ	df	F	p	η_p^2	λ	df	F	p	η_p^2
Gender	.933	2;119	4.241	.017	.067					
Grade	.887	2;119	2.452	.026	.058					

Gender*Grade .972 6;238 .577 .749 .014

Grade, also, seemed to exert a main effect on participants L2 WTC and FLCA scores as illustrated in Table 4. Descriptive statistics indicated significant grade differences for L2 WTC scores in favor of 5th graders and there was a steadily decrease over the years of education. Results showed that participants descriptive values for L2 WTC were (5th grade = $M = 4.62$, $SD = .89$, 6th grade = $M = 4.47$, $SD = .98$, 7th grade = $M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.06$, 8th grade = $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.14$). Participants descriptive results for FLCA scores (5th grade = $M = 2.83$, $SD = .49$, 6th grade = $M = 2.86$, $SD = .54$, 7th grade = $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.06$, 8th grade = $M = 2.68$, $SD = .42$) did not yielded any significant difference. After the Bonferroni adjusted level of .25, L2 WTC was the only variable reaching statistical significance among grade groups ($F = 4.347$; $p = .006$, partial eta squared .098). Further analysis of the data to see interaction effects of gender and grade on the dependent variables indicated no statistically significant interaction effect on L2 WTC and FLCA ($\lambda = .972$, $F = .577$, $p > .05$).

By setting the L2 WTC as the dependent variable and gender, grade and FLCA as the independent variables, a standard multiple regression analysis was performed to identify how precise these independent variables predict and explain variance in the dependent variable.

Table 5. Gender, Grade and FLCA as the Predictors of L2 WTC

Predictors	β	t	p	Correlations		
				Zero order	Partial	Part
Gender	.240	2.828	.005	.215	.246	.238
Grade	-.267	3.156	.002	-.248	-.273	-.266
FLCA	-.059	-.698	.486	-.039	-.063	-.059

Note: R^2 for model = .120

As is visible in Table 5, regression analysis revealed that all the independent variables entered into the model explained 12% of the variance in L2 WTC, $F(3, 124) = 5.639$, $p = .001$. Among all these three independent variables, gender explained 5% of the unique variance ($\beta = .240$, $t = 2.828$, $p = .005$), and grade explained almost 7% of the unique variance ($\beta = -.267$, $t = 3.156$, $p = .002$) made significant unique contributions to the predictions of L2 WTC.

DISCUSSION

The current study set out to survey the relationship and difference among age, gender, L2 WTC and. Findings show that learners' overall FLCA levels are at moderate level. On the question of perceived level of WTC, this study finds out that Turkish EFL learners have WTC. These results may be attributed to the fact that learners are moderately anxious in language classes. These learners might feel comfortable while using L2 during oral communication tasks. As a result, they would not fear being put on the spot in the public sphere of the classroom.

Although no significant interaction effect is identified on L2 WTC and FLCA, it is found that FLCA levels of learners appears to be affected by grade and gender differences. The difference between the males and the females is significant. This observation is in line with what Özer and Yetkin (2022) reported in their study on high school students' anxiety levels. Moreover, it is observed that a significant difference is found between participants' grade and anxiety levels. This finding broadly supports the results of other crucial studies (Aydm et al., 2017;

Dewaele, & Al-Saraj, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2008; Er, 2015), which suggested that age was generally seen as a factor strongly related to anxiety. Another finding of this study is that gender and grade levels are important driving factors of learners' WTC. The study reveals that females are more willing to communicate than males. A possible explanation for the current result might be that female students have more positive attitudes towards the foreign language. Additionally, females might be more willing to talk in their daily lives than males as a result of social and cultural stereotypes. This situation might impact their interaction skills in a positive way not only in their native language but also in foreign language. This outcome, however, is contrary to that of Ekin (2018) who found gender was not an underlying factor for WTC. Future studies on the gender effect are recommended. Another observation is that older students are less willing to communicate. However, the findings of the current study do not support the previous research on age factor. These results might be related to the lack of motivation among older learners. As mentioned in the literature review, motivation was one of the important determinants of WTC. Despite these promising results, questions related to age effect remained unanswered. That is why, future studies on the current topic are recommended. What is interesting is that WTC appears to be unaffected by FLCA. These results reflect those described by Bashosh et al. (2013). However, this finding is contrary to that of Dewaele (2019). This discrepancy could be attributed to the anxiety levels of students. Literature has indicated that high anxiety levels might refrain students from initiation of communication. In this study, students have moderate level FLCA, and this seems not to block their WTC. It is possible to say that learners' reduced anxiety can give rise to their increased WTC.

CONCLUSION

The present study is designed to explore young EFL learners WTC and FLCA levels during their learning process. It is also used to explore whether any difference occurs in aforementioned levels based on learners' age and gender differences. The analysis of the quantitative data through comparison and correlation statistics indicated that Turkish EFL learners are moderately anxious and they are willing to initiate communication both inside and outside the classroom. It is understood from the study results that young EFL learner's do not have debilitating anxiety during their learning process and moderate levels of anxiety could flourish their WTC even though regression analysis did not yield any significant predictive power of FLCA on participants WTC levels. Students' unwillingness to communicate is a significant problem in foreign language education. Therefore, examining the determinants of WTC should have high priority to increase learners' proficiency in English. It is also noted that both age and gender make difference on participants WTC and FLCA levels and significant predictors of WTC. It is important to see that individual differences plays significant roles during learning process. Teachers should be aware of these differences to analyze their students differences rightly to be able to reach each of their students and create a more positive learning environment. It is also noteworthy to see that a moderate level of anxiety do play neither debilitating or facilitating role on participants WTC in and outside the classroom. Therefore, creating a moderate level of anxiety classroom could assure that participants anxieties would not intervene into their learning process.

The study has several implications for teachers and teacher educators. First of all, teachers should be aware of students individual differences and their impact on learning process. In a learning environment where teachers are aware of students individual differences and their relevant impact on students learning process, teaching and learning would be more effective and enjoyable. Then, they should encourage students and provide them with safe environment

to communicate without fear of making mistake. Teachers also need to identify factors that determine the students' WTC and eliminate the ones hinder their intentions to speak.

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