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Relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Iranian EFL Learner's Speaking Fluency and Accuracy

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Abstract

The application of English as an international language has been well known in any field of life. Four skills of this language are divided into two categories, productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (listening and reading). According to the practicality of the English language nowadays, most of people try to learn English. It is observable that majority of learners step in this way just to learn how to converse and participate in discussions. In other words, they aim to improve their speaking skill. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate possible relationship between willingness to communicate and Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency and accuracy. In this way, OPT, WTC test, fluency and accuracy test were employed. Afterwards, statistical analysis were accomplished. Consequently, the analysis indicated acceptable results. The results contains positive relationship between willingness to communicate and speaking fluency. It can be concluded that both trainers and trainees can employ willingness to communicate as one of the tools to increase fluency and accuracy level of learners speaking.

Keywords: speaking accuracy, speaking fluency, Willingness To Communicate.

Introduction

English as an international language has established its position as a lingua franca. As opportunities for oral communication have grown, ELT educators have become increasingly more preoccupied with finding the most effective ways of helping EFL/ESL learners master the oral skills as an important aspect of foreign language learning. Students of a new language will not learn to speak fluently just by hearing flow of speech in a class. Although, hearing the forms of a language is an important factor in learning a new language, it is not enough. Teachers will need to give their students many opportunities to practice speaking (Rivers, 1981). Many studies have focused on the investigation of factors that can help to improve the learners' speaking ability.

The affective side of FL learning has now been recognized to play a crucial role in learning a new language. In the past, it was often considered that a learner's cognitive ability to communicate in a new language was important. By now, it is accepted that in the process of foreign language learning both cognitive and affective domains should be optimally activated. One of the variables that seems to have an important effect on the speaking ability of the learners is their level of willingness to communicate. According to MacIntyre, et al (2002, p.538), WTC is defined as "an underlying continuum representing the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice".

Statement of the problem

Speaking has been considered as an important skill in language learning by most learners and researchers. Researchers (e.g., Bygate, 2002) often describe it as a complex and multilevel skill. The reason is due to the fact that learners should use their knowledge of the language and activate their abilities to

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communicate in that language. They have to apply these abilities in order to be a good communicator in different conditions. A good communicator can handle the situation by the use of all skills specially speaking. Speaking is practical in any field such as education, job, and routines and so on. Via speaking people express their ideas and thoughts. Therefore the ability to speak can pave the way in any stage for the speaker. Many factors can influence this skill, i.e. cognitive and affective factors (Brown 1994). Both of these domains are significant in achievement of learner in any field. Pop ham (2011) states that "affective variables are often more significant than cognitive variables" (p. 230). In the present study the researcher has focused on willingness to communicate and its relation with Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency and accuracy. The main problem under investigation in the present study is the possible relationships between the learners' willingness to communicate and their fluency and accuracy in speaking.

Research Questions

The main concern of this study was to investigate the relationship between WTC and speaking fluency and accuracy. In order to systematically pursue the investigation, the researcher formulated the following two research questions:

1. Is there any relationship between WTC and speaking fluency?
2. Is there any relationship between WTC and speaking accuracy?

Research Hypotheses

H01 = There is no relationship between WTC and speaking fluency.

H02 = There is no relationship between WTC and speaking accuracy.

The Theoretical Framework

The Nature and Importance of Speaking

Speaking is at the heart of language learning. Based on its function, speaking is defined as a way to verbally communicate for mostly interpersonal and somewhat transactional purposes (Nunan, 1999, p. 228). Speaking is an interactive process it means that it involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994). It is different from singing. In speaking speaker produce ordinary sounds but in singing they use rhythm. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants, purpose of communication and the physical environment. Communication occurs between at least two people.

Learners are supposed not only to know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also they comprehend when, why, and in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence).Interactional language engages people for social reasons. Transactional language is for service encounters like ordering drink or booking a ticket. However, these purposes are usually intertwined (Thornbury and Slade, 2006, p. 20). People mostly communicate with each other through speech. According to John Laver (1994) Speech is the main means of communication and the system of the society itself would be completely different if we had gone astray to develop communication through speech. People express their ideas, their feelings through speaking. Moreover, nowadays at school there is a great emphasis on the use of language for better group work throughout the curriculum. Many researches have shown that there is link between spoken language, learning and cognitive development, such as Mercer et al 1999; Mercer et al. 2004. All skills namely speaking, listening, reading and writing are critical in learning a new language.

Furthermore speaking is an important skill in workplaces. It is very critical in finding jobs and be a good worker in different companies. Its use as the working language in 85% of international organizations (Crystal 1997) and its function as the main door to get a better job, especially in multinational companies have motivated a great number of people around the world to learn English as a second language or and as a foreign language in order to be able to speak in it. This skill attracts people's attention because it is practical in every situation to do varieties of jobs. Zaremba (2006) also pointed out a study indicating that speaking skills or communication skills were usually placed ahead of work experience, motivation, and academic credentials as criteria for new recruitment for employment.

Affective factors influencing the successful development of speaking

As other skills, speaking skill is affected by some

factors that influence language input and output. These factors have both positive and negative influences. These factors are divided into two domains: affective and cognitive. Moskovitz (as cited in Stevick, 1996, p. 24-25), regarding human affective and cognitive domain believes:

Humanistic education is related to a concern for personal development, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others, in other worlds, making students be more human. Humanistic education takes into consideration that learning is affected by how students feel about themselves. It is concerned with educating the whole person- the intellectual and emotional dimensions.

The quotation emphasizes that cognitive and affective domains are interrelated. Therefore, focusing on just one of them, means providing an incomplete educational experience (Popham, 2011). The word affect refers to emotion (Brown 1994). Affective domain refers to the way people act emotionally. Values, motivation, self-efficacy, attitudes, beliefs, learning styles, feelings and emotions are major components of this domain (Brown, 1994; Mc-Leod, 1991).

Brown (1994) states that "affect" refer to emotion or feeling; he defines affective domain as the emotional side of human behavior. According to Venes (as cited in Schaber et al., 2010), affect is regarded as an "emotional reaction associated with an experience and related to mood or mental state" (p.2).

For better performance it is important to consider factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate, anxiety, and so on. The present study focuses on one of the major components of this domain known as "willingness to communicate" and its possible relation with speaking fluency and accuracy.

Willingness to communicate

Nowadays by the increase in use of English as an international language, speakers, especially non-native, willingness to communicate has gained importance. The notion of willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally introduced with reference to first language (L1) communication, and it was considered to be a personality-based, trait-like predisposition that remained stable across different communication situations (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). MacIntyre et al (2003) define WTC as "...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice" (p.538).

WTC originally was regarded as people's tendency toward participating in communication when they are free to choose (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). As DoËrnyei (2003) points out, competence in the L2 may not be enough. Learners need to be not only able to communicate but also willing to communicate in the L2.researches have shown that learner's WTC affect their participation in communication more and more (Cler̈ment et al., 2003; Yashima et al., 2004). Thus MacIntyre et al. (1998) propose that WTC should be regarded as main objective of second language learning and as a comprehensive framework to describe, explain and predict behavior of communication.

L2 WTC is expected to facilitate language learning because higher WTC among students leads to increased opportunity for authentic L2 use (MacIntyre, Baker, Clйment & Conrod, 2001), which is really necessary in developing language (MacIntyre & Legatto 2011).

Previous studies done in this area

Ahmadian and Shirvani (2012) have studied 'The Role of Gender and Academic Experience in EFL Students' Willingness to Communicate in English in Academic Context'. They were to investigate the status of the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) of the Iranian students of English as a foreign language and the possible roles of gender and academic experience in the degree of the students' WTC. Vaseghi, Barjesteh and Neissi (2012) have studied Iranian EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate across Different Context- and Receiver-Types.

Hashimoto (2002) developed a research to probe the relation between the WTC of Japanese learners of English as a second language and their motivations to use English. Vaseghi, Barjesteh and Neissi (2012) have studied Iranian EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate across Different Context- and Receiver-Types. This paper investigates Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of their willingness to initiate communication across four types of context and three types of receiver. An investigation of Willingness to Communicate, Communication Apprehension, and Self-esteem in the Workplace is done by Brittany Natalie Fulmer (2010). The goal of this research was to investigate willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and self-esteem in daily life and in organizational settings. Another work 'The Relationship between Language Anxiety and Psychophysiological Responses to Oral Performance: A

Study on Iranian EFL Students' is done by Hayatdavoudi and Kassaian.

Methodology

Research Design

This study falls under the classification of correlational research and has an exploratory design as it strives to explore the possible correlations between WTC and speaking accuracy and fluency.

Participants

For the purpose of this study out of 100 conveniently selected upper-intermediate students studying English at three English institutes in Anzali, 60 participants were selected and homogenized in terms of language proficiency through Oxford Placement Test. All of the participants were female and had the same command of speaking. The participants aged from 18 to 30.

Sampling

The method of sampling used in this study was non-probabilistic or convenient sampling. The reason for the choice of convenient sample was the institute directors' and teachers' reluctance to cooperate with the researcher. They argued that a lot of MA students had won their cooperation in the past so much so that their students started to complain about the time allocated to these researchers. Considering the researcher's inability to seek the cooperation of a number of institutes, she had to limit her participants to the 100 students from 3 institutes in Anzali out of which 60 homogeneous students were selected.

Procedure

Data collection

The researcher distributed questionnaires and interviewed the participants to test their fluency and accuracy. A digital voice recorder was employed in order to record the participants' voice to test their fluency and accuracy. All participants were upper-intermediate students studying English at 10 institutes in Anzali.

Data analysis

The collected data were fed into SPSS 22 and the questionnaire was investigated in terms of internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha statistic was computed for the 60 items of the OPT test and 12 items of the WTC test to estimate the internal consistency within the items of the tests.

Instrumentation

Oxford Placement Test: to remove interfering variable of language proficiency and also obtain the language proficiency level of participants, an Oxford Quick Placement Test of English was administered to the participants.

WTC test: to calculate WTC of participants, a test which was designed by McCroskey & Richmond (1985; 1987), was employed. The test consisted of 12 items and the participants were completely free to choose whether they want to initiate the communication or not. The employed test was based on the Persian version of the questionnaire of willingness to communicate which were translated and validated by Ganji (2002).

Fluency and Accuracy Test: to evaluate the participants' oral fluency and accuracy, data were collected in the form of a semi-structured oral interviews. The interviews were and approximately 5 minutes in duration. According to Kvale (1996), that suggested nine different kinds of questions, the test consists of introducing questions that covered topics about values, beliefs and relationships and grammatical structures. The questions were planned with the help of five experienced ELT instructors and approved by 10 MA-holding and PhD holding instructors as appropriate for the intended test of speaking.

Results

The study employed qualitative and quantitative approach to get information about students' WTC, fluency, and accuracy in their speaking. The results of the study are presented in the following sections. The first section scrutinizes the results of the pilot study for the reliability analysis; next it presents the results of the quantitative research questions and tests the two null hypotheses each followed by the related discussion.

Reliability Analysis of the OPT Test and WTC test

The reliability of the Oxford Quick Placement test and WTC questionnaire was checked through the pilot study on 30 subjects. Cronbach's Alpha statistic was computed for the 60 items of the OPT test and 12 items of the WTC test to estimate the internal consistency within the items of the tests. The determined values of Cronbach alpha for the WTC test and OPT test equalled (.762), and (.781), respectively which were both acceptable based on the reliability standards suggested by Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott (1994).

Assumptions for the First Research Question

The major assumption of the Pearson correlation test was that the distribution of the scores for the

two variables (including fluency and WTC scores) was normal. A scatter plot was drawn and Skewness analysis was run to establish the normality of the scores. The following Scatter plot illustrated the relationship between fluency and WTC scores of the participants.

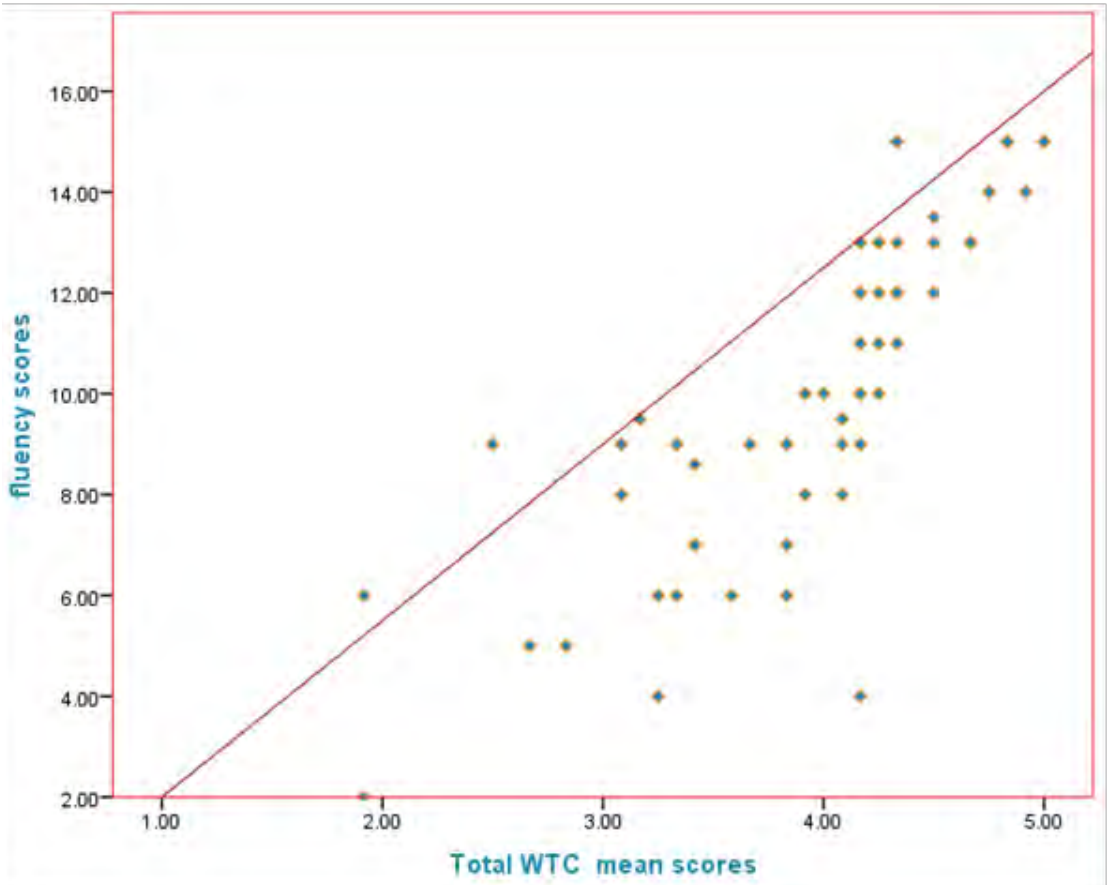

Figure 1: Scatter Plot for the Fluency and WTC Scores

Table 1: Skewness analysis for Total WTC Scores and Fluency Scores

		total WTC mean score	fluency scores
N	Valid	60	60
	Missing	0	0
Mean		3.9611	10.1267
Median		4.1667	10.0000
Mode		4.17	9.00
Std. Deviation		.69763	3.23906
Variance		.487	10.491
Skewness		-1.017	-.326
Std. Error of Skewness		.309	.309
Kurtosis		1.056	-.579
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.608	.608
Range		3.08	13.00
Maximum		5.00	15.00
Sum		237.67	607.60

The above scatter plot showed that the relationship between the two variables was linear. There was a straight line, which established the normality of the distribution of scores for fluency and WTC scores. The following Skewness analysis also supported that the normality assumption was met.

The findings of Skewness analysis also indicated that the assumption of normality was met in the distributions of the scores. Meanwhile, the Skewness and Kurtosis values reported in the table were all within the range of +2, suggesting that the distributions were all normal and symmetric. The statistic of Skewness for (WTC scores) equaled to -1.01 that for (fluency scores) came to -.326. Moreover, the Kurtosis for (WTC scores) was equivalent to 1.05, and for (fluency scores) amounted to -.579. The findings suggested that the distributions were all symmetric.

The possible relationship between speaking fluency and WTC scores of the participants was evaluated through running Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient after exploratory analyses were done to confirm the normality of the distributions. The results of the descriptive statistics for the fluency and WTC test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Total WTC Scores and Speaking Fluency

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
fluency scores	10.1267	3.23906	60
total WTC mean score	3.9611	.69763	60

The above information described the characteristics of the sample. Sixty participants took part in the speaking test. The mean score of the participants on fluency test came to (10.126) with standard deviation of (3.23). Moreover, for the WTC test scores, the information was collected from 60 upper- intermediate EFL students, with a mean of (3.961) and standard deviation of (.697).

Table 3: Correlations for the Total WTC Scores and Speaking Fluency

		total WTC mean score
fluency scores	Pearson Correlation	.816**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	60

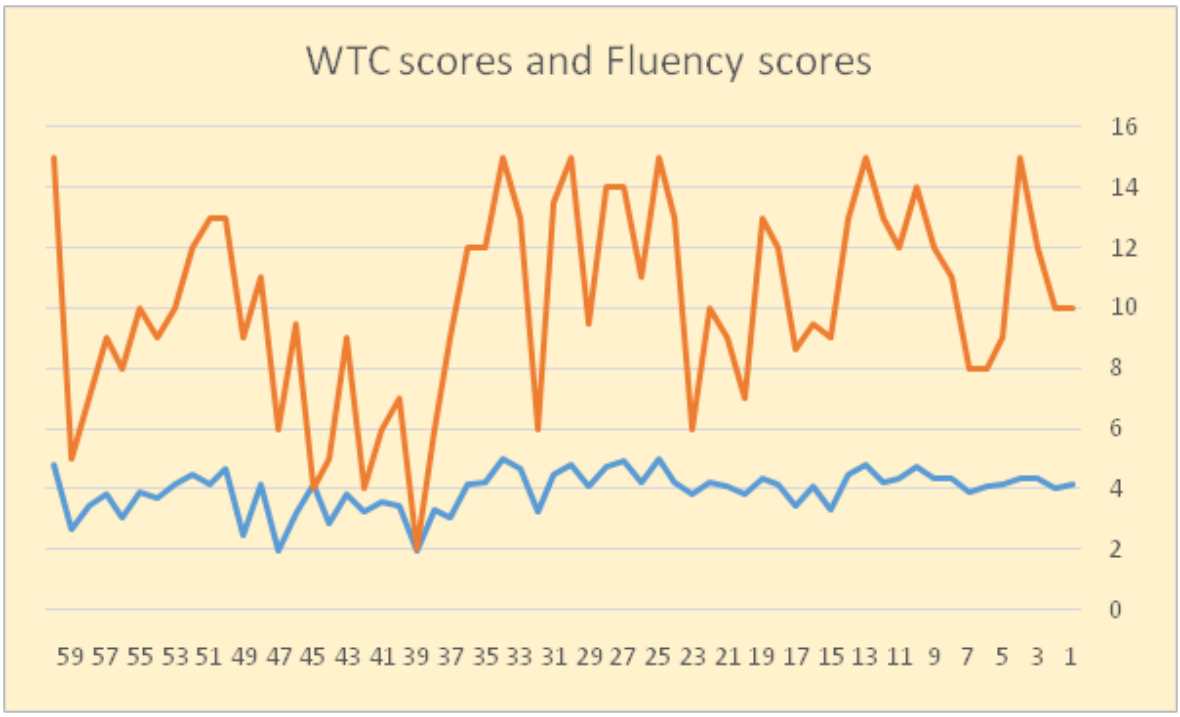

Figure 2: The Correlation between WTC Scores and Fluency in Speaking Skill of Iranian Upper- intermediate EFL Learners

Calculating the Coefficient of Determination for the Total WTC Scores and Speaking Fluency

After confirming the statistically significant relationship between the speaking fluency and WTC scores of the upper - intermediate EFL learners, to get the idea of how much variance the two variables shared, the coefficient of determination was computed. First, the (r= .816) value was squared and then was converted to percentage of variance by multiplying it by (100). The participants' fluency and WTC scores shared (66.58) percent of their variance. Thus, there was acceptable overlap between the two variables. This meant that the fluency scores of the participants helped to explain nearly (66.58) percent of the variance in respondents' WTC scores and vice versa. There was a strong, positive correlation between the two variables, ($r = +.816$, $n = 60$, $p \leq .05$), with high scores of speaking fluency associated with higher scores of WTC scores for the upper- intermediate participants. This rejected the first null hypothesis and suggested that there was a significant correlation between WTC and fluency in speaking skill of Iranian upper- intermediate EFL learners. Figure 2 depicts the correlation between the two aforementioned variables.

Assumptions for the Second Research Question

The relationship between accuracy and WTC scores was also investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Initial analyses such as Skewness analysis and a scatter plot were employed to ensure that there was no violation of the assumption of normality.

Primarily, the descriptive statistics was computed for the results of speaking accuracy and WTC scores of the upper- intermediate group. The results are presented in the following table:

Table 4: Skewness Analysis for Total WTC Scores and Accuracy Scores

		total WTC mean score	accuracy scores
N	Valid	60	60
	Missing	0	0
Mean		3.9611	.7800
Median		4.1667	.8150
Mode		4.17	.90
Std. Deviation		.69763	.17883
Variance		.487	.032
Skewness		-1.017	-1.002
Std. Error of Skewness		.309	.309
Kurtosis		1.056	.764
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.608	.608
Range		3.08	.80
minimum		1.92	.20
Maximum		5.00	1.00
Sum		237.67	46.80

The findings confirmed that the assumption of normality was met in the distributions of the scores. Meanwhile, the Skewness and Kurtosis values reported in the table were all within the range of +2, suggesting that the distributions were all normal and symmetric. The statistic of Skewness for (WTC scores) equaled to -1.01 that for (accuracy scores) came to -1.002. Moreover, the Kurtosis for (WTC scores) was equivalent to 1.05, and for (accuracy scores) amounted to .764. The findings suggested that the distributions were all symmetric. The following scatter plot confirmed the normality of the scores.

The Scatter plot demonstrated the relationship between accuracy and WTC scores. It confirmed the normal distribution of these two variables. There was a straight line, which established the normality of the distribution of scores for speaking accuracy and WTC scores.

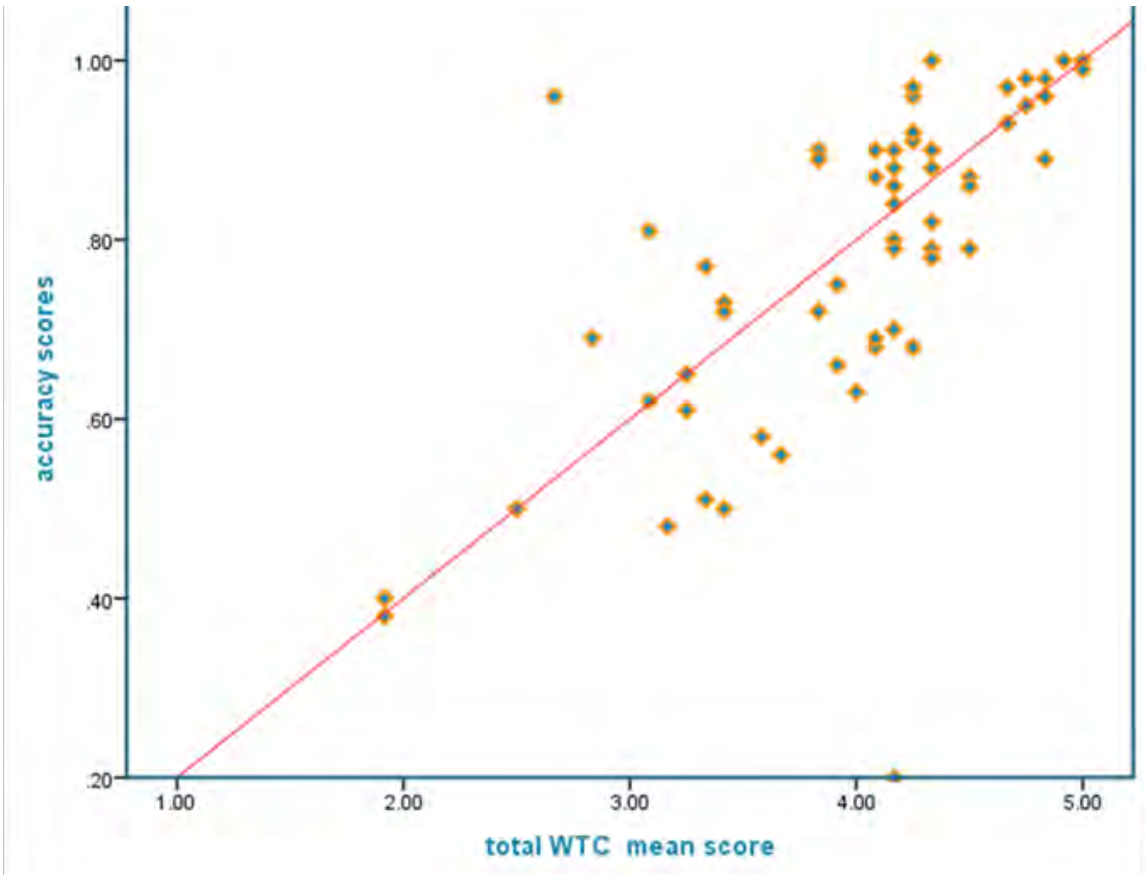

Figure 3. Scatter Plot for the Speaking Accuracy and WTC Scores

Table 5: Correlations for the Total WTC Scores and Speaking Accuracy

		accuracy scores
total WTC mean score	Pearson Correlation	.670**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	60

Based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines (see Table 5), There was a strong, positive correlation between the two variables, ($r = +.670$, $n = 60$, $p \leq .01$), with high scores of accuracy associated with higher scores of WTC.

To determine how much variance accuracy and WTC test scores shared, the coefficient of determination was computed for the accuracy and WTC test scores. The ($r=.670$) value was first squared and then turned to percentage of variance, by multiplying it by (100). This time, the participants' speaking accuracy and their WTC scores shared (44.89) percent of their variance. This was considered medium overlap between the two variables (see Table 5). This suggested that the accuracy scores of the participants helped to explain nearly (44.89%) of the variance in respondents' WTC scores.

Discussion

The first research question was answered through correlation of WTC and fluency test. In WTC test participants were supposed to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 on the extent to which they are willing to participate and initiate communication in some special situations mentioned in the test. Then, through an interview their fluency were analyzed respectively. Analysis of data obtained from administering the test of WTC and fluency revealed the existence of a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables. The correlation ($r=.816$, $N=60$, $P\leq.05$) entails a link between participants WTC level and their speaking fluency; it means that the researcher's null hypothesis is rejected. As a result, it can be stated that in this study and for this group of subjects, willingness to communicate was found to have positive relationship with the speaking fluency. This finding confirms that students who have more tendency toward participating in a communication also produce fluent

speaking. (The higher willingness to communicate, the higher fluency is in their speaking).

The second research question was answered through correlation of WTC and accuracy test. Analysis of data obtained from administering the test of WTC and speaking accuracy revealed the existence of a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables. The correlation ($r = +.670$, $n = 60$, $p \leq .01$) depicts a link between subject's WTC level and their speaking accuracy; it means that the null hypothesis of the research is rejected. As a result, it is safe to say that in this study and for this group of participants, WTC was found to have a positive relationship with the speaking accuracy of them. This finding confirms that learners who are at high level of willingness to communicate also produce accurate speaking. (The higher willingness to communicate, the higher accuracy is in their speaking).

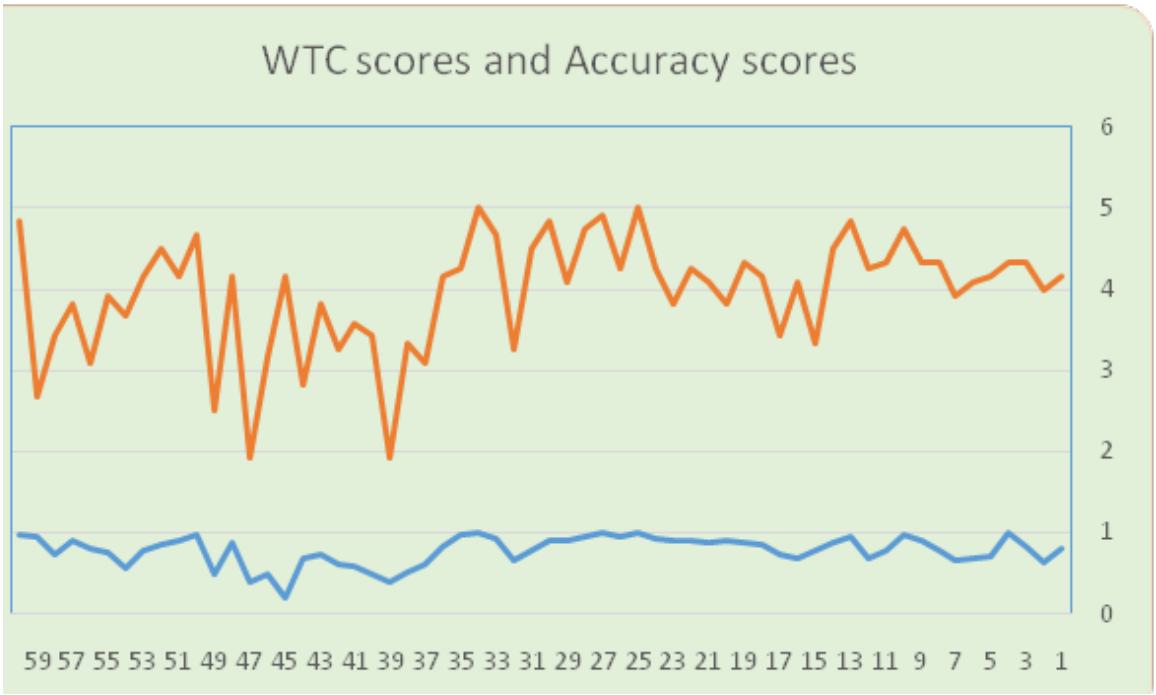

Figure 4: The Correlation between WTC scores and Accuracy in Speaking Skill of Iranian Upper- intermediate EFL Learners

Conclusion

The major goal of this thesis was to find out that besides various components that might relate to speaking fluency and accuracy, the willingness to communicate of learners might play a leading role in the process of producing a fluent and accurate speaking.

In general, findings of the present study go along the same line with Yashima et al (2008) who showed a connection between willingness to communicate and linguistic ability, especially language proficiency. Of course it is important to mention that language proficiency is different from speaking fluency and accuracy. It was originally hypothesized that learners who were more willing to communicate would demonstrate more fluent and accurate speech. The result of present study showed a positive significant relationship between willingness to communicate and speaking fluency and accuracy of learners. The result of this study supported the mentioned hypothesis.

Therefore, based on the two research question of this paper, two conclusion could be drawn from the findings of this study:

First, the study revealed the existence of positive significant relationship between willingness to communicate and speaking fluency of Iranian EFL learners (the higher level of willingness to communicate, the greater fluent speech). Therefore, one can conclude that in this study subject's WTC level is related to their speaking fluency.

Second, the study also found that (in this investigation and for this subjects) willingness to com-

municate is linked to the speaking accuracy. In other words, in this study those how are more willing to initiate and participate in a communication in situation as in a line, in a big and small meeting, that are examined in this study, produce more accurate speech.

In general, based on the findings of this study, the researcher's hypothesis for present study is rejected. In other words, it is confirmed that there is a link between the variables. The researcher obtained the present result through statistics. During the data collection procedure, researcher first participated in classes. During her observation, she found out that willingness to communicate is a facilitator in foreign language learning. In other words, willing to participate in discussions and conversations in class plays role of push bottom. Those learners who are more willing to initiate any communication in class or other situations try to speak. Based on researcher's observation, those learners who speak much more than the other learners speak more fluently and accurately.

The researcher observed that learners who are willing to communicate more, speak more as well. Moreover, she found out that learners who speak more try hard to correct themselves and pay more attention to their speech and have more control over their speaking and the reason behind all of these elements is that they speak much. Therefore, according to the findings of present study, willingness to communicate leads to speak more and then more speaking leads to fluency and accuracy of speech.

According to the findings of the researcher, learners with high level of willingness to communicate are more sociable and chummy. The researcher found that they are really good speaker and attract the attention of audiences. During their speech, they try to use great strategies such as eye contact, gesture, intonation and etc.

In general based on findings and observation of the researcher, willingness to communicate is a key factor in process of language learning. Employing this factor as a tool, trainers can improve the skill of speaking. In the light of increase of speaking in process of learning, learners may have more control over their speech that leads to fluency and accuracy of speaking.

According to findings of this study WTC is as a torch. Its light guides the learners. In the light of this torch learners cope with their problems and mistakes. Once they make a mistake, next time they do not make that again because they are aware of it. Step by step they become more proficient.

As mentioned before, speaking skill is very important in different fields. So, being proficient speaker leads to success. In this way trainers can employ factors that have positive effects on improving speaking skill that in this studied WTC was really helpful in the way.

Recommendation for Further Research

The findings obtained from conducting the present study made it clear that to what extent willingness to communicate could relate to the fluency and accuracy of speaking skill. One can conduct a study to investigate the change of willingness to communicate in process of language learning. A research could be done to demonstrate that to what extent learners' ideology might affect there fluency and accuracy of speaking. Nowadays affective factors have gain so much attention. It is recommended to direct studies to measure other factors influences on speaking fluency and accuracy. In present study, the researcher studied the relation between the variables among female. Others can study the variables among male and female subjects. One of the researches that can be done in this field is that one researcher can do this research in long term in order to record the possible changes and even can expand the its study through different cities or conveniences.

Another area for research in this field can be the relation between culture and willingness to communicate. The researchers can study willingness to communicate across different cultures and investigate its relationship with speaking fluency and accuracy.

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