

Investigating the Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language, English in this context, and communicating in that language can be an anxiety provoking experience for learners. In other words, language anxiety is a major potential factor affecting EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). In this study, the researcher made an attempt to fulfill the following purposes: a) the correlation between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and WTC of the students, b) the reasons of FLA among EFL learners, c) the ways to get rid of FLA, and d) the reasons of students' reticence in English classes. For this purpose, 60 EFL learners within the age range of 18-22 filled out two questionnaires of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Willingness to Communicate questionnaire. Also, the participants were asked to provide their ideas about the reasons of anxiety and reticence in EFL classes. In order to find the possible relationship between students' FLA and WTC, one set of Pearson Product correlation analyses was run, the findings of which revealed that there existed a strong negative relationship between EFL learners' FLA and WTC indicating that students who had high level of anxiety, tended to have low desire to communicate. Moreover, quantitative descriptive approach was used to examine learners' perspectives towards the two concepts. Teachers' negative evaluation was the predominant reason of anxiety among learners. Also, the participants believed that EFL teachers have the most important role in easing the level of anxiety by creating a friendlier relationship and less negative evaluation. The choice of topic was also known as the most important reason of reticence among EFL learners. The findings of this study highlight the fact that language anxiety is a great barrier to WTC.

Keywords: EFL learners, foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate

Introduction

Foreign language learning as a sub-area of Applied Linguistics is deeply related to human psychology. There exist many affective variables (e.g., attitude, motivation, anxiety, inhibition and self-esteem etc.) which have been found to have great effects (positive or negative) on the process of foreign language learning. From among the many factors which influence language learning process, anxiety has been the focus of many researchers.

In general terminology, anxiety refers to an individual's state of developing a feeling of anxiousness and nervousness during learning and demonstrating his/her skills when asked to read, write, listen or speak publicly. Anxiety is called as an emotional response to a threat value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality (Akshalova, 2019). Anxiety can have effects on the process of learning a language. One of the key concepts in learning a new

language which can be affected by anxiety is the learners' willingness to communicate (Al-Hazmi, 2003). Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an important concept due to the increasing emphasis on authentic communication as an essential part of L2 learning and instruction. WTC is defined as "a learner's readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a L2." (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008).

Researchers believe that conversing and interacting are essential parts of learning a second language (Vernon & Jensen, 1984). Also, it is claimed that WTC is "the most immediate determinant of L2 use" (Clement et al., 2003, p. 191). Therefore, one of the fundamental goals of learning a second language is to be willing to use the language for authentic communication (Aydin, 2016). In other words, higher levels of L2 WTC lead to better and more successful communication in L2 contexts.

In this study, the researcher made an attempt to investigate the interaction between the two above-mentioned individual differences (i.e., FLA & WTC) since in Iranian context, most of the EFL learners do not feel at ease while they are asked to communicate in a foreign language. By conducting this research study, the researcher could explain the sources of anxiety that learners feel while communicating. Moreover, by investigating the relationship between learners' anxiety and their willingness to communicate, some recommendations are suggested addressing the problem of unwillingness to communicate among EFL students to all the people who are involved in language learning process. Also, the reasons of learners' reticence are elaborated in details. Considering these issues, the present study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' anxiety and their willingness to communicate in L2?
2. Which stimuli do trigger anxiety among Iranian EFL students?
3. How can EFL students get rid of anxiety in an efficient way?
4. What are the reasons of students' reticence from their own perspectives?

Method

Design

In the current research study, the researcher strived to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate, and to examine the stimuli of FLA and the possible ways of overcoming it from EFL learners' perspectives. Therefore, the present research study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. It is considered as quantitative correlational research since it is an attempt to find the relationship between two variables (i.e., EFL learners' language anxiety and the willingness to communicate). Moreover, the second phase of the study encompassed a qualitative survey with three research questions whose answers were analyzed descriptively by the researcher.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, a total number of 60 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, studying in three language schools participated. Their age range was within 18-22 and they were from both genders (i.e., 30 female & 30 male). The participants were chosen based on convenience sampling from among all the students studying in these language schools. The logic

behind choosing EFL students as the participants of this study was that, these learners are believed to be able describe their feelings toward language learning and making interactions better than language learners at language schools or institutes since they have been studied the relevant subjects in their courses.

Assessments and Measures

The following measures were used in the present study:

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

In order to measure the participants' WTC, an adapted version of the WTC questionnaire by Mc Croskey (1992) was utilized by the researcher. The questionnaire includes 20 Likert scale items and was designed by Mc Croskey to measure a person's willingness to communicate. The participants were asked to express how often they would prefer to communicate in each situation by choosing 0 (never) to 100 (always). From among the 20 items, eight are considered as fillers (items 1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 18); therefore, in the analyses section, these items were not considered relevant. A second section was added to the questionnaire by the researcher in which the participants were asked to choose and mention their perceptions about the factors which influence their willingness to speak in L2.

Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire

The second instrument which was used in this study has two main sections. The first section is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al., (1986). FLCAS is a questionnaire in which there are 33 statements which aim at assessing language learners' anxiety regarding their communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The statements are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (always=5, usually=4, sometimes=3, almost never=2 and never=1). The score of the participants can range from 33 to 165. The lower the score, the higher the level of anxiety. The second section of the questionnaire has two main essay type questions asking the participants about the stimuli that trigger anxiety among them. Moreover, they were asked to respond to the question about the ways of controlling and overcoming language anxiety. This section was designed with the help of two experts in TEFL in order to answer the descriptive research questions 2, 3 and 4.

Procedure

In order to conduct this research project, the researcher administered the two questionnaires to EFL students of the three language schools. It is important to mention that due to the worldwide spread of the coronavirus disease, language courses are held online all around the country; therefore, the researcher had to administer the questionnaires online through email and different social networking applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp, etc. At the beginning of the questionnaires, the researcher had introduced herself and had clarified the objectives of the study to them. She also had assured them that their responses to the questionnaires would be kept anonymous and would not be disclosed to anyone. Data gathering process lasted for about two weeks in was in July, 2021.

Results

Results of the Normality Tests

First of all, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run in order to check whether the data were normally distributed or not. This test is typically used to investigate whether the data distribution deviates from a comparable normal distribution or not. Table 1 and 2 present the descriptive statistics of the variables and the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Willingness to Communicate

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
language anxiety	60	33	62	45.73	8.03
willingness to communicate	60	112	1175	632.15	370.9

Table 2

Normality Test for the Questionnaires

	N	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic	df.	Sig.
language anxiety	60	0.11	60	0.05
willingness to communicate	60	0.20	60	0.07

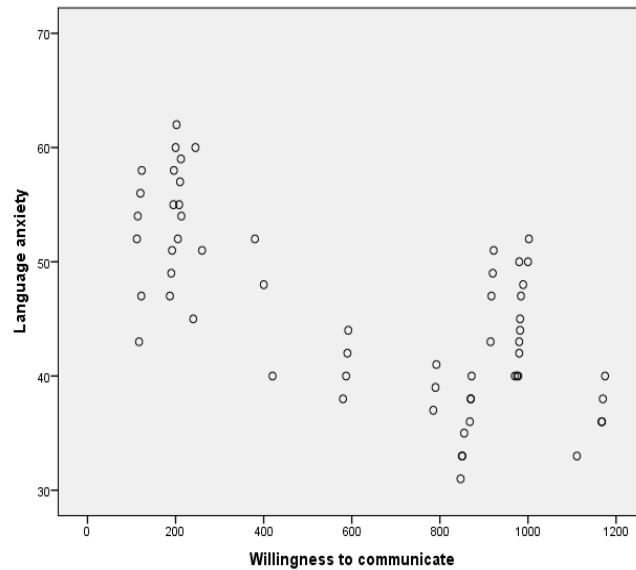
In case the p-value is higher than .05, it is concluded that the sample is normal. However, if the p-value is smaller than .05, it is concluded that the distribution is not normal. As it is seen in Table 4.2, significance values reported for both variables are larger than .05 (i.e., 0.05, 0.06) which show that the data are distributed normally with regard to the variables of the study.

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' anxiety and their willingness to communicate in L2?

Research question 1 deals with the possible relationship that might exist between EFL learners' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate. In order to find the answer to this research question, one set of correlation coefficient analyses was run. Figure 1 presents the related scatter plot.

Figure 1

Scatter plot for the Relationship between EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Willingness to Communicate



As it is seen in the figure, the distribution of the data points is somehow linear and it is almost spread all over the place. Furthermore, the spread of the data is downward showing that there is a negative correlation between the two variables. Moreover, as the distribution of the points does not start off narrow and then get fatter, the data does not violate the assumption of homoscedasticity.

Moreover, in order to find the correlation between the two variables, the Pearson Product Correlation was utilized since the linearity assumption was not violated (according to Figure 4.1). The information about correlation is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Correlations between EFL Learners' Language Anxiety and their Willingness to Communicate

	learners' language anxiety	learners' WTC
Pearson Product Correlation	1.00	- 0.67
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00

	N	60	60
learners' WTC	Correlation Coefficient	-0.67	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	60	60

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

As indicated in Table 4.3, N=60 and there is no outlier or missing data. Furthermore, the Pearson Product Correlation value (-0.67) is negative, indicating a negative correlation between learners' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate. Moreover, according to Cohen (1988), the correlation between the two variables is a big value (above 0.66). In other words, there is quite a strong and negative relationship between learners' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate indicating that higher levels of language anxiety leads to low willingness to communicate among Iranian EFL learners.

2. Which stimuli do trigger anxiety among Iranian EFL students?

In research question 2, the researcher probes the causes of foreign language anxiety from the learners' perspectives. For this purpose, she asks the participants to describe the causes of their language anxiety and makes a list of them. When data gathering process ended, the researcher provided a complete list of learners' responses and categorized them into eight topics of low self-confidence, fear of tests, fear of mistakes, fear of teachers' negative evaluation, fear of being laughed at, insufficient time to practice, lack of interest, and others. For example, phrases such as I cannot communicate with a person whom I do not know was put into category 1(i.e., low self-confidence). In Table 4, some of the answers provided by the participants are provided along with the categories that the researcher has used.

Table 4

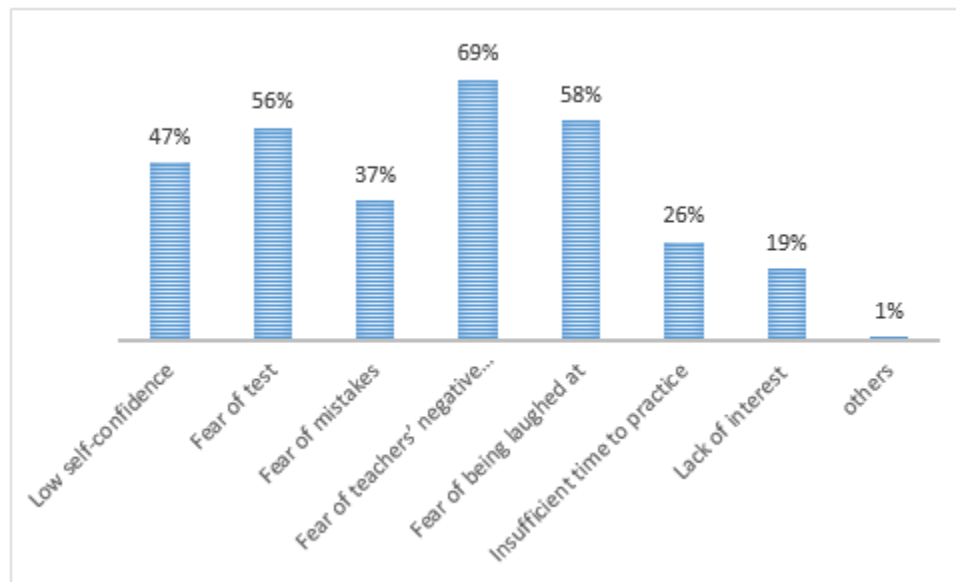
A List of Responses about Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety from EFL Learners' Perspective

Category	Response
Low self-confidence	-Not having ability to do the tasks - Being compared with other classmates.
Fear of tests	- Hating tests specially the ones that you do not study - Difficult tests
Fear of mistakes	- Not having good memories of past failures
Fear of teachers' negative evaluation	- Teachers' judgement on one's weak performance
Fear of being laughed at	- Classmates laughing at one's mistakes - Classmates laughing at one's accent
Insufficient time to practice	- Being busy out of class - Not having time to practice English
Lack of interest	- Not enjoying English. -Parents force to study English

Descriptive statistics of the causes of foreign language anxiety from EFL learners' perspectives are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety from EFL Learners' Perspective



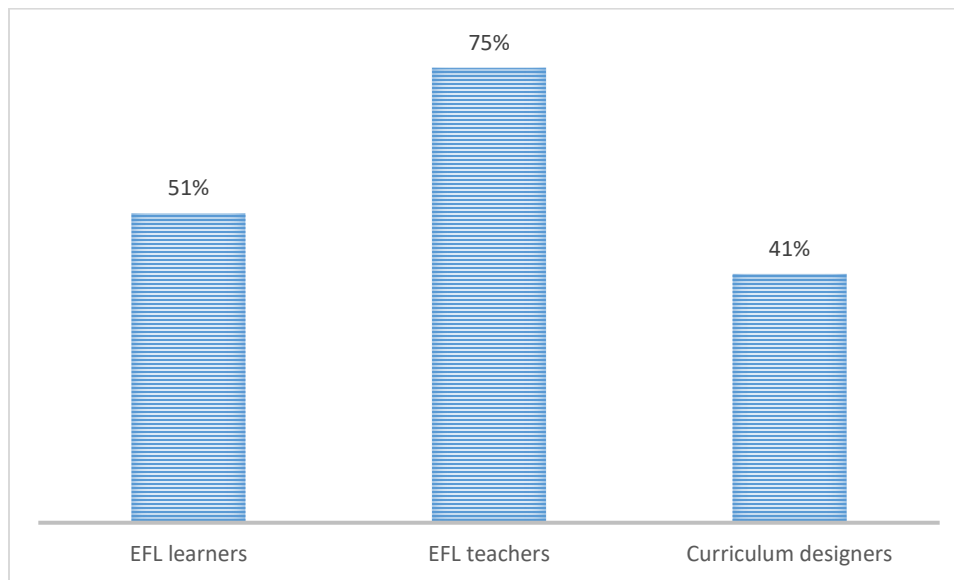
The data obtained from the essay type question showed that students' fear of teachers' negative evaluation is the main source of their language anxiety. Students' fear of the teacher's negative evaluation shows that learners are not aware of the purpose of learning a foreign language. In other words, they do not learn for the sake of learning, rather, they learn to get a good mark and pass their tests. The students were also upset about being laughed at (58%) and fear of tests (56%) as reflected in their responses. Other causes of FLA reported by the EFL learners are: students' low self-confidence (47%), fear of mistakes (37%), and having insufficient time to practice (26%). Lack of interest (19%) was the least chosen item by the learners showing that most of the students who attend EFL courses do take the courses without any force or obligation.

3. How can EFL students get rid of anxiety in an efficient way?

The researcher of the present study also attempted to investigate the ways through which EFL learners can get rid of foreign language anxiety from their own perspectives. The participants mentioned several ways in order to overcome their language anxiety. From among their responses, the researcher concluded that, from their point of view, three main factors are the most effective ones, that is, the learners themselves, their teachers, and the curriculum designers (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Factors which Help EFL Learners to Get Rid of Language Anxiety



The researcher attempted to put the participants' responses into categories in order to report the data more elaborately. A list of participants' responses is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

A List of Ways of Getting Rid of Anxiety from Learners' Perspective

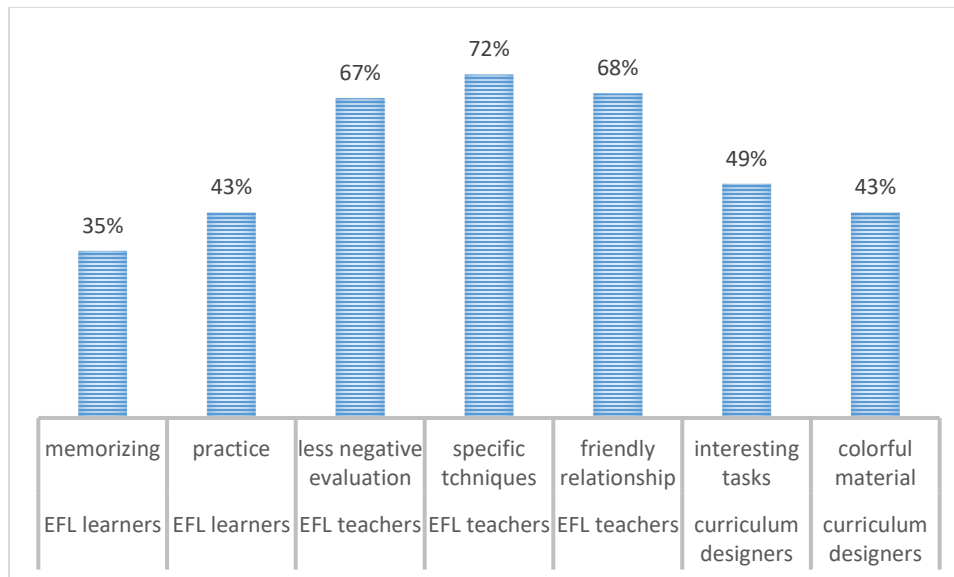
Category	Responses	
Teachers	Less negative evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My teacher should not judge me on my scores. - Teachers should treat their students not biasedly. - Fewer tests in class help me be less anxious.
	Specific techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My teacher can help me not to feel anxious by using special techniques. - Teachers can act like psychologists.
	Friendly relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher should be like a friend to me. - My teacher is not my boss. - Teachers should not punish their students. - Teachers should not let others make fun of me.
Learners	Memorizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I should memorize more words. - I should learn grammar more and better.

	- Learning idioms and expressions help me speak better.	
Practice	- More time should be allocated to study. - Watching English movies help my ear get used to English. - I should talk with my friends in English out of class. - Reading authentic texts (newspaper, etc.) improves my English.	
Curriculum designers	Interesting tasks	- There are not interesting tasks topic in books. - Activities in books are boring and childish.
	Colorful materials	- Books should not be in white and black. - Real pictures should be added to texts.

As it is seen in Figure 4, more than half of the learners (51%) believe that their language anxiety can be relieved by their own attempt. Teachers' role, however, seems more important since 75% of the students put this burden on teachers' side. Moreover, curriculum designers (41%) are also responsible in reducing learners' language anxiety from their points of view.

Figure 4

Ways of Getting Rid of Anxiety from Learners' Perspective



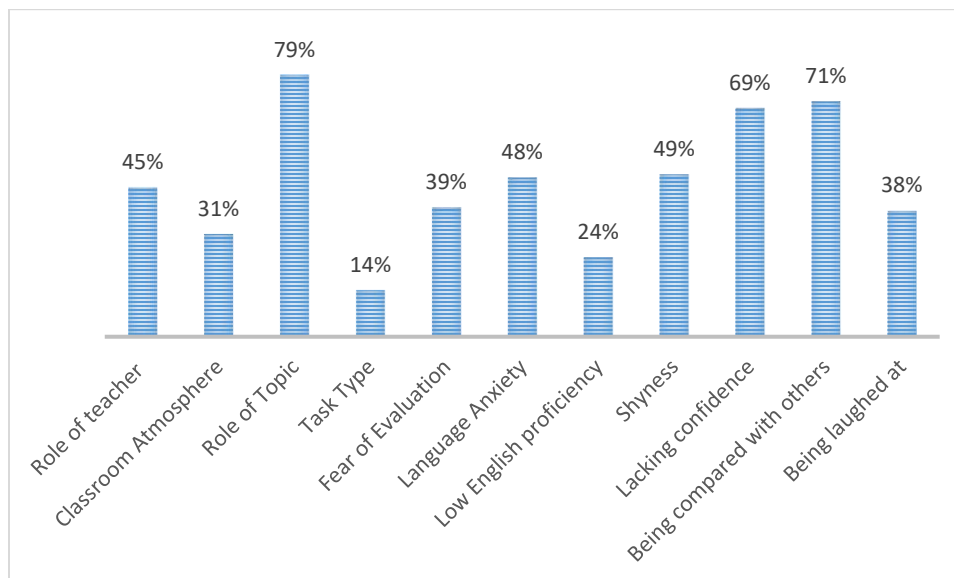
The participants of the study assert that they would feel less anxious if they memorized whatever they were going to talk about before performing the task (35%). Moreover, more practice out of class and is another clue for decreasing FLA (43%) which is a main reason for not making mistakes and therefore feeling less anxious. Language teachers also play an important role in helping the students get rid of language anxiety since their negative evaluation is a main reason of FLA. Therefore, if this evaluation is done in a more efficient way, learners' anxiety will decrease (67%). This can be done through specific techniques of teaching. Also, teachers' relationship with students is so effective in increasing/ decreasing language anxiety (72%). It is really important for language teachers to create a friendly atmosphere in the class rather than a strict and uncared one (68%). And finally, curriculum designers who are considered as important factors in decreasing learners' anxiety should provide tasks and activities which are fun and enjoyable leading the language learners feel less stressed in language classes (49%). Also, designing the books and material in a colorful and attractive way does provide the learners with a comfortable feeling in learning process (43%).

4. What are the reasons of students' reticence from their own perspectives?

Research question 4 investigated the reasons which caused EFL learners to be reticent about communicating with their peers and others in English. The researcher asked the students to choose from among some items which had been chosen from other articles (e.g., Irvanti, 2016; Chang, 2011, etc.) and also add their own items if they were not in the list. Figure 5 presents the learners' responses in percentage.

Figure 5

The Reasons of EFL Learners' Reticence from their Own Perspectives



From among the provided items in the questionnaire, the role of topic (79%) had the highest effect on learners' reticence. The participants of the study had also mentioned being compared with others (71%) and lack of confidence (69%) as the two important factors leading them be less willing to communicate. Other reasons such as shyness (49%), role of teacher

(45%), fear of evaluation (39%), and classroom atmosphere also had medium effect on their willingness to communicate; however, the task type was not seen as a very important factor affecting learners' reticence from their own perspectives.

Discussion

With regard to the first research question, (whether there is any statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language anxiety and willingness to communicate), the result of data analysis showed a statistically significant negative relationship between the two variables. In other words, if EFL learners' language anxiety is high, they are less willing to communicate in the FL and if their anxiety decreases, their willingness to communicate increase. These findings are in line with those of Mc-Croskey and Richmond (1987) who found that willingness to communicate is highly affected by learners' anxiety. They report that learners being able to communicate in the foreign language means they have the ability to raise their confidence and do not feel intimidated by peers or teachers' judgments (feel less anxious).

In another study, McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida (1985) found a negative correlation between language anxiety and willingness to communicate among Japanese language learners indicating that whenever learners' anxiety level was moderate, their willingness to communicate decreased. In a similar study in Puerto Rico, McCroskey, Fayer, and Richmond, (1985) reported a significant negative relationship between language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate among students. These findings led the researchers concluded that the more language anxiety the participants experienced, the less willingness to communicate they had. Also, the results of another study which was conducted by Kang, S.J. (2005) indicated that there was a sufficient negative correlation between students' anxiety and their willingness to communicate. Indicating that EFL learners' high level of anxiety caused their low level of willingness to communicate. Also, Cao and Philp (2006) probed the relationship between L2 WTC and learners' anxiety in taking speaking test. The results of their study indicated that L2 WTC was negatively related to their speaking test anxiety. These findings led the researchers conclude that by enhancing EFL learners' WTC, their speaking anxiety would reduce, thus enhancing their speaking performance.

As justifications for the findings of the present study, the researcher can refer to McCroskey, et al. (1985) who assert that foreign language anxiety which is an enduring personal characteristic lead to variations in self-confidence. In the context of language learning, if a learner is anxious he/she tends to communicate less in comparison to those who are non-anxious. In other words, anxious students are not able to communicate well in terms of output quality which leads them to be less willing to communicate since they believe that anxiety affects both what they say and how they say it. Also, the findings of the preset study regarding the students high amount of fear from teachers' negative evaluation represents the Iranian educational system in which the teacher is viewed as the authority. Students often show some degree of anxiety as far as tests are concerned and since tests are considered as an inseparable part of learning in Iranian educational setting, this fear will accompany learners all time. A quarter of students reported insufficient time for practice (26%). This seems logical since they have insufficient practices due to heavy loads of courses and lack of exposure to context.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to examine the relationships between Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate and their foreign language learning anxiety. The findings of the analyses revealed that learners' willingness to communicate was associated with language

learning anxiety and there was a negative relationship between the two constructs. In other words, EFL learners who had lower levels of language learning anxiety were more willing to communicate in English and vice versa. The researcher also investigated the causes of FLA from the students' perspectives by asking them to write down their responses. From the EFL learners' point of view, fear of teachers' negative evaluation, being laughed at and fear of tests were considered as the dominant reasons. Other reasons which were mentioned by the participants were low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, not having enough time to practice, and lack of interest.

In research question three, the learners were asked to mention the ways that can help them get rid of anxiety. In their responses, they asserted that three elements of language teachers, the learners themselves and the material and curriculum designers all played important roles. Most of the participants believed that if language teachers use specific techniques and create more friendly atmosphere in the class as well as providing less negative evaluation, the anxiety level of the students decreases. EFL learners can also reduce their FLA by using techniques such as memorizing and practicing more and more. And curriculum designers are believed to be helpful in reducing FLA from the learners' point of view. The participants assert that if the learning tasks are designed in an interesting and creative way and if the materials are colorful and intriguing, less anxiety will be experienced in EFL settings. And finally, regarding research question 4, the researcher investigated the reasons of students' reticence from their own perspectives. Based on the replies that the students had provided, the researcher concluded that many factors such as the topic, low confidence, being compared to others, shyness and anxiety, low proficiency, etc. play important roles in learners' reticence.

The findings of the present study, provided helpful implications for language teachers as well as EFL learners and curriculum designers. Regarding language instructors, it is important to consider that teachers are suggested to create a friendly atmosphere to encourage learners to be more active in communicative tasks which leads them to be more willing to communicate. Moreover, language teachers should take into account that their negative evaluation does play a vital role in increasing learners' language anxiety; therefore, less negative evaluation from teachers' side results in less anxiety and more willingness to communicate among EFL learners. Also, language teachers should know about the concept of language anxiety; and therefore, try to identify the factors that cause FLA for L2 learners and suggest strategies that reduce language anxiety.

EFL learners do also get use of the findings of this study since the main target of this topic is to help them be great communicators in the foreign language. Language learners should be aware that their anxiety should not discourage or frustrate them in the process of learning a foreign language. In other words, they should be aware that being anxious does not mean they will not be successful learners. They only need to find techniques and strategies that help them ease their anxiety and improve their WTC. Regarding material and curriculum designers, the findings of the present study highlight the fact that materials and course books should be developed in a way to improve learners' willingness to communicate and reduce their anxiety level. Also, curriculum designers should be aware of the fact that if a task is anxiety provoking, they should alleviate the anxiety by turning the task into a creative one.

Like any other study, in the present study, the researcher encountered some limitations too. Some of the limitations are not controllable such as participants' fear of being tested or lack of time in collecting data, etc.; however, others can be controlled by paying more attention to the process of data gathering. The first limitation that the researcher faced was the small size of the

sample. While the researcher was busy collecting the needed data, universities were holding their classes online due to the spread of the Corona Virus and many language learners did not take part in the process of data collection. Therefore, only 60 EFL learners participated which leads the researcher to be cautious when generalizing the study findings.

The next limitation lies in the data gathering process which lasted for two weeks. Although the needed data for this study were gathered by administering questionnaires, due to the online administration of the scales, it lasted for two weeks which might be affected by some factors. For example, EFL learners might have filled out the two questionnaires at different times with different moods which surely does affect the way they responded to the items.

Besides the limitations, there existed delimitations which helped the researcher conduct her research study. First of all, the sample of the study was EFL students who study English as their majors; therefore, the researcher used the original questionnaires since the participants were proficient enough to go through the items. Moreover, although language courses were being held online during data gathering process, the researcher administered the questionnaires online (using Telegram and WhatsApp).

Those researchers who are interested in the objectives of this study are suggested to conduct research studies considering the following points: In this study, the researcher did not compare the relationship of the two variables between EFL learners with different proficiency levels. Further research is expected to fill this gap to find out whether their studying experience plays an influential role in this concept or not. The participants of the current study were EFL students only; therefore, replication of the process on other EFL communities (e.g., institute learners, etc.) is suggested. Lastly, EFL learners' age, and gender can be considered as moderator variables in future studies.

Acknowledgments

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