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The Relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Learner Autonomy among EFL University Students

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Learners' Autonomy among university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Recently, both Willingness to Communicate and autonomy have been recognized as critical affective and behavioral factors influencing language acquisition, especially in learner-centered educational settings. The study aims to explore whether students who exhibit higher levels of autonomy in their learning are also more willing to initiate and participate in communicative tasks in English. The sample includes 65 university students, (male and female), they are randomly chosen from Baghdad and Tikrit universities. Data collection involved the administration of standardized questionnaires to a sample of EFL university students. Quantitative data were analyzed using correlation coefficient. Preliminary findings indicate a significant positive correlation between

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learner autonomy and willingness to communicate, suggesting that students who take greater responsibility for their learning are more likely to engage in communicative activities. These results highlight the importance of fostering autonomous learning environments to support EFL learners' communicative competence. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for integrating autonomy-enhancing strategies into EFL curricula to encourage more confident and communicative learners.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, EFL students, Learner Autonomy, Correlation, university students

العلاقة بين الرغبة في التواصل واستقلالية المتعلم بين طلبة الجامعة دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في العلاقة بين الرغبة في التواصل والاستقلالية التعليمية لدى طلاب الجامعة الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. في الآونة الأخيرة، تم الاعتراف بأن كلًا من الرغبة في التواصل والاستقلالية التعليمية عاملان فعالان وسلوكيان حاسمان يؤثران على اكتساب اللغة، خاصة في البيئات التعليمية المتمركزة حول المتعلم. تهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف ما إذا كان الطلاب الذين يُظهرون مستويات أعلى من الاستقلالية في تعلمهم هم أيضًا أكثر استعدادًا لبدء والمشاركة في المهام التواصلية باللغة الإنجليزية. تشمل العينة 65 طالبًا وطالبة جامعيين، تم اختيارهم عشوائيًا. تم جمع البيانات من خلال تطبيق استبيانات قياسية على عينة من طلاب الجامعة الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. تم تحليل البيانات الكمية باستخدام معامل الارتباط. تشير النتائج الأولية إلى وجود علاقة إيجابية ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الاستقلالية التعليمية والرغبة في التواصل، مما يوحي بأن الطلاب الذين يتحملون مسؤولية أكبر في تعلمهم هم أكثر ميلًا للمشاركة في الأنشطة التواصلية. تسلط هذه النتائج الضوء على أهمية تعزيز بيئات التعلم الذاتي لدعم الكفاءة التواصلية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تختتم الدراسة بتوصيات تربوية لدمج استراتيجيات تعزيز الاستقلالية في مناهج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتشجيع ظهور متعلمين أكثر ثقة وميولاً إلى التواصل.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الرغبة في التواصل، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، الاستقلالية التعليمية، الارتباط، طلاب الجامعة.

1. Introduction

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, developing learners' communicative competence remains a central goal. However, a persistent challenge faced by language educators is the reluctance of students to actively participate in communicative activities, even after years of formal instruction. **Willingness to Communicate (WTC)**—defined as the probability that a learner will choose to initiate communication when free to do so—is now seen as a critical factor in successful language acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Students who are unwilling to communicate may miss important opportunities for language practice and, consequently, slower progress in language development.

At the same time, **learner autonomy**, or the capacity of students to take control of their own learning process (Holec, 1981), has been increasingly emphasized in second language acquisition research. Autonomous learners are more likely to set goals, seek opportunities to practice language outside the classroom, and employ strategies that enhance learning effectiveness (Little, 2007). Importantly, autonomy also fosters a sense of responsibility and motivation, which can influence learners' readiness to participate in communicative tasks (Benson, 2013).

Despite the theoretical alignment between learner autonomy and WTC, empirical studies investigating the relationship between these two constructs—especially among university-level EFL learners—remain limited. Existing research has tended to examine them in isolation, focusing either on communication anxiety and motivation (Yashima, 2002) or on the benefits of self-directed learning (Tassinari, 2012). As a result, there is a gap in understanding whether and how learner autonomy contributes to increased willingness to communicate in the EFL context, particularly in university settings where students are expected to become more self-directed and communicatively competent.

Addressing this gap is crucial for informing pedagogical practices that not only promote autonomy but also cultivate communicative confidence in language learners. Understanding the link between these two variables may lead to more effective teaching strategies that foster both independent learning and communicative engagement, ultimately improving language proficiency outcomes among EFL students.

"What is EFL students' level at Willingness to Communicate Scale?

"What is EFL students' level at Learner Autonomy Scale?"

"What is EFL university students' Willingness to Communicate and their Learner Autonomy Scales?".

1.2 Aims of the study

This study aims to:

1. Finding out EFL students' level at Willingness to Communicate Scale?

2. Finding out EFL students' level at Learner Autonomy Scale?

3. Finding out the relationship between EFL university students level in Willingness to Communicate and their level in Learner Autonomy Scales?".

1.3. Research Questions

The study will address the following research questions:

1. What is EFL students' level at Willingness to Communicate Scale?

2. What is EFL students' level at Learner Autonomy Scale?

3. What is the relationship between EFL university students level in Willingness to Communicate and their level in Learner Autonomy Scales?"

1.4 Limits

The study is confined to Iraqi EFL university students at Tikrit University/College of Education for Humanities/English Department for the academic year 2025.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses the growing need in EFL education to shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction, where learners are both autonomous and communicatively active (Little, 2007; Benson, 2013). Understanding the relationship between autonomy and WTC can help educators foster a learning environment that supports students' confidence and participation in English.

Second, most EFL students—especially in university settings—struggle with speaking or initiating conversations in English, despite having studied the language for years. If learner autonomy is found to influence WTC, then promoting autonomy may serve as a key strategy for encouraging more communicative engagement (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002).

2.Theoretical Background

2.1 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

People communicate to each other at different times, but chatting is important for building relationships and communicating with others. Some people only talk when someone else does, and sometimes not even then. Some people have a habit of speaking out before they are asked.
When it comes to motivating some people to start a conversation, context can be quite important. In brief, readiness to communicate is a psychological trait that makes people more likely to converse to others. At initially, readiness to communicate is connected to communication in one's primary language (McCroskey and Baer, 1985). McCroskey posited that characteristics such as fear and anxiety significantly influence oral communication, integrating these aspects as essential components of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the target language context.

McCroskey and Baer (1985) and McCroskey and Richmond (1986) were the first to write on the idea of WTC in communication literature. They based their work on Burgoon's (1976) previous work (Wen and Clement, 2003, pp.18-38). McCroskey and Baer explicitly defined readiness to communicate as a personality trait, even though external conditions can affect it. They characterized it as a persistent and unwavering tendency to communicate across many circumstances.

MacIntyre (1994) proposed a model that examined WTC from an alternative viewpoint. The model examined the interrelations among many different traits. The results corroborated a model indicating that a combination of perceived communication competence and communication apprehension exerted the most significant influence on willingness to communicate (WTC). It was formerly believed that introversion, self-worth, and, to a lesser extent, anomie, were the causes of these variables. The study's results indicate that this model may account for around 60% of the variance in WTC. Furthermore, MacIntyre suggested that this model may be employed to examine situational variability (MacIntyre et al., 1998, pp. 545–562).

Next is MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model Several layers of variables feed WTC in the model. WTC depends on other factors as a final-order variable. The six layers of WTC—situational antecedents, motivational tendencies, affective-cognitive context, social-individual context, communicative conduct, and behavioral goal—are included in this heuristic model of variables impacting WTC. Social and individual communication circumstances are most important at the concept's base. This layer addresses society-person relations. Social context is the intergroup

setting in which interlocutors grow, while individual context is the stable personality features connected with communication. Societal context creates conditions for learning and using a second language (Clément, 1986) while imposing its members' attitudes, values, bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Gardner and Clement (1990) define intergroup climate as two complementary dimensions: community structure and lasting emotional and affective linkages. Comprehensive intergroup relationships require the acquisition and use of a second language, while poor intergroup connections may demotivate language learning and communication (Gardner and Clément, 1990).

Personality explains responses and interactions between in-group and out-group individuals. Extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience may affect second language acquisition and communication readiness. In Japan, attitude (international posture), English learning motivation, and English communication confidence affect English WTC, according to Yashima (2002). Different personality types may be ready to learn a second language and confident in using it for communication.

MacIntyre (2007) depicts WTC as a complex concept formed by communication anxiety, perceived communication skill, and perceived behavioral control. The subsequent layer in the model is termed motivational inclinations, defined as stable individual difference qualities observable across many contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998). It includes motivation between people, motivation between groups, and self-confidence in a second language. Interpersonal motivation is the way a person feels about the second language and the people who speak it. Intergroup motivation refers to the attitudes and relationships among persons who represent language-related groups (MacIntyre, 1998).

Based on experience, communicative skill boosts self-confidence. A larger sense of communicative ability leads to increased self-confidence, which in turn fosters a greater willingness to speak in a second language. We know that certain of the ways we talk to each other stay the same over time. This indicates that individuals exhibit consistent patterns in their communicative behavior across many contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In certain contexts, particular communicative responses may be elicited, varying across different scenarios. The following layer deals with these variables. It is called the situated antecedents of communication. These factors are characterized as a propensity to engage in communication with a particular

individual and reflect communicative self-assurance. The factors of affiliation and control affect this need to talk to a certain person. Control also has an effect on communicating in a second language. If a person can use their second language to reach a goal without any trouble, control could be a reason. People usually try to change how others act, and in a second language scenario, trying to change how someone else acts to reach a goal might be a reason to speak a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

MacIntyre et al. (2001) examined readiness to communicate as an indicator of social support and the language learning orientations of immersion students. Matsuoka (2004) assessed Japanese college students' desire to communicate (WTC) in both their first and second languages. Matsuoka and Evans (2005) argued that Japanese nursing students' second language acquisition depends on their willingness to communicate.

2. Definitions of Learner Autonomy

The Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project in the early 1980s started the idea of learner autonomy in language education. The most common definition in the literature is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). This idea came from the idea of freedom and autonomy in philosophy.

subsequently, "capacity" and "take responsibility for" were sometimes used instead of "ability" and "take charge of." It looks like these changes to the words are only about language, and the meaning of the construct stays the same. This ability was further clarified as not being "innate but must be acquired," mostly through formal educational approaches (Holec, 1981, p. 3).

These differences in how learner autonomy is defined show a tendency in growth that one should expect. Since every learning construct is rooted in and evolves from a situational context, its interpretation should be adapted by users in response to shifts in political ideology, language acquisition theory, technological advancements, labor market demands, and educational goals. This is even more important for learner autonomy, and recent research has shown that this skill needs to be taught and used in certain social situations (Smith & Ushioda, 2009). People from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds may think differently about what it means to be independent as a learner. This means that various people will respond to different

approaches of helping them learn this ability. These differences can be seen in the four different points of view: psychological, technological, socio-cultural, and political-critical (Benson, 2013).

Psychological perspectives emphasize learners' personal traits, technical perspectives emphasize learning environment traits, socio-cultural perspectives emphasize learner-environment interactions, and political-critical perspectives emphasize community access, control, power, and ideology. At first glance, these points of view may seem to be very different or even opposite, but they actually work together. The two most essential factors that affect learner autonomy are the learning environment (from a technical point of view) and the learner's personal traits (from a psychological point of view). In a shared setting, people negotiate their socio-cultural circumstances. These community interactions aim to increase learning, agency, and quality of life (political-critical stance). Oxford (2003) suggests that research should include multiple perspectives because they are not mutually exclusive.

2.1 Learner autonomy models for development stages

Nunan (1997) initially linked learner autonomy features to growth stages. He proposed a five-level paradigm centered on learner action: awareness, involvement, intervention, invention, and transcendence. The phases of learning teach learners to perform a series of cognitive and behavioral actions to learn a language item. Students must know their learning goals and how to achieve them. They set goals and pick assignment that suits them. They then tweak things, develop new learning goals, and create new projects.

The model gives a meaningful index of learner autonomy that builds up over time. It is very evident what the learning behaviors and processes are at each stage. Nonetheless, this sequence of growth may not be applicable to learners in diverse circumstances (Sinclair, 2009). This means that a student doesn't have to reach Level 2 of learner autonomy before reaching Level 4. This shows that learner autonomy is not universal and that language learning theory-driven models for socially-mediated phenomena are flawed (Nunan & Lamb, 2001). The second model of learner autonomy relies on self-regulation. It includes reactive and proactive self-regulation (Littlewood, 1999).

The differentiation between reactive and proactive levels has yielded major insights, indicating the promotion of autonomy in education without substantial modifications (Benson, 2013) and establishing a criterion for evaluation. This distinction, however, is somewhat broad. Scharle and

Szabo (2000) came up with the third model, which has three steps: raising awareness, altering attitudes, and transferring roles. The first step in the cognitive process of raising awareness is to help learners understand the learning goals, what they need to learn, and how they will get there. Changing attitudes is the stage of transition where students try to change how they learn by replacing old ways of learning with new ones. They choose the best approaches and tactics for their learning journey in a logical way (Little, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 Population

Best et al (2006, p.3-16) "state that population is any group of individuals that has one or more characteristics in common". The population of the present study covers University students (male and female) in Baghdad and Tikrit. The sample of this study is limited to the EFL students (male and female), for the academic year (2024/2025). The sample includes 65 university students, (male and female). They are randomly chosen.

3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire serves as a key research instrument designed to gather data by prompting respondents to answer questions or respond to specific items. This study adopts questionnaires adapted from Namaziandost et al. (2024). The first section measures Willingness to Communicate (WTC) using a 16-item scale, while the second section assesses Learner Autonomy with an 11-item scale. Responses are collected using a 5-point Likert scale: "Strongly Agree (5)," Agree (4) "Neutral (3)," and "Disagree (2)", “Strongly Disagree (1).”

3.3 Validity

Bynom (2001, p.3) "define validity as "the degree to which a test (instrument) measures or can be effectively used for the purpose for which it is intended to be measured"."

Many forms of validity exist, such as face validity, text validity, construct validity, etc. Material validity is the type of method used to determine whether or not the tool is accurate to achieve the aims of the current research. The questionnaire was offered to a jury of qualified instructors in the field of teaching English as a foreign language to achieve the substantive validity of the tool.

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3.4 Reliability

Reliability is “an essential characteristic of any good measurement instrument. It refers to the consistency of measurement, which not only makes validity possible but also determines the degree of confidence that can be placed in a test's results” (Verma & Beard, 1981, p. 860).

To assess reliability, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated for the questionnaires. The results indicated high reliability, with a coefficient of 0.88 for Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and 0.93 for Learner Autonomy (LA), both of which are considered statistically acceptable.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

This section includes students’ responses to the questionnaires items:

4.1 Results Related to the First Question

To verify the first question, which states, "*What is EFL students’ level at Willingness to Communicate Scale?"* The average score on the students' "willingness to communicate scale" was 47.58, while the theoretical average was 48 with a standard deviation of 5.57. The formula for the T-test for one sample is utilized. The t-value that was estimated is 0.936, which is greater than the t-value that was discovered in the table, which is 2.000 at the 0.05 level of significance when the degree of freedom is 64. The results in Table (1) show that there are no statistically significant discrepancies between the theoretical mean and the students' desire to communicate scale. These results indicate that students exhibit a notably low degree of willingness to communicate.

Table 1

The Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and One Sample T-Value of the Students' Willingness to Communicate Scale

Group	No. of students	Mean	SD.	Theoretical Mean	T-Value		DF	Level of Significance
					Calculated	Tabulated		
WTC	65	47.58	5.57	48	0.936	2.000	64	0.05

4.2 Results Related to the Second Question

To verify the second question, which states, "*What is EFL students' level at Learner Autonomy Scale?"* The average score on the students' learner autonomy scale is 34.03, and the theoretical average is 33, with a standard deviation of 6.42. Utilizing the T-test formula for one sample. The calculated t-value is 4.783, exceeding the tabular t-value of 2.000 at the 0.05 level of significance with 64 degrees of freedom. "The results of Table (2) show that there are statistically significant differences between the theoretical mean and the students' learner autonomy scale, with the learner autonomy scale being higher." Based on these findings, students exhibit a pronounced inclination towards the learner autonomy scale.

Table 2

The Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and One Sample T-Value of the Students' Learner Autonomy Scale

Group	No. of students	Mean	SD.	Theoretical Mean	T-Value		DF	Level of Significance
					Calculated	Tabulated		
LA	65	34.03	6.42	33	4.783	2.000	64	0.05

4.3 Results Related to the Third Question

In order to investigate the correlation which is between "*EFL university students' Willingness to Communicate and their Learner Autonomy Scales*?". Thus, the Pearson correlation coefficient is employed. The computed findings indicate that the r-value is 0.459 and the critical value is 0.246, with a significance level of 0.05 and a sample size of 65. As a result, "this shows that there is a correlation coefficient between EFL university students' willingness to communicate and their learner autonomy scales," as seen in Table (3).

Table 3

The Correlation between students' Willingness to Communicate and their Learner Autonomy Scales

Sample Size	R- Value	Critical value	Significance 0.05
65	0.459	0.246	Not Sig.

4.4 Discussion of Results

The study explores the dynamics between Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Learner Autonomy (LA) among Iraqi EFL university students, revealing intriguing patterns about how these two psychological and educational constructs interact. The results paint a picture of students who are moderately willing to engage in English communication but exhibit strong independent learning habits—and, importantly, these traits are somewhat linked. Moderate Willingness to Communicate: A Reluctance to Speak? When examining students' WTC, the findings show that their average score (47.58) is just slightly below the theoretical mean (48), with no statistically significant difference. This suggests that, on the whole, students are neither highly eager nor entirely reluctant to communicate in English—they hover around a moderate level of willingness. Why might this be? In many EFL contexts, especially where English is not used daily, students often hesitate to speak due to: Fear of mistakes (language anxiety), Cultural norms that discourage spontaneous classroom participation, Limited real-life practice outside academic settings. This moderate WTC implies that while students are not completely silent, they may need more encouragement—structured speaking activities, low-stakes conversational practice, or confidence-building exercises—to become more active communicators.

In contrast, the Learner Autonomy (LA) results are striking. Students scored significantly higher (34.03) than the theoretical average (33), indicating that they are highly autonomous learners. This means they likely: Take initiative in studying outside class (e.g., using online resources, self-directed reading). Set personal language-learning goals. Seek out additional practice without relying solely on teachers.

This finding aligns with trends in higher education, where university students often develop self-regulated learning strategies. In Iraq, where access to immersive English environments may be limited, students might compensate by independently engaging with media, textbooks, or digital tools.

The relationship between autonomy and willingness to communicate, Perhaps the most compelling discovery is the moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.459$) between WTC and LA. This suggests that students who take more control of their learning also tend to be more willing to communicate—and vice versa. Why does this relationship exist? Confidence from autonomy: Students who actively seek learning opportunities may feel more prepared and thus more willing

to speak. Practice leads to comfort: Autonomous learners might engage in more self-initiated speaking practice (e.g., talking to themselves, recording speeches), which reduces anxiety over time. Motivational overlap: Both traits may stem from intrinsic motivation—students who care about improving English are likely to both study independently and push themselves to communicate.

However, the correlation is not extremely strong, meaning other factors (e.g., personality, teacher influence, classroom environment) also shape WTC.

The study highlights two key takeaways; Autonomy can support communication. Since more autonomous learners tend to be more willing to speak, teachers might foster self-directed speaking tasks (e.g., vlogging, peer teaching, language exchanges). Moderate WTC calls for intervention. Even though students are independent learners, their hesitation to communicate suggests that classroom dynamics (e.g., fear of judgment, lack of speaking opportunities) may need adjustment.

These students appear self-sufficient in learning but cautious in speaking—a reminder that language acquisition requires both independent study and social practice. Future research could delve deeper into why some autonomous learners still hesitate to communicate and how teachers can bridge that gap.

5. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the interplay between Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Learner Autonomy (LA) among EFL university students, revealing a moderate but meaningful connection between the two constructs. The findings indicate that while students exhibit strong autonomous learning behaviors, their willingness to communicate in English remains moderate, suggesting that independence in learning does not always directly translate to confidence in speaking. The moderate positive correlation between WTC and LA implies that students who take charge of their learning are somewhat more inclined to engage in communication, possibly due to increased confidence, self-directed practice, or intrinsic motivation. However, the hesitation to

speak persists, likely influenced by factors such as language anxiety, cultural norms, and limited real-world English use.

These results highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that not only foster autonomy but also create a supportive environment for communication. Encouraging low-pressure speaking activities, peer interactions, and self-directed speaking tasks (e.g., vlogging, language exchanges) could help bridge the gap between independent learning and oral engagement.

Future research could further explore why some highly autonomous learners remain reluctant to communicate and investigate specific classroom interventions that enhance both WTC and LA simultaneously. Ultimately, this study underscores that language learning success depends on balancing self-driven study with meaningful communicative practice.

APPENDIX (A)

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Greet someone in English.					
2. Say thank you in English when someone lends you a pen.					
3. Give directions to your favourite restaurant in English.					
4. Tell someone in English about the story of a TV show you saw.					
5. Read out a two-way dialogue in English from a textbook.					
6. Translate a spoken utterance from Turkish into English.					
7. Interview someone in English asking your own original questions.					
8. Interview someone in English asking questions from the textbook.					
9. Do a role-play in English at your desk (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant).					
10. Do a role-play standing in front of the class in English (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant).					
11. Give a short speech in English					

about your hometown with notes.					
12. Give a short self-introduction without notes in English.					
13. Ask someone in English to repeat what they have just said in English because you did not understand.					
14. Ask the meaning of a word you do not know in English.					
15. Ask someone how to pronounce a word in English.					
16. Ask someone in English how to say a phrase you know how to say in Turkish but not in English.					

Learner Autonomy

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.					
2. I make good use of my free time in English study.					
3. I preview before the class.					
4. I find. I can finish my task in time.					
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc.					
6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself.					
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I make progress.					
8. I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language.					
9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc.					
10. I know my strengths and					

weaknesses in my English study.					
11- I choose books, exercises which suit me, neither too difficult nor too easy.					

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