

*Dynamic emergent patterns of L2 willingness  
to communicate within the ecology of the classroom*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the dynamic factors influencing willingness to communicate (WTC) in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Iran at a private institute, over the period of one semester, from an ecological perspective. Six students (2 males and 4 females) participated in the study allowing intensive, individual-level microanalysis. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and learning journals. Qualitative content analysis was applied to the data through reading, coding and revising the codes which were later analyzed by MAXQDA in light of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model as an analytical framework. Six WTC factors within the microsystem of classroom ecology were identified: cognitive factors, linguistic factors, and affective factors. In addition, factors at the meso-, exo-, and macrosystem and their effect on classroom WTC were explained. The findings shed light on an ecological understanding of the dynamics of Iranian EFL students' WTC in language classrooms. The comparison of these findings with those of a previous study within the context of China is also discussed.

*Keywords:* willingness to communicate; ecological understanding; nested ecosystems model; motivation

## 1. Introduction

It is unquestionable that one of the most important factors in effective second language acquisition is students' classroom participation, especially in a foreign language learning context. Interaction research proved that students' participation has a facilitating role in language acquisition. Therefore, researchers such as MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clement and Noels (1998) stress the important role of learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language learning as a factor promoting acquisition. The concept of WTC originated from L1 communication. L1 WTC was considered to be a personality-based, trait-like predisposition (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). However, the situation is more complex with regard to the second language acquisition because here the level of individuals' L2 proficiency, particularly their L2 communicative competence, is an additionally powerful and modifying variable (Dörnyei, 2010).

Findings of empirical studies have indicated that L2 WTC is under the influence of many individual factors, such as motivation, attitude, and L2 confidence (Cao, 2011, 2013, 2014; Cao & Philp, 2006; Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Yashima, 2002). However, some of these studies have utilized linear and predictive perspectives *via* quantitative surveys providing little contextual evidence about L2 WTC emergent patterns within the actual classroom ecology. Furthermore, a number of studies have recently offered evidence for the emergence of situational WTC in the context of the L2 classroom (Bernaldes, 2016; Cao, 2011; Cao, 2014; Kang, 2005; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Peng, 2012, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Findings of these studies mainly refer to the fact that WTC is a multilayered construct that could fluctuate from time to time under the intricate influence of individual conditions and environmental factors.

The situated nature of WTC is currently under investigation with the purpose of understanding it more fully. Nevertheless, as Cao (2014) argues, it seems that in order to explore the dynamic nature of WTC, a description of WTC adopting an etic view is not sufficient. In other words, to examine the dynamic nature of WTC, an emic perspective is also essential. Yet, most studies that have been conducted in the context of Iran have treated WTC as a static trait largely neglecting its dynamic nature. Some Iranian learners may be competent yet unwilling to communicate while others seek out every opportunity to get their messages across with their limited linguistic resources. Bridging these gaps in the literature, this study investigates some contextually dynamic factors and emergent patterns that can affect L2 WTC from an ecological perspective. Making use of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) nested ecosystems model, based on the

basic principles of the ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004; Mercer, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2016) and providing a contextual framework to investigate dynamic nature of WTC, the study reported below explores factors affecting Iranian learners' WTC in different L2 classroom situations. Besides, it was aimed to compare the ecology of L2 WTC within the context of Iran with a similar one within the context of China (Peng, 2012) to determine whether similar or different patterns emerge in these two contexts.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. L2 willingness to communicate

L2 WTC was defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a theoretical pyramid-shaped construction for situated L2 WTC which incorporates a range of potential linguistic and psychological factors influencing WTC in L2. In this pyramid model, different levels of conceptualization, intergroup communication processes, and time-related factors were taken into account. This model defines WTC as a behavioral construct preceding the ultimate stage of using an L2 by a specific individual. MacIntyre et al. (1998) made a distinction between immediate situational factors and enduring influences underlying WTC in the L2. The first three layers contain situational factors, such as the desire and confidence to communicate with a specific person at a specific time in a specific place. The enduring influences are considered to be stable factors shaping the foundation of the pyramid. Intergroup motivation, communicative competence, intergroup climate, and personality are examples of these enduring influences. The importance of the pyramid model is that it is the "first attempt towards a comprehensive treatment of WTC in the L2" as a situational variable (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 558).

As a consequence of the situational view of WTC, L2 WTC has been associated with several individual and social variables, including self-confidence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 2001), international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004), personality (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), learners' beliefs (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), motivation (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001), gender, and age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002; Weaver, 2004). While these earlier studies relied mostly on quantitative data, more recent studies have employed qualitative methods to explore situational nature of WTC. In qualitative research exploring L2 situated WTC among Korean learners, Kang (2005) used interviews, stimulated recall, and class observations to gather data

from four Korean L2 learners. Inductive analysis of these data showed that psychological factors (i.e., excitement, responsibility, and security) and situational variables (i.e., topic, interlocutors, and conversational context) interacted with each other in determining students' situational WTC. Additionally, in his more recent multiple-case study, Cao (2014) found that situational L2 WTC emerges from the joint impact of linguistic factors, classroom environmental conditions, and individual characteristics. Moreover, he suggested that the combined impact of these factors is different from person to person as it might be facilitative for some and debilitating for others. Examining L2 WTC as a complex dynamic system, Pawlak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015) reported that Polish learners' WTC was in a state of flux influenced by factors such as time management, interlocutors' cooperation, discussion topic, interlocutors' topic familiarity, mastery of requisite lexis, and opportunities given to share students' ideas.

## 2.2. Ecological model of L2 WTC

The individual, environmental, social, and cultural influences on situational L2 WTC justify the need for adopting an ecological view. Language ecology is defined as the study of interactions between any specific language and its environment since it is primarily determined by the people who learn it, who use it, and who transmit it to others (Haugen, 1972). From an ecological perspective, the significance of context in language learning cannot be overestimated because it is constructed through the social and dynamic interaction between an individual and his environment on a moment-by-moment basis (Larsen-Freeman, 2016; Mercer, 2012; van Lier, 2004). An ecological approach to research on language learning is an observation-based approach which focuses on contextual analysis, significant attention to students' activities in context, and patterns associated with the complex process of interactions (van Lier, 2004).

The ecological perspective views a web of interrelating interactions among learners, teachers, their immediate classroom contexts at the micro level, and institutional factors at the macro level. All the elements in the interaction web are invisibly interrelated. For example, agency in learners and their teacher "emerges from the interaction between resources and contexts and the learners' [and teachers'] perceptions and use of them" (Mercer, 2012, p. 43). An ecological perspective investigates how each element in a particular context is related to the others, meaning that contextual learning elements can be put into a set of ecosystems. Each ecosystem has a set of actors, artifacts and patterns of procedures and interactions. Emergence is also emphasized because learning takes place when simple elements gather together constructing a higher system (Van Lier, 2004). In Larsen-Freeman's terms (2016, p. 378), "emergence is the arising of something new, often unanticipated,

from the interaction of components which comprise it". As Mercer (2012, p. 43) explains, agency in learners and teachers "emerges from the interaction between resources and contexts and the learners' [and teachers'] perceptions and use of them".

In other words, classroom ecology is seen "as one dynamic system nested in a hierarchy of such systems at different levels of scale, all of which are spatially and temporally situated" (Larsen-Freeman, 2016, p. 377). These "systems are not only nested one within another; each also influences what transpires above and below any given level" (Larsen-Freeman, 2016, p. 379). According to the ecological nested model (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 2009), there are four hierarchical ecosystems: the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem. At the lowest level of this nested hierarchy, *microsystems* demonstrate that developing individuals play a direct role, have direct social interactions with others, and gain direct experiences. For example, in the field of second language learning, the classroom setting is a microsystem where learners play a direct role, enhance their experiences (e.g., learning the language), and have direct social interactions with others (e.g., teacher and peers). *Mesosystems*, within which microsystems are nested, involve linkages between two or more settings including the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). In our example, a mesosystem could take account of learners' past experiences learning a second language and extracurricular activities outside of the classroom context. *Exosystems*, within which mesosystems are nested, include settings that influence the developing person but in which the person does is not directly involved. For example, a learner generally does not play a direct role in the education policy-making community. However, the educational policies and the testing system have an impact on learners' development and their learning experiences. Finally, *macrosystems*, within which *exosystems* are nested, include extensive social and cultural effects or ideologies and their long-term consequences for the developing person. These underlie hierarchical associated systems in which superordinate status of one individual and subordinate status of another could influence teacher-students relationship, leading to attitudes questioning the acceptability of the dialogic classroom, which consequently has an effect on how learners experience classroom learning.

In recent years, Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems model has been applied to classroom second language learning. Adopting an ecological perspective towards situated WTC, Peng (2012) recognized six factors underlying classroom WTC in the context of China, that is: learner beliefs, motivation, cognitive factors, linguistic factors, affective factors, and classroom environment. However, more studies of the same nature are required in order to shed more light on the dynamics of students' WTC in different contexts because every context has its own ecology in terms of the emergent patterns of L2 WTC and dynamicity of the influence of the ecosystems.

Thus, the study reported below attempted to apply an ecological perspective to L2 WTC in the context of Iran in order to determine some individual, situational, and cultural factors that can affect readiness to speak. This qualitative study examined the following research questions:

1. What are the individual and contextual factors affecting participants' L2 WTC in the language classroom?
2. How do the individual and environmental factors jointly create learners' L2 WTC in the classroom from an ecological view?
3. To what extent are the emergent patterns of L2 WTC within the context of Iran similar to those within the context of China?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants and setting

This study was conducted at a private institute in Iran over the period of one month in September, 2015. In order to allow intensive individual-level microanalysis, 6 students (2 males and 4 females) participated in the study. The main participant-selection criterion was inclusion in a normal class composed of different kinds of students both with high WTC and low WTC. Participants were selected based on two classroom observations by the second researcher as well as consultations with the teacher but their participation was voluntary. The participants' WTC was measured over the period of four weeks including 8 sessions. Table 1 includes details regarding the participants of the study.

Table 1 Information about participants

Pseudo-name	Gender	Age	Class	Proficiency level	Level of WTC*	General characteristics
Sara	Female	19	A	Upper-intermediate	high	Enthusiastic about learning, ask questions and always need teacher's confirmation.
Paria	Female	18	B	Upper-intermediate	mid	Unserious in learning, but interested in discussion.
Mary	Female	17	B	Upper-intermediate	low	Shy, has to work hard to get but interested in learning.
Shadi	Female	17	B	Upper-intermediate	mid	Clever, but easily distracted and sometimes appears uninterested.
Saeed	Male	21	A	Upper-intermediate	Low	He did not put much effort into classroom tasks, uninterested in learning.
Nima	Male	19	A	Upper-intermediate	high	Serious about learning and had sense of humors.

\*Based on the participants' WTC self-ratings in the journals.

Moreover, we implemented a multiple-case study method since the case study approach is appropriate when investigating “changes in complex phenomena over time” in specific contexts (van Lier, 2005 p. 195). It is specifically proper for uncharted research avenues because it can often achieve “a high degree of completeness, depth of analysis, and readability” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 155). Additionally, case studies provide insights that quantitative measures cannot offer (Punch, 2013), allowing in-depth investigation of participants’ actual behavior in the classroom.

### 3.2. Instrumentation and procedure

We collected data through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, as well as learning journals written by the participants.

#### 3.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

There were 8 sessions of semi-structured interviews carried out individually with each of the six students. The sessions were held with each participant at the end of each classroom observation. The first session, conducted after the first two classroom observation sessions, was concerned with building rapport with the participants to explore their background experiences of learning English and communication. The remaining interview sessions were conducted shortly after each classroom observation in order to investigate what was observed in class and recorded in journal entries.

The interview questions were developed, providing the participants with prompts, based on the four ecosystems of nested ecosystem model, mainly the microsystem, so that we could analyze the participants’ elicited responses at each ecosystemic level, but the items were flexible enough for the participants to focus on or explain more about the issues they were more willing to discuss. Thus, the interview guide included preselected topics, such as learners’ past experiences in learning English in high school or private English language teaching institutes, their attitudes towards influential ways of learning English, the role of communication in English in class, the teachers’ methodology and activities used in the classroom, and the difficulties they faced while communicating in English in classroom situations. They were also asked to talk about a specific situation in which they were willing or unwilling to communicate in class. Moreover, participants were asked to share their experiences concerning extracurricular activities and their impact on the process of learning English. In addition, some questions about the atmosphere of English classes were included. All the interviews were carried out in participants’ first language, Persian. Each interview lasted about 15-20 minutes and the transcripts were later translated into English.

### 3.2.2. Classroom observations

In addition, we conducted 8 classroom observations to obtain contextualized information for the data gathered from interviews and journals. The first two sessions were allocated to the selection of participants. Observations involved taking notes during and immediately after a given class to record puzzling or critical scenarios. Verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the participants, such as their hand-raising to volunteer their willingness to speak were also recorded. The observations were mainly focused on the microsystem of classroom ecology concerning the activities carried out in class by the participants as well as the teachers' behaviors. Furthermore, any hints of WTC at the other levels of the ecosystem were noted by the first author as a non-participant observer.

### 3.2.3. Journals

Journal writing was applied to achieve deeper understanding of the participants' WTC. In other words, since observations might function as an instrument paving the way for understanding the actual communication context rather than judging participants' WTC, we used journals to record participants' perceptions, feelings, and performance during that particular session. The journal questions included explanation of the topics and activities they carried out in that session, their feelings about these topics and activities, and the amount of their satisfaction with their own oral performance during that session as well as the situations in which they felt most and least willing to communicate with the teacher and peers as well as the reasons for this. Students were asked to self-assess their level of WTC on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 indicated *very unwilling to communicate*, 50 indicated *neither willing or unwilling to communicate*, and 100 indicated *very willing to communicate*.

## 3.3. Data analysis

In order to analyze the interviews, journals and observations, we applied a qualitative content analysis. Data analysis included reading, coding and revising the codes via MAXQDA software (Belous, 2012). The two researchers independently coded the transcriptions of the interviews and journals. Then, the coding results were compared, leading to high inter-coder agreement.

## 4. Results and discussion

The analysis allowed identification of various themes influencing learners' WTC in class the most. These themes could be categorized at level four of Bronfenbrenner's ecological nested model (1993).



#### 4.1. Microsystemic level

The analysis of the data collected by means of journals and interviews revealed that at this level six factors could affect learners' WTC in class, that is: (1) students' beliefs about learning, (2) their motivations, (3) affective factors, (4) linguistics factors, (5) cognitive factors, and (6) classroom context.

##### 4.1.1. Students' beliefs about learning

Based on interview and journal data from six learners, the most common learning beliefs perceived by learners are the importance of acquiring vocabulary and expressing knowledge, and the crucial role of learning structure knowledge for both comprehension and production of language. However, students' presumed preference for communicative tasks in the classroom was different from one individual to another. Participants with higher WTC, as indicated by their self-ratings in their journals, tended to get engaged in more communication tasks in class, but those with lower WTC did not give high priority to communication tasks since they believed that the teacher should emphasize the elements required in the final exam such as reading and writing skills, grammar, and vocabulary. Table 2 presents all the factors related to learning beliefs and the number of participants who noted each factor in the interviews or the journals.

Table 2 Learners' beliefs about learning

Important factors for second language acquisition	N/6
Vocabulary knowledge	6
Structure knowledge	5
Expression and idioms	4
Communication tasks	4
Reading skill	3
Listening skill	3
Speaking skill	4
Writing skill	2
Cultural elements of target language	2

##### 4.1.2. Learners' motivation

When the participants were asked to provide a list of reasons for learning English, different reasons were mentioned, with the students indicating that learning English would enhance performance in the entrance exam of the universities (4 out of 6), provide more opportunities for finding a better job (3 out of 6), help them pass their high school or university English courses successfully (3 out of

6), and enable them to understand English speakers, their culture, and community better (2 out of 6). The majority of the participants (5 out of 6) stated that the most important reason for their learning English were their parents' expectations (Table 3). These results indicate that the participants manifested more extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation. In comparison with the EFL Chinese context, Iranian EFL learners are more extrinsically motivated, which is not consistent with Peng's (2012) findings. She showed that Chinese students displayed both kinds of motivation as some believed that communicative activities would help them improve their English proficiency and some manifested highly exam-oriented attitudes, believing that it did not matter if they study or enhance their competence through communicative tasks as long as they can pass the final exams and graduate (Peng, 2012). Thus, both studies highlight learners' WTC as a factor within the ecology of EFL WTC patterns emerging as a consequence of learners' goals in learning English.

Table 3 Reasons of learning English

Reasons	N/6
Their parents' expectations to learn English	5
Enhancing their performance in the entrance exam of the universities	4
Helping them pass their high school or university English courses successfully	3
Providing more opportunities for finding a better job	3
Enabling them to understand English speakers, their culture, and community	2
Traveling abroad	2

#### 4.1.3. Linguistic factors

Another set of factors influencing participants' WTC were linguistics ones, including difficulties in comprehension, lack of vocabulary knowledge, a low level of competency, and a low level of fluency in speaking English. The participants reported that when they could not understand the teacher's question, they preferred to be silent and, thus, could not participate in class discussions (4 out of 6). Moreover, most of them (4 out of 6) stated that when they were unsure of the correctness of their answers, they tended to be inactive. The participants' level of English emerged from the data as another factor influencing their WTC. They asserted that they were less willing to speak English when they felt embarrassed about their non-fluent English speaking skills (5 out of 6). Moreover, the participants' competence in using language is another linguistic factor impacting their WTC. It seems that when students feel that they are competent in using the target language, they are less concerned with error detection and correction, which results in greater willingness to speak. In a similar vein, Peng's (2012) study demonstrated positive links between retention of correct expressions in English, rich vocabulary and high WTC levels

#### 4.1.4. Affective factors

The results showed that affective factors were another set of factors underpinning the emerging patterns of participants' WTC (see Table 4). The most frequently mentioned obstacle with respect to WTC was anxiety caused by the teacher or peers. However, it was observed that familiarity among students could reduce such anxiety, which resulted in greater willingness to speak English in class. The participants seemed to feel more anxious when other students had already built rapport with each other. This is well expressed by Shadi, who commented: "When the teacher and other students know each other very well and I am a new comer, I feel stressed and unwilling to communicate". Another source of anxiety was associated with the students' feeling of insecurity which stemmed from their fear of losing face in front of the teacher and other students when mistakes were made. For example, Maryam offered the following comment: "I feel anxious and reluctant to speak English in front of people who have no idea of my English proficiency level because I'm afraid to be misjudged". The third source of anxiety was related to the number of students in a group. As the number of individuals participating in conversation increased, so did the feeling of anxiety, which led to smaller WTC. Saeed stated, for example, that when the number of students in the group was smaller, he felt more comfortable speaking English without other students being judgmental about his making mistakes.

Another affective factor related to participants' WTC was self-confidence. Maryam and Shadi stated that they did not participate actively in class because they were not confident about their abilities. Saeed offered the following comment: "Since my classmates' proficiency level was much higher than mine, I felt as if I have lost all my confidence speaking in the class. But, I felt confident about speaking English in front of my teacher in a private class without any worries about making mistakes". In this case, it appears that her low WTC was brought about by the other students' high proficiency level despite her feeling secure with her teacher.

Table 4 Different affective factors that influence students' WTC

Affective factors	Frequency
Students' anxiety	5
Students' feeling of insecurity	4
The number of the group participants	2
Students' lack of self-confidence	2

As can be seen from the above, our study provided greater insight into speaking anxiety within the classroom ecology compared with Peng's (2012) study. This is because the only aspect she identified was concerned with other

students' attitudes and judgments about one another resulting from whole-group discussions within microsystem.

#### 4.1.5. Cognitive factors

Cognitive factors concern students' background knowledge or skills in reasoning that influence their communication in the ecology of the classroom. The topic played an important role in the emergence of dynamics in the participants' WTC patterns. To be more precise, the topics that were perceived to be interesting and familiar seemed to foster willingness to speak. Sarah, for example, stated that „(...) when I talk about my personal experiences, I feel more willing to communicate, but whenever the topic is not interesting to me, my excitement diminishes and I tend to be silent“. In line with the outcomes of the present research project, Peng's (2012) study also reported that lack of topical knowledge or interest can cause low WTC. Also, facing a topic that the participants were fully prepared for, they tended to feel more willing to participate in classroom discussions. Moreover, when they were relatively more knowledgeable about a topic than other students, they reported to be more willing to communicate. Shadi, for instance, stated that she manifested high WTC to talk topics related to her field of study at the university. Critical thinking was another factor influencing WTC revealed in Peng's study (2012) because students who could not come up with appropriate arguments in discussions with their peers were not very willing to speak.

#### 4.1.6. Classroom context

Environmental factors reported by the participants to influence their situated WTC patterns in class were identified through interviews and journal data and could be categorized into teacher factors and learning tasks. Teacher factors involved teachers' error correction, teacher support, as well as teacher involvement and participation in group tasks. The learning task was associated with the types of tasks and learners' interest in these tasks

#### 4.1.7. Teacher factors

Among different environmental factors the most prominent dimension reported by the participants was the teacher. The first category of teacher-related factors affecting students' L2 WTC is the chosen method of error correction. Based on the learners' journals, it was possible to infer that whenever the teacher's corrective feedback immediately followed the participants' error, their WTC was

diminished. Some participants reported that the teacher's immediate feedback on their mistakes increased their insecurity and anxiety. Maryam, a student who was characterized by low WTC described her feelings in reaction to immediate correction in the following way:

Sometimes, but not always, I found my teacher catching me by a so-called shower of form or pronunciation correction whenever I spoke in the classroom. I was prepared for a discussion and I was ready to speak. But once I started to speak, the teacher repeated one of my sentences in a surprising way. It was a sad moment leaving me with an awful memory. I felt embarrassed making that mistake in front of the whole class which resulted in me not speaking much through that session. And then on, I decided to talk when I am sure of the accuracy of what comes out of me (Journal 2#, September 12, 2015).

The findings showed that when participants are corrected after they have finished their speech (i.e., delayed feedback), their WTC is likely to increase. For example, Nima (high WTC) offered the following comment:

Ms. B is very caring. I feel at home in her class. What makes me more willing to speak in his class is that she is not much concerned about my pronunciation or grammatical forms during me speaking. The content of my speech is her main concern. She rarely interrupts me and put it off until after my speech is out (Journal 1#, September 8, 2015).

The second category of teacher-related factors was related to support such as delivering a short positive phrase or smile during students' talk. Zarrinabadi (2014) states that teachers' support is an important determining factor affecting WTC. Findings based on the journals and interviews indicated that teacher support plays an important role in maintaining security for participants, thus making them more willing to communicate. Sara commented: "The teacher was very friendly and sympathetic. She created a pleasant and lovely class and encouraged us to speak in English. I had a blast speaking in his class". Shadi believed that "[h]er teacher's support was evident thorough such words as "yes" "good" or "excellent" during my speech as they helped me feel less anxious and more willing to speak". This shows that teachers' reactions to their students' errors could elevate or debilitate their WTC, a pattern that was not revealed in Peng's (2012) study.

The third category of teacher-related factors is teacher involvement and participation in group tasks, which can be understood as the quality of an interpersonal relationship between the teacher and his or her students (Fraser, 2015). The participants reported that the teacher's involvement and immediacy influenced their WTC. In the excerpt presented below, Sarah considers teacher involvement and participation in class activities to be a key factor shaping her WTC:

I love to participate in Ms. B. discussion class. She sits at the center of the class carefully listening to us and when we are done expressing our mind, she thanks us for sharing our ideas. And during the group discussion, she walks around the class and participates in different groups and solves our problems of any kind. Last session I said a thing in the group, but I knew that I couldn't make delivering my message to my classmates. She heard my whisper of 'help' through the mirror of my improficient problematic sentences and helped me with what I intended to share (Interview 2#, September 14, 2015).

Although teacher involvement in group tasks was not demonstrated in Peng's study (2012), she provided evidenced for the pivotal role of teachers' interpersonal relationships with students and teachers' support and immediacy behavior in their growth of WTC. This was achieved through giving explanations in Chinese, talking with students in Chinese during the break, and having a sense of humor within the microsystem of the classroom.

#### 4.1.8. Learning tasks

The second environmental factor influencing students' emerging patterns of WTC were learning tasks. The data revealed that the participants' WTC in the L2 classroom was impacted by the type of task and their attitudes towards the tasks. In the case of learners with positive attitudes towards the task, their WTC increased. Moreover, the participants asserted that the inclusion of a pre-task in the case of listening, speaking, and reading increased their WTC. Evidence for fluctuations in WTC within a single lesson and from task to task can be found in Paria's interview. She stated that:

The first activity of today's lesson was group role play which I found it quite boring and surprisingly ridiculous; thus, I was not willing to communicate. The other activity we worked on was a pre-reading discussion, which seemed appealing to me and positively affected my willingness to communicate as I could feel it in my bones. At the end of the class, we had a group discussion in which I easily participated and expressed my ideas (Journal 1#, September 8, 2015).

Paria's WTC level decreased sharply in role play tasks due to the fact that she was not interested in them. However, her WTC rose in the pre-reading discussion and group discussion, resulting in her greater participation because she was working on her favorite task with her friends. It seems that students' interest in the learning task played an important role in their WTC. Students were not interested in doing role-plays because they found them, as Peng (2012) called them, meaningless interaction. It seems that students can tell the difference between meaningless and meaningful tasks and are they no fans of the former.

## 4.2. Mesosystematic level

The links described above could be identified at the mesosystematic level as well. In this regard, the learners' past experiences overshadowing their WTC patterns in the classroom can be emphasized. Such experiences not only refer to the academic aspects of teaching, learning, and the curriculum in the past, but also include students' extracurricular activities (Ruhanen, Scott, Benckendorff, & Roberts, 2009). They also encompass students' engagement, satisfaction, growth in knowledge, personal development, and academic success (Ruhanen et al., 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

The findings revealed that the participants (5 out of 6) expressed a negative attitude towards their past learning experiences in high school, which impacted their WTC in the classroom. Sarah commented that "at high school, English teachers ignored us as if we never existed, they hardly ever motivated or encouraged us to learn English". Maryam, in turn, offered the following comment: "My high school teacher, always serious, made me feel nervous as she created a boring atmosphere during a two-hour session. She only used to focus on the grammar, translation, and memorization of a large number of new words. She never engaged us in class communication and interaction" (Journal 7#, September 21, 2015). The second most frequently observed obstacle was unpracticality and uselessness of class content and the materials used in the process of language instruction. Nima said that the materials selected for the high school students were not useful for their daily lives since they could not put what they had learned in the classroom into practice. This is because the high school curriculum placed emphasis on English linguistic knowledge in order to prepare students for entrance exams in universities in Iran. Consequently, the communicative aspects of language learning were neglected.

Most interviewees mentioned unpleasant experiences during time in high school. For example, Maryam mentioned that she was often ridiculed by her classmates for her mistakes. This made her very anxious when she spoke in class, thus hindering her WTC. Shadi talked about her fear of losing face and being negatively judged by peers in one of her English classes because of her incorrect pronunciation. Furthermore, it was found that students who had some kind of nerve-racking experience in the course of extracurricular activities, such as participating in communicative and free discussion classes at English language institutes, exhibited higher levels of WTC in classroom communication and interaction. Similarly, considering the mesosystemic influences on L2 WTC, Peng (2012) found that negative embarrassing experiences, which students underwent in their past learning, had a negative impact on their WTC

### 4.3. Exosystemic level

The relationship between the microsystemic settings, the policies of language institutes regarding curriculum design, and the assessment system is investigated at the exosystemic level. The findings revealed that regulations of the institutes regarding the curriculum of English courses could possibly influence the patterns of participants' WTC in the classroom. For instance, four of the participants claimed that the content taught in every semester was large and thus the teachers sometimes skipped communication tasks in order to cover the book, which must have impacted students' readiness to speak. Besides, the testing procedures seemed to have an influential effect on the learners' WTC. For example, Sara commented: "One of the important sections of the final exam is speaking; each semester the supervisor of the institute interviews pushed us to improve our speaking to pass the course" (Interview 8#, September 25, 2015).

### 4.4. Macrosystemic level

#### 4.4.1. Social factors

With the growth of international relations of Iran with other nations and the increasing role of technology throughout the world, learning English as an international language has begun to play a more pivotal role in Iran compared to previous years. Consequently, the importance of learning English as a tool for communication has become important for language learners. This could have motivated language learners to develop their communicative skills, which, in turn, could have affected their WTC. For example, when asked to explain their reasons for learning English, 4 out of 5 students stated that learning English is necessary for promotion in their profession.

#### 4.3.2. Cultural factors

In the following sections, three aspects of the Iranian culture which have an impact on language learning and communication in the language classroom are focused upon as their influence was also observed in the data.

##### 4.3.2.1. Face saving culture

Face saving is an important concern in Iranian society. Goffman (1976) identified face as "a type of performance, in that we present an image of our 'self' through our appearance, our messages, and our actions that we believe will give the impression that



we are competent and worthy social interaction" (p. 4). The findings showed that face concerns might have influenced the learners' WTC in class (see Table 5). Three of the participants repeated that they preferred not to raise their hands to answer the teacher's questions when they were not sure about their answers because in this way they avoided being negatively judged or mocked by their classmates, which was confirmed by class observations (see Figures 1 and 2 below). The data elicited from the interviews also showed that under the influence of culture, the participants believed that repeatedly speaking up in class is not desirable by others and might have negative social consequences. All of this indicates that the students tried to maintain their face by not responding to the teachers' questions even when they knew the answer. Nima, for example, felt hesitant to participate in classroom interaction because, as he stated, "I was worried that if I answer the teachers' questions, I would be laughed at or others would think that want to show off". Such problems are illustrated in the following excerpt:

*Teacher: Who wants to practice this conversation in pair?*

*Students: No answer*

*Teachers: Who can practice this conversation with me?*

*Students: No answer or hand raising*

*Teachers: No one is volunteer?*

*Students: After 10 seconds Nima raises his hand for role playing.*

#### 4.3.2.2. Learning-by-repetition culture

Repetition and memorization rather than interaction is another characteristics of Iranian cultural (Pishghadam, 2012). First, with respect to class observations, the number of repetition and memorization activities was larger than the number of interactive and communicative tasks (see Figures 1 and 2). It is obvious that the lack of sufficient opportunities for interaction in the classroom might have reduce learners' WTC. Second, the analysis of the journal and interview data demonstrated that 4 out of 6 students believed that repetition activities do not enhance their WTC. Sarah offered the following comment: "In my opinion, reading more, writing more and repeating more might be good ways to study but not necessarily good enough to make me willing to communicate".



Figure 1 Total number of different observed behaviors of participants in the first observed class



Figure 2 Total number of different observed behaviors of participants in the second observed class

#### 4.3.2.3. Hierarchical relationships in Iranian society

Eslami-Rasekh, Tavakoli, and Abdolrezapour (2010) argued that Iranian culture falls within the hierarchical relation system, in which the status of one individual is superordinate and the status of the other individual is a subordinate one. Therefore, individuals in a lower position are expected to stick to established behavioral norms. This is the case in the classroom, the teacher is considered as authority. This cultural factor was noticeable during the observed classes in which the learners were reluctant to answer teachers' spontaneous questions, perhaps because they felt that their answers would contradict the teachers' comments (see Figures 1 and 2). The data from the interviews and journals revealed that the participants preferred be asked more premeditated questions, which allowed them to save their own face as well as that of the teacher.

## 5. Conclusion

By applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model, the study attempted to present a more comprehensive and contextualized picture of factors influencing EFL learners' patterns of WTC within the ecology of English language classes in Iran. The findings are to some extent consistent with those of Peng (2012), Cao (2011, 2014), and Peng and Woodrow's (2010) studies, emphasizing the interdependence of individual, environmental, and linguistic factors that influence WTC. We also conducted a comparative analysis of the results of the present study and the findings reported by Peng (2012) for the Chinese context.

From the ecological perspective, Iranian learners' WTC inside the English classroom could be influenced by a dynamic interaction of different agents at different ecosystemic levels. As Peng (2015, p. 154) argued, such interaction is not "additive" but "synergistic" (p. 154). This implies that WTC in English needs to be understood as dynamically constructed by the totality of the learner and the environment. In line with current research, learners' motivation is a dynamic construct that shows ongoing fluctuation rather than a static attribute (Waninge, Dörnyei, & De Bot, 2014). In fact, the assumption that motivation is "socially constructed or constrained, rather than simply influenced, whether positively or negatively, by the social context" also applies to the understanding of WTC in the EFL classroom. Thus, based on the present research findings, students' WTC can be shaped by the joint influences of factors belonging to different levels of the ecosystem within and between the individual, environmental, and cultural dimensions. For example, at the microsystemic level, cognitive, linguistic and affective factors proved to be interrelated since a problem in one area affected the remaining two. For instance, a high level of anxiety in participant 2 had an effect on her linguistically and cognitively as she stated "being obsessed with my fussy state of mind and worrisome blacked out my memory". Moreover, as was evident with Saeed, cognitive problems, such as lack of topical knowledge, may influence learners affectively which subsequently has a negative impact on their perceived proficiency in the target language. In other words, this qualitative research provided evidence to support the assumptions proposed by the ecological perspective and proved the logic of implementing the ecological nested model in explaining the dynamic nature of classroom WTC. In line with the results of the study conducted in China by Peng (2012), it was found that WTC in the language classroom emerges and fluctuates out of the interaction of multiple internal and external factors. The results indicate that in order to explain the interrelatedness between different ecosystems and joint effects of several factors facilitating or hindering WTC, the an ecological emic perspective has to be adopted.

The main implication that can be drawn from this study is that teachers should become aware of the factors within the ecology of the classroom influencing learners' WTC. Moreover, language educators and teachers should realize that both students and teachers themselves are parts of a "sensitive learning ecology" (Horn, 2008, p. 142), and any fluctuation in the interactive patterns of the classroom could change the nature of this ecology. This study supports the proposition of van Lier (2004) and others that teachers should adopt an ecological perspective when providing instruction. This approach is required to expand skills essential in dealing with the contingencies of classroom ecology in which teaching and learning unfold. This contingent approach assumes that teachers should notice and effectively manage unanticipated patterns in the classroom (van Lier, 2004).

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