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Examining EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Strategies for Fostering Learners' Willingness to Communicate in Online Classes

Abstract

Communicating in the target language is a significant element contributing to success in language acquisition (Swain and Lapkin 1995). Authentic use of L2 is an important part of language teaching and learning with the objective of promoting learners' communicative competence. Teachers' role is very important here as their interventions can boost learners' desire to communicate at a specific moment. In online classes in English institutes, teachers provide the students with authentic material, but without any good results. Therefore, this study aims to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of strategies to foster a willingness to communicate with learners in online classes. The participants of this study were 38 teachers from an English Language institute in Yazd, Iran. The data were collected both quantitatively and qualitatively. Five teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of fostering WTC in online classes. The results revealed that the motivational strategies employed by the teachers helped foster WTC in the online classes, followed by teacher immediacy. In addition, the findings of the qualitative part also confirmed the results. Teachers have a vital role in provoking a positive atmosphere and encouraging the learners to participate in communications.

Keywords: *Willingness to Communicate, Teachers' Perceptions, Motivational Strategies, Teacher Immediacy.*

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Introduction

Over the past century, foreign/second language teaching has undergone many changes and revisions. Traditionally, English language teaching emphasized the mastery of structures, but lately, learners' communicative competence of the language and the application of language for the aim of communication have been emphasized (Cetinkaya, 2005). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emphasized language application in the process of foreign and second language acquisition for meaningful communication. The trends observed regarding the conversational approach to second language pedagogy indicate the belief that one should use the language to promote proficiency (MacIntyre & Charos 1996). Unless the language is used communicatively, L2 learners cannot become proficient. Differences have been noted when the learners in the class have a chance to speak. Some learners make use of every opportunity to speak English in the classroom, while others remain quiet

Since the advent of CLT, importance has been given to interaction. Language learning is enhanced by fluency, improving learner inter-language, automatizing language production, and encouraging hypothesis testing among learners, and these are assisted by output (Gass & Mackey, 2015). In addition, in some new studies, the vital role of interaction, stating that online interaction can end in even better learning outcomes, has been confirmed (Ziegler, 2016).

In Iran, online instruction has not proved promising, taking into account the learners' participation, as it suffers from a lack of interaction, attention, and motivation (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). In other countries, online instruction has proved promising in terms of learner participation in other countries (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2015). As stated by Sheybani (2019), in the EFL context, 'communication is largely related to classrooms, thus requires more teacher intervention.'

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in the second or foreign language is the construct that describes and makes clear the variations in learners' intention to communicate in the L2. It is regarded as an individual difference variable and has recently been examined by several researchers (Cao, 2011; Ghonsooly, Khaja, et al., 2012; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Peng, 2012). WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse, at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (MacIntyre et al. 1998, p. 547). It has been noted as the final aim of language learning as an increased willingness to communicate in a foreign language promotes the usage of L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

During the past decade, teachers' potential for promoting WTC has been reverberating through various studies (Peng, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014); however, few studies have been conducted in Iran on teachers' role in face-to-face classroom contexts. Given that "novel situations should be particularly detrimental to WTC because the speaker will be uncertain of his or her ability to meet the demands present at that moment" (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998, p. 549), it may be difficult for the learners to prepare themselves in online platform communication.

To meet our objectives, the research aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Which strategies are perceived to best foster learners' WTC in online classes?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of these strategies in online classes?
3. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online instruction in promoting WTC?

Literature Review

WTC is confirmed as a predictor of classroom participation because learners with an increased level of WTC participate more in class interaction (Richmond et al., 1987) and try to be ready to entail in any interactions employing their L2 outside the classrooms (Kang, 2005). MacIntyre et al. (1998) formulated a heuristic model was developed by MacIntyre et al., (1998) which was made up of more than 30 variables (situational and enduring), including six layers involving linguistic, communicative, and social psychological variables that set up the top layer (i.e., L2 usage). As mentioned before, it constituted six layers, Layers I, II, and III held situational, contextual, and changeable variables, and Layers IV, V, and VI entailed enduring variables. More recent definitions of L2 WTC have become even more comprehensive. According to Kang's (2005) perspective, WTC entails "an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutors, topic, and conversation context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291).

Several studies were conducted that have paved the path for the execution of online classes for communication; on the basis that online ways of communication assure more promised learners. The studies conducted, for example, in the context of Turkey (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Satar & Özdener, 2008), Japan (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006), Thailand (Reinders & Wattana, 2015), Vietnam (Le et al., 2018), and USA (Yanguas & Flores, 2014).

In the context of Japan, Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) conducted a study, and the participants were 39 female students from the first and second years of university. The student's performance in face-to-face and online tasks was compared. A qualitative method was applied to find out students' perceptions of their experiences in different communication environments. All the participants in all the groups performed the tasks in both face-to-face and online moods. In one week, the tasks were done face to face mood, and the next week, they were performed. A counterbalanced design was adopted. The results revealed that the tasks performed on online mood were attractive and engaging for the learners. In addition, significant positive themes of online chat stemmed from lower anxiety, high confidence, lesser control of dominant speakers, and power balance among all members. The participants reported that online chat has more flexibility. It is more flexible in time, with the freedom to talk in the absence of interaction immediacy, which in face-to-face speech is the focal factor.

Yanguas and Flores (2014) examined in the context of the USA how face-to-face or online settings would cause changes in WTC. Participants were selected from two intact classes from the university. The research design employed was counterbalanced. The task selected for the participants was decision-making. On the first day, each class has to do a task related to decision-making. This task was performed in a face-to-face mood or a Skype meeting. Students worked in groups of three and decided on the topic. Both groups' interactions were recorded. At the end of the second day, a cross-examine questionnaire was given to explore the experiences of the participants. An Independent t-test was employed for the analysis of the data. The independent variable considered was mode, and the dependent variable was the number of turns and words. The result of the t-test indicated more number of turns compared to the face-to-face group. However, both groups had words that were not meaningfully different. The second question aimed to determine the relationship between WTC and the number of words and turns. A linear relationship between the WTC, the number of turns, and the word was revealed for the face-to-face group. In the online platform, the results did not indicate such a relationship. WTC in Skype chat seemed to be more than the face-to-face group. This result also reported decreased anxiety and external motivation.

Satar and Özdener (2008) conducted a study to examine the changes in the level of anxiety and development of speaking in high school. The participants selected from high school were 90 female students. Synchronous voice and text chat were used to examine the changes in anxiety level and speaking development. The participants were divided into three groups, voice, text, and control groups. First, tests related to Pre-anxiety and pre-speaking were given to the participants. No meaningful difference was noted in the test results considering the speaking proficiency level of the groups. Eight tasks were given in four weeks in-group of two. When each session ended, depending on two measures, the development of students' speaking was tested. Two open-ended questionnaires were also administered to the participants. One was given to express their immediate experiences. Another one was given at the end to get insight into their general experiences. When the speaking proficiency of both groups was compared with the control group, it was revealed that both the experimental group participants had meaningfully developed compared to the control group. However, between the speaking proficiency of the voice group and chat group, no meaningful difference was observed. Although the level of anxiety in the text chat group

after the intervention reduced strikingly. In comparison, no meaningful changes in the anxiety levels of voice and control groups were indicated. The data from the questionnaires shed made statistical results clearer. For example, the participants worked in pairs in voice chat and could easily speak to an acquaintance, but if they had to talk with a foreigner, they would feel anxious. Had they talked to a foreigner? The point to be noted was that they were also concerned about their pronunciation and understanding of their partners. The reason for the decrease in anxiety level of the text chat group was that none of them was concerned about understanding and pronunciation. The questionnaires further confirmed the overall satisfaction with synchronous communication, ease of talking to the acquainted person, and ability to apply the target language without depending on L1.

In the context of Turkey, Buckingham, and Alpaslan (2017) conducted a study to explore if asynchronous computer-mediated practices would enhance young learners' WTC. This study had two objectives: to find out the potential influence of audio-visual activities on learners' speaking scores and explore if the intervention could have a bearing on WTC. Two intact Grade 3 classes were randomly selected and divided into two groups, experimental and control groups. The treatment continued for one term. The control class followed the same old routine and submitted the homework in writing, but for the experimental group, the students were asked to complete and submit their homework orally through PowerPoint (PPT). The participants were given a speaking pre-test and a post-test, the content of which was recorded. Questions were selected from the topics of their textbook. WTC measurements were realized through the operationalization of layers three and two in MacIntyre et al.'s model (1998). Two criteria supported the measurement, extension, and response. The results of the study indicated that there was an improvement in the speaking proficiency of the experimental group from pre- to post-test. Their scores also surpassed the scores of the control group. Regarding the changes in WTC, the learners, by the end of the intervention, did not produce longer sentences; however, the sentences they produced were on a gradual basis with lesser pauses. This gradual pattern could be observed from the beginning to the end of the intervention.

In Thailand, Reinders and Wattana (2015) conducted a study in a higher education institution to examine the extent to which digital game-based learning would affect learners' WTC. The program implemented was for 15 weeks. The participants of this study were thirty IT students. The participants played a popular game at the end of each unit. Interviews were taken with five IT students to talk about their experiences of game playing. The relaxed environment was assumed to result in learner self-confidence, motivation, and lower anxiety. The results in online game playing showed positive communicative experiences with only one exception. The majority of interviewees said that when they did not know their partner, they were more comfortable, especially when they were supportive. Regarding the impact of the game on WTC, nearly all of them said their self-confidence and motivation increased while their anxiety decreased. The interviewees stated that games are beneficial for language development and seem to boost their participation. On the whole, games increased risk-taking and decreased anxiety

Methodology

To meet the aims of the study, a mixed-methods design was used. First, the quantitative data were collected and analyzed. The sequential explanatory design was used to get a clear picture of the topic, which demanded the close contextual clues given by the teachers

Participants

The participants of this study were 38 EFL teachers selected by convenience sampling from an English institute in Yazd, Iran. Seventy-five percent of the sample included female teachers, while the remaining twenty-five percent comprised male teachers. More importantly, all the participants were supposed to have experienced online teaching.

Research Instruments

To collect the data, an adapted questionnaire from Zohrabi & Bimesl (2021) was employed. The questionnaire entails 35 items divided into two parts; the first was related to demographic information, and the second was related to the teachers' perceptions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). The teachers were asked to inform how often they applied a strategy they found beneficial in fostering WTC in online classes. The five elements that were considered to focus on to address teachers' perceptions were teacher immediacy, wait time, motivational strategies, corrective feedback strategies, and topic familiarity. Items 1-10 were related to teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors. Each type of immediacy included five questions. Items 11-15 were related to teachers' wait-time practices. Sixteen to twenty-five were related to Motivational strategies. The fourth part was related to strategies of feedback which centered on timing and type of feedback.

Interview

Semi structure interviews were employed to collect the qualitative data. The interview questions were adapted from Zohrabi & Bimesl (2021). The interviews were performed on online platforms.

Procedure

As mentioned before mixed methods design was used. First, the quantitative data was collected through the

questionnaire and analyzed. Then the qualitative data was collected and coded, followed by the integration of the results with the results obtained from analyzing the quantitative data.

Each participant was asked to respond to seven questions about their experiences as well as probes regarding the detailed account of strategies that improved learners' WTC in online classes. The interview time allotted was 25 min. All interviews were done in English on an online platform. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and initial coding was given. After the open coding process, the qualitative data was broken down and categorized into manageable segments (Ary et al., 2019). Common themes among the initial codes were identified. The process of coding continued until the data yielded no more categories.

SPSS 26 was employed to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, including the mean, were employed to calculate the percentage of each element. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normal distribution of the data. With respect to the qualitative results, open coding and second-level coding were applied in an iterative process to obtain common themes.

Reliability

For determining the questionnaire's internal consistency, the questionnaire's Alpha coefficient approached 0.89, indicating a relatively high internal consistency (Table 1).

Table 1

Reliability Analysis

Reliability	N	Cronbach Alpha
Teacher Immediacy	30	0.727
Wait time	30	0.737
Motivational strategy	30	0.822
Feedback	30	0.773
Topic Familiarity	30	0.775
Total	30	0.898

Results

Examining the Normal Distribution of the Data

To check the normal distribution of the data, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied for checking the normal distribution of the data. The results of this test are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) Test*

Variables	N	K-S	Sig
Teacher Immediacy	38	0.661	0.778
Wait time	38	0.956	0.323
Motivational strategy	38	0.792	0.559
Feedback	38	0.826	0.505
Topic Familiarity	38	0.799	0.547

As shown in Table 2, the meaningful level of all the variables is more than 0.05, which indicates that the distribution of the data is normal, so it can be used for parametric tests to test the hypotheses.

Addressing the First Research Question

RQ1: Which strategies are perceived to best foster learners' WTC in online classes?

To answer this question, the mean was used to determine which strategies were perceived to best foster learners' WTC in online classes.

Table 3. Mean and Percentage of Strategies

Variables		N	Mean	Mean/Percentage
Teacher Immediacy	Verbal Nonverbal	38 38	18.38 19.41	16.51/17.1 %
Wait time	Self-elaboration Turn completion Teacher echo Close-ended questions Explicit positive assessment	38 38 38 38 38	3.65 3.57 3.71 3.88 4.59	19.38/17.1%
Motivational strategy		38	41.84	41.83/39.6%
Feedback Timing	Delayed Timing Immediate Prompt	38 38	4.28 3.36	19.08/18.0%
Feedback	Type of Recast feedback Explicit Correction	38 38 38	3.92 3.79 3.76	
Topic Familiarity		38	18.07	18.06/16.1%

As shown in Table 3, the highest mean is for the variable of motivational strategy, which shows that the percentage of teachers who perceived that the motivational theory could best foster the learner's WTC was 39.6%. As observed in Table 3, teacher immediacy entailed two variables, verbal (m=18.38, 16.51%) and non-verbal immediacy (m=19.41, 17.1%). The results in the table indicate that verbal immediacy was perceived to be slightly less useful than non-verbal immediacy, and non-verbal was a little more beneficial in fostering the WTC of the participants. Five practices were categorized under Wait time, namely self-elaboration (m=3.65, 3.0%), turn completion (m=3.57, 3.0%), teacher echo (m=3.71, 3.50 %), close-ended questions (m=3.88, 3.0%), and explicit positive assessment (m=4.59, 4.0%). The results reveal the usage of explicit positive assessment more compared to the other four practices mentioned in the table. Furthermore, the percentage of participants who declared to apply these five strategies was 17 percent. Feedback included both timing and type of feedback. Timing targeted both delayed (m=4.28) and immediate (m=3.36). Feedback entailed three types of corrective feedback, namely prompt (m=3.92), recast (m=3.79), and explicit correction (m=3.76). The data revealed that teachers perceived delayed feedback to be beneficial in maintaining learners' WTC. In addition, according to the participants' perception, in online classes, to correct learners' errors, mostly prompts are applied.

According to the means of various variables given in the table, a conclusion can be reached that variables related to teacher immediacy (m=37.79, 33.5%), wait time (m=19.38, 17.1%), feedback (m=19.08, 18%), and topic familiarity (m=18.06, 16.1%) were perceived to help promote WTC in online classes only after motivational strategies (m=41.83, 39.6%).

Addressing the Second Research Question:

What are the teachers' perceptions of these strategies in online classes? Semi structure interviews were taken from the participants, and the data was analyzed. The qualitative results revealed that one of the main roles in fostering online communication was motivating learners. According to the participants, the other things that can attract and motivate learners in online classes are various online tools, games, and online polls or questionnaires.

Regarding immediacy, they stated that encouraging, using humor in the classes, or using fun was stated by most of the teachers. On the whole, verbally immediate behavior was supported by the qualitative data, but the qualitative data revealed that non-verbal immediacy (m=19.41, 17.1%) was perceived to be applied a little more than verbal immediacy (m=18.38, 17.1%).

Addressing the Third Research Question:

What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online instruction in fostering WTC?

Online instruction assists learners' WTC through technological affordances; this was revealed by the qualitative data. It was stated that in online classes, films and videos were very influential in fostering communication. The teachers also reported online polls, pair work, and games to be influential for communication. As another strategy, questionnaires were perceived to be influential as they motivate learners to take part and communicate on topics. Finally, some teachers stated that text and audio modes of communication motivate shy learners. The teachers saw some instructions in online classes as challenges like lack of eye contact and body language, and this theme was consistently repeated. The data revealed the most challenging aspect stated by all teachers was that they suffer a lot because of the lack of gestural clues in the online classes.

Discussion

This study employed a mixed methods approach and was conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of the effective strategies they employed in their online classes to increase learners' WTC. The data was collected quantitatively through a questionnaire and qualitatively through semi-structured interviews. The results of the questionnaires revealed that fostering WTC teachers mostly use motivational strategies. One of the prominent themes in qualitative data was motivating learners. This was followed by teacher immediacy, which the teachers perceived to be effective in provoking the learners to participate. The quantitative questionnaire results seem to favor non-verbal immediacy a little more than verbal immediacy; qualitative data was a little more in favor of verbally immediate behaviors.

Technological affordances were derived as a promoting theme regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online instruction in fostering WTC. The challenging aspect of online instruction reported was the lack of body language. In both quantitative and qualitative data, motivational strategies were ranked high in both quantitative data and interview accounts. Motivation is an important predictor of WTC in the Iranian context (Fallah, 2014). One of the most repeated categories For motivational strategies, one of the most repeated aspects was having a good and friendly relationship with the learners.

The teachers also reported that they contribute much to fostering learners' WTC. A supportive classroom environment is created by the teachers where the learners are not afraid to communicate; they have no anxiety and are free to communicate. This finding is in line with the previous study, where the results revealed that if the classes have increased levels of enjoyment, they can foster WTC" (Khajavy et al., 2018). Another motivational strategy stated was encouraging and positive feedback. This finding is in line with a study by MacIntyre et al., 2011). This study reported that games enhance learners' WTC; this finding is in line with Reinders & Wattana (2015). In this study, all participants expressed their satisfaction with games and declared that games boosted their self-confidence and motivation while decreasing their anxiety. These findings seem to support the present study in that teachers perceives games to increase learners' motivation.

Teacher immediacy was the next element in fostering learners to participate in communication. The qualitative data also support the quantitative results because it was filled with teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors. A correlational study was conducted in the Iranian context by Sheybani (2019) to examine the relationship between immediacy and WTC. A positive relationship between the two variables was revealed. In addition, verbal immediacy indicated increased relation to speaking WTC but nonverbal immediacy to listening WTC.

Regarding the third research question, teachers stated using audio/visual resources fosters WTC; this finding is in line with Peng, 2019; and MacIntyre et al., 2011. The correlational study conducted by Peng (2019) showed a positive correlation between audio/video resources and WTC. Probably audio/visual resources provide learners with "an authentic, contextualized application of the target language," as a result enhancing "students' sensory stimulation (Peng, 2019).

The challenges of online instruction that the results revealed were the lack of nonverbal clues, like facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. Peng's study (2019) showed that the aspects of teachers' vocal and facial expressions were not related to WTC but directly related to the classroom environment. However, teachers' gestures were found to strongly predict WTC. Text chat, voice chat, and pair work were reported to enhance WTC. This finding is in line with a study by Satar and Özdener (2008). The results of the study showed that the text chat group had no concerns about understanding and pronunciation. In addition, a study conducted by Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) explored that the asynchronous mode of communication could foster WTC. This finding corresponds to the present study, as teachers stated that learners had more time to rehearse and consult their books or parents. One more aspect of this study revealed was the use of Pair work that has been reported to foster WTC,

which is similar to the results of the study conducted by Cao & Philp, 2006; Pawlak et al., 2015.

Limitations of the Study

As with all studies, this study also suffers from several limitations. One of the limitations of the present study is that it completely depends on teachers' perceptions. The number of participants is small, and this can pose some threats regarding the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study proposes some implications for teachers. The findings suggest that teachers should use different strategies to enhance their learners' WTC. For example, teachers should depend not only on their strategies but also on the different affordances that technology supplies for them to keep learners engaged and motivated. In addition, encouraging, appreciating, and asking the students to share their experience related to verbal immediacy behaviors assume significance in online instruction when it fails to supply due to nonverbal clues.

Another practical implication calls for teachers' attention to motivational strategies as a primary methodological concern if they attempt to communicate with learners. A better comprehension of elements that have a bearing on WTC can enable teachers to use multiple strategies to renew the enjoyment of speaking in learners.

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Appendix: Questionnaire Items

Teachers' Strategies to Promote Willingness to Communicate with Learners in Online Classes

Teacher Immediacy

1. I use personal examples or talk about experiences he/she had outside of class.
2. I use humor in class.
3. I address students by their first names.
4. I invite students to telephone/meet with me outside of class if they have any questions or want to discuss something.
5. I ask questions to solicit viewpoints.
6. I gesture while talking to the class.
7. I maintain eye contact when talking to students.
8. I smile at individual students in the class.
9. I have a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.
10. I use a variety of vocal expressions while talking to the class.

Wait Time

11. To get students engaged in discussions, I self-elaborate on their responses.
12. When a student fails to give a complete answer, I take the floor and complete their turn.
13. When students give the right answer, I immediately repeat their answers.
14. To help students answer the questions, I break-a general question into a series of lower-level ones.
15. I positively evaluate students' responses with words like 'excellent, very good, great, etc..'

Motivational Strategies

16. I establish a good relationship with my students.
17. I show students that I respect, accept, and care about each of them.
18. I create a supportive and pleasant classroom climate where students are free from embarrassment and ridicule.
19. I use short-opening activities to start each class (e.g., games).
20. I give clear instructions about how to carry out a task by modeling every step that students will need to do.
21. I give good reasons for students as to why a particular activity is meaningful or important.
22. I design tasks that are within learners' abilities so that they get to experience success regularly.
23. I encourage students to try harder by making it clear that I believe that they can do the tasks.
24. I show students that their efforts and achievements are being recognized by me.
25. I monitor students' accomplishments and take time to celebrate any success or victory.

Corrective Feedback Strategies

26. Before giving feedback, I take the time to listen to students till they give the whole answer.

27. Upon noticing an error in students' answers, I immediately give feedback.

28. I provide clues to encourage students to self-correct.

29. I reformulate all or part of the incorrect answer.

30. I pinpoint the errors of students and provide the correct answer.

Topic Familiarity

31. I ask students to brainstorm ideas about a particular topic.

32. I do a survey on students' ideas about topics of interest.

33. I use discussion groups to let students of similar interests talk together

34. I let students give voice to their opinions about the least and the most interesting parts of the content list.

I assign a class leadership position to a student each week who can make day-to-day content decisions