

Mejreme Ymeri, 2016

Volume 2 Issue 1, pp. 103-119

Year of Publication: 2016

DOI- <http://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2016.s21.103119>

This paper can be cited as: Ymeri, M. (2016). *The Impact of Gender and Second Language Proficiency on Willingness to Communicate In the Upper Secondary Schools of Gjilan Town-Kosovo*. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 2(1), 103-119.

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## **THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN THE UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF GJILAN TOWN-KOSOVO**

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### **Abstract**

*Second language willingness to communicate (WTC) has lately become an important concept in second language learning and communication. Earlier research on willingness to communicate (WTC) has shown that there are a lot of factors that influence the willingness of the learners to communicate and among those factors there are mentioned also the factor of gender and the language proficiency. The objectives of the study were to identify the factors that influence willingness to communicate and to find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate. In addition, by this study there is intended to provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves. This study included a questionnaire with upper-secondary school students. In order to measure students willingness to communicate there was administered a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001). A total of 300 hundred upper-secondary schools students participated in the study. Results from the study do not show*

*that the gender of the students plays a noteworthy role on their willingness to communicate respectively based on the results female students are just a little bit more willing to communicate compared to male students. On the other side the proficiency of the students has a notable effect on the willingness of the students to communicate respectively proficient students are much more willing to communicate than the non-proficient students.*

### **Keywords**

Willingness to Communicate, Gender, Second Language Proficiency, Upper- Secondary School Students

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## **1. Introduction**

Prior to the introduction of communicative language teaching, the major purpose of language learning was to develop linguistic competence and to master the structure of the language. However, in recent decade we are experiencing the fact that communication is gaining momentum and is becoming a very important tool if one wants to be successful in various settings. According to Daly (1986, cited in Civikly, 1986 p.21) communication is critical to success in academic, occupational and social settings. The English language is the most important foreign language in Kosovo and it is extensively used in the education system from primary level up to tertiary level. It is also extensively used in various professions such as medical, engineering, legal and business sectors. Therefore, it is very important for upper school students to become proficient in English so that they can use the language efficiently for academic purposes and later on in a professional setting. In addition to this many students of this age after finishing upper secondary school plan to study or work abroad where English proficiency and in particular communication skills are very necessary.

Furthermore, students who are proficient in English will have better opportunities to be employed by international business companies after they have graduated. Increasingly these companies do not only select applicants who can deliver technical skills but also those that possess soft skills. These soft skills include the ability to communicate in English effectively.

## **2. Literature Review**

## **2.1 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)**

Latest approaches to teaching a second language (e.g. communicative language teaching) have attached great importance to the role of frequent meaningful communication in gaining L2 competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Howat (1984, p. 279, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 155), "language is acquired through communication". In addition, he states that if he or she is not fully willing to communicate his attempts at establishing sound communication will be less than desirable. Hence, learners' willingness to use language to communicate is critical to their second language acquisition.

The research on second language acquisition suggest that, students and in particular the novice ones, who are willing to communicate with the others in the target language, are likely to possess a strong tolerance for ambiguity, low anxiety and a desire to make moderate but intelligent risks, such as guessing word meanings based on background knowledge and speaking up despite the possibility of making occasional mistakes' (MacIntyre et al., 1994; MacIntyre & Charos , 1996 cited in Oxford 1997 p.450). On the other hand, according to these authors students who do not take any risk or the ones who take extreme, uninformed risks are less likely to have positive experiences and they are more disposed to language anxiety. Furthermore, if the L2 student does not feel any link with the target language group or feels threatened by the loss of his or her native-language identity there can be risen the unwillingness to communicate (Oxford 1997).

Interaction plays an important role in the development of language. The origin of the WTC is related to the first language (L1) communication (McCroskey and Baer, 1985). WTC was first used to measure the speaker's tendency to approach or avoid starting communication (McCroskey and Richmond, 1987). McCroskey assumed that factors such as fear and anxiety play an important role in oral communication and he applied these issues as main elements of WTC in the second language context (McCroskey et al., 1985). McCroskey & Richmond (1987 cited in Barraclough, Christophel & McCroskey, 1988 p. 188) advanced the concept of "willingness to communicate" to 'reference an individual's general personality orientation towards talking. While talking is central to interpersonal communication, people differ in the amount of talk in which they will choose to engage'.

## **2.2 Willingness to Communicate; A Personality Trait-Like or Situational State-Like Construct?**

MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) uttered that the goal of the L2 learning process should be to encourage a willingness to seek out communication opportunities and to actually communicate in them. MacIntyre et al., (1998) recommends that WTC in a second language is defined by a specific set of linguistic, communicative, and social-psychological variables. Based on these authors these factors are inborn to the individual while other factors are seen as more transitory characteristics of the specific context in which a learner functions at a given time. The first factors are seen as personality trait like and the last ones as situational state-like construct.

While talking about personality types it is worth mentioning that in regards to WTC there is a distinguishing between introverted persons and extroverted ones. Introverted persons are less socially active than extraverted people and most of the introverts are trying to avoid communicating with others. On the other hand, an extravert requires communication to facilitate social interaction; therefore, he places a higher value on communication (MacIntyre, et al., 1999). In brief, the extraverts are more likely to communicate than introverts. That is, the extraverts have stronger willingness to communicate than the introverts. According to MacIntyre (1994), introverts have a tendency to have lower self-esteem. Therefore, they are not willing to communicate with others.

Given that the extraverts often communicate with other peoples in many kinds of social situations they have greatly practiced the using of second language so that they perceive that they have the competence to communicate with other people. These persons have high emotional stability and are more self-confident to communicate with others in the second language . So, based on this we can conclude that extroverts people compared to introverts people are more willing to communicate.

### **2.3 Second Language Proficiency**

Baker and MacIntyre (2000) argue that it is learners' perceptions of competence that will affect learners' willingness to speak rather than their actual ability. Neither have there been a large number of studies that inquired into how learners' willingness to speak, and ultimately their language production might affect their language skills.

Moreover, the role of L2 production and interaction in L2 development is not clear cut. However, according to some studies it seems that it may facilitate language acquisition (e.g., Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998 cited in Nagy 2007, p.59), therefore, it is reasonable to suppose a

positive relationship between language proficiency and L2 WTC. According to Nagy (2007.p.59) it might be thought that if

*'language learners have linguistic means to communicate their ideas or obtain information, there is no reason why they should not do so. In addition, if learners do not have adequate language skills it does not come as a surprise that they will be reluctant to speak up in the target language. On the other hand, on some occasions and under certain circumstances proficient L2 learners may be unwilling to speak in the target language'.*

#### **2.4 The Effect of Gender on Willingness to Communicate**

It is evident that gender might have an impact on L2 communication. Gardner (1985 cited in Macintyre et.al 2002 p. 542) reports several studies that demonstrate more positive attitudes toward language learning among girls and argues that attitudinal differences might be responsible for obtained sex differences in achievement. In addition, (Clark & Trafford, 1995 cited in Macintyre et.al 2002 p. 542) modern languages seem to be perceived as a "traditionally 'female' subject".

On the other side, in relation to the effect of the gender on Willingness to Communicate, Afghari and Sadeghi (2012) proved the opposite of the Gardner's findings (2008) which indicate that females are significantly more prone to experiencing anxiety than young men (p. 61). According to the findings of this study there are not showed any significant difference between male and female learners in their rate of communication apprehension.

Wright (1999) in his study found that in a sample of Irish adolescents learning French, girls had more positive attitudes than boys toward learning and speaking French. According to him, when sex, school type, perceived in-school influences on attitudes, and perceived out-of-school influences on attitudes were entered into a regression analysis, sex emerged as the strongest predictor of attitudes toward speaking French. Regarding gender, Baker and MacIntyre (2000 cited in Afghari and Sadeghi 2012 p. 52) stated that "boys prefer L2 communication outside of class, whereas girls prefer in-class communication, and effect sizes for sex and for interactions involving sex as an independent variable are small.

#### **2.5 Motivation and Willingness to Communicate**

Another factor that is considered to predict WTC is the motivation. 'Psychologists have long been interested in what makes people pursue their goals (e.g., Baróczy & Séra, 1970; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Kozáki, 1980; Nagy, J, 1995; 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). "Empirical research has shown that besides language learning aptitude, which is a cognitive factor, (e.g., Carroll, 1990; 1993; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Harley & Hart, 2010; Ottó, 1996; Skehan, 1991, 1998) the second best predictor of L2 proficiency is language learning motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, 1998, 2001; Gardner, & MacIntyre, 1993a; McGroarty, 2001; Spolsky, 2000' cited in Nagy, 2007 p.18). Furthermore, according to the view of Gardner (1985, p. 10 cited in Nagy, 2007); language learning motivation is "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity".

The relationship between language learning motivation and willingness to communicate is a complex one. As it concerns motivation, Gardner and Lambert (2011) developed an approach which has influenced various studies in L2 motivation to the present day. According to this approach there is a distinction between integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is positive attitudes toward the target language group and a willingness to integrate into the target language community, whereas instrumental motivation refers to practical reasons for learning a language, such as to gain social recognition or to get a better job.

From the studies it can be concluded that learning context may have an effect on the strength of the relationship between motivation and willingness to communicate. In the cases where learners have more opportunities for interactions with members of the target language community, they will develop stronger instrumental and integrative motivation. As a result of this there will be an even stronger influence on their willingness to speak or vice versa.

## **2.6 Attitude of the Learners**

Another significant contributing factor to the development of WTC is the learner's attitude. 'Attitudes represent language learners' beliefs and feelings towards the target language, its speakers, its culture, the social value of learning the target language, and towards themselves as members of their own culture' (Ellis, 1994, p. 198 cited in Nagy 2007, p.28). MacIntyre & Charos, (1996) suggest that if a person has a positive attitude toward learning the second language he or she may be more willing to use it in the future.

Studies that have been conducted in this field illustrated a direct and/or indirect relationship between WTC and attitude. Despite the fact that Yashima (2004) indicates a 'direct relation between students' WTC and their attitude toward international community in the EFL (English as a Foreign language) context, in the ESL (English as a Second Language) context, Clement et al. (2003 cited in Dourakshhan et al., 2011 p. 57) show an indirect relation through linguistic self-confidence between WTC and attitude toward the other language group'.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

1. Does learner's gender have any effect on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)?
2. Is there any relation between the language proficiency and WTC among the upper secondary school students?
3. What can the teachers do to help increase the willingness of the students to communicate?

#### **3.2 Objectives of the Research**

The purpose of this research was to explore the effects of EFL learner's gender and second language proficiency on willingness to communicate.

The major objectives of this study are:

- To identify the factors that influence willingness to communicate
- To find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate.
- To provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves.

This present study was carried out at high secondary schools during the Winter Semester 2015/16. Three hundred (300) students were involved in the present study and both male and female students were included. The age of the students is between 15-18 years. These are high school students of different profiles (natural sciences, economy and architecture).

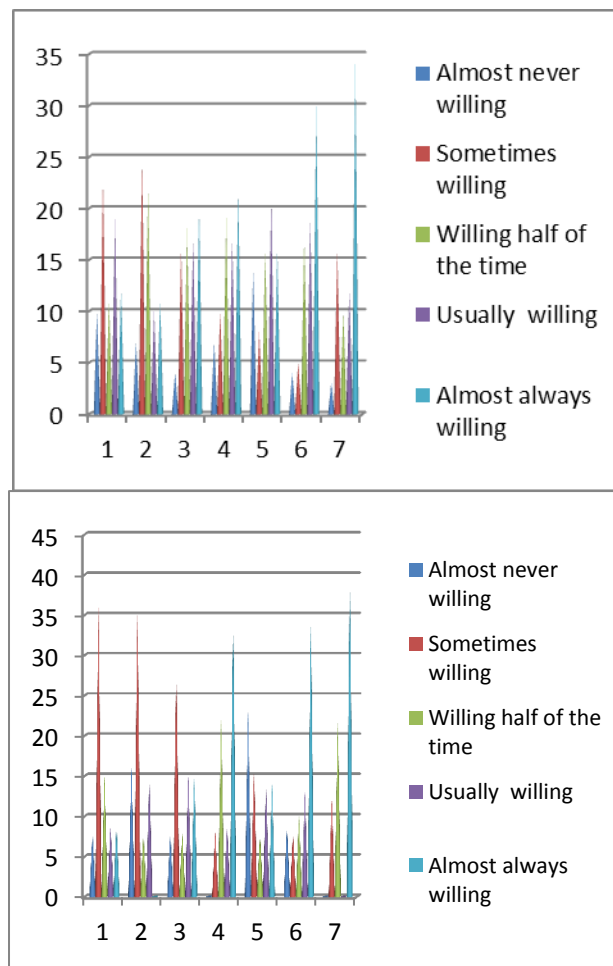
In order to measure students' willingness to communicate, a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was distributed to the participants. The questionnaire is comprised of 24 items entailing speaking, reading, writing and listening comprehension. Students rated each item in a range from 1 to 5 (1 = almost never willing, 2 =

sometimes willing, 3 = willing half of the time, 4 = usually willing, and 5 = almost always willing) according to their WTC in each situation.

## 4. Analysis of Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Analysis of the Results of the Students' Questionnaire

The first instrument of this study was the questionnaire which focused on students' feelings in communicating with other people, in English. It also gathered students' thoughts on their willingness to communicate. The questionnaire was distributed among three hundred students. It had twenty-four questions.



**Figure 4.1:** Results from the speaking skills (female and male students)



This subdivision contains 7 statements and questions in total. In regards to the first statement if the students are willing to speak in a group of their summer vacation the difference between female student and male student is quite significant. In other words, number of female students who responded positively is 42 (or 56%) out of 75 students the number of male students who responded positively is only 33 (or 44%) out of 75 male students. The other female and male students are almost never willing and sometimes willing to speak in a group.

The next statement is related to willingness of the students to speak to their teacher about their homework assignment and in relation to this the difference between the females and males is moderately significant. While 43 female students (or 57%) responded positively that they are willing to communicate to their teacher, number of male students who responded positively is only 33 (or 44%) out of 75 male students.

In relation to the third question of the questionnaire about the willingness of the students to have a conversation with a stranger who enter the room in which they are in and he/she talks to them first the difference between the females and males is quite noteworthy. While the number of female students who responded positively that they are willing to communicate to their teacher is 55 (or 73%) the number of male students who responded positively is only 38 (or 50%) out of 75 male students.

The fourth statement is related to the willingness of the students to talk to a friend while waiting in line and talking about the gender difference it can be noticed that in this statement the number of male students who responded positively is a little bit higher that the female ones. In other words, the number of male students who responded positively is 67 (or 89%) while the number of female students is 58(or 77%).

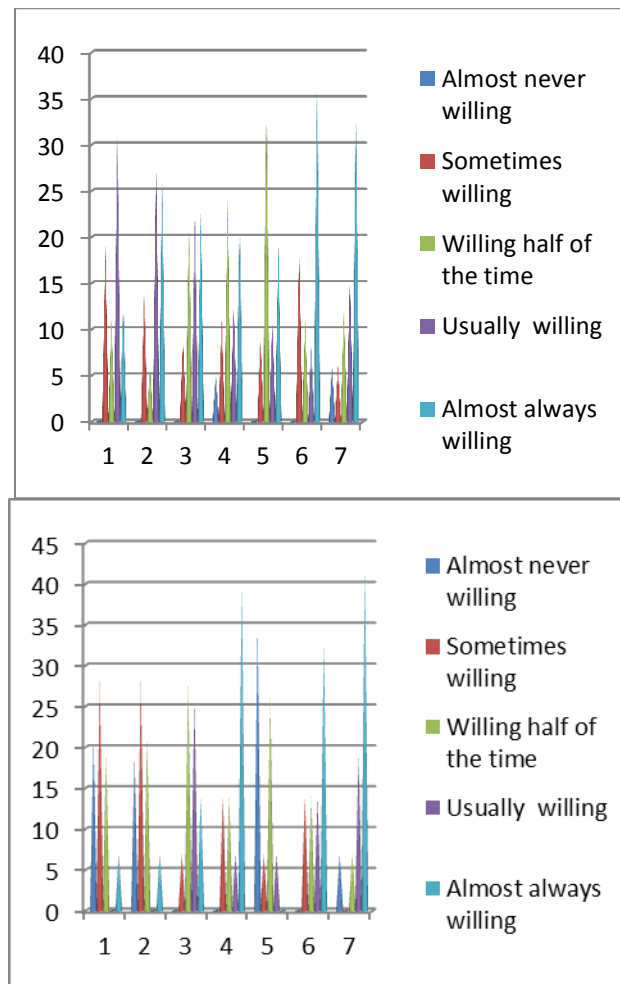
The next one is the question related to how willing are the students to be an actor in a play and concerning the results from this question it can be concluded the difference between the male and female students who responded positively is really high. More precisely, the number of female students who responded positively is 53 (or 70%) and the number of male students is 32 students (or 48%).

On the next statement about the willingness of the students to describe the rules of their favorite game the gender difference is not so significant. In other words, the number of female students who responded positively is 66 students (or 88%) while the male ones is 58 students (or 77%).

In regards to the last statement on willingness to play a game in English it can be noticed that in this statement the number of male students who responded positively is a little bit higher than the female ones. In other words, the number of male students who responded positively is 63 (or 84%) while the number of female students is 56(or 74%).

Therefore, from the above-mentioned results on speaking in class in English it can be concluded that there are some gender differences related to the willingness to speak in class in English but it cannot be certainly concluded that the female students are more willing to speak than the male students. The reason for this statement is that while on the first, the second, the third, the fifth and the sixth statement the number of the female students who respond positively is quite high, on the fourth and the seventh statement the number of male students who responded positively is a little bit larger than the female ones. Although, taking into consideration the fact that in most of the statements the number of female students who responded positively is higher than the male students perhaps it is good to conclude that the female students are more willing to speak in class in English compared to male students.

### **Proficient and non-proficient students**



**Figure 4.2:** Results from the speaking skills (proficient and non-proficient students)

This subdivision contains 7 statements and questions in total. In regards to the first statement if the students are willing to speak in a group of their summer vacation the difference between proficient and non-proficient students is quite significant. In other words, number of proficient students who responded positively is 56 (or 75%) out of 75 students the number of non-proficient students who responded positively is only 26 (or 44%) out of 75 non-proficient students. The other students are almost never willing and sometimes willing to speak in a group.

The next statement is related to willingness of the students to speak to their teacher about their homework assignment and in relation to this the difference between proficient and non-proficient students is really significant, too. While 61 proficient students (or 81%) responded positively that they are willing to communicate to their teacher, number of non-

proficient students who responded positively is only 28 (or 37%) out of 75 non-proficient students.

In relation to the third question of the questionnaire about the willingness of the students to have a conversation with a stranger who enter the room in which they are in and he/she talks to them first the difference between the proficient and non-proficient students is really high. While the number of proficient students who responded positively that they are willing to communicate to their teacher is 66 (or 88%) the number of non-proficient students who responded positively is only 9 (or 12%) out of 75 non-proficient students.

The fourth statement is related to the willingness of the students to talk to a friend while waiting in line and talking about the difference between the proficient and non-proficient students it can be noticed the difference between proficient and non-proficient students who responded positively is really small. In other words, the number of proficient students who responded positively is 57 (or 77%) while the number of non-proficient students is 59 (or 79%).

The next one is the question related to how willing are the students to be an actor in a play and concerning the results from this question it can be concluded the difference between the proficient and non-proficient students who responded positively is pretty significant. More precisely, the number of proficient students who responded positively is 66 (or 88%) and the number of non-proficient students is 42 students (or 56%).

On the next statement about the willingness of the students to describe the rules of their favourite game the difference between the proficient and non-proficient students is not so significant. In other words, the number of proficient students who responded positively is 56 students (or 75%) while the number of non-proficient students who responded positively is 61 (or 81%).

In regards to the last statement on willingness to play a game in English it can be noticed that also in this statement that the difference between proficient and non-proficient students who responded positively is not noteworthy. In other words, the number of proficient students who responded positively is 63 (or 84%) while the number of non-proficient students is a little bit higher respectively 68 out of 75 non-proficient students (or 90%).

Therefore, from the above-mentioned results on speaking in class in English it can be concluded that there are some differences related to the willingness to speak in class in English between the proficient and non-proficient students. In other words, the proficient students are

much more willing to speak in class in English. This can be noticed from the responses of the students whereby in four of the seven statements or questions in total the number of proficient students who responded positively is really high compared to the willingness of the non-proficient students. In three other statements the difference is insignificant.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study aimed to identify the factors that influence willingness to communicate, to find out if the gender and language proficiency have any effect on willingness to communicate and to provide information to teachers in order to help their students feel more confident in expressing themselves.

The results of this study indicated that the willingness of the students to communicate is pretty much linked with the gender and proficiency of the students. Data gathered through students' questionnaire indicated that the gender of the students plays a certain role on their willingness to communicate. In other words according to the results of the questionnaire female students are a little bit more willing to communicate compared to male students.

In order to answer the first question of this study 'Does learner's gender have any effect on Willingness to Communicate (WTC)' it is perhaps good to conclude that at least according to the responses from the student's questionnaire it can be noticed that female students are more willing to communicate than the male students.

In regards to the second question of the study 'Is there any relation between the language proficiency and WTC among the upper secondary school students' it can surely be stated that there is pretty strong relation between the language proficiency and WTC of the students.

Concerning the third question 'What can the teachers do to help increase the willingness of the students to communicate' it would be good for the teachers to take into consideration the below mentioned recommendations.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the effect of gender and language proficiency on willingness to communicate among the upper secondary school students of Gjilan town is quite significant. While concerning the gender it cannot surely be stated that it has a significant effect in regards to the language proficiency this can for sure be stated. Both, the results from the

student's questionnaire and the interview with the English language teachers indicate the language proficiency has quite a big effect on the willingness of the students to communicate.

In order to increase the willingness of the students to communicate perhaps it is good to recommend the following points:

1. As students lack practice in speaking, they experience significant communication apprehension, therefore a good communicative approach should be adopted to provide students with more opportunities to practice their speaking skills.
2. As students appear to be extremely sensitive to the fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage students to have the confidence to learn from their mistakes in order to improve their communication skills.
3. In order for the student to participate actively in the classroom discussion, teachers should provide a low stress, friendly, informal and learning-supportive environment. Teachers should be friendly, helpful and cooperative in order for the students to feel comfortable in the class.
4. Above all they should continuously offer words of encouragement; this may be the best way to make students express themselves.
5. In addition they should try to find relevant and interesting topics for class discussions and exercises and progress gradually in order to reinforce the material.

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