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Perceived Communication Competence in Willingness to Communicate in English Language (A Case Study of Sudanese EFL Students)

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Abstract: ***This study tries to investigate the willingness to communicate in English language among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students, in relation to self-perceived communication competence. It further aims at examining the role of English language achievement and gender differences in relation to willingness to communicate, and self-perceived communication competence. The study adopted the descriptive and the analytical methods to analyze the collected data, by utilizing two standardized scales conducted on a sample composed of 156 respondents studying English as a foreign language at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Khartoum. The results were statistically computed and revealed that: willingness to communicate in English language and self-perceived communication competence are positively correlated among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students. Self-perceived communication competence is a good indicator of willingness to communicate in English language than actual language achievement. The study also showed that there are some gender differences in willingness to communicate, and self-perceived communication competence among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students.***

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate; Perceived Communication Competence; Language Achievement; Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Despite the ongoing emphasis on communication and communicative approaches in modern language pedagogy; language teaching/learning in Sudan is still influenced and dominated by teacher-centered approaches and traditional methods that primarily focus on language structures and grammatical rules.Under such conditions, students have few opportunities to enhance their communicative competence in English language and remain reluctant to communicate in English language. This study aims at investigating Sudanese EFL students' willingness to communication in relation to their self-perceived communication competence and their overall actual English language achievement. Itempirically and objectively attempts to answer the following questions:

1) What is the relationship between Sudanese undergraduate EFL students' willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence in learning English language?
2) Are there any significant differences among Sudanese EFL undergraduate students in their willingness to communicate in English language, with regard to their overall language achievement?
3) To what extend does self-perceived communication competence of Sudanese undergraduate EFL students bea good indicator of their levels of willingness to communicate in English language than their actual language achievement?
4) Are there any significant gender differences among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students in their willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence in English language?

To answer these questions, the study makes the following hypotheses:

1) Willingness to communicate among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students is positively correlated with self- perceived communication competence in learning English.
2) There is a significant positive correlation between willingness to communicate in English language and overall English language achievement among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students.
3) Self- perceived communication competence among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students plays a vital role in predicting students' level of willingness to communicate than their actual language achievement.
4) There are significant gender differences among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students in their willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence in English language.

2. Conceptual Background

It has long been established that the process of language learning is not merely a simple learning of language skills and structures, but there are many other non-linguistic factors such as willingness to communicate, foreign language anxiety, motivation, and self-perceived communication competence that substantially affect this process. (Gardner et al,1997, Arnold& Brown, 1999). The main goal of language teaching is to promote learners' communicative competence in the foreign language. Kang (2005: 278) states that "with increased emphasis on authentic communication as an essential part of L2 learning and instruction, willingness to communicate has been proposed as one of the key concepts in L2 learning and instruction". Willingness to communicate is a potential construct that emphasizes the active involvement of L2 learners to use the language and create opportunities to

enhance their English language proficiency. MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) point out that being willing to communicate is part of becoming fluent in a second language, which often is the ultimate goal of L2 learners. Since language is a tool for communication, willingness to communicate promotes language acquisition, by improving speaking skills and emphasizing the speaking opportunities to language learning. In this context, MacIntyre and Charos (1996: 3) point out that:

"*Communication and second language acquisition are closely tied together. On one hand, recent trends toward a conversational approach to second language pedagogy reflect the belief that one must use the language to develop proficiency, that is, one must talk to learn. On the other hand, communication is more than a means of facilitating language learning, it is an important goal in itself"*.

Advocating communicative language teaching and learning approaches emphasized the importance of cultivating communicative competence in L2 learners. Swain and Lapkin (2002) imply that language is learned through interactive meaningful communication in a pragmatic setting. The term willingness to communicate is a relatively recent psycholinguistic construct, which is quite central to an individual's communication in a second/foreign language in particular, and to their overall language proficiency in general. The notion of willingness to communicate was originally proposed in communication science and was applied to the field of first language (L1) by McCroskey and Richmond (1987). McCroskey (1997: 77) defines willingness to communicate as "an individual's predispositions to initiate communication with others". This personality trait and orientation could explain why some people would talk and others would not under the same or similar circumstances. Therefore, an individual's personality was assumed to have a general impact on the cognitive choices, that a learner would make about his orientations and attitudes towards communicative situations and to the extent to which he would initiate or being willing to communicate in the target language. However, the current trend in second language research views willingness to communicate as a rather dynamic and context-specific construct. It could further be argued that, willingness to communicate in the classroom settings does not exist as a single variable but rather as the result of various underlying cognitive, affective and social factors, where language learning is essentially regarded as a dynamic social activity. Nevertheless, earlier studies have emphasized the importance of willingness to communicate as a key variable in language teaching and learning, that could contribute to a successful language acquisition especially speaking fluently in the target language as ultimate outcome of any language instruction. In this regard, McCroskey and Richmond (1987: 153) state that "high willingness is associated with increased frequency and amount of communication, which in turn are associated with a variety of positive communication outcomes. Low willingness to communicate is associated with decreased fluency and amount of communication, which in turn are associated with a variety of negative communication outcomes". As such, willingness to communicate is considered to be a crucial element in the frequency and fluency of the second language use, implying that language learners who are optimally willing to communicate in the second language, would actually look for and utilize opportunities to communicate in L2, which in turn would enhance their level of fluency in the target language. Moreover, MacIntyre et al. (1997) indicate that throughout the process of acquiring a second language, learners often assess their own developing abilities. Commonly, this self-assessment can facilitate their learning by helping them develop strategies to enhance their linguistic capabilities. Many empirical researcheslike (Yashima et al. 2004; Matsuoka, 2005; Cameron, 2013) indicate a strong correlation between perceived communicative competence and willingness to communicate.Similarly, Peng and Woodrow (2010) report that Chinese university students who have high self-evaluation of L2 competence and less anxiety arousal tend to be more willing to enter into communication. MacIntyre et al. (2002) suggest that the effect of one's perceived competence can override one's actual competence in communication situations, especially when it comes to the initiation of communication, which is conceptualized as willingness to communicate.Self-perceived communication competence - which refers to the self-evaluation of one's ability to communicate appropriately in any given situation - has been considered as one of the potential predictors of learners' willingness to communicate. McCroskey (1997) reveals that willingness to communicate is highly related to self-perceived communication competence more than actual competence. Self-Perceived communication competence is a cognitive construct that implies an individual's self-assessment of the target language skills. In this regard, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) argue that since the choice of whether to communicate is a cognitive one, it is likely to be more influenced by one's perceptions of competence, of which one is usually aware, than one's actual competence of which one may be totally unaware. In an empirical investigation, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) found a positive relationship between L2 self-perceived communication competence and willingness to communicate in L2. This implies that self-perceived communication competence is a potential predictor of L2 communication performance, since that learners would usually tend to communicate based on their self-judgment of L2 fluency rather than their actual competence.

3. Methods

3.1 Subjects

The Study subjects consistof 156 Sudanese undergraduate students majoring in English Language, (English as foreign language) selected randomly from second, third, fourth, and fifth yearlevels.They represent different levels of mastery in English language ranging between preliminary, intermediate, and advanced levels. However, there are notably gender imbalances, where almost all academic levels are dominated by female students. Thus, the vast majority who participated in this studyare females (83.3%)compared to (16.7%)ofmale students in all levels.

3.2 Instruments and procedure of analysis

In order to collect and analyze the data of this study, two

standardized scales of questionnaires were used. First, Baghaei's (2013) scale (Willingness to communicate in a Foreign Language) was used to investigate the nature of Sudanese students' willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language; The scale includes 22 items with three sub-scales namely: willingness to communicate with native-speakers (items 1–7), willingness to communicate with foreign non-native speakers (items 8–14), and willingness to communicate with classmates/instructors who learn and teach the foreign language, willingness to communicate in the school context (items 15–22). Participants have to indicate their levels of agreeability on a 5-points Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Secondly, McCroskey's (1988) scale was used to investigate the process ofself-Perceived communication competence. The scale has 12 items scoring for four communication contexts (public speaking, meetings, small groups, dyads) and scores for three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends).The respondents were instructed to estimate their English communication competence and assess the extent to which the respondents feel confident communicating in different situations and with different interlocutors, by indicating a number ranging from 0% (entirely incompetent) to 100% (entirely competent).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Table 1: Correlation between Students' Willingness to Communicate and Self-Perceived Communication Competence in Learning English

Variable		SPCC
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.277
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	156

As seen in table(1) the Pearson test indicates that willingness to communicate among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students is significantly positively correlated with self-perceived communication competence (r = .277, P = .000). This result suggests that students who perceive themselves as less communicatively competent, show less willingness to communicate in English. This finding is in line with MacIntyre & Doucette (2010), who indicated that willingness to communicate was significantly and positively correlated with perceived communication competence and negatively with anxiety on speaking French as a second language.

4.2 Differences in Willingness to Communicate according to Language Achievement

Table 2: ANOVA: GPA Differences in WTC

Variable		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
WTC	Between Groups	1100.10	3	366.70	3.15	.027
	Within Groups	17681.49	152	116.33		
	Total	18781.59	155			

To explore the significant differences of Sudanese EFL undergraduate students in their willingness to communicate according to their overall language achievement, the (ANOVA) test was conducted. As seen in table ((2) the results indicate that there are statistically significant differences in students' willingness to communicate at the significant level of P value < .05 with the conditions F (3,152) = 3.15, p = 0.27]. This means that differences in language achievement as indicated by accumulative grade average lead to variations in the levels of willingness to communicate. Since the results of the ANOVA test was statistically significant, Tukey HSD post hoc test was conducted to compare the conditions with each other in order to identify the exact differences among the different categories of language achievement indicating pass, good, very good and excellent language achievement, respectively.

Table 2.1: Tuckey HSD Post Hoc Test: GPA Differences in Willingness to Communicate

(I) GPA	(J) GPA	Mean	SD	Sig.
Pass	Good	80.48	10.7	0.802
	Very good			0.333
	Excellent			0.021
Good	Pass	82.51	9.57	0.802
	Very good			0.851
	Excellent			0.067
Very good	Pass	84.2	12.16	0.333
	Good			0.851
	Excellent			0.157
Excellent	Pass	93.29	6.4	0.021
	Good			0.067
	Very good			0.157

Tukey HSD post hoc comparison as shown in table ((2.1) indicates that the mean score of students with pass grade (M = 80.48, SD = 10.70) is significantly smaller than those with excellent language achievement (M = 93.29, SD = 6.40). There are no statistically significant differences between students with good and very good language achievement. This suggests that students with the lowest language achievement differ from students with the highest language achievement. These findings are in line with some studies of (Mahdi, (2014) Menezes & Juan-Garau, 2014) who reported a significant positive correlation between willingness to communicate and foreign language achievement. However, this result indicates a significant difference in willingness to communicate among Sudanese students only between those who achieved pass grades and excellent students.

4.3 The Role of Self-Perceived Communication Competence and Language Achievement on Willingness to Communicate

Table 3: Correlation of Language Achievement and SPCC, with WTC

Variable		SPCC	GPA
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.277**	.209**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.009
	N	156	156

Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted to examine if self-perceived communication competence can be a better indicator of willingness to communicate than the students' actual language achievement. The results of the correlation

coefficient as presented in table (3) indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence (r= 277, P = .000), and between willingness to communicate and language achievement (r = 209, P = 0.009). These results indicate that self-perceived communication competence is considered as the better indicator of willingness to communicate than actual language achievement.

Table 3.1: Correlation of Language Achievement and SPCC with WTC for each year

Level	Variable		SPCC	GPA
Second	WTC	Pearson Correlation	.439**	.154
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.336
		N	41	41
Third	WTC	Pearson Correlation	.570**	.375*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.013
		N	43	43
Fourth	WTC	Pearson Correlation	-.330	-.142
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.061	.431
		N	33	33
Fifth	WTC	Pearson Correlation	.159	.268
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.335	.099
		N	39	39

When a further analysis for each academic level was computed as shown in table (3.1), stronger significant correlations are demonstrated between these variables, especially among intermediate students. For instance, there is a strong significant correlation between willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence in the second academic level (r = .439, P = 0.004), and in the third level (r = .570, p = .000). No significant correlation between willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence is indicated in the advanced levels of the semi-final and final students in the fourth and fifth year. On the other hand, actual language achievement as measured by GPA is moderately significantly correlated with willingness to communicate in the third year only. From these results, it isrevealed that self-perceived communication competence could be a good indicator of willingness to communicate for preliminary and intermediate students rather than their actual language achievement.These findings are consistent with (MacIntyre et al, (1997), (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000), which imply that self-perceived communication competence plays a vital role in predicting learners' level of willingness to communicate than their actual language achievement.

4.4 Gender Differences in Willingness to Communicate, and Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Table 4: Gender Differences in Willingness to Communicate

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
WTC	Male	26	84.69	13.13			
	Female	130	82.72	10.56	.832	154	.407
WTCNS	Male	26	29.46	4.27			
	Female	130	27.55	4.15	2.13	154	.035
WTCNN	Male	26	24.15	5.68			
	Female	130	24.12	4.14	.032	154	.974
WTCSC	Male	26	31.08	6.49			
	Female	130	31.05	4.95	.027	154	.978

(Note, WTC: willingness to communicate, WTCNS: willingness to communicate with native speakers, WTCNN: willingness to communicate with non-native speakers, WTCSC: willingness to communicate in school context)

An independent sample t-test was computed to measure if there are any gender differences in the levels of willingness to communicate, and self-perceived communication competence, respectively. Regarding willingness to communicate, the results of the t-test as appears in table (4) reveal gender significant differences only in the construct of willingness to communicate with native speakers, where male students have higher mean score (M = 29.46, SD = 4.27) than the female students (M = 27.55, SD = 4.15), with conditions t(154) = 2.13, p = 0.035. This indicates that male students are more willing to communicate with native speakers of English than their female counterparts.

Table 4.1: Gender Differences in Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
SPCC	Male	26	68.11	21.04			
	Female	130	65.10	15.80	.836	154	.404
Public	Male	26	69.22	26.22			
	Female	130	62.47	17.72	1.623	154	.107
Meeting	Male	26	62.95	27.12			
	Female	130	58.27	19.15	1.054	154	.294
Group	Male	26	69.58	24.48			
	Female	130	69.88	16.89	-.077	154	.939
Dyad	Male	26	70.69	20.65			
	Female	130	69.76	16.97	.246	154	.806
Stranger	Male	26	63.17	27.92			
	Female	130	49.32	21.76	2.821	154	.005
Acquaintance	Male	26	63.13	24.97			
	Female	130	65.90	19.19	-.639	154	.524
Friend	Male	26	78.03	20.20			
	Female	130	80.07	15.68	.836	154	.404

Concerning self-perceived communication competence, the result of the t-test as shown in table (4.1) indicates that the mean score of male students in self-perceived communication competence with strangers (M = 63.17, SD = 27.92) is significantly higher than the mean score of female students (M = 49.32, SD = 21.76), with conditions t(154) = 2.821, p = 005. This result shows that female students perceive themselves as less competent to communicate in English with strangers than their male counterparts. This result indicates there are some significant gender differences among Sudanese undergraduate EFL students, in which males are more willing to communicate with native speakers and are more competent to communicating with strangers in English language. This can partially be attributed to a number of considerations. One possible explanation is that male students as a minority are assumed to have better chances and opportunities to communicate and might receive more attention from their teachers. Another probable explanation might be attributed to the conservative nature of the Sudanese society towards females and social constraints imposed upon them that lead them to shy away in communication. In this regard, Tannen, (1990) postulates that despite the stereotypes of women as being talkative, adult men seem to talk more in meetings, or mixed-group discussions than their female counterparts. In terms of self-perceived communication competence, the

current study does not indicate any significant gender differences in the overall self-perceived communication competence. However, a significant gender difference is indicated only in regard to the communication with strangers, in which Sudanese female students are less competent .So, it seems plausible that female students shy away from communicating with strangers and native speakers whom they are not familiar with, and tend to be reluctant to communicate in certain situations, in which they are expected not to initiate communication according to the societal values and norms in Sudan.

5. Conclusion

Willingness to communicate is an essential part of language learning, which profoundly enhances students' oral proficiency and communication competence. However, willingness to communicate is influenced by many potential factors such as self-perceived communication competence among others. Self-perceived communication competence positively affects one's willingness to communicate in the target language, which implies that students who have higher levels of self-perceived communication competence tend to be more willing to communicate and engage in communication opportunities, irrespective of their actual language proficiency. The results of the empirical investigation indicate that willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence are positively correlated. Language achievement as measured by overall GPA also partially predicts variability in willingness to communicate. However, self-perceived communication competence is the most important and determinant factor rather than actual language achievement in predicting willingness to communicate, especially among preliminary and intermediate students, but not among advanced students.The results further reveal that there are gender differences, in which female students tend to have lower communication competence when communicating with native speakers and strangers than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, no gender differences are indicated in terms of the overall willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence.

The findings of this study might have direct pedagogical implications for the language learning process and teaching practices. It also provides further evidence that self-perceived communication competence exerts a strong influence on willingness to communicate than actual language achievement. This implies that psychological and affective variables play a potential role in foreign language learning and communication, especially in the early stages of the language learning process. Therefore, English language teachers and instructors should pay especial attention to these factors in order to promote their students' willingness to communicate and reduce their communication apprehension.

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