

## Self-perceived Communication Competence: Is It Related to Foreign Language Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate

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**Abstract:** The present study aimed to investigate the relationships among foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), and self-perceived communication competence (SPCC). To this end, 90 upper intermediate and advanced English learners from Azaran Language College and Avesta Language Institute, Mashhad, Iran were asked to complete 3 questionnaires: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLCAS), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), and Self-perceived Communication Competence. The results of the correlational study indicated that there was a significant relationship between WTC and FLCAS, and SPCC. To further analyze the data, t test and regression analyses were run. t test analysis indicated that the difference between the means of high and low anxiety groups and high and low SPCC groups were significant. Regression analysis also indicated that several predictions can be made regarding these three constructs.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Foreign Language Anxiety

Many factors affect foreign language development and anxiety is one of these factors (Ellis, 1994). Anxiety is believed to be highly culture related and it is different in different cultures (Williams & Burden, 1997). In general, when an individual becomes anxious, they experience negative self-related cognition and the person becomes cognitively paralyzed. They cannot use the resources available to them at other times (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

In educational research, anxiety is put into two categories: trait or state. Trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality trait. Trait anxious people tend to feel anxious in a variety of situations. State anxiety, on the other hand, is a temporary condition experienced at a particular moment. A third type of anxiety is situation specific anxiety. This reflects a trait that recurs in specific situations (Spielberger, Anton, & Bedell, 1976; Brown, 2000). Research into language learning anxiety has considered language learning as situation specific anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991; Horwitz 2001). That is, a trait which recurs in language learning situations, namely classrooms.

As Woodrow (2006) has maintained, L2 anxiety hinders the oral performance of ESL speakers. Second language anxiety can predict oral achievement. Interacting with native speakers has been distinguished as the most frequent source of anxiety. Anxiety experienced in communication in English can debilitate and can influence students' adaptation to the target

environment and ultimately the achievement of their educational goals.

#### 1.2. Willingness to Communicate

The use of the target language is one of the main purposes of second language learning and it is an indicator of success in learning the second language. Seliger (1977) has shown that it plays an important role in learning L2. Willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally introduced with reference to L1 communication but it was extended to L2 communication as well (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998). In this model, the factors that affect WTC are social and individual context, affective cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioral intention.

Although SPCC, foreign language anxiety, and learners' willingness to communicate have been center of attention in language learning and teaching, their interrelationships seem to have been ignored. In this study, the researchers attempted to see if there was a relationship between Self-perceived Communicative Competence (SPCC), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

So far, research has been done on the EI, L2 anxiety and empathy (Rouhani, 2008), the effect of teachers' multiple-intelligences on their perceived self-efficacy (Chan, 2003), the interrelationships among EQ, FLCAS, and WTC (Birjandi & Tabataba'ian, 2012), and relationship between language learners' attribution and their SPCC (Eslami Rasekh, Zabihi, & Reza zadeh, 2012) but it seems no research has taken

willingness to communicate and foreign language classroom anxiety into account in connection with SPCC.

Therefore, this study aimed at seeking the relationship between SPCC, foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate. In this study, the aim was to focus on learners' self-perception of their competence and its facilitative or debilitating effect on willingness to communicate and anxiety.

The researchers sought to answer the following questions:

- Is there a relationship between SPCC and foreign language anxiety?
- Is there a relationship between SPCC and willingness to communicate?
- Is there a difference between the means of those who have a high perception of their ability and those who have a low perception of their competence?
- Can SPCC predict foreign language anxiety?
- Can SPCC predict willingness to communicate?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and Setting

Ninety upper-intermediate and advanced students from Avesta Language Institute and Azaran Language College in Mashhad, Iran took part in this study (52 females and 38 males). Upper-intermediate and advanced students were chosen as they are able to speak and write English well and they have taken part in several classes. Therefore, they were able to take the questionnaires in English. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 46.

### 2.2. Instrumentation

#### 2.2.1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test (FLCAS)

This test was designed to measure foreign language learners' anxiety level. It was designed by Horwitz in 1986. It is a 36-item questionnaire and specifically measures foreign language classroom anxiety.

#### 2.2.2. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

WTC was designed in 1998 by MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels. It is a self report which shows the degree the learners are willing to take part in class discussions and communicate with others. It is a 27-item self report.

#### 2.2.3. Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC)

This scale (SPCC) was designed by McCroskey and McCroskey (1988). It was later revised by Richmond and McCroskey (1998) to obtain

information regarding the extent to which people feel confident to communicate in a variety of interactional contexts and with a variety of interlocutors. This instrument allows learners to express their perception of their own communication competence. They indicate the degree to which they feel competent in a variety of contexts (e.g. public, meeting, friend, stranger, etc). This is not a measure of actual communication competence. Although the scale has few items, it showed a high alpha reliability estimate of 0.88 in the present study.

## 2.3. Procedure

### 2.3.1. Data Collection

The participants were given the EQ test so that their EQ level is obtained. Their anxiety and willingness to communicate level were also obtained through FLCAS and WTC. The EQ-i is a self report and it takes about 30-40 minutes to answer it. FLCAS and WTC will also take about 10 minutes each.

### 2.3.2. Data Analysis

The results gained from the three tests fell within the interval data so the Pearson Product moment formula was used to calculate the correlation between these three tests.

Multiple regression analysis and t test were also run to see whether any predictions could be made regarding these tests and to compare means of different groups of learners.

## 3. Results

The first two questions of the present study dealt with the interrelationships between SPCC, FLCAS, and WTC. Table 1 shows the correlations between these three constructs.

Table 1. Correlation between SPCC, FLCAS, &WTC

	WTC	FLCAS
SPCC	.313*	-.421*
	.004	.000

As the table has presented there is a significant negative relationship between FLCAS and SPCC ( $r = -.421, p \leq .05$ ). Moreover, a significant positive correlation can be observed between SPCC and WTC ( $r = .313, p \leq .05$ ).

The results of the correlations indicate that high SPCC is related to low anxiety and it is also related to a high tendency to communicate.

To further examine the data and to answer the third question of the study t test analysis was run. Table 2 shows the results of t test analysis which was run to see whether the means of learners with a higher perception of their communicative competence where

different regarding their performance on WTC and FLCAS.

Table 2. Prediction of WTC by EQ

Variables	High SPCC Group (n=45)	Low SPCC Group (n=45)	T
FLCAS	91.47	102.00	-3.315
WTC	90.87	76.00	4.326

As the table indicates, the difference between the means of the two high and low SPCC groups is significant regarding performance on both WTC ( $t = 4.326$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) and FLCAS ( $t = -3.315$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Therefore, learners with a higher SPCC are expected to experience lower levels of anxiety in comparison with those who rate their communicative competence low. In addition, those with higher levels of SPCC are more likely to be willing to communicate in comparison with those who believe they do not have a high foreign language ability.

For the purpose of further examination of the data, regression analyses were also run with FLCAS and WTC as dependent variables.

Table 3. Prediction of FLCAS by SPCC

Predictor	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	B
SPCC	.421	.178	.167	17.699	.000	-.284

The preceding table shows that SPCC can predict about 18% of the variance in foreign language anxiety negatively ( $R^2 = .178$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Having a high SPCC was a good predictor of a low FLCAS.

Table 4 shows the results of regression analysis using SPCC as the predictor of willingness to communicate.

Table 4. Prediction of WTC by SPCC

Predictor	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	B
SPCC	.313	.098	.087	8.929	.004	.205

Table 4 indicates that SPCC accounts for about 10% of the variance in willingness to communicate ( $R^2 = .098$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Therefore, the more competent the students consider themselves, the more willing they will be to communicate.

#### 4. Discussions

The present study sought to investigate the relationships among SPCC, FLCAS, and WTC. Furthermore, it aimed to see whether SPCC could predict WTC and FLCAS and also whether learners with higher perception of their communicative competence differed from those with a lower perception of their own communicative competence regarding their obtained means on FLCAS and WTC.

In the present study, the correlational analyses showed that SPCC was related to both FLCAS and WTC. Its relationship to FLCAS was negative, i.e. the higher the SPCC of language learners, the lower the level of anxiety they will experience while doing foreign language tasks, and while in language classrooms. Having a high perception of one's communicative competence decreases the anxiety experienced by the language learner. It also increases the learner's tendency to communicate via the foreign language.

The obtained results from t test analysis indicated that the difference between the means of the two SPCC groups was significant regarding both WTC and FLCAS. This finding is in line with those obtained from the correlational analysis as it also indicates that those who believed that they had a higher communicative competence tended to experience lower levels of anxiety and they also were more likely to be eager to communicate in comparison to those with a lower perception of their own communicative competence who tend to be more anxious in foreign language classes and who seem to show reluctance to communicate with others via the foreign language.

The results of the regression analysis revealed that SPCC can predict the foreign language anxiety level of language learners. This finding also shows that the higher the SPCC, the lower the anxiety level one would experience.

The investigation also showed that SPCC can predict language learners' willingness to communicate. Therefore it was revealed that the higher the learners' SPCC, the higher the tendency to communicate via the foreign language.

It seems that learners communicate when they believe that they can do it well. When they indicate that their communicative competence is more acceptable, they tend to be more eager to communicate.

In a previous investigation, Birjandi and Tabataba'ian (2012) had referred to the negative relationship between WTC and FLCAS. They had concluded that a higher level of anxiety hinders communication and those who experience higher anxiety in language classrooms tend to be reluctant to communicate.

The results of the present study also show that SPCC has a negative correlation with FLCAS which is in a way in line with the result of the aforementioned study.

Due to SPCC's facilitative role, it would be desirable to try to enhance it as it will help learners learn more effectively. Its enhancement will decrease the amount of anxiety learners experience in a foreign language class and it will also increase students' willingness to communicate in the foreign language they are learning.

As Woodrow (2006) has put it forward, anxiety is an important issue in language learning and it can hinder speaking English for some students. Therefore, teachers need to be sensitive to this and provide help to lessen foreign language anxiety in classroom interactions. If SPCC decreases FLCAS and increases WTC, it is desirable to help learners gain a belief in their ability to speak and communicate in the foreign language they are learning as this may lead to a more successful foreign language learning.

Dewaele (2007) has also reported that learners experience higher levels of FLCAS when they learn foreign languages at later ages. He has also concluded that levels of communicative anxiety and FLCAS could be linked to a lower order personality trait like emotional intelligence. Oya, Manalo, and Greenwood (2004) have also found out that learners who experience higher levels of anxiety make more errors while speaking. All these studies can show the importance of trying to improve learners' picture of their own ability and it is indicated that teachers need to find ways to lower the debilitating effect of anxiety and to foster WTC especially with adult learners. These may be done through enhancing SPCC or emotional intelligence as suggested by this study and by other studies (e.g. Birjandi & Tabataba'ian, 2012; Dewaele, 2007, etc).

Eslami Rasekh, Zabihi, and Rezazadeh (2012) have also highlighted the effect of learners' attributions on their SPCC. This may also reveal that improving learners' attributions can help them develop a higher tendency to communicate which in turn facilitates language learning.

The results of the present study conform to the ones obtained by other researchers (e.g. Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Clément, Baker, & Conrod, 2001). It was formerly indicated that communication anxiety and perceived communication competence account for WTC. This study also shows the same factor.

The present study has several implications for teachers and material developers. Teachers should include activities that help learners' SPCC growth in the classroom. They should try to make the classroom a calm and enjoyable environment so that students gain the belief that they can communicate. They should also encourage communication and show that their learners are successful communicators in the foreign language. Material developers are also advised to incorporate activities that give a high sense of SPCC in the books. Difficult and easy activities can be included side by side to foster a sense of competence in the language learners.

Like every other study, the present study also suffered some delimitations. Firstly, the data collection scope was rather limited so the sample might not be

representative of the population. Moreover, the questionnaires used in this study were all self reports; therefore the study suffers the shortcomings of self reports. The limited number of the participants can also be another delimitation of this study.

Finally, it should be mentioned that to highlight the effects of emotional factors in education, more research is needed in the field. Other factors that influence willingness to communicate should also be studied as communication in classrooms and in the foreign language is crucial to learning the language. Also, emotional factors and personality traits that decrease the level of anxiety must be identified to make language learning experience an enjoyable one.

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