

## The Relationship between Students' Achievement, Socio-Economic Orientations and Willingness to Communicate in English in Iranian Context

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### Abstract

*In a context where modern language pedagogy places a strong emphasis on authentic communication as an essential part of language learning (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrod, 2001)[1], the individual differences in communication tendencies play an important role. On the basis of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998)[2] L2 willingness to communicate model, and Stratification theory which tests structured social difference in cultural, social and material formations and provides a framework for analyzing differences, this paper examines the relationship patterns between socio-economic factors, i.e. parental occupations, cultural capital, and willingness to communicate in English in Iranian context. The data were gathered through three instruments, based on namely, MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Conrod's (2001) [1] Willingness To Communicate (WTC) questionnaire, Bourdieu's (1985, 1986, 1989) [3-5] status-based approach to social stratification and Nelson Battery Test (Fowler and Cao, 1976)[6] to measure students' EFL proficiency. Questionnaires were administered to 120 female high school students studying in Shiraz. Individual semi-structured interviews were also used to obtain supportive data. A range of quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to analyze the data of the study. The results of the study revealed noticeable evidence of the existence of a strong relationship between willingness to communicate in English and socio-economic orientations and language achievement.*

**Keywords:** language achievement, willingness to communicate, parental occupation and cultural capital, foreign language learning

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Individual differences

The focus of most research in foreign/second language context is on two aspects of individual differences: affective and cognitive variables. Motivation, anxiety, extroversion/introversion, self-esteem, empathy, inhibition, self-confidence, risk-taking are among affective factors while language learning strategies, learning style, language aptitude, socioeconomic status and intelligence are cognitive variables (Dornyei, 2005)[7].

### 1.2. Willingness to communicate

A new variable in individual differences research tradition in applied linguistics is willingness to communicate (WTC) which is defined as a learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels, 1998, p.547)[2]. The reason for willingness to communicate cannot be just lack of enough competence as many competent L2 learners tend to avoid L2 communication (Dornyei, 2003)[8].

So a model has been conceptualized by MacIntyre et al. (1998)[2] to explain the interaction among these components (linguistics, sociocultural and learners' perspectives). This model in L2 is in accordance with the perspective that "authentic communication in a L2 can be seen as the result of a complex of interrelated variables" (p.547).

### 1.3. Socioeconomic status

"Socioeconomic status" (SES) is defined as one's access to economic, social resources, the social positioning, privileges, and prestige that derive from these resources (Willms, 2003)[8]. The concept of socio-economic position adopted in this paper is based on Bourdieu's (1985)[3] which comprises not only economic capital but also cultural and social capital.

#### 1.4. Iranian EFL context

As it was mentioned before, the relationship between WTC and various variables might be substantially different (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990)[10]. Previous study that has been done in different Iranian schools has produced remarkable result due to diverse factors affecting these contexts (Pourjafarian, 2010)[11]. However, no study to date has been conducted on the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on willingness to communicate (WTC).

This suggests a need for more research in Iranian EFL context where a large number of individuals are learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, this study aims to answer three research questions:

- 1) Is there any relationship between the economic capital (i.e. parental occupation) and willingness to communicate?
- 2) Is there any relationship between the cultural capital (i.e. parents' educational level) and the students' willingness to communicate?
- 3) and to what extent is there a relationship between socioeconomic factors, students' achievement and willingness to communicate?

## 2. Method

The students were given two questionnaires in, willingness to communicate and socioeconomic factors and a battery test. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to address different concern of the study.

### 2.1. Participants and instruments

This study was conducted on 120 female high school students in Shiraz who were studying in grade one of public high school and were randomly selected from a population of 210 students.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through two questionnaires, a battery test and semi-structured interviews.

#### 2.1.1. Willingness to communicate scale in a foreign language context

To measure willingness to communicate (WTC) a modified questionnaire for EFL context by Pourjafarian (2010)[11] which has been adopted from MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Conrod (2001)[1] was used.

#### 2.1.2. The Socio-economic Questionnaire

The socio-economic questionnaire was used to obtain data on the socio-economic status of the sample. This questionnaire was borrowed from Lifrieri's study (2005)[12] who developed that regarding the metaphors of economic capital and cultural capital based on Bourdieu's (1985, 1986, 1989)[3-5] reproduction theory. These two scopes were measured using information on the participants' parental occupation and parental educational level.

#### 2.1.3. Nelson Battery Test

Nelson Battery -050A (Fowler and Cao, 1976)[6] which had 50 multiple choice items was applied to measure students' EFL proficiency.

#### 2.1.4. Interview

A semi-structured interview was also conducted with 25 students who were selected from 120 participants. The questions were designed in a way to elicit and clarify information from the participants. Regarding the framework of the study, the semi-structured interview data were examined and categorized.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Parental Occupations

The results revealed that parents' occupations are different, ranging from professionals such as government officials, lawyers, manual workers, doctors, engineers, drivers, school teachers and university lecturers. The results showed that 97 (81%) of the students' fathers and 46 (38%) of the

students' mothers are employed, while 23(19%) of the students' fathers and 74(62%) of students' mothers are unemployed.

Father's past/present occupations can be distributed within a range of 0-4 of Hollingshead's (1975)[13] occupational scale. Some interesting results came up after examining the frequencies and percentages of the participants' responses. The results showed that most of the participants' fathers (i.e.76(63%)) have/had slightly high qualified jobs such as sales persons, doctors, lawyers, teachers, military personnel and engineers while 3(3%) of them have/had menial jobs ,that is, they were/are employed at somebody else's company as unskilled workers. 18(15%) of the participants' father are/were semi-skilled workers. They were taxi drivers, mechanic operators, barber and service workers. Finally, 23(19%) of the fathers are unemployed or retired.

In contrast, mothers' past/present occupation are distributed within a very limited range of scores of Hollingshead's occupational scales,i.e.0-2.40(33%) of the participants 'mothers have/had slightly high qualified jobs They are/were teachers, doctors, salespersons, bank tellers, nurses while 6(5%). More than half of the mothers are unemployed/retired, or homemakers.

### 3.2. Cultural capital

The educational level of the parents was studied based on the frequency of reading newspapers. The results revealed that of the 105(88%) participants 'fathers who read newspaper,48(46% )read the newspaper every day ,39(37%) read newspapers twice or three times a day and 18(17%) read newspapers on Fridays. However, of the 34(28% ) participants 'mothers 17(50% )read newspaper every day .The results showed that in the sample's families fathers read newspapers more frequent than mothers. It was found that 15(44% ) read newspapers twice or three times a day and 2(6%) read newspapers on Fridays. It is clear that father in the sample's families read newspapers more frequent than others.

### 3.3. Correlation analysis

Table1. Correlations for socio-economic variables, willingness to communicate and language achievement.

+	Cultural Capital	Father's Past/Present Occupations	Mother's Past/Present Occupations
Willingness to communicate	$r=0.84^{**}$	$r= 0.71^{**}$	$r= 0.68^{**}$
Language achievement	$r=0.79^{**}$	$r=0.86^{**}$	$r=0.72^{**}$

Significant at the 0.01 level.

The above table shows that there is a significant correlation between WTC and socioeconomic variables. Willingness to communicate has the highest correlation with cultural capital(  $r=0.84$ ) and father's past/present occupations( $r=0.71$ )and mother's past /present occupations(  $r=0.68$ ,) and these correlations are statistically significant at the level of ( $p<. 01$ ). It also shows statistically significant correlation between achievement and socioeconomic factors. Language achievement has the highest correlation with cultural capital(  $r=0.79$ ) and father's past/present occupations( $r=0.86$ )and mother's past /present occupations(  $r=0.72$ ,) and these correlations are statistically significant at the level of ( $p<. 01$ ).

### 4. Discussion and conclusion

As it was shown in the previous part the scores of willingness to communicate was correlated with three dimensions of socioeconomic status (cultural capital, father's past/present occupations and mother's past /present occupations)and language achievement. Results indicate that there is a significant correlation between SES and WTC in this study. The results of this paper shows that differences in family SES impact significantly on students 'willingness to communicate. Compared with those students with high SES and rich cultural capital, those who do not have high cultural capital are less willing to communicate in English.

The results of interview showed that many students like to communicate in English but the most important barrier that they have is lack of competence which is the result of insufficient instruction that they receive at school (three hours a week).

The findings of the interview also indicated that most students with higher cultural capital had experienced learning English in language institute which is the second place for learning English in Iran and compensated the deficiency of instruction at school. The results are in line with studies who claim that more opportunities for interaction may lead to an increase in perceived competence and as a result to a greater WTC and more frequent communication (MacIntyre & Charos ,1996[14] ; pourjafarian,2010[11]) .

The significant correlation between socioeconomic factors with language achievement also confirmed the previous studies (Csapo´ 1998, 2002; Andor ,2000; Nikolov and Jo´zsa 2003 all cited in Nikolov in press[15] and Mattheoudakis & Alexiou ,2009[16]) .

Although so far the effect of SES on willingness to communicate hasn't been investigated, the significant effect of motivation on willingness to communicate (Hashimoto, 2002[17]; MacIntyre et al., 2003[18]; Peng, 2007[19]) and socioeconomic factor (Lifrieri, 2005[12]; Bektas-Cetinkaya & Oruc,2011[20]) has been researched in different studies. Therefore, this study shed light on the relationship between willingness to communicate and socioeconomic factors and is in line with previous studies. However, further study needs to explore this issue due to dynamic nature of willingness to communicate.

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