

On the Effect of Using a Flipped Classroom Methodology on Iranian EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate



Nourollah Zarrinabadi, Ensieh Khodarahmi, and Hadis Shahbazi

Abstract This study employed a mixed method design to study the effect of a flipped classroom strategy on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Two EFL classes ($N = 20$ for each class) were assigned to experimental and control groups. The flipped classroom was taught via flipped classroom strategy while the control group received conventional English teaching. The groups were tested for their WTC before and after the intervention. Also, interviews were conducted with the participants of the both groups. The results indicated that flipped classroom strategy significantly influenced learners' WTC by making language learning enjoyable, increasing motivation, and decreasing language anxiety. The implications of the study for researchers and language teachers are presented.

Keywords Flipped classroom strategy · WTC · Anxiety · Motivation

1 Introduction

Willingness to communicate is among the individual differences that predict the amount of communication in L2 (Clément et al., 2003). Over the past two decades, a considerable bulk of research has been conducted on different linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors that influenced L2 learners' WTC (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Peng, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014; Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2017). While remarkable achievements have been made in understanding WTC and the factors that hinder or foster it (see Zarrinabadi & Tanbakooei, 2016 for a review), there are still several unknown issues about L2 WTC. One of these issues related

N. Zarrinabadi (✉)
University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
e-mail: nur.zarrinabadi@gmail.com

E. Khodarahmi
Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

H. Shahbazi
University of Mazandaran, Sari, Iran

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to online and computer-assisted learning environment and their effects on learners' WTC. To address this gap in the research, this study examined the effect of flipped classroom strategy on Iranian EFL learners' WTC. In so doing, this study compared L2 WTC in flipped classroom environment with the conventional one and examined the reasons for effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the both strategies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 L2 WTC

The concept of L2 WTC was introduced into the L2 literature by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as a complex construct underpinned by a group of contextual and psychological variables that are linked in a linear-cause-and-effect relationship (Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002). It has been generally described as "a readiness to enter into the discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Considering the significance of "talking in order to learn" (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011, p. 152), L2 WTC has been highlighted as one of the main goals of L2 pedagogy (MacIntyre et al., 1998, pp. 545–6). Through boosting learners' L2 WTC, language instruction can be more efficient given that learners with higher WTC are more likely to use L2 in real communication situations and to get involved in autonomous learning outside the classroom (Kang, 2005). In its earliest conceptualization, psychological variables including communication apprehension (CA), perceived communication competence and motivational propensities were seen as the proximal factors and contextual variables such as topic, interlocutor and conversational context as its distal antecedents (MacIntyre et al., 2003; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; MacIntyre et al., 2002). Accordingly, early research into WLC was predominantly concerned with the causal relationship between learners' L2 WTC and its psychological predictors including motivation, self-confidence, communication apprehension and personality (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2012; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1999; Yaghoubinejad et al., 2017; Yashima, 2002, 2009). More recently, however, research studies have shown that while psychological variables are the determining factors in L2 learners' WTC, contextual factors also interact with L2 WTC directly (Kang, 2005; Peng, 2014). These findings have resulted into the development of the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) as a new approach which has characterized L2 WTC as a dynamic and non-linear construct which is the outcome of the interplay among multiple factors including psychological, contextual and linguistic variables (MacIntyre et al., 2011). Several studies have adopted DST to explain whether and how it can explain the dynamic interrelations between L2 WTC and its underpinning variables (e.g., Cao, 2009; Pattapong, 2015; Peng, 2014; Suksawas, 2011; Syed & Kuzborska, 2020).

In this strand of research, classroom environment including teacher (Hsu et al., 2007; Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Wen & Clément, 2003; Zarrinabadi, 2014), learning task, topic, multimodality of classroom interaction (Peng, 2019) has been reported as one of the strongest antecedents of L2 WTC (Hsu et al., 2007; Joe et al., 2017; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng & Woodrow, 2010) that could enhance or hinder L2 WTC (Eddy-U, 2015; Kang, 2005; Peng, 2019). As Dörnyei & Ryan (2015) noted, qualitative classroom-based research on WTC has gained momentum in an attempt to examine the situated nature of learners' L2 WTC (e.g., Cao, 2009; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 2011; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Peng, 2007, 2012, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yu, 2015). Kang's (2005) study which was among the first classroom-based studies on L2 WTC focused on four male Korean students in the US for eight months and found that their willingness to communicate in English was affected by the interaction among psychological variables such as excitement, sense of responsibility, and security, as well as contextual conditions including topic and interlocutor, and the conversational context. Zarrinabadi's (2014) study showed that teachers can affect learners' willingness to talk in the classroom. More specifically, teachers' wait time and support, feedback, and decision on the topic were found to exert an influence on learners' WTC. Khajavy et al.'s (2016) also found out that classroom environment was the most important predictor of WTC among Iranian English-major university students.

In particular, due to the important role of classroom environment, several studies have adopted an experimental approach to find out whether and how it would be possible to promote L2 WTC in the classroom environment (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Munezane, 2015; Peng, 2019). In a large-scale study, Peng (2019), for example, examined the interrelations among multimodal pedagogic effect, classroom environment, and Chinese EFL learners' WTC in English. The results showed that the effective use of audio and video as well as teachers' gestures and spatial positions could significantly predict L2 WTC. In another study, Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) reported significant improvements in Turkish learners' L2 WTC after completing out-of-class speaking activities which involved recording their voices in response to the questions their teachers raised in video and voice recordings. Reinders and Wattana (2014) reported that playing a multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) for nine hours over six weeks, relieved L2 apprehension and boosted L2 WTC among Thai EFL learners. In a follow-up study, Reinders and Wattana (2015) argued that unlike classroom environment that learners feel worried about negative judgment of the teacher and their classmates, in digital game environment, they have a higher willingness to communicate as they play under pseudonyms which make them feel safer and more relaxed while using the L2. Eddy-U (2015) explored factors affecting task-situated WTC at two Chinese universities. Students reported in focus group discussions that in addition to self-confidence and L2 learning motivation classroom, social atmosphere, group mates, marks, and task-related factors significantly influenced their willingness to participate in pair and group tasks. Despite the wide range of studies on L2 WTC, whether and how different teaching methods can influence L2 WTC has yet to be fully clarified.

2.2 *Flipped Classroom Strategy*

Education has made great strides toward more student-centered and self-directed learning over the last few decades (Wanner & Palmer, 2015). In fact, pedagogical literature has shown that teaching and learning is moving from teacher-centered instructions towards personalized education and flexible learning in which the learner is central and actively involved in the learning process in a way that their needs, interests, backgrounds and learning styles are the focus of attention (Johnson et al., 2012; Keamy et al., 2007). Flipped model as one of the personalized and flexible teaching methods emerged in 2007 by Chemistry teachers Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams. It refers to a blended and online method wherein *students* get their first exposure to *course* content and learning materials *before coming to class* (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Students watch video lectures before joining the class, they build knowledge through readings, learn other materials at home, and then participate in an active-based learning in class time (Arnold-Garza, 2014; Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Snowden, 2012). As students have enough time to gain necessary knowledge *before* class time, they can increase the value of face-to-face and meaningful interaction in class time by their active engagement so that teachers are able to provide appropriate guidance and feedback during in-class activities (Kim et al., 2017). Flipped classroom has been also advocated in higher education for reflecting flexible and innovative pedagogies (Nouri, 2016).

The studies on the flipped model impact showed that not only does it have a deep impact on the teachers' professional lives, but also it has positive effect on language learners' lives. For instance, Bergmann and Sams (2012) found that greater extent of motivation was reached due to students' greater engagement and their freedom to learn independently. Davies et al. (2013) had similar findings reporting that students in the flipped classroom courses were more satisfied with the learning environment than the traditional ones.

As it was mentioned earlier, the flipped classroom model is about increasing active learning (Hamdan et al., 2013); therefore, it reverses the traditional classroom approach to teaching and learning (Sharples et al., 2014) where students are passive due to the lack of engagement with the material, their attention decrease quickly, and the pace of the lectures is not adapted to all learners' needs (Young et al., 2009). Moreover, learners prefer flipped classroom over traditional approaches as they enjoy being able to learn in their own pace (Davies et al., 2013; Zarrinabadi & Ebrahimi, 2019) and in terms of examinations of learning outcomes, students using a flipped classroom approach get higher exam grades as compared to students learning through traditional methods (Love et al., 2014). While, much has been reported about the beneficial effects of flipped classroom strategy in education and language learning (Bergmann & Sam, 2012; Zarrinabadi & Ebrahimi, 2019), little research is done on the effect of this method on learners' L2 WTC. This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by addressing the following research question.

RQ1: How does implementation of flipped classroom strategy influence L2 WTC among Iranian EFL learners?

3 Methods

3.1 *Design of the Study*

The purpose of the present mixed methods study was to explore the impact of two types of teaching methods (conventional classroom vs. flipped classroom) on learners' L2 WTC. First, the authors gathered quantitative data about learners' L2 WTC in both classroom situations before and after the interventions. To further analyze the data gathered in this stage, the authors planned and implemented a qualitative phase. To this end, a protocol for semi-structured interviews based on the data in the experimental phase of the study was developed. The data collected in this stage helped to explain and interpret the quantitative results.

3.2 *The Setting and Participants*

The present study was conducted in a private language school in Isfahan, Iran. The school offers different English courses in different proficiency groups. The authors randomly selected two intact classes from eight intermediate level classes in this language school. There were 40 intermediate EFL learners in the two classes (13 males and 17 females; two intact classes, N for each class = 20). The two classes were randomly assigned to the flipped strategy and conventional groups. All participants spoke Persian as their mother tongue and ranged in age from were from 14 to 19 years old ($M = 15.6$, $SD = 1.6$). The classes met three times a week and the main coursebook was *American English File 2*. The purpose of the course was developing learners' ability for communication in English. The same teacher taught both classes. Participants' OPT scores and their L2 WTC before the intervention were used to ensure homogeneity of both classes.

3.3 *Instruments*

Data for the study was collected through L2 WTC questionnaire and semi-structured.

3.3.1 **Willingness to Communicate Inside the Classroom**

To measuring participants' willingness to communicate inside the classroom, a modified version of the L2 WTC questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was used. It is a 27-item scale comprising 27 items on 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never willing, 2 = sometimes willing, 3 = willing half of the time, 4 = usually willing, and 5 = almost always willing). The items indicate willingness of learners

to communicate inside the classroom in the four language skills. The reliability estimates for this scale in the pretest and posttest conditions were 0.73 and 0.76.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews and stimulated recalls were used to supplement the findings of the statistical analyses (Green et al., 2007). The goal was to understand whether and how flipped classroom strategy could influence learners' L2 WTC. Five participants in each group were asked to talk about their experiences and feelings towards communication in English in the classroom before and after the intervention. To prevent any negative effects of participants' English proficiency on their ability to express their feelings, the interviews were conducted in Persian. The interviews were performed by the first author in one of the classrooms of the language school and lasted between 15 to 35 min. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

3.4 The Intervention

The intervention involved assigning pre-class activities to provide preparation for being engaged in deeper learning and increased L2 WTC in the classroom. Learners then did some higher level classroom activities which involved group-level and whole-class communication. More specifically, the flipped strategy employed in this study included three stages.

In the first stage, Telegram application was used to assign learners pre-class activities. Telegram is one of the most widely used social networks in Iran with more than 45 million subscribers. Materials were sent to the classroom group on Telegram. Learners were supposed to watch the videos, study short texts, and listen to audio recordings related to the content of each lesson. In the second stage, in the classroom, the teacher reminded learners of the pre-class activities they were to complete before the class. In the next stage, the teacher assigned group-level and whole-class activities. These activities included problem-solving activities, and question and answer tasks. For instance, learners were asked to propose solutions for some problems/tasks related to the materials studied online. The students' discussion in the groups was audio-recorded using recorders installed on the desks. Finally, the teacher asked the groups to share their solutions with other groups and to present arguments for and against the ideas presented. The intervention continued for 16 sessions. It should be noted that the course developed synergistically, with less teacher intervention and authority and more learner autonomy and independence in the classroom activities.

The tasks assigned to the control group were the same as those designed for the intervention group in terms of purpose and topic. The only difference relied in task sequencing. To illustrate, in the final session, the focus was on teaching comparatives. Thus, both groups discussed the differences between British and Iranian culture in the classroom. In the control group, however, the participants were presented the

materials inside the classroom and then discussed their ideas. In the flipped classroom, students studied the materials at home and then discussed them in the classroom.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected by the L2 WTC scale before and after the intervention was analyzed using descriptive (e.g., Mean, SD) and inferential statistics (Independent-samples and repeated-measures t-test).

The analysis of interview data was carried out in several steps. First, semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded by the first author. The coding process was guided by the research questions and the literature in the field. After being coded, the data were reread, expanded, and refined again to identify potential themes. To ensure credibility of the analysis, a colleague familiar with L2 WTC and qualitative research was asked to do an external audit of coding and the interpretations. An acceptable level of intercoder agreement was achieved ($K = 0.92$). Moreover, to avoid bias and inaccuracies in data analysis, member checking was carried out by emailing the results to participants and asking them to comment on the degree to which the interpretations reflected their experiences.

4 Results

Prior to the intervention, the WTC scale was administered and the groups were compared to ensure that no prior differences existed in terms of their WTC scores. An independent-samples t-test was computed to compare WTC in conventional and flipped classroom conditions. There were no significant differences in WTC scores for conventional ($M = 83.95$, $SD = 14.34$) and flipped classroom ($M = 84.25$, $SD = 14.48$) conditions; $t(38) = 0.166$, $p = 0.616$. After the researcher made sure that the groups were homogeneous in terms of their WTC, the intervention was presented. Another t-test comparison was conducted for the WTC scores in the posttest. The results of independent-samples t-test indicated that there was a significant difference in WTC scores for conventional ($M = 83.95$, $SD = 10.73$) and flipped classroom ($M = 93.90$, $SD = 14.34$) conditions; $t(38) = 2.48$, $p = 0.18$. The results show that flipped classroom strategy significantly improved learners' WTC as compared to conventional classes.

Follow-up interview data were analyzed to see how flipped classroom strategy improved learners' WTC. The results indicated that flipped classroom strategy increased EFL students' WTC in three main ways. First, the results revealed that the flipped strategy enhanced students' motivation to learn L2. The participants noted that they were more motivated when they learned English materials using their mobile phones and via videos, pictures, and audio clips. One participant told us that using

media and studying the information before the class improved his motivation since the new method created positive beliefs about language learning. As he commented:

I became really motivated to learn English. This method was new and engaging. You were not left to yourself when you were not in class. You had materials to study and this was really useful.

Another participant interpreted flipped classroom strategy as teacher's respect for learning and said that this attention and respect by the teacher made her more responsible and motivated to learn English. As she commented:

I really liked this method. You know why? When the teacher devotes time and sends you materials online and tells you what to do, you feel really responsible. The teacher showed us respect and implicitly told us that you are important for me. I really felt I should return this attention and respect, so I studied harder. I think I was really motivated and I liked participation in the class.

In addition, the results showed that using flipped classroom strategy created enjoyable feelings about language learning. The participants believed that this method was funny and made language learning enjoyable. As a participant commented:

I really liked this method. It was really funny. It broke the classroom formalities and made it something enjoyable. I think all classmates had the same feeling. We were willing to speak in the class because it became something funny and some sort of entertainment. We studied everything before the class via videos and audios and then attended the class.

Another participant commented:

I think the biggest merit of this method was its entertaining nature. The teacher us sent videos, audios, and cartoons about the lesson. It made language leaning easy. It had two benefits. First, it gave us good feelings about learning English. Second, it helped us prepare before the class. I mean it helped us enjoy the class because we knew what would go in the class.

Finally, the results showed that the flipped classroom strategy influenced learners' WTC by reducing their anxiety. the participants noted that having the opportunity to practice the content before attending the class lowered their anxiety. the stated that knowing the vocabulary and grammar needed for speaking in the class and practicing them before the class significantly decreased their stress and anxiety. As they commented:

It was really helpful to know the content before coming the class. I attended the class with more confidence. I was no longer anxious about my vocabulary or pronunciation because I practiced and learned whatever I needed in Telegram.

I think this method was good because we attended the classes with less stress. When you know about the content you feel no pressure and pain in talking because you have practiced what you should talk about before.

It seemed that practicing the materials before attending the class enhanced students' self-confidence and decreased their stress and anxiety. these two factors in turn lead to higher WTC.

5 Discussion

The results of the study indicated that flipped classroom strategy, as compared to conventional class, significantly increased learners' WTC. The results also showed that flipped classroom anxiety increased learners' WTC by making learning enjoyable, motivating learners, and reducing their anxiety. These results are in line with the results of Zarrinabadi and Ebrahimi (2019) who reported that flipped classroom strategy significantly increased communication among peers and classmates. Moreover, the results for the effectiveness of flipped classroom strategy are explainable through the reasons students mentioned for the usefulness of the method. For example, flipped classroom increased learners' motivation to learn English. This is in line with previous research on the positive relationship between motivation and L2 WTC (Hashimoto, 2002; Peng, 2012, 2014; Yashima, 2002). Moreover, the results showed that flipped classroom influenced WTC by decreasing anxiety. This is in line with previous studies that found that there is a negative relationship between anxiety and WTC. In other words, this method makes the students feel less anxious and more self-confident which in turn leads to higher WTC.

This study has some implications for language teachers. Language teachers who wish to increase their students' willingness to participate in the classroom activities can use a flipped classroom strategy. Given that all students nowadays are equipped with smart phones and tablets planning and using a flipped classroom strategy might not be that difficult. Also, this study has some implications for further research in the field. It is suggested that more research be conducted on WTC in online and computer-mediated contexts. It is also suggested to examine learners' WTC while doing language tasks online or on computers or mobile phones to see if these new environments increase students' WTC. It is also interesting to see if the same factors foster or hinder learners' WTC in online computer or mobile-assisted environments.

It should be noted that the results of this study are limited in some ways. First, the findings are limited to the sample of the study and the specific educational context. Moreover, the results are limited to the type of scales and qualitative data collection tools used. Finally, reviews have shown that cultural and socioeconomic factors have the potential to influence learners' WTC. As such, more studies in different ethnolinguistic contexts are needed before generalizing the results of the study.

6 Concluding Remarks

The results of this study show that implementing new technologies and new environments into L2 teaching practices can significantly and positively influence learners' WTC. We hope that the findings of our study provide language teachers and researchers with insights on how to increase the amount of communications in L2 classrooms.

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Nourollah Zarrinabadi is a lecturer at the University of Isfahan, Iran. His areas of interest include psychology of language and psycholinguistics. He is specifically interested in researching motivation, willingness to communicate, and language mindsets. His articles have been published in various journals such as *System*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Teacher and Teaching*, *REL C* and *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*.

Ensieh Khodarahmi received her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran, in 2019. Her main areas of interest include psycholinguistics, teacher education, inter-language pragmatics (ILP). She has several peer-reviewed published works in journals such as *Current Psychology* and *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*. She has recently co-authored a book chapter published in *Technology and the Psychology of Second Language Learners and Users*.

Hadis Shahbazi (Ph.D. Student of TEFL at Yazd University, Yazd, Iran) is a lecturer of TEFL at Imam Javad University College, Yazd, Iran. Her research interests range from SLA to Psycholinguistics. She is also interested in research on fostering learners' autonomy, motivation and self-regulated behavior.