

Relationship between Willingness to Communicate and Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Use of English Idioms

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ABSTRACT

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is one of the affective factors influencing success in second and foreign language learning. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) and Iranian intermediate EFL learners' use of English idioms. It also explores the relationship between EFL learners' WTC, their use of idioms and gender. A quantitative correlational design was used for this study. 225 students from different English institutes were chosen. Afterwards, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20) software was used for analyzing the obtained data. Results of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient showed that there is a positive and significant correlation between level of WTC and use of idioms. Results of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient also revealed that there is a positive and significant correlation between level of WTC and learning of idioms. Moreover, results of the independent-samples t-test showed that there is a significant difference between gender and WTC. Finally, results of the independent-samples t-test indicated that there is no significant difference between gender and use of idioms. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that teachers can employ willingness to communicate as one of the useful tools to increase learners' use and learning of idioms.

KEYWORDS: willingness to communicate (WTC), usage, learning, idioms, EFL context

Introduction

English is a language particularly rich in figures of speech or idioms. Without idioms, English language would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing (De Caro, 2009). Idioms are important for language researchers and language teachers. Many researchers emphasized the significance of idioms in any foreign language learning process (Cooper, 1999; Pollio, Barlow, Fine, & Pollio, 1977). According to Crystal (1991), an idiom is "a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically or syntactically limited, so that they act as a single unit" (p. 170). The other definition is given by Longman Dictionary that an idiom is "a group of words that has a special meaning that is

different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2012, p. 870).

Many factors affect EFL learners’ use of idioms. Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is one of those factors. Being able to communicate information effectively, accurately, and clearly is the most important of all life skills. Developing communication skills can help us to improve all aspects of our life, professional life to social gatherings, and everything in between (Maisa & Karunakaran, 2013). One of the situation in which the communication is emphasized and should not be ignored is communicating in the classroom. Student participation is admired in a communicative language class, yet the extent to which classroom interaction is successful depends on the degree of students’ willingness to communicate the target language. The study of WTC in an L2 is very important in decoding learners’ communication psychology and increasing communication interaction in class. The WTC is a readiness to talk in the L2 at particular moment with the specific person, and is the final psychological step to the beginning of L2 communication (MacIntyre, 2007).

Teaching and learning English have long been a difficult task for both EFL learners and teachers in Iran due to some reasons such as lack of resources and little contact with the target language. Among different components of a language, learning the idioms is probably the most difficult task to be accomplished. The speakers use idioms in their everyday speech that most of the time they are unaware that they use them. Therefore, idioms can be utilized to differentiate natives from non-natives. Students who effectively communicate with idioms indicate a certain understanding of the language. They understand and communicate on a deeper level of the language. Thus, understanding and the use of idioms are very important for every learner. However, most students do not overcome language learning problems and are not proficient to communicate fluently to use idioms in L2. A serious problem in language teaching which learners face is that the activities involved in their textbooks do not give them sufficient practice in the idiomatic expressions they will require for a good communication (Sadeghi, 2005).

Research questions

The study was carried out to seek answers to the following research questions:

- Q1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ level of WTC and their use of idioms?
- Q2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ level of WTC and their learning of idioms?
- Q3. Is there any significant difference between males and females in terms of WTC?
- Q4. Is there any significant difference between males and females in terms of the use of idioms?

Research hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study were as follows:

- H01: There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ level of WTC and their use of idioms.
- H02: There is no significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ level of WTC and their learning of idioms.

H03: There is no significant difference between males and females in terms of WTC.

H04: There is no significant difference between males and females in terms of the use of idioms.

Literature review

Idioms are common in both written and spoken language. According to Lundblom and Woods (2012), idioms appear in conversation, print (magazines and newspapers), and media (movies, radio, and television). Cooper (1999) says that when idioms happen on TV-shows, the viewer should understand the idiom in question. Burke (1998) tells that there is no way a nonnative speaker of English can understand an American movie, news broadcast, or a conversation without assistance because our language is filled with nonstandard English, i.e., slang and idioms. He continues that if nonnative speakers do not understand idioms, they will not be able to fully integrate and they will always be outsiders. Lundblom and Woods (2012) stated that idioms happen very often in classroom. Learners with language weaknesses are challenged by idioms; thus, the failure to understand idioms can influence students' performance. In the following section, the researchers review previous research on WTC and idioms in detail.

Alemi, Daftarifard, and Pashmforoosh (2011) performed a study on learners' language anxiety and their language proficiency. The results indicated that learners' WTC is directly related to their language proficiency but higher proficient learners were less communicative than lower proficient ones. In addition, there was no significant interaction between WTC and anxiety. Khazaei, Zadeh, and Ketabi (2012) conducted a study on WTC of Iranian EFL learners. The results represented that class size had a great impact on learners' willingness to communicate. Learners were more willing to communicate in small classes where they had more opportunity to practice oral skills.

Baghaei, Dourakhshan, and Salavati (2012) investigated the relationship between WTC and its constituents and success in language learning. Results revealed that two out of the three subscales of WTC, namely, willingness to communicate in the school context and willingness to communicate with native speakers, were related to success in learning English. The other subscale of WTC, i.e., willingness to communicate with nonnative speakers was not pertinent to success in language learning. Another study done by Heidari Soureshjani (2013) on the relationship between EFL learners' self-regulation, willingness to communicate (WTC), and their oral performance. The findings indicated a strong, positive relationship between the WTC level of learners and their oral presentation.

Some studies have indicated the positive influence of motivation on L2 WTC. Hashimoto (2002) investigated affective variables among Japanese learners learning English. The results indicated that the path from WTC to motivation was significant. Similarly, Peng (2014) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between the three elements of language motivational self-system (namely, ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience), willingness to communicate (WTC), and L2 anxiety. The results revealed that L2 WTC was affected by L2 anxiety and L2 learning experience directly. Additionally, he realized that ideal

L2 self and ought-to L2 self, respectively, has a negative and positive impact on L2 anxiety and L2 anxiety has a negative influence on in-class L2 WTC.

Although some studies have indicated the positive impact of motivation on L2 WTC, some studies revealed various results. Yashima (2002) examined the relationship among L2 learning and L2 communication variables and understood that motivation affected self-confidence in L2 communication which led to willingness to communicate in a second language. Peng and Woodrow (2010) got the same results. They tested a model integrating WTC in English, communication confidence, learner beliefs, and motivation. Results indicated that motivation influences WTC indirectly by communication confidence.

The studies carried out by Yashima et al. (2004) and Wen and Clement (2003) have revealed the direct and positive relationship between language learners' proficiency levels and their WTC. Dixon (1994) declared that idioms are necessary for successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Hinkel (2017) expressed that the learning and using of idioms is vital for effective spoken and written communication because they are frequent in every language. Encouraging L2 learners to learn and use such expressions helps create more language practice opportunities to communicate with native speakers (Wray, 2000).

The importance of teaching and learning idioms in contexts has been emphasized by some researchers in the last years (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Swain, 1996; Waring, 1997). According to these researchers, learning idioms gives the learners the opportunity to participate in natural conversational tasks. They continued that learning idioms and using them in production is more effective than decontextualized learning. According to Samani and Hashemian (2012), learning idioms not only helps language learners to have better communication, but also helps them learning the culture of the target language.

Khan and Daşkin (2014) stated that the L2 learners' lack of understanding and unfamiliarity with idioms cause communication failure. Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) emphasized that as learners learn idioms, it enables them to get involved into the real world. They will be able to speak what is known as the natural English and it is because of learning and using idioms that the language is being regarded as natural, conversational. They continued that if our purpose in EFL classes is to increase learners' naturalness and fluency in speaking a foreign language, then it is necessary for learners to learn and use idioms in order to have better communicative skills.

Many researches have been done in Iran to investigate the relationship between using idioms and other components including language learning (Khabiri & Masoumpanah, 2012), captioned slides (Ketabi & Sadeghi, 2013), learning strategies (Zarei & Shahidi Pour, 2013), writing (Saadati Bidi, 2011), and grammaticality judgment (Akbarian, 2012). Saadati Bidi (2011) performed a research to perceive the usage of idiom by Iranian learners. Learners were asked to write a paragraph and use idioms that they have learned before as much as they can remember. Her findings indicated that all learners use idioms in their writings. The other finding was that there is no significant difference between males and females in using idioms

in their writings, but comparison between juniors and seniors shows that juniors are better than seniors in using idioms.

Related to the impact of major on learners' WTC, researchers such as Alemi, Tajettin and Mesbah (2013) concluded that major did not have any impact on learners' WTC in English. Alemi, Tajettin, and Mesbah (2013) categorized learners into three groups called mathematics, arts, and science. The results obtained from this study indicated that learners of Art were superior to learners of the other two groups. However, the results of the ANOVA tests showed that there were no significant disciplinary differences between learners' major and their WTC in English.

Alavinia and Agha Alikhani (2014) carried out a relationship between relationship between learners' gender and their emotional intelligence as well as willingness to communicate (WTC). The researchers used Bar-On's (1997) emotional quotient inventory and McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to communicate questionnaires as the instruments of this study. They distributed the questionnaires to 200 Iranian EFL learners. Data analysis indicated that there is a positive significant correlation between learners' willingness to communicate and their emotional intelligence level. The mean scores on the subscales of two questionnaires were also significantly correlated with one another. The other result obtained from this study was that learners' gender differences played a significant role in configuring the findings, with females being characterized as the outperforming group both in terms of emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate.

Khabiri and Masoumpanah (2012) investigated the comparative effect of teaching idiomatic expressions through practicing them in conversation and paragraph writing on learners' idiom learning. The findings revealed that using new idioms in conversation and paragraph writing helped learners learn idioms more effectively than just practicing them through various written exercises. Furthermore, the usage of idioms in conversation was more effective than using them in paragraph writing. Ketabi and Sadeghi (2013) investigated the effectiveness of captioned inputs for understanding idiomatic expressions among Iranian learners. The mean score showed that the group using captioned slides of idiomatic expressions outperformed than another group. Moreover, Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) examined Iranian learners' views towards learning and producing idioms. The findings revealed that Iranian learners have positive attitudes towards learning idioms.

In other countries, many studies have been done to examine the relationship between using idioms and other components. De Caro (2009) conducted a research about the advantages and importance of learning and using idioms in English. One group of eleven Electronic Engineering students participated in this research. Dialogues, interviews, and informal speech or conversations were applied to collect the data. The findings of this study represented that by learning and using some idioms, the learners increased their knowledge about idioms, learned new vocabulary, and improved their communicative skill. The results of this study revealed that the use of idioms can be included in the syllabus as a useful strategy to help the learners improve their communicative skill. The findings also indicated that the learners can recognize a lot of idioms in the English language, gained particular knowledge about the

English language through idioms. Finally, the findings revealed that learners can practice communicative skill connected with idioms, including grammar, vocabulary, and collocation.

Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) investigated age and sex differences in willingness to communicate (WTC), communication apprehension, and self-perceived communication competence using three age groups of participants: junior high, high school, and university student populations. The results of this study showed that junior high females are higher in WTC than their male peers and females at the university level are higher in communication apprehension and lower in self-perceived competence than are male university students. Communication apprehension and self-perceived competence indicated a consistent negative relationship that is not different with age or sex. The degree to which communication apprehension and self-perceived competence predict WTC varies with age and sex. In all three age groups, communication apprehension is a significant predictor of WTC among women. Among men, self-perceived competence appears as an important predictor of WTC in all three age groups.

De Caro (2009) carried out a research on eleven learners, aged around 16 and 18 who belonged to an engineering program. They attended two English classes weekly. The research was based on using particular idioms in dialogues and daily conversations. The learners were motivated because some of them had travelled abroad and they accepted that they experienced a lot of difficulties in comprehending the meanings of idioms native speakers of English use in their daily life. Therefore, teaching idioms helped them understand native speakers, movies and enhanced their vocabulary knowledge because they knew how to use idioms and increased their communicative skills.

Tran (2013) performed a study on EFL learners' knowledge of idioms. The findings indicated that learners' idiomatic competence was poor due to the lack of exposure to idioms in their learning process. In addition, results represented learners' desire to study idiomatic language; therefore, teachers should pay attention to idioms when designing learning materials for learners. Wang and Plotka (2016) performed a study on the impact of adult verbal scaffolding and the usage of iconic gestures on facilitating English-Chinese children's comprehension and retention of idiomatic expressions in their languages. The results showed that speech-gesture modality is more effective than speech-only modality in assisting learners to comprehend and retain more idioms in both languages.

Xie (2017) found that Chinese EFL learners' comprehension of English idioms is related to their judgments of idiom-familiarity. The finding indicated that context has a key role in interpreting the meaning of idioms and that there are significant interactions between familiarity and context. Chen and Lai (2013) carried out a study on learners' idiomatic competence. The findings represented that teaching idioms by cognitive-oriented methods increases learners' idioms. Although the number of studies on WTC and the use of English idioms in language teaching and learning written by Iranian researchers is abundant, there are few studies done on the impact of WTC on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' use of idioms.

Methodology

This section gives a detailed account of the steps taken towards conducting the study. Therefore, design, participants, instruments, procedure, and data analysis will be explained.

Design of the study

This study follows a quantitative approach to research. Moreover, the design of the current research is a correlational one. A quantitative correlation design was the most effective method for the research study as it offers a non-obtrusive approach to the inquiry and results in the identification of significant relationships between study variables (Creswell, 2009). A correlational study determines whether or not two or more variables are correlated. This means to study whether an increase or decrease in one variable corresponds to an increase or decrease in the other variable. Two main variables of this study are willingness to communicate (WTC) and the usage and learning of English idioms. The present paper tries to determine if there is a relationship between the two variables.

Participants

The participants of this study comprised 225 male and female students who were selected among different private language institutes in Tehran and Lahijan, two cities of Iran. Females' age range varied from 20 to 28 (M=24.35) and males' age range varied from 21 to 30 (M=25.69). Their selection was based on convenience sampling and the participation was entirely voluntary. According to Dornyei (2007), convenience sampling is the most common sampling procedure in L2 research, where the main criterion of sample selection is the convenience of the researcher. Intermediate EFL learners were chosen because learners at this level of English proficiency can easily understand the English version of the questionnaire.

Instruments

The instruments adopted in this study consisted of two questionnaires which were administered to intermediate EFL learners enrolled in private language institutes. They are: 1) learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms questionnaire, and 2) willingness to communicate (WTC) questionnaire.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) questionnaire

To measure the participants' WTC, 14 items from Peng and Woodrow (2010) were used in this study to measure WTC in English. Students answered the questions on a six-point scale from "1=definitely not willing" to "6=definitely willing." The items assess the extent to which the participants are willing to communicate in classroom situations. Examples of items are as follows: "I am willing to present arguments to the rest of my class", "I am willing to take part in a discussion in a small group", or "I am willing to modify what I have said in response to an indication of an error." Table 1 summarizes the number of items in WTC scale and its internal reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) in the original (Peng & Woodrow, 2010) and the present study.

Table 1. The reliability indices of willingness to communicate (WTC) questionnaire

Scale	Number of Items	Reliability in the Original Study	Reliability in the Present Study
WTC	14	.88	.80

As Table 1 indicates, the reliability of the original scale was established, with the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.88. In addition, the reliability of WTC scale in the present study is higher than .70 which demonstrated a good degree of reliability.

Learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms questionnaire

Learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms questionnaire was designed by Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) with the reliability of 0.71. It consisted of 19 items. This questionnaire allows the researchers to identify Iranian EFL learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms. It is a 5-point Lickert scale from always (5) to never (1). The possible range of score was from 19 to 95. Table 2 summarizes the number of items in this scale and its internal reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) in the original (Tadayyon & Ketabi, 2014) and the present study.

Table 2. The reliability indices of English idioms questionnaire

Scale	Number of Items	Reliability in the Original Study	Reliability in the Present Study
English idioms questionnaire	19	.71	.73

Procedure

The participants of this study comprised 225 male and female intermediate students who were selected from different private language institutes in Iran in August 2017. The reason for selecting private English institutes over public schools is threefold: First, because of educational policies in Iran's schools, researchers are not allowed to enter and collect questionnaires there; second, as teachers in private institutes are not restricted to follow some preset rules, they may integrate different techniques and strategies to get satisfactory results; and third, age, the material, and learners' background are very different in institutes. After a brief explanation of the aim of the study, the students were received two questionnaires, WTC and learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms questionnaires. To obtain reliable data, the researchers explained the purpose of completing the questionnaire and asked them not to write a name on them. They were required to provide demographic information such as gender and age.

Data analysis

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20) software was used for inputting data and computing descriptive statistics, reliability analysis of the instruments, Pearson Correlation Coefficient, and independent sample-t-test. These analyses are explained below.

Findings

To check the normality of data distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. This test is used to check whether the distribution deviates from a comparable normal distribution. If the p -value is non-significant ($p > .05$), it shows that the distribution of a sample is not significantly different from a normal distribution; therefore, it is normal. If the p -value is significant ($p < .05$), it indicates that the distribution is not normal. Table 3 presents the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As it can be seen, the obtained sig value for all variables is higher than .05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the data is normally distributed across all the variables.

Table 3: The results of K-S test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Using idiom	.678	225	.078
Learning idiom	.924	225	.214
WTC	.817	225	.092

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics of sub-constructs of learners' attitude towards both learning and using English idioms questionnaire including the mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of sub-constructs of learners' attitude towards both learning and using idioms questionnaire

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Using idiom	225	12.00	38.00	35.52	3.54
Learning idiom	225	17.00	49.00	36.78	4.17
Total questionnaire	225	29.00	86.00	68.47	8.22

The possible range of score for using idiom is between 8 and 40, for learning idiom is between 11 and 55, and for the total questionnaire is between 19 and 95. As it can be seen in Table 4, the mean score of total idiom questionnaire is (68.47) with standard deviation of (8.22). In addition, the Table shows that number of learner participant was 225. Table 5 reveals descriptive statistics of learners' WTC.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of learners' WTC

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
WTC	225	28.00	77.00	68.54	5.51

The possible range of score for the WTC is between 14 and 84. As it can be seen in Table 5, the mean score of learners' report in WTC is 68.54 with standard deviation of 5.51.

Table 6 summarizes the information obtained from Cronbach alpha analyses. As it can be seen, the utilized questionnaires gained acceptable indexes of Cronbach alpha as a whole as well as in their subscales.

Table 6. Results of Cronbach alpha indexes after reliability analysis

Scale	Subscales	Number of Items	Cronbach alpha
Idiom Questionnaire	Using idiom	8	.74
	Learning idiom	11	.70
	Total questionnaire	19	.73
WTC Questionnaire	-----	14	.80

Research questions

To assess the research questions 1 and 2, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was conducted. In addition, research questions 3 and 4 were assessed using independent-samples t-test.

Research question 1

Q1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' level of WTC and their use of idioms?

To answer question 1, which investigates the possible relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' level of WTC and their use of idioms, SPSS 24.00 was run. Table 7 indicates the correlation coefficient between level of WTC and the use of idioms among Iranian intermediate students. As the Table shows, there is a positive and significant relationship between level of WTC and the use of idioms ($r=.63, p = .000$).

Table 7. Results of correlation between level of WTC and use of idioms

		Use of Idioms
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.63**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	225

** Significant at the level of .001

Research question 2

Q2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' level of WTC and their learning of idioms?

To answer question 2, which examines the possible relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' level of WTC and their learning of idioms, Pearson correlation test was run. Table 8 indicates the correlation coefficient between level of WTC and learning of idioms among Iranian intermediate students. As the Table indicates, there is a positive and significant relationship between level of WTC and learning of idioms ($r=.45, p = .000$).

Table 8. Results of correlation between level of WTC and learning of idioms

		Learning of Idioms
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.45**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	225

** Significant at the level of .001

Research question 3

Q3. Is there any significant difference between males and females in terms of WTC?

To answer the third research question which examines whether WTC differs significantly between genders, an independent-samples t-test was performed. Table 9 shows the descriptive statistics of males and females' scores in WTC. Results of the independent-samples t-test are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of males and females' scores in WTC

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
WTC	M	90	66.92	3.97
	F	135	70.10	6.12

As it can be seen in Table 9, the number of males (90 participants) is lower than females (135 participants). The mean score of females (70.10) is higher than males (66.92) in WTC questionnaire. To find that this difference is significant statistically, t-test was run (Table 10).

Table 10. Results of the independent-samples T-test between male and female students and WTC

<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
WTC	1.392	223	.000	7.50184	2.96329

Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance on WTC. As indicated in Table 10, there is a significant difference between gender and WTC ($t= 1.392, p=.000$).

Research question 4

Q4. Is there any significant difference between males and females in terms of the use of idioms?

To answer the last research question aiming at exploring whether the use of idioms differs significantly between genders, an independent-samples t-test was performed. Table 11 shows the descriptive statistics of males and females' scores in using idioms. Results of the independent-samples t-test are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics of males and females' scores in use of idioms

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Use of idioms	M	70	35.11	3.41
	F	135	35.95	3.95

As the above Table reveals, the number of males (90 participants) is lower than female (135 participants). The mean score of females (35.95) is somehow equal with the mean score of males (35.11) in the use of idioms questionnaire. To find that this difference is significant statistically, t-test was run (Table 12).

Table 12. Results of the independent-samples T-test between male and female students and use of idioms

	<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Use of idioms	.134	223	.893	.172	1.28

Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance on the use of idioms. As indicated in Table 12, there is no significant difference between gender and the use of idioms ($t = .134, p = .893$).

Discussion

To get a clear picture of the results, each research question is discussed in the following section. As the results indicated, there was a positive and significant relationship between WTC and both using and learning idioms. The present study revealed that students who learn and use English idioms more than their peers, were also more motivated to communicate with other people in English. Therefore, learning and using idioms impact learners' willingness to communicate. The results of this study are in line with other researches who suggest that for learning idioms, using them in production is effective than decontextualized learning (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Swain, 1996; Waring, 1997).

The findings of the study show that the use of specific idioms can be included in the syllabus as a useful strategy to help learners improve their communicative skill. For example, this language component is a way to help students understand the native English speakers, movies, songs and increase their lexicon, because when students know how to use idioms, they feel better and they can trust on themselves since they are able to understand what English speakers want to express by using idioms.

The findings of this study are in substantial agreement with De Caro's (2009) study. She found that by learning and using some idioms, learners were able to increase their knowledge about idioms, they learned new vocabulary and improved their communicative skill. In addition, this finding confirms previous studies that there is a positive link between idiomatic competence and English proficiency (Ellis, 1997; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Tran, 2013; Wray, 2002; Yorio, 1989). This implies that idioms should be given a due attention among EFL learners.

The findings pertinent to the third hypothesis (the relationship among WTC and gender) were rejected by the results. It was found that females are more willing to communicate than males. The findings of the present study confirmed those of Donovan and MacIntyre's (2009) findings. They investigated age and sex differences in willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and self-perceived competence. Results indicated that junior females are higher in WTC than their male counterparts and females at the university level are higher in communication apprehension and lower in self-perceived competence than are male university students.

These results are in line with the study conducted by Alaviniaa and Agha Alikhani (2014). They found learners gender differences played a significant role in forming the findings, with females being characterized as the outperforming group both in terms of emotional intelligence and willingness to communicate. In other words, the amount of gained p-value was less than .05, which shows a significant difference between males and females in their WTC. Indeed, WTC mean in females' group (72.90) was greater than the one in males' group (52.83).

However, contrasting evidence exists about whether males and females differ significantly in general level of WTC. Afghari and Sadeghi (2012) investigated the impact of EFL learners' gender and second language proficiency on willingness to communicate. They analyzed the data using independent sample t-test. The results showed no significant difference between male and female students in WTC, perceived competence, and communication apprehension. In addition, Arshad, Shahbaz and Barjas (2015) conducted a gender based study for WTC. They found no major differences in willingness to communicate, however, in some situations, boys and girls have arguable differences and this helps us to understand that while teaching, some language activities should be organized based on different individual variables like gender.

As the results showed, there was no significant difference between male and female students in using idioms. It means that all learners (both male and female) use idioms equally. We believe that idioms can be taught successfully in many different, creative ways. In general, it is useful to use a mixture of procedures to teach students because not all learners are the same type. Books, group work, drama, illustrations, music, and sounds can all be used in order to create different tasks and activities that appeal to different students. Teachers can help raise students' awareness of idioms' origins and improve their cultural knowledge through teacher training and other methods.

A few weeks can be spent on these activities and learning a larger set of idioms or teachers can make a habit of integrating idioms into lessons and address them on occasion throughout the year. There are also many new ways of incorporating idioms in students' everyday lives by showing them different idiom games that can be downloaded to their smartphones. We believe that when students' attention is drawn to idioms, an entire world will open up and they will start noticing idioms everywhere.

Conclusion

With respect to the results obtained from the analysis of data, it can be concluded that there is a high positive relationship between willingness to communicate and learners' learning and the use of idioms. It shows the importance of idioms on raising learners' motivation to learn and also raising their desire to communicate with others. Most of the learners show serious problems in communicating with other people. This issue can be partly due to the lack of linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, and lexical knowledge. But as the results of this study indicated, part of this problem can also be due to the absence of effective teaching strategies that can help students learn idioms in context. The findings of this study suggested that for the purpose of encouraging communicating, it is preferable to ask them idiom learning, and using idioms in conversation and writing.

Thus, based on the four research questions of this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn from the findings of current study: First, this study indicated the positive significant relationship between willingness to communicate and learning and use of idioms among Iranian EFL learners (the higher level of willingness to communicate, the greater the use and learning of idioms). Therefore, it is concluded that learners' WTC level is pertinent to their use and learning of idioms. Second, this study found that willingness to communicate is linked to the more use and learning of idioms. In other words, learners who are more willing to initiate and participate in a communication situation, use more idioms in their learning activities.

Willingness to communicate is a facilitator in foreign language learning. That is, willing to participate in discussions and conversations has a key role in language learning. Based on the findings of this study, those learners who use idioms much more than other learners can communicate more easily and effectively. Furthermore, the results represented that learners who use idioms more try to pay more attention to their communication and have more control over their communication and the reason behind all of these elements is that they communicate much. Therefore, according to the findings of present study, willingness to communicate leads to the more use of idioms more and then more idioms lead to better communication with speakers. The findings revealed that learners with high level of willingness to communicate are good speakers and attract their audiences' attention.

The findings illustrated that the use of idioms can be included in the syllabus as a useful strategy to help learners improve their communicative skill. For example, it is a way to help learners understand native English speakers, movies, songs, and increase their vocabulary, because when learners know how to use idioms, they feel better and they can trust on themselves since they are able to comprehend what English speakers want to express through using idioms.

Further, learners should know that improving their idiomatic knowledge can help them express their opinions in beautiful language and become more proficient in their communication activities. In addition, learners are in need of improving their communication skills through idiom-based learning. According to the findings, curriculum designers should

pay attention to idiomatic expressions and include them in various language courses. EFL English textbooks should present more idioms. Moreover, teachers should assist in raising learners' awareness of idioms' origins. Teachers should improve their cultural knowledge through teacher training.

The findings of this study can be useful for learners because it allows them practice communicative skill connected with idioms, including grammar, vocabulary, and collocation. Lack of idioms knowledge has a great effect on learners' overall performance. It is necessary for teachers and learners to deal with idioms in an appropriate environment; thus, the teaching/ learning process of English as well as learners and teachers will receive benefits pertinent to the communicative skills. Finally, teachers should be aware of the significance and benefits of using idioms and integrate in the development of the four English language skills.

Suggestions for further research

The present study was a quantitative research relying on a statistical method which explored learning and using idioms and its impact on learners' willingness to communicate in the Iranian EFL context. This method is dependent on student's self-reports which may be complemented with qualitative methods. Therefore, future research can explore L2 WTC and their level of idiom learning in the Iranian context using qualitative methods like observation and interview.

Many L2 researchers may agree that a better way to understand what affects L2 students' WTC in L2 is to ask them directly. In addition, direct observation can facilitate researchers to explore whether or not participants are actually involved in L2 communication. The method of direct questions and observations can enable researchers to understand what affects WTC in L2 in more depth. Moreover, the method can also enable researchers to explore WTC in a specific communicative context in regard to informal or formal contexts. Nonetheless, the method may require more time and expense, compared to the survey method. With this concern, the researchers of the current study suggest that any researcher interested in WTC in L2 integrate the survey method with the method of direct observation and questions according to the research purpose.

Further study is also suggested to investigate the effect of different types of idioms at different levels of language proficiency and with the same age. Furthermore, in another research, different qualitative techniques of using idioms in context like using idioms in essay or story writing, e-mails, blogs, and on-line processing or through SMS as well as using them in free group discussions lectures, or jokes can be investigated.

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