



Willingness to Communicate, Big Five Personality Traits, And Empathy: How Are They Related?

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the relationships among willingness to communicate (WTC), big five personality traits, and empathy. To conduct the study, 302 intermediate learners were selected randomly from English language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. Three questionnaires of big five factor, willingness to communicate in a foreign language, and interpersonal reactivity index were administered in one session. Spearman correlation formula was employed to analyse the data. The findings revealed that WTC was slightly correlated with extraversion, openness, and agreeableness. Also, empathy was slightly correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and WTC. Furthermore, a moderate correlation was found between empathy and neuroticism.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, Empathy, Big Five Personality Traits

Introduction

In second language education, individual differences (IDs) and their importance has been founded in paramount studies (Dornyei, 2005, 2006, 2009). Dornyei (2005) referred to the individual differences as the most stable anticipator of learning achievements. These individual differences consist of factors such as motivation, learning styles, language aptitude, anxiety, personality, and so forth. Willingness to communicate (WTC) (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) and personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 2004) are other IDs. Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) have revealed the significant role of personality traits in language learning development. The importance of willingness to communicate in learning a second or foreign language has been emphasized by researchers (MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, & Noels, 1998; Riasati, 2012; Tousi & Khalaji, 2014). In the domain of foreign language (FL), Ghonsooly, Khajavy, and Asadpour (2012) referred to social, linguistic and communicative variables which impact WTC. These variables include state of communication, self-confidence, intergroup and interpersonal motivation, communicative competence, social attitudes, intergroup attitudes, personality and

intergroup climate. In language instruction, the goal is to train individuals that are willing to interact in the second language.

Empathy is another variable which is considered as contributing to foreign language learning success (Wang, 2005). It is referred to as a kind of communicative behavior which belongs to cognitive processes (Chen, 2013). Without empathy, communication as a type of negotiation will not happen. Many linguists have identified that empathy involves a major role in verbal communication; hence, it is the beginning point for an influential interpersonal interaction (Chen, 2013). McIntyre and Charos (1996) stated that personality traits like extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to a new experience contribute to developing motivation for language learning or to willingness to communicate or to both. Personality traits, WTC, and empathy are interrelated as they fall within the individual differences domain of human behavior, so the purpose in this study is to examine the relationships among these variables.

Researchers have examined the impact of many factors in the success of second language learning. They have recognized affective variables like motivation, attitude, personality, and so forth (Ellis, 1994; Noels & Clement, 1996). Among these factors personality has been in the center of most studies (Adelifar et al., 2016). Phares (1991) described personality as a "pattern of characteristics of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that distinguishes one person from another and that persists over time and situations"(p.4). Personality can also be defined as the enduring tendencies and features that specify variations in individuals' psychological behavior such as feelings, thoughts and actions that should not be considered as a unique outcome of social and biological pressures (Maddi, 1996).

Most psychologists believe in traits as the elements used to explain personality (Adelifar et al., 2016). Halsam (2007) asserted that "the structure of personality is the organization of traits"(p.18). Also, he reflected on traits being the chief fundamentals in studying personality. There are many personality traits. Psychologists have designed a brief list of five factors that are known as the big five. Costa and McCrae (1992) labeled the five factors in their model as: Agreeableness, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism.

According to Allwright and Hanks (2009) individual differences impact the process of learning a second/foreign language. Individual differences are "characteristics or traits in respect of which individuals may be shown to differ from each other" (Dornyei, 2005, p.1). MacIntyre et al. (1998), Yashima (2002), Kang (2005), MacIntyre (2007), and MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) considered willingness to communicate as a major factor in language instruction.

McCroskey and Baer (1985) proposed the concept of WTC based on the studies of Burgoon (1976) on unwillingness to communicate, Mortensen et al. (1977) on predisposition toward verbal behavior, and McCroskey and Richmond's 1982 research on

shyness (as cited in Alemi, Tajeddin, & Mesbah, 2013). Willingness to communicate was developed for the first time in first language to determine individuals' trait-like personality. It was considered as an "individuals' predisposition to initiate communication with others and posited to remain stable across situations" (McCroskey, 1997, p.77). McCroskey (1997) considered WTC as a trait-like personality that remains stable in various contexts. The investigation of WTC in first language prepares the ground for the development of WTC in second language that is considered more complex than first language (MacIntyre, et al., 1998).

In second language contexts WTC is defined by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as "a learner's readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, use an L2" (p.547). The focus in their explanation was on a state of readiness. Indeed, they explained WTC as a situational variable that is changeable in different conditions. MacIntyre et al. (1998) criticized the trait like idea (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) of WTC. They believed in situational factors that can impact persons' WTC.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggested the pyramid model of L2 WTC. The model presents variables that impact WTC in L2 and the complexity of interacting using a target language. MacIntyre et al. (1998) believed that peoples' intention for communication is based on the psychological, linguistic, and social factors. In fact, various contexts may contribute to various degrees of willingness to communicate. The model considered the communicative competence as a means to achieve the communicative purposes. It was also stressed that individuals will look for opportunities if they intend to communicate. Researchers (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004; Kang, 2005) have applied the model to recognize the factors that impact WTC in L2. In the domain of foreign language researchers like Ghonsooly, et al. (2012) have employed the model in their study.

MacIntyre and colleagues (1998) considered personality as the basis in their heuristic model. They asserted that personality can impact individuals' WTC in second or foreign language. Similarly, MacIntyre, Babin, and Clement (1999) have regarded personality as a factor that relates to WTC. In the same vein, Skehan (1991) highlights that the high degree of WTC in L2 encourages learners to search for opportunities in class which can result in learning. WTC in L2 is a factor that facilitates L2 acquisition and a desired non-linguistic outcome in the process of learning (MacIntyre et al., 2002).

Empathy is a new concept that appeared hundred years ago in other disciplines including psychology, aesthetics, pragmatics, and linguistics. It is based on the word *Einfühlung*, (feeling within), in German. Indeed, *Einfühlung* defined "humans' spontaneous projection of real psychic feelings into the people and things they perceive" (Duan & Hill, 1996, p.261). There are many explanations for Empathy as there are scholars who examined it (Olivares, 2012), so there is not an agreement on its definition. However, it is defined by Guiora (1965) as " a process of comprehending in

which a temporary fusion of self-object boundaries, as in the earliest pattern of object relation permits an immediate emotional apprehension of the affective experience of another, this sensing being used by the cognitive functions to gain understanding of the other (cited in Guiora, Brannon, & Dull, 1972, p.182). Similarly, Brown (1973) explains empathy as "the process of reaching beyond the self and understanding and feeling what another person is understanding or feeling "(p.235). Empathy is considered as an important factor in the coexistence of people in community that improves interaction, because it needs individuals to "permeate their ego boundaries, so they can send and receive messages" (Brown, 1994; as cited in Chen, 2008, p.142).

One of the problems that is experienced by language instructors in classes is the learners' unwillingness to communicate (Riasati, 2012; Toussi & Khalaji, 2014); whereas, it is believed that the use of the target language in interaction is one of the main goals in learning a second or foreign language for most learners. Language use can also indicate successful second language acquisition. "When given an opportunity to speak, some learners prefer to speak up and express themselves, whereas others choose to remain silent" (Riasati, 2012, p.1287). It has been revealed that unwillingness to communicate in the target language leads to ineffective interaction and language production (Freiermuth & Jarrel, 2006). It is also stated that highly empathic L2 learners are more likely to recognize the communicative behaviors of the speakers of the target language (Chen, 2008). It "can encourage learners to learn the language successfully, [...] if a learner shows no interest, he will not have a thirst for knowledge" (Chen, 2008, p.142).

Based on the personality type, individuals may incline more or less to use language (Ehrman, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman 1992). Conducting research to uncover those relationships that are mentioned previously are of paramount significance since few researchers have investigated the issue from the perspective of personality factors (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Ghonsooly, et al., 2012; Oz, 2014; Adelifar, Jafarzadeh, Abbasnejhad, & Hasani, 2016).

To investigate the above-mentioned relationships, the following questions were formulated.

Q1: Are there any significant relationships between Big five personality traits and Willingness to Communicate?

Q2: Are there any significant relationships between Big five personality traits and Empathy?

Q3: Is there any significant relationship between WTC and Empathy?

Materials and Methods

Participants

The participants in the present study were 302 Iranian EFL learners studying

English at language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. They were from both genders and at the intermediate level. Cluster sampling as a probability type of sampling was employed. The participants' ages ranged from 14 to 31. The number of females and males was 197 (%65.2) and 105 (%34.8), respectively. Most of the participants' ages ranged from 14 to 19 (%39.1), 19-24, (%25.8), 24-29 (%26.5), and over 29 (%8.6).

Instrumentation

To gather the data for the present study, three instruments of Big five factor, Willingness to Communicate in Foreign language, and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index were employed.

The Big Five Factor Questionnaire

The first instrument for the present study is a measure of Big five personality adopted from Khormaei and Farmani (2014). The questionnaire is the reduced version of 50-item questionnaire of Goldberg (1999). The questionnaire contains 21 items which include the five domains of personality including extraversion, agreeableness, openness, neuroticism and conscientiousness. Each of the domains is assessed by 4 items, except for extraversion which is assessed by 5 items. The reported internal consistencies of these subscales were 0.72 for extraversion, 0.83 for agreeableness, 0.69 for openness, 0.81 for conscientiousness, and 0.83 for neuroticism (Khormaei & Farman, 2014). Each item had to be rated based on the participants' views on a five point Likert-scale.

Willingness to Communicate in Foreign Language

The second instrument is a questionnaire of willingness to communicate with 22 items in foreign language adopted from Baghaei (2013). The instrument comprises three subscales: willingness to communicate with native speakers (7items), willingness to communicate with foreign nonnative speakers (7items) and willingness to communicate in class context (8items). The subjects were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 how willing they were to communicate. The Cronbach Alpha of this instrument is reported as 0.79.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Translated Version)

The third instrument is a measure of Empathy which contains 22 items on a 5-point Likert-scale. It involves the four subscales of Fantasy, Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress. The present instrument is adapted from Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1983). As the researcher sought full understanding of the

items on the part of the learners, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) was translated into Persian. The translated questionnaire was examined by language teaching experts (three assistant professors of Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) for comments and its face validity was certified. In addition, the Persian translation was back-translated into the source language to confirm the conformity of the source and target versions. Then, the questionnaire was distributed among 302 learners in English language institutes. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed and some items were removed. Overall, the CFA verified the dimensions in the scale. The obtained Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the Interpersonal Reactivity index and its dimensions were calculated as %78.

Data Analysis and Results

The descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation, maximum, and minimum were calculated for the measurements. In addition to the descriptive statistics, inferential statistics of Spearman correlation was run in the present study. Spearman correlation analysis was employed to answer the research questions. The results for the first research question are presented in table 1 blow. Willingness to communicate is slightly correlated with extraversion, openness, and agreeableness. There are no relationships among WTC, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness.

Table 1: Correlation between WTC and personality traits

		E	O	A	N	C
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.282**	.233**	.141*	.092-	.029
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.014	.109	.613
	N	302	302	302	302	302

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); E = Extraversion; O = Openness; A = Agreeableness; N = Neuroticism; C = Conscientiousness.

Table 2 illustrates the results for the second research question. Empathy is correlated with extraversion and agreeableness. Moreover, a moderate correlation is observable between empathy and neuroticism. Also, empathy is negatively correlated with Conscientiousness. Besides, there is no correlation between empathy and openness.

Table 2: Correlation between Empathy and personality traits

		E	O	A	N	C
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.145*	.029-	.275**	.398**	.127-*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.611	.000	.000	.027
	N	302	302	302	302	302

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)

Table 3 presents the finding for the third research question. Empathy is slightly correlated with WTC.

Table 3: Correlation between Empathy and WTC

	WTC	
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.143*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013
	N	302

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings revealed that WTC was slightly correlated with extraversion, openness, and agreeableness. No correlations were found among WTC, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. In addition, empathy was slightly correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and WTC. Furthermore, a moderate correlation was found between empathy and neuroticism.

Based on the findings, extraversion was slightly correlated with empathy and WTC. Extraverted individuals are adventurous, sociable, assertive and talkative. They prefer to participate in social activities that help them to improve communication. Therefore, it could be concluded that extroverts are willing to communicate. Also, they are empathetic and interested to know others' feelings. The results are compatible with the results of Oz (2014), Khany and Ghoreyshi (2013), and Dilshad and Dislhat (2012). But the results are not in agreement with those of Adelifar et al. (2016) as they did not find any relationship between extraversion and WTC.

Furthermore, agreeableness was slightly correlated with WTC and Empathy. Agreeable people are identified by altruism, caring and emotional support (Howard & Howard, 1995). Individuals with a high degree of agreeableness seek to cooperate and sympathize with others (John et al., 2008; as cited in Khany & Ghoreyshi, 2013). Compromise with other individuals is considered important for an agreeable person; thus, he/she is interested in sharing his/her idea with other individuals. These features make it easy for an agreeable person to communicate with others and learn from them. The results of the present study are consistent with those of Oz (2014), Takac and Pozega (2012), and Adelifar et al. (2016). Similarly, there was a slight relationship between openness and WTC, and no relationship was found between openness and Empathy. Open people are usually creative, imaginative, and open to new ideas and experiences (Howard & Howard, 1995). These individuals have a variety of experiences. Since they are experienced and creative, it is concluded that they tend to communicate while they are not empathetic.

As it was mentioned previously no relationship was found between neuroticism and WTC but there was a moderate relationship between neuroticism and Empathy.

Individuals with a high degree of neuroticism are reactive and easily bothered by stimuli in their circumstances (Howard & Howard, 1995). They often become worried, temperamental and sad (Howard & Howard, 1995). Considering the emotional state of these people they are reluctant to communicate. But it could be supposed that they need the emotional support from other individuals; thus, they have a sense of empathy. The result related to the relationship between neuroticism and Empathy is in agreement with the results of Oz (2014), Takac and Pozega (2012).

In addition, conscientiousness was not correlated with WTC, but negatively correlated with Empathy. Conscientiousness is described by traits like having discipline, desiring to progress and being honest. Individuals with the high degree of this trait, attempt to achieve their goals and neglect others (Adelifar, et al., 2016). As a result, they do not like to communicate. They are only concerned about their achievements. However, they are considered as empathetic people.

Furthermore, WTC was correlated with Empathy. Chen (2013) asserted that "as one of the basic communication processes, empathy is the starting point of an effective interpersonal communication climate that lays the ground work for responses that clarify meaning and help the other person"(p.2269) and WTC is described as the desire for communication. It is concluded that in both of them the purpose is interaction which can explain the relationship between WTC and Empathy.

In the present study the slight correlations were among extraversion, openness, agreeableness and WTC, also no correlations were found between neuroticism, conscientiousness and WTC. In addition, the slight and moderate correlations were among extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, and Empathy. Conscientiousness negatively correlated with Empathy. Also, no relationship was found between openness and Empathy. Furthermore, there was a slight correlation between Empathy and WTC. The present results suggest that participating in social activities (extroversion), and being friendly and cooperative (agreeableness) have relationships with Empathy and WTC. In addition, being imaginative (openness) relates to WTC, and being responsible (conscientiousness) and anxious (neuroticism) relate to Empathy.

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