

Willingness to Communicate in English: Insights from Kurdish Tertiary Students

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Abstract: WTC can be conceptualized as the readiness and intention of a language learner to enter a communicative situation. Although previous studies have acknowledged learners' willingness to communicate (henceforth, WTC) in English in diverse educational settings, very few studies have examined the issue in the Kurdish setting. This study will investigate the level of Kurdish undergraduate students' communication willingness in English and explore the ranking order of the components of the WTC construct. It further aims to identify the communication context in which and the category of interlocutor with whom Kurdish students are more likely to communicate. It also shows the impact of gender and study year on WTC and the correlation between WTC in Kurdish and English. Utilizing a quantitative design, data were collected from a total of 151 undergraduate students through a structured questionnaire applied online. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests, including the Independent Samples T-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson Correlation Coefficient tests. The data revealed that most Kurdish students experienced a moderate amount of WTC in English. Additionally, the gender and study year variables did not significantly influence WTC in English. The study concluded with the implication that teachers should prioritize the provision of supportive, low-anxiety learning environments and prepare interactive, small-group activities to raise students' moderate WTC in English, particularly by retaining stronger listening skills and addressing weaker reading skills. Thus, the present study contributed to and confirmed the literature by conceptualising the WTC construct beyond spoken interaction, including not only speaking, but also the other language skills.

Keywords: Gender; Tertiary Students; Year of Study; Willingness to Communicate.

1. Introduction

English is utilized for communication by approximately 1.5 billion people globally (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Qadir et al., 2023). English is now so pivotal that the aim of teaching and studying the language has shifted from helping students overcome linguistic structure to assisting them to become generally competent in speaking the language orally (Asmalı et al., 2015; Yashima, 2002). Textbooks, classroom activities, and even methods of teaching English are expected to provoke communication. English will cease to be regarded as a knowledge-based subject, which has long been in Iraqi Kurdistan (Yashima, 2002).

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Learners generally attempt to learn English for communication purposes. Although students try to learn English, the ability to communicate varies from individual to individual and even from one moment to another within the same individual. Modern communicative methods motivate language learners to connect in pair or group activities with other learners to utilize language in meaningful situations (Hamasaïd et al., 2021). An important role of teaching English in the classroom now is to develop EFL learners' communication skills.

WTC has recently become one of the most common matters in L2 learning, and much research has been particularly devoted to it (Cao, 2014; Li & Li, 2022; Li et al., 2022; Hamasaïd et al., 2021; Saidi, 2018; Silva, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). The concept means that the student is mentally interested and ready to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 2002). Thus, this study's major concern is tackling the willingness of students to communicate in English. For Kurdish students, English is highly desirable to learn, but the WTC is an issue that has not been specifically addressed. The issue in this study is that WTC seems low in some Kurdish students based on their psychological readiness to use the language, as observed. Some factors might cause this, such as a lack of confidence, classroom environment, L2 learner emotions, and so on (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Obaid et al., 2022; Osterman, 2014), which makes students have anxiety about communicating with their teacher in the classroom, classmates, and others.

This research will explore Kurdish students' WTC, that is, to know how ready Kurdish undergraduate learners are to communicate in English. It is an attempt to offer insights into this arena, revealing, for the first time, Kurdish students' WTC in English in the Kurdish context, which is an under-investigated context. It further investigates the ranking order of the components of WTC. More specifically, learners' preparedness to listen, read, write, and speak in the English language is measured. Some students might be more willing to write, others might be more willing to read, and so forth. It further clarifies whether gender and year of study impact students' readiness to communicate in English. The study uses a quantitative method for investigating students' WTC on all four language components to determine which component(s) play a more important role in communication. It can benefit other researchers in the future and can be the first of its kind to tackle the subject in question, through the provision of empirical data and analysis. To be more precise, the following questions are investigated in the current study:

1. What is the perceived level of willingness to communicate in English among Kurdish tertiary students?
2. Which component of the willingness-to-communicate construct receives the highest score, and which receives the lowest, on the scale?
3. To what extent does students' willingness to communicate in English vary across different situations and with different types of interlocutors?
4. Can gender and year of study impact students' communication willingness in English?
5. What relationship exists between willingness to communicate in the native language and the target language?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Communication Willingness

The WTC construct was first devised for L1 communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Subsequently, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) used it for L2 communication. WTC is a variable that postulates that learners who are motivated to communicate in an L2 will have more chances to acquire it since they carefully look for opportunities to do so. Therefore, anytime a communication opportunity presents itself, the students who have a higher propensity to speak carry out the communicative act. Based on MacIntyre and colleagues, the objective of the learning process ought to be to foster learners' WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Many specialists in L2 acquisition have studied and discussed the term WTC, and as a result, numerous definitions and interpretations have been put forward. Generally, two types of definitions have been distinguished, namely definitions considering WTC a trait and definitions considering WTC a state. WTC has been described as a trait-like variable as a student's inclination to inaugurate communication when provided with the chance to do so (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). It has also been described as a situational variable by Kang (2005, p. 291) as a person's deliberate or optional tendency toward actively engrossing in the communication act in a particular situation, which can change according to the conversational context, the receiver, and the topic.

According to research by Peng (2012), students view interaction with teachers as a key point to enhancing the perception of communication skills, particularly teachers' support through behaviour (such as making jokes), which positively impacts students' WTC. Khajavy and Ghonsooly (2017) investigated how emotions and the learning environment functioned in EFL classes and discovered that a supportive learning atmosphere promotes WTC and decreases anxiety.

2.2 The Pyramid Model of WTC

MacIntyre et al. (1998) have created a heuristic model that captures a variety of psychosocial factors that all have an impact on whether or not communication is made. This model comprises 12 factors in a tiered pyramid, presented in Figure 1. The model's theoretical recognition stems from an overview of the communicative, linguistic, and psycho-social factors that may be attributed to an individual's communication willingness. The model is grounded in the reasoned action theory. Accordingly, an individual's intention to engage in a particular behaviour and simultaneous effort to exert control over those actions constitute the most instant cause of the behaviour. People typically think about the effects of their behaviour before choosing whether or not to engage in it (Hale et al., 2002). Figure 1 demonstrates the six tiers of the pyramid theory.

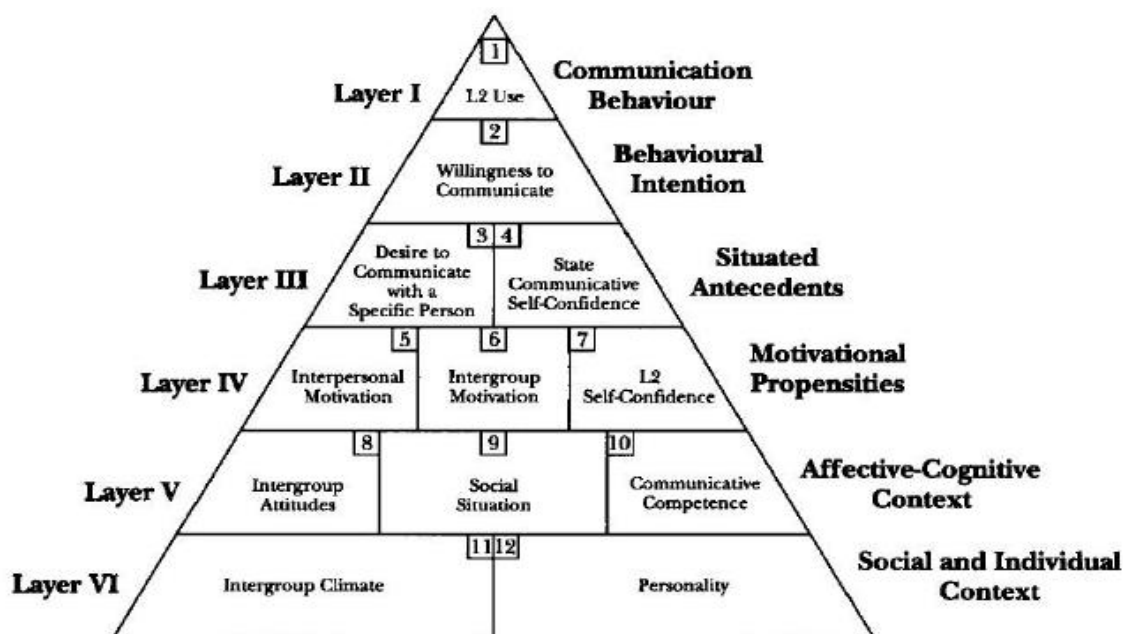


Figure 1: WTC Framework Proposed by Macintyre et al. (1998)

As the figure shows, the first three layers located at the baseline show enduring, distal, and applicable impacts on L2 communication. However, the three tiers located at the top represent transient, instant, and situation-specific impacts on WTC (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021). More specifically, the first layer, communication behaviour, incorporates reading L2 newspapers, talking in class, and watching L2 television. The second layer, including the WTC, is defined as someone's preparedness to be engrossed in communication with a certain individual at a certain time, utilizing an L2. The third layer, which is called the situated antecedents of communication, suggests two instant antecedents of WTC, namely communicative confidence and the inclination to associate with a particular individual. The fourth layer is named motivational proclivities or propensities. The choice to communicate is a motivational activity that is influenced by situational and enduring variables. The motivational tendency to engage in speech is often a consistent trait that can apply across various situations. The fifth layer includes affective-cognitive variables. These factors are not linked to a specific communication instance, such as intergroup attitudes and communicative competence. The sixth layer is known as the societal and individual context. The social context pertains to the intergroup atmosphere in which communicants develop, while the individual context pertains to enduring personality traits that are significant for communication.

2.3 Variation of WTC According to Gender and Study Year

Previous studies have shown that gender affects learners' communication behaviour (Arshad et al., 2015; Livingston, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Maftoon & Sarem, 2015). Arshad et al. (2015) investigated the communication willingness variable based on gender. They concluded that both are willing to use English, but male learners utilize English more than female learners. It is often noticed that males are considered more confident than females. The main reason for this difference can be the domination of society by males. When women speak in public, they are frequently ignored. They also showed that female learners,

different from male learners, are more inclined to participate in writing. They have the fear of negative feedback from teachers as well as other communicants in the group, which creates a break in their self-confidence. That is why they prefer writing more than speaking to avoid negative feedback (Arshad et al., 2015). Maftoon and Sarem (2015), based on their inquiry on Iranian EFL learners, realized that females scored higher on the communication willingness construct than male learners. Female language learners are typically more expressive than male language learners. This means that they discuss more personal matters, their issues, significant events, and even their upcoming ambitions. However, Valadi et al. (2015) and Rizvić and Bećirović (2017) observed no statistical gender differences in WTC. As for the year of study, Rizvić and Bećirović (2017) and Li and Li (2022) found that WTC in English increases with the increase in education level.

2.4 Related Studies

WTC is a significant tool that can ease language learning. Therefore, lecturers' aims while teaching a language ought to be to enhance learners' WTC (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017). Communication willingness has been tackled in many settings. Studies have investigated its level among EFL learners. Nevertheless, other studies have probed into the factors that influence communication willingness among learners. Rizvić and Bećirović (2017) explored the Bosnian Herzegovinian tertiary students' WTC. For that purpose, they utilized a questionnaire that consisted of 20 items and seven sections, including meetings, group discussion, public speaking, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The sample consisted of 193 participants from three different universities. The findings showed that GPA and the kind of university affected students' WTC, while nationality and the number of languages that participants knew did not impact WTC. Alqahtani (2015) also examined communication willingness among Saudi learners. He revealed that students had a high amount of English communication willingness with other students in their groups. He also revealed that motivation level and social and cultural factors influenced students' WTC.

Aoyama and Takahashi (2020) examined the causes of the second WTC, with a particular focus on acculturation, motivational types, and L2 self-confidence. The findings revealed that acculturation and L2 self-confidence highly significantly predict WTC, but L2 self-confidence could inconsistently mediate the connection between WTC and acculturation. Zeng (2010) researched Chinese learners' WTC and the social and cultural factors that governed WTC in and outside class. The findings showed that Chinese learners were generally WTC in English. The study also observed a substantial connection between students' WTC and perceived communication behaviours, but the connection between WTC and international posture was found to be insignificant. As for the social and cultural factors, the study showed that feedback seeking, face protection, and the Chinese value of quality talk influenced Chinese students' WTC.

Choi (2014) investigated Iranian EFL learners' WTC in the classroom, proposing an L2 WTC model utilizing Structural Equation Modeling. She scrutinized the interconnection among WTC, communication confidence, motivation, classroom environment, language achievement, and attitudes toward learning English. She established a set of correlations, namely a strong direct correlation between classroom environment and WTC, a direct correlation between communication confidence and WTC, an indirect correlation between motivation and WTC via communication confidence, an indirect correlation between

language proficiency and WTC via communication confidence, and a direct relationship between classroom environment on the one hand and attitudes, motivation, and communication confidence on the other.

It is evident from the extensive review of the above studies that the WTC construct has been investigated in a large number of contexts, and these results have contributed to the literature on the topic. Nevertheless, no studies have been conducted to report Kurdish university students' WTC in English. That being so, the current investigation is an endeavour to tackle the issue in question.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

A purely quantitative design was employed, which used an online questionnaire and statistical techniques to collect and analyse the data to find out Kurdish university students' WTC in English across the four skills of the English language. The questionnaire asked participants about their gender and year of study and contained several questions related to university students' WTC in English.

3.2 Participants

Convenience sampling was utilised to select the participants. The sample of this investigation was 151 university learners from the first year to the fourth year from several diverse universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, including (University of Raparin, Soran University, University of Komar, University of Halabja, and Koya University). A total of 151 students completed the survey. 77 (51%) of the respondents were female, and 74 (49%) were male. Students from different grade levels participated in the survey, the highest number of which was the fourth-year students ($n= 49$, $\%= 32.5$), and the lowest participation rate was obtained for the first-year students ($n= 15$, $\%= 9.9$).

Table 1: Distribution of the Participants Based on Gender and Study Year

Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	F	77	51
	M	74	49
		151	100
Year	1st-year	15	9.9
	2nd-year	46	30.5
	3rd-year	41	27.2
	4th-year	49	32.5
		151	100

To justify the adequacy of the sample size, an a priori power analysis was utilised with G-Power (Faul et al., 2009) for a one-way ANOVA (fixed effects, omnibus). Assuming a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$), an alpha level of 0.05, and a power of 0.80 across four groups (study years) (Cohen, 1988), the required sample size was calculated to be 180. The sample size used in the current study was 151, which is slightly

below this threshold. Nevertheless, the sample size is sufficient to detect medium-to-large effects, especially in exploratory research on an under-investigated population.

3.3 Data Collection

To collect data for this study, MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) WTC survey was adapted. The survey consists of three sections: 1. Demographic questions regarding the students, including gender and education level, 2. General background questions about WTC in diverse communication situations and with various interlocutors, in which students were to write the amount of time (in percentages) they would opt for communication in each sort of situation employing a figure between 0 and 100, and 3. WTC in English Scale. The first part includes gender and year of study, and the second section includes general background questions, while the third section includes questions about students' willingness on all four language components (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) to determine the level of students' willingness across all four skills. The researchers removed 7 items from the questionnaire because they were not relevant to the research. The updated questionnaire includes 20 items: speaking (4 items), listening (4 items), reading (6 items), and writing (6 items). The questionnaire was distributed to the students in both hard copies and electronic copies. The researchers created Google Forms for the universities that could not have access to them easily. They were also with the students when filling in the survey and observed them in case they did not understand the items.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

One of the important aspects of conducting any study is ensuring the reliability of its instrument. For evaluating the instrument reliability of the quantitative method, Cronbach's alpha was used. The reason behind using Cronbach's alpha is that it is a statistical tool that helps assess whether a group of items congruently measures the same construct or not. The scores for Cronbach's alpha occur between 0 to 1.

Table 2: Alpha scores for the overall scale and the subscales

Scale	N of cases	N of items	Reliability score
Willingness to communicate in English	151	20	0.91
Willingness to speak	151	4	0.75
Willingness to read	151	6	0.79
Willingness to write	151	6	0.72
Willingness to listen	151	4	0.76

Another significant aspect of any research is the validation of its research instrument. For this purpose, the validity of the instrument was ensured through face validity. That is, the questionnaire was sent to two experts in the field and three fourth-year students to review the items. After two weeks, the experts made very few changes including reducing the items, rephrasing two statements, and correcting some inaccuracies. Also, the fourth-year students looked at the topics, they confirmed that they understood most of the items and had no problems except for a few items that were not clear to them; the researchers edited

these items to make them clear and easy for the participants. Hence, the researchers endeavoured to make the amendments accordingly.

3.5 Analysing the Data

As our research was quantitative, the data were analysed by utilizing SPSS (Version 25). With the aid of SPSS, it is possible to examine how different variables, such as gender and year of study, affect students' WTC in English, while looking at descriptive data for each variable. In the questionnaire that was used to investigate the WTC through four components of the English language, the answers for each item were assessed from (Almost never willing= 1) to (Almost always willing= 5). To procedure the congruency of the items in the questionnaire, we used Cronbach's Alpha. To tackle the amount of WTC in English and the ranking order of the components, descriptive statistics and a one-sample t-test were used. Additionally, the variable was distributed over high, moderate, and low based on the following scoring: very low= 1 to 1.5, low= 1.6 to 2.5, moderate= 2.6 to 3.5, high= 3.6 to 4.5, very high= 4.6 to 5. More importantly, to show the connection between gender and WTC, a t-test was utilized. Most importantly, we used one-way ANOVA to investigate the impact of the year of study on WTC, whose results will be reported in the coming chapter. Pearson correlation was also employed to demonstrate the correlation between WTC in English and Kurdish.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out following ethical research guidelines to ensure the rights and privacy of all participants. Prior to data collection, approval was gained from the Research Centre at the University of Raparin. Participants were also clearly informed about the major objectives of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was gained from all participants orally, and no identifying information was collected to preserve anonymity. The data were handled with strict confidentiality and utilised solely for academic research purposes. More importantly, care was taken to avoid any form of coercion or undue pressure during the recruitment process. The research adhered to the principles of honesty and integrity throughout all stages of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The results are first presented based on the questions addressed, and then will be discussed:

Research Question 1. What is the perceived level of willingness to communicate in English among Kurdish tertiary students? To discuss this question, percentages and frequencies were utilized to answer the general background question of the survey, as shown in Figure 2.

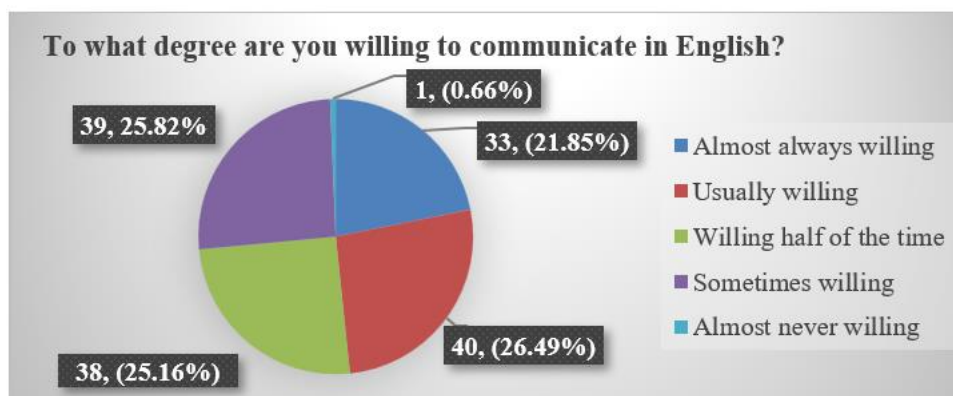


Figure 2: Students' Communication Willingness in English

This figure shows that the majority (40, 26.49%) of the students are usually WTC in English. However, another majority (39, 25.82%) of EFL Kurdish students are sometimes WTC in English. It also appears that (38, 25.16%) of EFL Kurdish students are WTC in English half of the time, and it seems that there are (33, 21.85%) of participants who are almost always WTC in the English language. Finally, only (1, 0.66%) of EFL Kurdish students are almost never WTC in English.

Further analysis was made to ensure the amount of willingness shown by the participants. A t-test was utilized to indicate if the calculated mean (CM= 3.27) was statistically different from the theoretical mean set as (TM= 3). The results confirmed the hypothesis that the two means statistically significantly differed at the p-value (p= 0.000). Since the calculated mean is higher than the theoretical mean (CM=3.27>TM=3), this indicates a moderate level of students' WTC in English (CM= 3.27, see Data analysis section above), consistent with the frequencies and percentages of the general background question inquiring about students' overall WTC in English.

Research Question 2: Which component of the willingness-to-communicate construct receives the highest score, and which receives the lowest, on the scale? To understand which component scored the highest, the researchers employed mean scores.

Table 3: The components of WTC in English

Descriptive Statistics		
Variables	M	SD
Willingness to speak in English	3.35	0.88
Willingness to Read in English	3.15	0.88
Willingness to write in English	3.24	0.81
Willingness to listen in English	3.41	0.92
Willingness to communicate in English	3.27	0.76

Further analysis was made to deduce the results for the components. Table 3 above demonstrates the components of the communication willingness construct in English, that is, the willingness to listen, read,

write, and speak in English. The figures in Table 3 show the ranking order of the components. The findings indicate that participants' inclination to listen scored the highest ($M= 3.41$), followed by willingness to speak ($M= 3.35$), and willingness to write ($M= 3.24$), while willingness to read ($M= 3.15$) recorded the lowest mean score.

Research Question 3: 3. To what extent does students' willingness to communicate in English vary across different situations and with different types of interlocutors? To answer this question, the researchers used means, as presented in Figure 3.

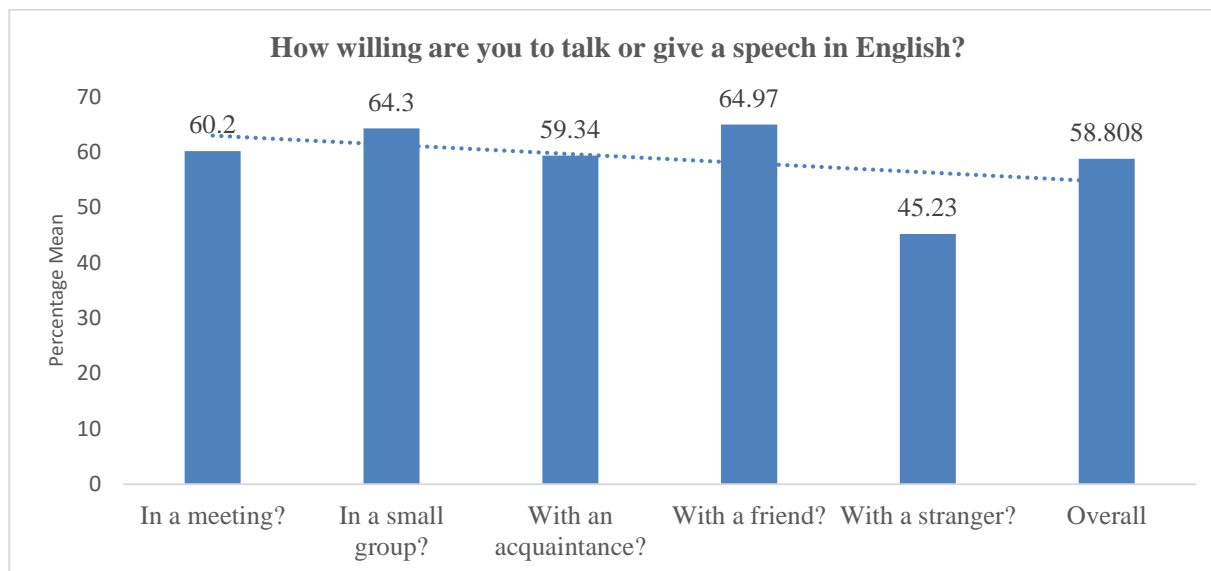


Figure 3: Students' WTC in Different Communication Contexts and with Different Receivers

The figure illustrates the percentage mean of students' WTC in diverse communicative contexts and with diverse receivers. The mean percentages indicate that the participants are more inclined to communicate in a group that is small ($PM= 64.30$) than in a meeting ($PM= 60.20$). More importantly, they are more WTC with friends ($PM= 64.97$) than strangers ($PM= 45.23$) and acquaintances ($PM=59.34$).

Research question 4: Can gender and year of study impact students' communication willingness in English? To discuss the question, a t-test was employed for gender, and ANOVA was utilized for the impact of education level on WTC.

Table 4: The effect of gender on learners' WTC in English

Independent Samples T-test								
Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	Df	P value	95% CI (Effect Size)	T value
WTC	Male	74	65.405	13.903	149	0.963	[-0.33, 0.31]	0.046
	Female	77	65.519	16.450	149			

In Table 5, the researchers showed the impact of gender on students' WTC in English. The findings reveal no substantial differences between males and females in WTC since the mean for males is (M= 65.405, SD= 13.90) and the mean for females is (M= 65.519, SD= 16.45), being quite similar at the P value (P= 0.963). The mean difference was negligible (M = -0.11, 95% CI [-5.02, 4.79]). Effect size estimates (Cohen's d = -0.007, 95% CI [-0.33, 0.31]) were minimal but not statistically meaningful, as their confidence intervals all crossed zero. Thus, it is found that gender did not have any effect. To show the impact of education level on WTC in English, one-way ANOVA was used.

Table 5: Variation of WTC According to Gender and Study Year

one-way ANOVA						
Variable	N	M	SD	F	P (Sig.)	η^2
Year- 1	15	69.866	13.60	2.406	0.070	.047
Year- 2	46	61.087	13.36			
Year- 3	41	68.780	17.41			
Year- 4	49	65.449	14.64			
Total	151	65.463	15.20			

Table 6 reveals the impact of the educational level on students' WTC in English. The highest mean score was obtained for first-year students (M= 69.86), followed by third-year students (M= 68.78), fourth-year students (M= 65.44), and second-year students (M=61.08). The P-value (Sig= 0.70) does not show significant differences because it is higher than the significance level, Sig= 0.05, although it is close to it. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .047$) indicates a very small effect, implying that approximately 4.7% of the variance in willingness to communicate can be attributed to the academic year. As a result, the table shows us that there is not much impact of the educational level on students' WTC in English. A follow-up analysis was conducted to explore potential pairwise differences between the study years, as shown in Table 7.

Table 6: Follow-up analysis to explore potential pairwise differences

Multiple Comparisons						
Year at college	Year at college	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
First year	Second year	8.77971	4.45872	.204	-2.8070	20.3664
	Third year	1.08618	4.52508	.995	-10.6730	12.8453
	Fourth year	4.41769	4.42503	.751	-7.0815	15.9168
Second year	First year	-8.77971	4.45872	.204	-20.3664	2.8070
	Third year	-7.69353	3.22076	.084	-16.0632	.6761
	Fourth year	-4.36202	3.07861	.491	-12.3623	3.6382
Third year	First year	-1.08618	4.52508	.995	-12.8453	10.6730
	Second year	7.69353	3.22076	.084	-.6761	16.0632
	Fourth year	3.33151	3.17396	.721	-4.9165	11.5796
Fourth year	First year	-4.41769	4.42503	.751	-15.9168	7.0815
	Second year	4.36202	3.07861	.491	-3.6382	12.3623
	Third year	-3.33151	3.17396	.721	-11.5796	4.9165

Typically, a one-way ANOVA demonstrated no statistically significant effect of the year of study variable on students' WTC in English. However, a Tukey HSD post hoc test was carried out to explore potential differences. The results revealed that none of the pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance (all $p > 0.05$). However, a marginal difference was observed between second- and third-year students ($p = 0.084$). These results suggest that while mean differences exist, they are not strong enough to observe a reliable difference across years.

Research Question 5: What relationship exists between willingness to communicate in the native language and the target language? To answer this question, the researchers utilized the Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

Table 7: The correlation between communication willingness in English and Kurdish

Variable		WTC in English
WTC in Kurdish	R	-.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.619
	N	151

The application of the Pearson correlation revealed no significant differences between students' communication willingness in the native language (Kurdish) and the target language (English) because the (p -value= 0.61) is greater than ($\alpha= 0.05$). The effect size is very inefficient ($r= -0.041$).

4.2 Discussion

As an affective variable in second language communication and a dual variable of trait and state (Li & Li, 2022; Yashima, 2002), WTC has appeared as both a causal variable and a consequence variable. It has

been noted that some students seek communication while others avoid communication. Some students who are competent in linguistic knowledge are not prepared to use the second language, whereas others with a low amount of linguistic knowledge use the L2 whenever and wherever possible (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Silva, 2019). There are numerous ways in which students differ in WTC, ranging from more universal traits such as personality, gender, age, and nationality to more specialized ones such as GPA, the institution students attend, their grade point average, and so on (Cao, 2014).

This paper investigated tertiary students' WTC in the Kurdish context, which is under-investigated. It was found that the majority of Kurdish students demonstrated a neutral amount of communication willingness in English, which validates and corresponds to the general background question of the study, with the majority of students being 'usually' and 'sometimes' WTC in English. This indicates that Kurdish undergraduate students acknowledge the use of English as an L2 moderately. This result is unsurprising and even expected, as several reasons could justify it. One of the most logical and plausible ones is that English is a superior global language and the instrumental significance of the language may have enhanced students' WTC (Qadir, 2021; Qadir & Omar, 2023; Qadir et al., 2023). Additionally, attitudes seem to play an essential role in WTC in an L2 (Yashima, 2002). Kurdish students' attitudes toward the English language have been reported to be moderate in previous studies (Qadir & Omar, 2023; Qadir et al., 2023) that co-occur with Kurdish students' WTC in English. More importantly, based on a recent study conducted in the Kurdish context (Hamasaïd et al., 2021) and another in the Malaysian context (Saidi, 2018), students' anxiety, reticence, and passivity in classrooms are considered hindrances to the WTC in English, especially in Asian countries (Shao & Gao, 2016). This might influence the amount of willingness shown by Kurdish students, being moderate rather than high. Yet, other most important reasons for the WTC level may include the immediate learning environment (including teachers, peers, learning tasks, and classrooms), classroom environment, and L2 language learner emotions (such as enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom) (Choi, 2014; Li et al., 2022; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Obaid et al., 2022; Osterman, 2014) as well as learner's grit (Wang et al., 2022). Our results contradict those revealed by Asmalı et al. (2015) in the Turkish context and Saidi (2018) in the Malaysian setting, who demonstrated a low amount of communication willingness in English. However, our results are strikingly similar to a study conducted among Iraqi EFL students (Obaid et al., 2022).

The WTC variable was further analysed to understand Kurdish students' WTC in English across the four language skills, namely the willingness to listen, speak, read, and write. Although the means show quite similar results, they suggest that students have more willingness to listen, followed by the willingness to speak and write, and the willingness to read scored the lowest on the scale. One possible reason for the increased amount of willingness to listen in English can be associated with the attitudes students generally hold toward listening skills, that they believe the best way to improve L2 language learning is through listening, and that listening skills can have multiple benefits for them. As for speaking, the learners' self-confidence is relevant here; increased learners' self-confidence leads to increased willingness to speak (de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). However, the willingness to write and read was lower compared to the willingness to listen and speak. One possible reason for the lower level of willingness on the writing dimension scale might be due to the lack of or inappropriate teacher/peer feedback, a low level of L2 writing motivation, and negative attitudes towards writing (Rafiee & Abbasian-Naghneh, 2020). Additionally, one reason for the lower level of willingness on the reading subscale might be associated

with the L2 reading experience in the classroom, the immediate learning environment, the ideal L2 self, and communication confidence (Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2017). The skills willingness order in this study roughly coincides with the Audio-Lingual Method, in which the order of acquisition of language skills is thought to be organized in this way: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Considering the communication context and the type of interlocutor as situational variables, the present study revealed that students were more WTC in groups than in meetings and with friends than with acquaintances and strangers. This result is supported by prior research that confirms the inconstancy of WTC in English, that is, WTC rises and falls depending on the communication context and the type of interlocutor (Asmalı et al., 2015; Saidi, 2018; Silva, 2019). It has been shown that students have higher WTC in their hometown than on their university grounds and with highly proficient lecturers and peers than with low proficient ones (Saidi, 2018). Again, our results resonate with those revealed by Asmalı et al. (2015), who explained that the factor associated with communication willingness in groups and with friends presumably relates to their feelings of security and comfort in groups and with friends. Additionally, Silva (2019) noted that interlocutor familiarity and linguistic competence are important in governing WTC in English. This result is significant because it considers the WTC construct as a dynamic variable that fluctuates under diversified conditions due to a combination of linguistic, psychological, physiological, and contextual factors (Cao, 2014; Saidi, 2018; Silva, 2019; Syed, 2016; Syed et al., 2022).

It was hypothesized, in this study, that females are WTC in English more than males because females are better at language learning than males due to their brains, that is, in terms of how their brains process the language. The results did not conform to our expectations. Unexpectedly, in this study, males and females had quite a similar amount of communication willingness in English based on gender, congruent with Rizvić and Bećirović (2017) as well as Riasati (2018) and Valadi et al. (2015). Nevertheless, a few previous studies have acknowledged the influence of gender and study level on communication level in English (Li & Li, 2022; Maftoon & Sarem, 2015). It has been found that females tend to have a higher amount of communication willingness in English because they are more expressive, speaking about themselves and the problems they have, as well as the important events that happen in their lives (Maftoon & Sarem, 2015). It has also been found that females are likely to have a higher amount of communication willingness in form-focused tasks, while males are in meaning-focused activities. On another extreme, Arshad et al. (2015) found that male students have more WTC. As for the educational (grade) level, our results did not show any statistically significant differences across the different education levels. This is inconsistent with previous research (Li & Li, 2022; Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017) that WTC in English increases with the increase in the education level. These different results might reflect the different cultural and educational contexts in which these studies have been carried out.

Lastly, the correlation between L1 communication willingness on L2 communication willingness was also investigated. The findings did not show any significant differences. In other words, the amount of WTC in the Kurdish language was not related to the amount of WTC in English. On a theoretical basis and based on observation, a student's WTC in the native language should be correlated with the target language WTC. However, this was not the case in this study, which might show the complex and dynamic features

of the WTC variable. Additionally, and more importantly, WTC in an L2 can be affected by a variety of antecedents that are different from the antecedents of WTC in an L1.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Suggestions for Further Research

The current study documented Kurdish university students' readiness to communicate in English; five questions were raised. The researchers used MacIntyre et al.'s questionnaire (2001) about WTC across four skills of language. Additionally, they used some general background questions that aimed at confirming and validating the results obtained from the scale. As a result, the majority of Kurdish students showed a moderate amount of communication willingness in English in the general closed-ended questions and on the scale. Considering the components, the listening component scored the highest mean score, while the reading component scored the lowest on the scale. Unexpected insights arose in this investigation; males and females were equally WTC in English, while in most previous studies, otherwise, results have been shown. Also, the year of study had no impact on communication willingness in English, and no association was observed between communication willingness in Kurdish and English. As for the communication context and the type of interlocutor, students showed WTC in small groups and with friends.

The findings in the present study have several implications for language educators. First, since the levels of WTC among the participants were moderate, educators should enhance students' confidence and reduce their anxiety, creating a supportive environment, and providing students with cognitive and affective support. Second, the relatively high willingness to listen implies that teachers can use auditory-based materials such as videos and podcasts to scaffold speaking activities. Additionally, teachers should implement confidence-building tasks, e.g., scaffolded reading tasks, to improve students' engagement with writing and reading. In other words, teachers can design integrated tasks to strengthen the weaker skills. Third, since students are generally more WTC with peers rather than strangers, teachers should encourage them to work in small groups first and then expose them to large groups, e.g., give a presentation in front of the class. Fourth, the lack of correlation between L1 WTC and L2 WTC suggests that teachers should specifically design strategies for boosting L2 WTC. Finally, recognising situational variations in WTC can help teachers create classroom activities and tasks that encourage communication in familiar contexts before expanding to more unfamiliar contexts.

The present study made several invaluable contributions to WTC theory and methodology. First, it extended and expanded the scope of WTC in English beyond spoken interaction, including reading, writing, and listening components. Second, it confirmed the results of prior research that situational variables such as the communication context and the type of interlocutor are significant determining factors influencing L2 learners' WTC. Third, it revealed students' WTC for the first time in a context that is underexplored, taking into account participants from different universities located in different areas and cities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

However, the study is confined to several limitations. Firstly, it only adopted a quantitative approach using self-reported data, which might cause social desirability bias; the use of a qualitative approach using interviews or classroom observations, or a mixed-methods approach might have produced more conclusive results. Secondly, in terms of sampling, the study used convenience sampling, which is not robust; other

types of sampling can make results more reliable. Therefore, we suggest that future research focus on these two limitations by using a mixed-methods approach and utilizing other types of sampling, such as stratified or cluster sampling methods. The researchers also recommend expanding this study, not only in the university setting but also in the high school context, to investigate high school students' WTC, as it is a significant variable of SLA. More importantly, the researchers recommend that future studies focus on the factors that enhance or inhibit WTC among Kurdish students, such as social influences, cultural aspects, the classroom environment, L2 learner characteristics, and teacher-student relationships. It is recommended to investigate whether teacher-student relationships affect students' WTC in English. This will be an important subject, and we suggest that qualitative research be conducted on this issue. Most importantly, it is recommended for future studies to consider longitudinal studies, comparable studies across Middle Eastern contexts, or intervention studies to enhance the level of WTC in English. Finally, this study was limited to university students and those who study in the English department. However, non-major students' willingness has not been addressed. The questions and items in the questionnaire are specifically designed for the English department students.

Conflict of interest:

- *There is no conflict of interest for this paper.*

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