The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Tolerance of Ambiguity in Academic Iranian EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract—**The present study was set up to detect any possible relationship among learners' emotional intelligence (EI), tolerance of ambiguity, and willingness to communicate inside the classroom. For this purpose, 64 undergraduate EFL university students were chosen. The instruments utilized in this study were a) Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I) to measure learners' emotional intelligence, b) Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) to identify participants' tolerance of ambiguity, and c) willingness to communicate questionnaire to evaluate learners' willingness to initiate and take part in the interpersonal communication inside the classroom. The gathered data were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Product Moment test. The results showed that although the relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity was not statistically meaningful, the two variables were positively correlated with learners' willingness to communicate.**

Index Terms—**emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity, willingness to communicate, EFL learners**

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have proposed and explored two important concepts which are considered to play an influential role in differences among language learners and their language learning achievements.

The first key concept is Emotional Intelligence (EI). As an overriding factor in determining learners' success, EI has received the attention of many researchers and educators during the last two decades. Many studies suggest that emotional quotient (EQ) more than IQ contribute to one's success in life and education (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Based on Goleman's (1995) view, IQ accounts for only 20% of the individual's total success and the remaining 80% is related to one's EQ.

The second crucial key concept is Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA). As the "the ability to take in new information ... to hold contradictory or incomplete information without either rejecting one of the contradictory elements or coming to premature closure on an incomplete schema ... [and] to adapt one's existing cognitive, affective, and social schemata in light of new material" (Ehrman, 1993, p. 4) tolerance of ambiguity trait helps learners to cope with L2 learning ambiguous situations.

Like any other concept, it takes researchers some time to explore the different dimensions of these concepts and their relationships with other variables related to L2 learning field. One of One of the variables which is of great interest in modern language teaching profession is the concept of Willingness To Communicate (WTC), proposed and advocated by McCroskey and Baer (1985), which is related to learners' psychological readiness to initiate and participate in communications.

Although there are some studies exploring each of the above variables separately, it is hard to find a single study on the relationship among emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to communicate. The current study is an attempt to investigate the relationship among the variables believed to affect Iranian learners' willingness to communicate inside the English language learning classrooms. More specifically, it aims to explore the role of individuals' EI and TA level in shaping their willingness to initiate and maintain interpersonal communication with others.

In line with the purpose of this study, the following research questions were raised:

1) Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence and their tolerance of ambiguity?

2) Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' emotional intelligence and their willingness to communicate?

3) Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and their willingness to communicate?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Emotional Intelligence Theory

The first roots of emotional intelligence concept, as a component of multiple intelligence, can be traced back in the works of Thorndike in 1920s. He believed that true intelligence does not solely consist of academic intelligence, but involves emotional and social elements. Conceptualizing EI through social intelligence, Thorndike defined social intelligence as the ability "to sympathy with others and behave wisely in human relationships" (Abdolmanafi Rokni, Hamidi & Gorgani, 2014, p.118). Later, during 1970s- 1980s, the concept of social intelligence was more developed by the works of great scholars such as Gardner, Salovy and Bar- Ons, emerging as the more completed EI concept. As an "an array of noncognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures"(Bar- On, 1997, p. 14), EI has proved to be an influential factor in success and/ or failure in a number of different areas like work settings, classroom performance, cognitive tasks and language acquisition, etc.

According to Bar- On (2000, p. 798), the whole picture of EI constitutes of the following components:

(1) **Intrapersonal**: managing oneself, the ability to know one's emotions.
 (a) Emotional self-awareness: the ability to be aware of, recognize, and understand one's emotions
 (b) Assertiveness: the ability to express one's feelings, beliefs, and thoughts and to defend one's right
 (c) Self-regard: the ability to be aware of, understand, accept, and respect oneself
 (d) Self-actualization: the ability to realize and reach one's potential
 (e) Independence: the ability to be self-directed and self-reliant in one's thinking and actions and to be free from emotional dependency

(2) **Interpersonal**: managing relationships with others.
 (a) Empathy: the ability to understand and appreciate others' feelings
 (b) Interpersonal-relationship: the ability to establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships that are characterized by emotional closeness and intimacy and by giving and receiving affection
 (c) Social responsibility: the ability to demonstrate oneself as a cooperative, contributing and constructive member of one's social group

(3) **Adaptability**: ability to adjust to change.
 (a) Problem solving: the ability to effectively solve problems
 (b) Reality testing: the ability to validate one's feelings and thoughts by assessing the correspondence between what is subjectively experienced and what objectively exists
 (c) Flexibility: the ability to adjust one's feelings/thoughts to change

(4) **Stress management**: controlling stress
 (a) Stress tolerance: the ability to manage one's strong emotions, adverse events, and stressful conditions by positively coping with problems
 (b) Impulse control: the ability to control one's emotions and resist an impulse to act

(5) **General mood**: the ability to be optimistic and positive as well as to enjoy life.
 (a) Happiness: the ability to feel satisfied with life and to have fun
 (b) Optimism: the ability to look at the brighter side of life and maintain a positive attitude in the face of problems

B. Tolerance of Ambiguity

Tolerance of Ambiguity is defined as how a person or group "perceives and process information about ambiguous situations or stimuli when confronted by an arrey of unfamiliar, complex or incongruent clues" (Furnham & Ribchester, 1995, p. 180). In educational settings, tolerance of ambiguity refers to the individuals' ability "to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and without appeals to authority (e.g. first language)" (Ellis, 1994, p. 518).

According to Ehrman (1999), tolerance of ambiguity helps learners to deal with ambiguous situations at three different levels: Intake, tolerance of ambiguity proper, and accommodation. First and foremost, tolerance enables learners to take new information which may include many unknown elements. At the second level, learners with tolerance of ambiguity are able to hold contradictory or even incomplete information without rejecting them. At the last level, learners will be able to integrate new information into the existing schemata and restructure it.

As part of people's personality, tolerance of ambiguity trait can influence individuals' life and work in general. More specifically, regarding the field of language learning and teaching, it can affect numerous aspects of language learning and learners' performance and achievement (Chapelle, 1983) since it is associated with risk taking and clearly, those who are able to tolerate ambiguities are more likely to take risks in the process of language learning, the factor which is vital for making progress in language learning (Ely, 1986). Furthermore, encountering with unknown structural and/ or cultural norms may increase learners' anxiety (Oxford, 1999), that may lead to "a degree of apprehension and frustration which may ... [be] deleterious to progress" (White, 1999, p. 456).

Supporting the above view, Chapelle (1983) asserts that learners who have moderate levels of ambiguity tolerance are more likely to overcome the ambiguous situations and persist in language learning demanding process. In other words, language learners with ambiguity tolerance are more successful in managing and coping with the ambiguous situations in the case of encountering with unfamiliar structures and/ or cultural cues. Such learners, based on Robin's

(1975) view, are more motivated to take risks and open to change and therefore, uncertainties cannot impede their progress.

Ehrman's (1993) and Reiss' (1985) studies also reveal that learners with low ambiguity tolerance achieve less in comparison with high ambiguity tolerant ones.

C. Willingness to Communicate

The concept of willingness to communicate refers to "a speaker's or writer's propensity to voluntarily engage into an interpersonal communication when the situation requires" (MacIntyre et al., 1998 cited in Mohammadzadeh & Jafarigohar, 2012, p. 25- 26). The proponents of this concept suggest that individual differences in language learning and/ or communication can be attributed partially to their different levels of willingness for communication. Nowadays, it is believed that interaction plays a significant role in language development and attainment of L2 competence and hence, meaningful communication is highly valued and emphasized by language educators. "No matter how proficient a person is in using a foreign language, his attempts at establishing sound communication will be less than desirable if he or she is not fully willing to communicate" (Mohammadzadeh & Jafarigohar, 2012, p. 25).

Taking into consideration the crucial role that willingness to communicate factor plays in determining language learners' success, its enhancement has turned out to be one of the important goals in foreign/ second language pedagogy. Many researchers emphasize that concentration on enhancement of WTC can guarantee the success of any language learning program; otherwise, its failure will not be out of sight.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 64 EFL language learners. They ranged in age between 18 to 39 years. Among the participants, 36 were male and 28 were female. In terms of language proficiency level, they were either intermediate or advanced language learners and therefore, the level of language proficiency was not controlled in the current study. The participants were selected voluntarily on the basis of their convenience and availability to take part in the study.

B. Instruments

The materials used in the current study consisted of three sets of self- reported questionnaires.

a. Bar- On Emotional Quotient Inventory

Bar- On EQ-I questionnaire, as a self- report measure of EI, provides valid and reliable information about individuals' social and emotional behavior. It includes 90 items in five categories, i.e. interpersonal, intrapersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood categories assessed on a five- point Lickert scale. The subjects are required to answer whether they 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neither disagree nor agree, 4= agree, or 5= strongly agree about each question. Higher levels of emotional intelligence are indicated by higher scores attained through this questionnaire.

b. Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Questionnaire

To evaluate the level of participants' tolerance of ambiguity, the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS), developed by Ely (1995) was used in the present study. The questionnaire includes 12 items based on 4-point response scale ranging from "strongly agree" or "agree" to "disagree" or "strongly disagree". The reported internal consistency reliability of SLATS is 0.89 in this study.

c. Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

To measure students' willingness to communicate inside the classroom, a questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was used. It includes 27 items in five- point Lickert scale ranging from 1= almost never willing, 2= sometimes willing, 3= willing half of the time, 4= usually willing, and 5= almost always willing (see Appendix 1). The subjects were required to indicate how much willing they were to communicate in the classroom.

C. Procedure

After selecting the subjects for measurement administration, a brief introductory session was held. The subjects were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were assured that the data collection process will be kept confidential. The students were given a brief oral instruction of how to complete the questionnaires and then, each student received a package including three questionnaires. The subjects returned all of the completed questionnaires in the same session.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After administering the questionnaires and tabulating the scores for each participant, the raw data were put under a series of statistical analyses using SPSS 18 software. Based on the nature of research questions, the correlation test was considered to best serve the purpose of the current study.

A. The Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Tolerance of Ambiguity

The first research question concerned the relationship between learners' emotional intelligence and their tolerance of ambiguity. As shown in Table 1, the correlational index (r= .068; P= .396> .05) is not statistically significant, indicating that there is not meaningful relationship between emotional intelligence and tolerance of ambiguity of the participants.

TABLE 1:
CORELATION BETWEEN LEARNERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE

		Emotional Intelligence
Tolerance of Ambiguity	Pearson Correlation	.068
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.396
	N	64

* The correlation is significant at .05 level.

B. The Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Willingness to Communicate

As stated earlier, the second research question of this study sought to explore the existence of any relationship between learners' EI and WTC. To answer this question, Pearson Product Moment Correlation test was run. The results are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2:
CORELATION BETWEEN LEARNERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

		Willingness to Communicate
Emotional Intelligence	Pearson Correlation	.861**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000
	N	64

* The correlation is significant at .05 level.

As it is clear, the above results show a significant correlation between learners' EI and willingness to communicate. The above high index of correlation (r= 0.86; P= .000< .05) reveals a significant positive correlation between EI and WTC, indicating the fact that if learners' EI enhances, their willingness to communicate will also increase.

The obtained result can be attributed to the fact that interpersonal factor as one of the components of emotional intelligence leads learners to successful communication, as supported by researchers such as Gardner (1999) and Armstrong (2003), etc. In other words, those possessing high emotional intelligence are more willing to get involved in interpersonal communication.

This piece of finding supports the previous body of research. It is in line with Sucaromana's (2010) statement that learners who have higher EI can perform better because EI makes study atmosphere more ideal.

Furthermore, it is in line with Lopes et al. (2003) suggestion that "people with higher EI are more successful in social competent, relationships, and they are more interpersonaly sensitive than people with lower EI" (Abdolmanafi Rokni et al., 2014, p.119).

Moreover, Hasanzadeh and Shahmohamadi's (2011) study confirms this finding. Their study revealed that students with high emotional intelligence are better able to communicate and express themselves and consequently, more successful in the process of language learning.

Tabatabaei and Jamshidfar's (2013) study is also in line with the above finding. They concluded that EI level of students has a significant correlation with their willingness to participate in L2 communications.

C. The Correlation between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Willingness to Communicate

The third research question concerned the relationship between learners' ambiguity tolerance and their willingness to initiate and participate in interpersonal communication. To find the answer to the third research question, another Pearson Product Moment Correlation test was conducted. Table 3 below shows the results of the correlation test.

TABLE 3:
CORELATION BETWEEN LEARNERS' AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

		Willingness to Communicate
Tolerance of Ambiguity	Pearson Correlation	.698**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.013
	N	64

* The correlation is significant at .05 level.

According to the above table (r= .698; P= .013< .05), it can be concluded that tolerance of ambiguity is highly correlated with willingness to communicate.

One reason underlying such finding may be due to the fact that individuals with higher tolerance of ambiguity seem to be more successful in meeting and coping with environmental demands and pressures, especially during communication and interpersonal relations and hence, they may be more willing to initiate and/ or participate in communications. This is especially the case in language learning classes where teachers put more emphasis on using the correct forms and structures during communications and therefore, impose more stress and pressure on students to use language accurately. This is why language learning classes are usually ambiguous and threatening environments. In

such situations, learners with higher tolerance of ambiguity seem to manage the situation more successfully and be more willing to communicate.

This result seems to be in accordance with the heuristic model of WTC proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998). In their suggested pyramid- shaped model, WTC is supposed to be interrelated with six affective variables- motivation, confidence, attitude, communication competence, communication apprehension, and personality. As revealed in this study, tolerance and/ or intolerance of uncertainties, reflecting part of one' personality can influence individuals' willingness to initiate and participate in communications, when the opportunity is provided.

Moreover, such finding is supported by Sun (2008) who emphasized that personality is an important predictor of individual's degree of WTC.

Furthermore, supporting the above line of thinking, Fu, Wang, and Wang (2012) state that interpersonal communications encouraged in L2 classrooms expose learners to ambiguous situations in which those who have higher degrees of tolerance of uncertainties and risk taking seem to more willing to participate. Clearly, those who fear to make mistakes in such communications and consequently, fail to cope with ambiguities remain silent in the class.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship among emotional intelligence, tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to communicate in Iranian EFL academic contexts. The findings revealed that there is a strong positive relationship between learners' EI and WTC. The positive correlation between tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to communicate was another finding of the current study. It was also found that there is no significant correlation between emotional intelligence and ambiguity tolerance.

The above findings have some implications for language teaching profession. Nowadays, the proponents of modern language teaching put greater emphasis on communication and authentic language use. Therefore, learners who take benefit of higher levels of willingness to communicate seem to be more successful in such systems. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), enhancing learners' WTC is accounted for as a critical factor in modern language pedagogy and as it is apparent, teachers play a significant role in providing the conditions in which students' willingness to communicate can be boosted. An awareness of students' level of ambiguity tolerance and emotional intelligence, as influential psychological traits on individuals' WTC in particular and their language learning achievements in general, will help language teachers to modify and improve their teaching practices. Put is more simply, "in order to provide successful instruction, teachers need to learn to identify and understand their students' individual differences. This may cause a shift from teacher to learner instruction, such as the learner- centered curriculum" (Nosratinia et al., 2013, p. 27).

Moreover, believing that emotional intelligence can be improved, trained and schooled (Elias et al., 1997 cited in Pishghadam, 2009), language policy makers and educators can design and/ or implement programs that can enhance learners' emotional competencies.

This study had also some limitations. First, three self- report questionnaires were used in this study and the reliability of the data depends on the degree of truthfulness of the answers given by the participants. To increase the reliability of the data, some performance- based instrument can be also used. Besides, the small number of the respondents limited the generalizability of the findings. Further research with greater number of participants can yield more generalizable results.

APPENDIX

A. **REVISED VERSION OF WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN THE CLASSROOM**
(MacIntyre et al., 2001)

We would like to appreciate you for your nice cooperation. Please, read the following statements carefully and answer them according to the instructions prepared.

Directions: This questionnaire is composed of statements concerning your feelings about communication with other people, in English. Please indicate in the space provided the frequency of time you choose to speak in English in each classroom situation.

If you are almost never willing to speak English, write 1. If you are willing sometimes, write 2 or 3. If you are willing most of the time, write 4 or 5.

1 = Almost never willing
2 = Sometimes willing
3 = Willing half of the time
4 = Usually willing
5 = Almost always willing
Speaking in class, in English
1. Speaking in a group about your summer vacation. ……
2. Speaking to your teacher about your homework assignment. ……
3. A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first? ……

4. You are confused about a task you must complete, how willing are you to ask for instructions/clarification? ……

5. Talking to a friend while waiting in line. ……

6. How willing would you be to be an actor in a play? ……

7. Describe the rules of your favorite game. ……

8. Play a game in English. ……

Reading in class (to yourself, not out loud)

1. Read a novel. ……

2. Read an article in a paper. ……

3. Read letters from a pen pal written in native English. ……

4. Read personal letters or notes written to you in which the writer has deliberately used simple words and constructions. ……

5. Read an advertisement in the paper to find a good bicycle you can buy. ……

6. Read reviews for popular movies. ……

Writing in class, in English

1. Write an advertisement to sell an old bike. ……

2. Write down the instructions for your favorite hobby. ……

3. Write a report on your favorite animal and its habits. ……

4. Write a story. ……

5. Write a letter to a friend. ……

6. Write a newspaper article. ……

7. Write the answers to a "fun" quiz from a magazine. ……

8. Write down a list of things you must do tomorrow. ……

Comprehension in class

1. Listen to instructions and complete a task. ……

2. Bake a cake if instructions were not in Persian. ……

3. Fill out an application form. ……

4. Take directions from an English speaker. ……

5. Understand an English movie. ……

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