

A Comparative Study of Intercultural Competence (IC) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Among Male and Female English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Due to limited exposure to authentic intercultural exchanges with native speakers, EFL learners often hesitate to communicate in English. Given the scarcity of research on intercultural competence (IC) in EFL environments, this study investigated whether a relationship exists between learners' unwillingness to communicate and their IC. To explore this, 100 male and female EFL learners from the University of Arak and local language institutes completed two measures: the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire and the Willingness to Communicate Scale. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) and IC. Additionally, an independent-samples t-test revealed that while male and female learners differed significantly in WTC, their IC levels showed no notable gender-based variation. Further analysis demonstrated that this correlation was primarily driven by the strong link between female learners' WTC and IC, with males showing a weaker association. As a key pedagogical takeaway, the study suggests that language instructors can enhance learners' motivation to communicate by tailoring support to their IC levels, thereby fostering a reinforcing cycle of improved WTC and further IC development. These findings also hold relevance for curriculum designers, syllabus developers, and language assessment specialists in creating more effective EFL learning frameworks.

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Introduction

English occupies an important position in educational programs (Badpa & Mardani, 2025). The English language has significant importance in communication (Badpa et. al., 2023; Zarrabi, 2025). Consequently, the country has implemented the teaching of the English language at various levels of education (Badpa, 2024). Moreover, Teachers have a fundamental role in determining the educational experiences in a globalized world (Shojaei et al., 2025). Despite this, educators frequently report learners' unwillingness to communicate (UWTC) in classroom settings. Initially conceptualized by Burgoon (1976), UWTC describes a persistent reluctance to engage orally, defined as "an enduring and chronic tendency to avoid or devalue oral communication" (p. 60). This issue is critical to address, as oral proficiency is widely regarded as fundamental to language acquisition, alongside listening, reading, and writing skills.

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Recent research highlights the interplay between EFL learners' intercultural competence (IC), and willingness to communicate (WTC), both pivotal for effective cross-cultural interaction (Al-Murtadha, 2023). IC—encompassing cultural awareness, adaptability, and communicative abilities—may bolster learners' confidence, thereby enhancing WTC (Peng, 2023). However, gender differences in motivation, social confidence, and communication strategies suggest this relationship may vary (Zhou & Wei, 2023). Investigating these dynamics can highlight various tailored pedagogical approaches for diverse learners.

A recurring challenge is learners' disproportionate discomfort with speaking despite competence in other skills. MacIntyre (2007) observed that prolonged language study does not guarantee oral proficiency, often due to UWTC, which impedes self-assessment and improvement. Baghaei et al. (2012) further link lower WTC to reduced L2 acquisition success. Studies across contexts confirm UWTC's prevalence in EFL/ESL settings, attributed to factors like self-confidence, emotional barriers, classroom environment, and instructional methods (Cao & Philip, 2006; Hashimoto, 2002).

McCroskey and Baer (1985) reconceptualized WTC as "a stable predisposition toward communication when free to choose to do so" (p. 240), later refined by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as "readiness to enter discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 574). Research distinguishes trait-like (personal) and situational (environmental) WTC influences (MacIntyre, 1994). Institutions increasingly prioritize fostering WTC through peer/teacher interaction and real-world practice.

Furthermore, IC emerges as a key WTC determinant, given language-culture interdependence (Gulbinskiene & Lasauskiene, 2014). Effective intercultural communication requires cultural and linguistic mastery, necessitating curricula that integrate cultural awareness to address societal demands. In an era of cross-cultural exchange, EFL instruction must emphasize cultural differences to prepare learners for global communication.

Recent developments in EFL pedagogy have highlighted the crucial role of technology-enhanced learning environments in fostering WTC. Studies by Derakhshan et al. (2024) demonstrate that virtual exchange programs significantly reduce communication anxiety while enhancing intercultural awareness among EFL learners. These digital platforms provide safe spaces for learners to practice authentic communication, particularly benefitting female students who may experience higher anxiety in traditional classroom settings (Wang & Chen, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the need to re-examine WTC in digital contexts. According to recent findings by Li and Chen (2023), the shift to online learning created new dimensions of WTC, where learners displayed different communication patterns compared to face-to-face environments. This digital transformation of language learning spaces necessitates updated frameworks for understanding how WTC develops in hybrid learning environments (Zhang et al., 2024).

Emerging research in positive psychology has also contributed new insights into WTC development. Studies applying the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to EFL contexts show that positive emotional experiences in language learning significantly enhance WTC (Dewaele & Li, 2023). Particularly noteworthy is the finding that momentary positive emotions during intercultural exchanges can have lasting effects on learners' communication willingness (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2024).

Review of the Literature

The increasing importance of intercultural communication in a globalized world has prompted extensive research into the factors that influence language learning, particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Two critical constructs in this domain are Intercultural Competence (IC) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC), both of which play significant roles in effective language acquisition and use. This literature review synthesizes recent findings on the relationship between IC and WTC among EFL learners, highlighting gender-related insights, technological influences, and the implications for educational practice.

Intercultural Competence and Willingness to Communicate

IC refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts, while WTC indicates a learner's readiness to engage in communication. Research has demonstrated a strong positive correlation between IC and WTC, suggesting that as learners enhance their IC, their willingness to engage in communication also increases (Özdemir, 2017). This relationship is particularly vital in EFL contexts, where learners often face challenges in effectively communicating across cultural boundaries.

In a study focused on Iranian EFL learners, Özdemir (2017) found that developing IC not only fosters a communicative environment but also enhances learners' motivation to communicate in the target language. These findings indicate that educators should prioritize the integration of IC training into language curricula to create a more culturally aware learning atmosphere.

Gender Differences in IC and WTC

The exploration of gender differences in IC and WTC has yielded mixed results. While some studies suggest that gender may influence communication styles and preferences, Özdemir (2017) reported no significant gender differences in IC levels among participants. This indicates that both male and female learners can equally benefit from IC development, and therefore, educational strategies should aim to be inclusive and sensitive to diverse learner needs.

Conversely, Lee and Lee (2019) examined the impact of affective factors and virtual intercultural experiences on WTC across gender lines. Their findings suggest that while both genders can exhibit similar levels of WTC, the factors influencing these levels may vary. This highlights the importance of understanding the nuanced dynamics of gender when addressing WTC in language education.

Technological Influences on WTC

The role of technology in enhancing WTC among EFL learners has garnered attention in recent studies. Tai and Chen (2020) investigated the impact of intelligent personal assistants (IPAs), such as Google Assistant, on adolescent EFL learners' WTC. Their findings revealed that engagement with technology can significantly boost learners' communicative confidence and reduce speaking anxiety, thus fostering a supportive environment for language development. This aligns with the notion that a conducive learning environment, whether through technology or traditional methods, is essential for promoting both WTC and IC.

Furthermore, Luan et al. (2020) explored the role of perceived social support in online EFL learning engagement, suggesting that social interactions facilitated by technology can enhance learners' motivation and willingness to communicate. These insights emphasize the need

for educators to integrate technology purposefully in language learning environments to promote IC and WTC.

Grit, Enjoyment, and Learning Engagement

Recent research has also highlighted the importance of affective factors, such as grit and enjoyment, in influencing EFL learners' WTC. Lee (2020) identified that grit and classroom enjoyment significantly contribute to learners' willingness to communicate. This underscores the necessity of creating engaging and enjoyable learning experiences that foster resilience and motivation among EFL learners, regardless of gender.

Derakhshan and Fathi (2023) further supported this notion by demonstrating the mediating role of online learning self-efficacy in the relationship between grit, enjoyment, and online engagement. These findings suggest that educators should focus on enhancing learners' emotional and psychological engagement to promote effective communication skills. Despite growing interest in the relationship between WTC and IC, several critical gaps remain in the existing literature that this study aims to address.

First, while numerous studies have examined WTC in Western educational contexts (MacIntyre, 2020; Dewaele, 2019), there remains a paucity of research focusing on Middle Eastern EFL settings, particularly Iran, where cultural and educational dynamics may yield different patterns of communication behavior (Badpa et al., 2023). This oversight is significant given Iran's unique sociocultural context that blends Islamic values with modern educational aspirations.

Second, current research has largely treated WTC as a static construct, overlooking its dynamic fluctuations across different learning environments (Pawlak et al., 2022). Few studies have investigated how WTC manifests differently in classroom versus naturalistic settings within the same cultural context, creating a need for more nuanced examinations of situational variability.

Third, while gender differences in WTC have been documented (Zhou & Wei, 2023), the mechanisms underlying these differences remain poorly understood. Existing studies have typically examined gender as a binary variable without considering how intersecting factors like age, proficiency level, and cultural background might moderate these effects (Derakhshan et al., 2024). Our study reveals that female participants were significantly older on average ($M=24.44$) than male participants ($M=18.53$), suggesting age may confound observed gender differences - a factor previous research has neglected.

Fourth, the pedagogical implications of the WTC-IC relationship remain underdeveloped. Although scholars agree that both constructs are important for language learning (Peng, 2023), there is little consensus on how to effectively foster them in tandem, particularly in teacher-centered educational systems like Iran's. The current study's finding that female learners show a stronger WTC-IC correlation ($r=.571$) than males ($r=-.054$) suggest gender-specific approaches may be needed - an insight missing from existing pedagogical recommendations.

Finally, the digital transformation of language learning post-pandemic necessitates updated frameworks for understanding WTC (Li & Chen, 2023). Previous instruments like

McCroskey's (1992) scale were developed for face-to-face contexts and may not fully capture communication willingness in hybrid or virtual environments where much language learning now occurs.

These gaps collectively highlight the need for context-sensitive research that examines:

- a) Cultural specificity in WTC-IC relationships
- b) Dynamic fluctuations across learning environments
- c) Intersectional analyses of gender differences
- d) Practical pedagogical applications
- e) Digital-age conceptualizations of communication willingness

By addressing these gaps, the current study contributes to more theoretically robust and pedagogically relevant understandings of WTC and IC in under-researched EFL contexts. Therefore, for this study, the following research questions were posed:

1. To what extent do gender differences exist in ELT students' willingness to communicate (WTC)?
2. How does intercultural competence (IC) differ between male and female ELT students?
3. What relationship exists between Iranian EFL learners' WTC and their intercultural competence?
4. How is female EFL learners' WTC associated with their intercultural competence?
5. What correlation exists between male EFL learners' WTC and their intercultural competence?

Method

Design

This investigation employed a quantitative, descriptive, correlational design to examine the relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) and intercultural competence (IC). As a quantitative study, it utilized objective measurement and statistical analysis of data collected through standardized questionnaires, focusing on numerical data to identify patterns and generalize findings across the target population.

The research design was descriptive, involving a single measurement of variables to establish potential associations. The correlational approach allowed for examination of the relationship between WTC and IC without manipulation of variables. Two validated questionnaires were administered, with careful attention given to ensuring their reliability and validity.

The study operated under the hypothesis that a significant positive correlation would emerge between participants' WTC and their IC levels. These two constructs served as the primary variables of interest in the research framework.

Participants

The study involved 100 EFL learners (50 males and 50 females) recruited from arak university's English department and local language institutes in arak, Iran. the participants were selected through non-random (convenience) sampling, meaning they were chosen based on availability and willingness to participate rather than strict randomization.

Demographic Background

They were non-native English speakers with varying proficiency levels, though the study did not explicitly categorize them into beginner, intermediate, or advanced groups. Their exposure to English primarily came from formal classroom instruction, as Iran is an EFL context with limited naturalistic interaction with native speakers.

Age Distribution

The participants' ages ranged from 15 years to 30 and above, ensuring sufficient cognitive maturity to comprehend the survey items. Descriptive statistics revealed notable differences in age between genders:

Table 1

The Demographic Information of the Participants

Gender	Male (n=50)	Female (n=50)
Mean age (years)	18.53 (Sd=4.73)	24.44 (Sd=6.98)
Age range	15–30+	15–30+

The older average age of female participants suggests potential differences in life experiences, educational background, or social factors that may influence their WTC and IC compared to male learners.

Recruitment Process

- a) Institutional collaboration: researchers coordinated with arak university and local language institutes to identify potential participants.
- b) Voluntary participation: students were invited to participate voluntarily, with no compensation provided.
- c) Inclusion criteria: participants were supposed to have the following features: being EFL learners (non-native English speakers), having at least 15 years old (to ensure comprehension of survey items) and being enrolled in university English courses or language institute programs.

Instruments

The study employed two validated instruments to assess Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Intercultural Competence (IC), grounded in established theoretical frameworks. McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to Communicate Scale measured participants' predisposition toward L2 communication, aligning with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) conceptualization of WTC as a context-dependent readiness to engage in discourse. This scale evaluated four contextual dimensions—group discussions, meetings, interpersonal exchanges, and public speaking—and three receiver types (strangers, acquaintances, and friends), using a percentage scale (0% = "never" to 100% = "always").

Additionally, the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire, adapted from Johnson's (2015) version of Ang and Van Dyne's (2008) Cultural Intelligence Scale, assessed IC across four theorized dimensions: cognitive (cultural knowledge), metacognitive (cultural awareness), motivational (interest in intercultural interactions), and behavioral (adaptive communication skills) competence. Both instruments demonstrated high reliability (WTC: $\alpha = 0.92$; IC: $\alpha = 0.82$), ensuring robust measurement of the constructs. By operationalizing these variables through theoretically defined dimensions, the study provided a nuanced analysis of their interplay in an EFL context.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure followed a structured approach to ensure reliable measurement of participants' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Intercultural Competence (IC). First, the two standardized instruments—McCroskey's (1992) WTC Scale and the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire adapted from Johnson (2015)—were administered in English to all participants during scheduled sessions at their educational institutions. The WTC Scale assessed communication tendencies across four contexts (group discussions, meetings, interpersonal exchanges, and public speaking) and three receiver types (strangers, acquaintances, and friends) using a percentage-based response format. Similarly, the IC Questionnaire evaluated four key dimensions of intercultural competence: cognitive knowledge, metacognitive awareness, motivational drive, and behavioral adaptability. To maintain consistency, the trained researchers supervised all sessions, provided standardized instructions, and ensured participants completed the questionnaires independently without time constraints. This rigorous protocol yielded high internal consistency for both instruments (WTC $\alpha = 0.92$; IC $\alpha = 0.82$), confirming the reliability of the collected data for subsequent analysis.

The research procedure for this study was systematically designed to investigate the relationship between Intercultural Competence (IC) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among male and female EFL learners. The study employed a quantitative, descriptive, correlational design, utilizing standardized questionnaires to collect data from participants. All in all, the procedure consisted of several key stages: participant recruitment, instrument administration, data collection, and statistical analysis.

First, 100 EFL learners were chosen through non-random sampling from the University of Arak and local language institutes in Iran. The participants comprised an equal number of male and female learners, all of whom were non-native English speakers aged at least 15 or older. This age criterion ensured that participants had sufficient comprehension of the survey items, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data.

Next, two validated instruments were administered to measure the primary variables of interest: the Intercultural Competence and Willingness to Communicate. The IC questionnaire consisted of 20 items assessing learners' intercultural awareness, adaptability, and communicative abilities, while the WTC scale included 20 items (12 scored and 8 fillers) evaluating participants' propensity to communicate in various contexts (e.g., group discussions, public speaking) and with different receiver types (e.g., strangers, friends). Responses were recorded on a percentage scale ranging from 0% ("never") to 100% ("always").

Data collection was conducted in English to align with the study's focus on EFL learners. Participants completed the questionnaires under controlled conditions to minimize external influences. The reliability of the instruments was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with the WTC scale demonstrating high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.92$) and the IC questionnaire showing good reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$).

This procedure ensured the validity and reliability of the findings, providing meaningful insights into the interplay between WTC and IC among EFL learners, with particular attention to gender differences. The results highlighted the need for tailored pedagogical strategies to enhance these competencies in language learning contexts.

Data Analysis

The collected data were systematically analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) to examine the relationship between Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Intercultural Competence (IC) among EFL learners. Initial descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and overall performance on both measures. For inferential analysis, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare gender differences in WTC and IC scores, while Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and direction of relationships between these variables. The analysis specifically focused on testing five research questions, with significance levels set at $p < 0.05$ to determine statistical significance. This comprehensive analytical approach allowed for both group comparisons and relationship testing, providing robust insights into the interplay between communication willingness and intercultural competence in the EFL context.

Results

To examine the relationship between EFL learners' Willingness to Communicate and intercultural competence, the obtained responses from the WTC and IC questionnaires were analyzed statistically in SPSS (version 26). Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the participants' performances in the questionnaires.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Willingness to Communicate and Intercultural Competence

S. D	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	N	Variables	Group
4.734	18.53	33	15	50	Age	
15.00	73.06	100	29	50	Intercultural competence	Male

369.165	1151.81	1997	0	50	Willingness to Communicate	
6.981	24.44	40	17	50	Age	
15.47	72.38	107	45	50	Intercultural competence	Female
322.354	967.660	1800	0	50	Willingness to Communicate	

As seen in Table 2, the age variable in male participants ($M_{\text{males}} = 18.53$; $SD = 4.73$) was remarkably different from female participants ($M_{\text{females}} = 24.44$; $SD = 6.98$). The mean score of WTC in male students ($M = 1151$) was higher than that of WTC in female students ($M = 967$). Similarly, the mean score of IC obtained from male participants' reports ($M = 73.06$) was higher than that of the one collected from female participants ($M = 72.38$).

RQ1: Gender Differences in ELT Students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

To examine gender differences in Willingness to Communicate (WTC), an independent samples t-test was conducted on the questionnaire responses. This parametric test was selected because it is specifically designed to compare means between two independent groups (male vs. female learners) when the data meet certain assumptions. The test's appropriateness was confirmed through two key verifications: first, the WTC scores were measured on an interval scale, satisfying the continuous data requirement; second, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p > .05$ for both groups) indicated normal distribution of scores within each gender group. Additionally, Levene's test confirmed homogeneity of variance ($p > .05$), further validating the use of this statistical approach. The analysis revealed a statistically significant gender difference in WTC ($t [98] = 2.756$, $p = .009$), with male learners ($M = 1151.81$, $SD = 369.16$) demonstrating higher willingness to communicate than female learners ($M = 967.66$, $SD = 322.35$), an effect that accounted for 7% of the variance ($\eta^2 = .07$).

Table 3

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Normality

Willingness to Communicate	Index	Group
1.036	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Male
.234	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	
.710	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Female
.694	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	

As shown in Table 3, the result of the normality test (Sig. value Male=.234 > .05; Sig. value Female=.694 > .05) indicates that the distribution of scores has no meaningful difference from a

normal distribution of data, which means the normality assumption was met. In addition, the Levene's test results in Table 4 suggest the homogeneity of variance in groups ($P>0.05$).

Table 4

Results of Independent Samples Test for Willingness to Communicate

t-test for Equality of Means				Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		
Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	t	Sig.	F	Dependent variable
148.15	.009	98	2.657	.313	1.027	Willingness to Communicate

As displayed in Table 4, the results of Independent Samples Test comparing WTC in male and female participants indicate that, statistically, there is a significant difference between Willingness to Communicate scores of male students ($M= 1151.81, SD= 369.16$) and those of female students ($M= 967.66, SD= 322.35; t (98) = 2.756, p=.009<0.05$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference 541.55) was fairly high (eta squared=.07), indicating that a noticeable proportion of variance in WTC scores could be explained by the independent variable of gender.

RQ2: Intercultural Competence (IC) difference between male and female ELT students

To answer the second research question, on a significant difference between male and female students in terms of their intercultural competence, an independent Samples t-test was run over the responses in the IC questionnaire. This statistical tool was used for the following reasons. Firstly, the scores obtained from the IC questionnaire were continuous. Secondly, as shown Table 4, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the normality assumption was met, i.e., the scores comprising each group mean were normally distributed (Sig. value Male=.585> .05; Sig. value Female=.982> .05). Thirdly, as presented in Table 5, the Leven's test results suggest the homogeneity of variance in the groups ($P>0.05$).

Table 5

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Normality

Intercultural competence	Index	Group
.775	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Male
.585	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	
.466	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Female
.982	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	

The results of the Independent Samples Test comparing the degree of IC in male and female participants (see Table 5) indicates that the difference between intercultural competence of male students ($M= 73.06, SD= 15.00$) and female students' ($M= 72.38, SD= 15.47$) was not statistically significant ($t (98) = 2.23, p=.824>0.05$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference=.68) was very small (eta squared=.004). This means that EFL

students' ability to master intercultural competence does not seem to be influenced by the gender variable in Iranian EFL contexts.

Table 6

Results of the Independent Samples Test for Intercultural Competence

t-test for Equality of Means				Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Dependent variable
Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	t	Sig.	F	
.68	.824	98	.223	.369	.813	Intercultural competence

RQ3: Relationship between Iranian EFL learners' WTC and their intercultural competence

For the third research question asking about a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence and their Willingness to Communicate, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was run over the participants' performances in the attendant questionnaires. Table 7 presents the outcome.

Table 7

Correlation between Willingness to Communicate and Intercultural Competence

Willingness to Communicate	Index	variable
.239*	Pearson Correlation	Intercultural competence
.017	Sig. (2-tailed)	
100	N	

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

A close examination of Table 7 shows a positive relationship between the two variables of WTC and IC, $r=.239$, $n=100$, $p<.05$, with high levels of Willingness to Communicate associated with high levels of intercultural competence. Statistically, this small correlation indicates only 5 percent shared variance between the variables. In other words, WTC helps to explain only 5 percent of the variance in respondents' scores on the Intercultural Competence score.

RQ4: Female EFL learners' WTC association with their intercultural competence

Similarly, for the fourth research question, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between female students' intercultural competence and Willingness to communicate. The results are presented in the Table below.

Table 8

Correlation between Willingness to Communicate and Intercultural Competence in Female Students

Willingness to Communicate	Index	Variable
.571**	Pearson Correlation	Intercultural competence
.000	Sig. (2-tailed)	
50	N	

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

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As seen in Table 8, there was a strong, positive correlation between female students' scores of WTC and their IC scores ($r=.571, n=50, p<.05$). The correlation index of .571 accounts for 32 percent of the variance in the WTC and IC measures, which means that 32 percent of variance in female EFL students' Willingness to Communicate could be predicted from their scores on the intercultural competence questionnaire. Thus, the proposed null hypothesis indicating no relationship between WTC and IC variables could be rejected in this study.

RQ5: Male EFL learners' WTC correlation with their intercultural competence

As for the fifth research question asking about a significant relationship between male students' intercultural competence and their Willingness to communicate, Pearson correlation statistic was also employed to examine the presumed relationship between the two constructs. Table 9 presents the results.

Table 9

Correlation between Willingness to Communicate and Intercultural Competence in Male Students

Willingness to Communicate	Index	Variable
-.054	Pearson Correlation	Intercultural competence
.708	Sig. (2-tailed)	
50	N	

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

As shown in Table 9, there was no strong correlation between male students' scores of WTC and their IC scores ($r= -.054, n=50, P>0.05$). It means that, unlike female students' WTC, male EFL students' Willingness to Communicate is not meaningfully related to their intercultural competence. This provides support for accepting the hypothesis that male students' Willingness to communicate is not related to their intercultural competence.

Discussion

This study operates on the premise that willingness to communicate (WTC) is a dynamic, context-dependent trait (Dewaele, 2019; MacIntyre, 2020) that evolves over time and significantly contributes to EFL learners' intercultural competence (IC). A key assumption is

that greater exposure to authentic English input—whether through natural or instructional settings—enhances learners’ opportunities for interaction with native and non-native speakers, thereby boosting both their confidence and WTC (Pawlak et al., 2022). However, this relationship is further complicated by gender differences, necessitating a cross-sectional analysis via independent samples *t*-tests and Pearson correlation coefficients.

Gender Differences in WTC: Contradictory Findings and Contextual Influences

The first research question examined gender-based differences in WTC, revealing that male EFL learners exhibited significantly higher WTC than their female counterparts. This aligns with prior research in Iranian EFL contexts (Ahmadian & Shirvani, 2012; Gholami, 2015) but contradicts studies in immersion settings (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Valadi et al., 2015). Such discrepancies underscore WTC’s situational nature, as emphasized by Ellis (2008), who posits that socio-political and educational factors shape communicative behaviors differently across learning environments.

Given these mixed findings, the study’s results should be interpreted cautiously. The participants—bilingual (Turkish Persian) Iranian EFL learners in an academic setting—may reflect cultural and institutional constraints that suppress female WTC, as suggested by Baghaei et al. (2012). However, broader generalizations require replication in similar EFL contexts to account for local sociocultural influences (Yashima et al., 2023).

Intercultural Competence (IC): No Gender Gap, but Underlying Complexities

Contrary to expectations, no significant gender differences emerged in IC levels, despite theoretical arguments that female learners typically exhibit greater intercultural sensitivity and adaptability (Friganović Sain et al., 2017; Morales, 2017). This finding resonates with Mirzaei & Forouzandeh’s (2012) study, which highlighted motivation, rather than gender, as a stronger predictor of IC development. The absence of gender disparity suggests that IC is shaped by multifaceted factors, including learner motivation, exposure to diverse cultures, and institutional support (Byram, 2021).

The WTC-IC Relationship: Gender-Specific Dynamics

While a significant correlation between WTC and IC was confirmed, this linkage was gender-dependent: only female learners demonstrated a meaningful association between the two constructs. This finding implies that:

Higher WTC in female learners may stem from greater intercultural engagement (e.g., consuming English media, participating in cross-cultural exchanges), reinforcing IC over time (Usó-juan & Martínez-flor, 2006).

Male learners’ WTC may be driven by factors unrelated to IC, such as classroom dynamics, social confidence, or extrinsic motivations (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2023).

This gender disparity aligns with Norton’s (2013) theory of investment, which posits that female learners often exhibit stronger integrative motivation and cultural curiosity, fostering deeper intercultural learning. Conversely, male learners may prioritize instrumental goals (e.g., academic or career benefits) over intercultural engagement (Papi & Teimouri, 2022).

The current study's findings reveal important insights about the dynamic relationship between WTC and IC in Iranian EFL learners, while also highlighting several theoretical and pedagogical implications. Our results demonstrate that while male learners showed significantly higher WTC ($M=1151.81$) compared to females ($M=967.66$), this difference was not mirrored in IC scores (male $M=73.06$ vs. female $M=72.38$). This pattern aligns with recent findings by Wang and Chen (2024), who similarly found gender disparities in digital communication contexts but no equivalent differences in intercultural capabilities. The strong positive correlation between WTC and IC among female learners ($r=.571$) contrasted sharply with the non-significant relationship for male learners ($r=-.054$), suggesting fundamentally different motivational frameworks that warrant further investigation.

The age disparity between our male ($M=18.53$) and female ($M=24.44$) participants introduces an important consideration for interpreting these gender differences. As Derakhshan et al. (2024) have noted, life stage and educational experiences may significantly influence communication patterns in ways that traditional gender analyses overlook. Our female participants, being older on average, may have developed more integrative motivation for language learning (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2024), explaining their stronger WTC-IC linkage. This finding challenges the common assumption that gender alone drives communication differences and supports recent calls for more intersectional approaches in SLA research (Zhang et al., 2024).

The study's most striking contribution lies in its demonstration of how context shapes the WTC-IC relationship. While previous research has established general connections between these constructs (Peng, 2023), our results reveal important nuances when accounting for gender and learning environment. The finding that female learners' IC more strongly predicts their WTC suggests they may approach language learning as a form of intercultural engagement, whereas male learners appear more influenced by situational factors like classroom dynamics (Li & Chen, 2023). This aligns with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, as positive intercultural experiences may create upward spirals of engagement particularly for female learners.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between Intercultural Competence (IC) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among Iranian EFL learners, with a focus on gender differences. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between WTC and IC, particularly among female learners, while male learners exhibited no meaningful association between the two constructs. Additionally, male learners demonstrated higher WTC levels compared to their female counterparts, though no significant gender differences were observed in IC. These results highlight the nuanced interplay between communicative willingness and intercultural competence, emphasizing the role of gender and contextual factors in shaping these dynamics.

The study's significance lies in its contribution to understanding how intercultural competence can foster communicative confidence, especially in EFL settings where learners often face barriers to authentic interaction. The stronger WTC-IC link among female learners suggests that intercultural engagement may be a key motivator for their communication, whereas male learners' WTC appears to be influenced by other factors, such as classroom dynamics or instrumental goals. These insights underscore the need for tailored pedagogical strategies that address gender-specific motivations and integrate cultural awareness into language instruction.

For educators and curriculum designers, these findings advocate for a more inclusive approach to fostering WTC and IC, such as incorporating culturally enriched materials, creating supportive learning environments, and leveraging technology to facilitate intercultural exchanges. The study also calls for further research to explore the underlying factors driving these gender differences and to examine the WTC-IC relationship in diverse educational contexts. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of nurturing both communicative willingness and intercultural competence to prepare EFL learners for effective global communication.

By bridging gaps in the existing literature, this study not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers practical implications for enhancing language education. Its findings encourage educators to adopt holistic strategies that empower learners to communicate confidently and navigate intercultural interactions with greater ease.

Instructional Recommendations

To address these gaps, EFL curricula should integrate:

- a) Structured scaffolding: continuous assessment and support for WTC and IC development.
- b) Motivational strategies: teacher-led encouragement and confidence-building activities.
- c) Gender-inclusive tasks: interactive exercises tailored to male and female learners' communicative preferences.
- d) Culturally enriched materials: graded formulaic language and authentic cultural content to enhance IC.

such measures aim to sustain learners' WTC both inside and outside the classroom while gradually fostering their intercultural awareness.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- a) Correlational design: no causal inferences can be drawn (Hatch & Farhady, 1982); longitudinal or experimental studies are needed.
- b) Context-specific sample: findings may not generalize to other EFL settings, particularly those with different gender dynamics.
- c) Uncontrolled variables: age disparities (male participants were older) and socio-economic backgrounds may have confounded results.

Therefore, future research should employ mixed-methods approaches to explore how institutional policies, teacher-student interactions, and digital learning environments mediate WTC and IC across genders (Peng, 2023). Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could clarify whether observed patterns are culturally bound or universally applicable. By bridging these gaps, future research can refine pedagogical strategies and deepen our understanding of WTC's role in effective language learning and intercultural communication.

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