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Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Strategies for Promoting Learners' Willingness-to-Communicate in Online Classes

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Abstract: Willingness to communicate (WTC) is subject to moment-by-moment fluctuations in the classroom. Therefore, teachers' decisive role comes to the foreground as they can increase learners' desire to communicate at a particular moment by their interventions. Online instruction, despite furnishing learners with authentic material, has failed to culminate in communication thanks to connection problems or lack of non-verbal clues. Thus, the present study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of strategies to promote willingness to communicate with learners in online classes. The mixed-methods design was employed to answer the research questions. To this end, a self-designed questionnaire was first piloted and then administered to the main sample which included thirty-seven teachers. The questionnaire subsumed five effective factors garnered from the extant literature. Five teachers were interviewed as to their perceptions of the pros and cons of promoting WTC in online classrooms. The results of the study indicated that teachers' motivational strategies were perceived to promote WTC best in online classes followed by teacher immediacy. Qualitative reports also corroborated the numerical data. Lack of non-verbal clues (i.e. body language) was perceived to decrease learners' motivation and participation; however, technological resources like games were reported to increase WTC in online classes. Teachers should pay heed to their crucial role in inciting a positive atmosphere and get better equipped to capitalize on online affordances to increase participation in online classes.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, Teachers' Perceptions, Motivational Strategies, Teacher Immediacy.

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Introduction

The importance of interaction has stood the test of time since the advent of communicative language teaching. Output has been found to contribute to language learning by enhancing fluency, improving learner interlanguage, automatizing language production, and encouraging hypothesis testing among learners (Gass & Mackey, 2015). Moreover, the new studies bear witness to the crucial role of interaction stating that online interaction can result in even better learning outcomes (Ziegler, 2016).

Although online instruction has proved promising in terms of learner participation in other countries (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2015), it seems to suffer from a lack of interaction, attention, and motivation in Iran (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). More importantly, communication is confined mostly to classrooms in EFL contexts, thus demanding more teacher intervention (Sheybani, 2019). During the past decade, teachers' potential for promoting WTC has been reverberating through various studies (Peng, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014); however, few studies in Iran have addressed teachers' role in face-to-face classroom contexts. Given that "novel situations should be particularly detrimental to WTC because the speaker will be uncertain of his or her ability to meet the demands present at that moment" (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998, p. 549), learners may go to great pains to brace themselves for communication in online platforms.

To meet our objectives, the current research aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Which strategies are perceived to best promote learners' WTC in online classes?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of these strategies in online classes?
3. What are the perceived pros and cons of online instruction in promoting WTC?

Literature Review

MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualized WTC in L2 as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 547). As MacIntyre et al. (1998) claim, L2 WTC is more complex than the manifestation of this notion in L1 as it is not transferable from one language to another. They further argue that political, social, and intergroup implications may have a significant bearing on L2 WTC, while they are not related to L1 WTC. Additionally, other context-dependent and potential situational variables also strongly influence WTC in L2 such as interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context (Kang,

2005; Cao & Philp, 2006). Consequently, L2 WTC tends to fluctuate with respect to given situations and contexts (Kang, 2005).

In particular, WTC is proven as a predictor of classroom participation since students with a high level of WTC participate more in classroom interaction (Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987) and tend to be ready to become involved in any interactions using their L2 outside classrooms (Kang, 2005). MacIntyre et al. (1998) formulated a heuristic model consisting of more than 30 situational and enduring variables with six categories comprising linguistic, communicative, and social psychological variables that determine the top layer (i.e. L2 usage). Layers I, II, III contain situational, contextual, and changeable variables while Layers IV, V, and VI comprise enduring variables. More recent definitions of L2 WTC have become even more comprehensive. Kang's (2005) definition of situational WTC is an example of how detailed the definition of WTC has become. From her perspective, WTC entails "an individual's volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutors, topic, and conversation context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291).

Studies on Willingness to Communicate in Online Platform

An emerging body of research in Turkey (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Satar & Özdener, 2008), Japan (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006), Thailand (Reinders & Wattana, 2015), Vietnam (Le, Cunningham, & Watson, 2018), and USA (Yanguas & Flores, 2014) have opened the way for the implementation of online mediums for communication on the grounds that online venues of communication promise more engaged students.

Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) compared thirty-nine female Japanese first and second-year students' performance in online and face-to-face tasks. To that end, they used a mainly qualitative study to explore students' perceptions of their experiences in different venues of communication. All groups did tasks in both modes of communication by adopting a counter-balanced design, that is, each group in their first session, did the task in either online or face-to-face conditions. They then switched modes of communication the next week of the study. The overall experience in online tasks was reported to be more engaging and attractive than the former. Prominent positive themes of online chat gleaned from the questionnaires entailed lower anxiety, power balance among all members, lesser control of dominant speakers, and increased self-confidence. The students reported that online chat offered more flexibility in

time and more freedom to talk in the absence of interaction immediacy which is the focal element in face-to-face speech.

In 2014, Yanguas and Flores explored how the mode of communication (i.e. face-to-face or online setting) would account for changes in WTC. Two intact university classes participated in the study. Adopting a counter-balanced research design, each class did a decision-making task on the first day in either a face-to-face setting or via audio computer-mediated communication (ACMC) Skype meeting. Students were asked to work in triads to come to an agreement about a topic. Interactions in both groups were recorded. At the end of the second day, a debriefing questionnaire was administered to delve into their experiences. For data analysis, an independent t-test was run by taking mode as an independent variable and the number of turns and words as a dependent variable. The result of the t-test showed that the number of turns in the ACMC group was significantly more than that in the face-to-face (FTF) group. However, the number of words in both groups was not significantly different. The second question aimed to resolve the relationship between WTC and the number of words and turns. The results supported a linear relationship between WTC and the number of words and turns for the FTF group but did not yield such a relationship in the online platform. In the FTF setting, more WTC would predict more words and more turns on the part of learners; however, the same linear relationship was not the case in the Audio CMC setting. WTC appeared to be higher in Skype chat than in the FTF discussion group. This result was further consolidated by comments regarding decreased anxiety and external motivation.

Another study (Le et al., 2018) set out to explore the relationship between WTC and social presence in online learning. To that end, eighteen Vietnamese students voluntarily participated in a six-week online course that implemented Facebook and Skype as the learning social networking sites. Data were solely gathered through interviews conducted before and after the course. Students were added into three Facebook groups where they were supposed to share their homework. Each week, they were asked to do and upload two asynchronous tasks on the Facebook group. Skype was also used for conferencing and discussion where students were free to choose text chat, video chat, or voice chat, respectively. After the completion of the course, students were interviewed via Skype to share their views on the online mode of communication and its effect on WTC. The interview data coding yielded two key themes: self-consciousness and affordances of technology. It appeared that students held back from voice chat at earlier weeks of the course due to shyness, face matters, and embarrassment. They avoided video chat as much as possible because either they were not confident enough to appear

on the screen or felt uneasy when seen by the other classmates. Text chat appeared to be the most favorite mode of communication in that not only did it offer plenty of time to rehearse and prepare for responses but it also reduced the odds of being corrected. Overall, in either synchronous or asynchronous chats, video chat was deemed as no less face-threatening than face-to-face interaction. In other words, the salient social presence in video chat held students back from speaking up.

In a study by Satar and Özdener (2008), synchronous voice and text chat were employed to investigate the changes in anxiety level and speaking development of 90 female high school students. They were divided into voice, text, and control groups. Pre-anxiety and pre-speaking tests were administered prior to the intervention. Test results showed no significant difference in speaking proficiency level of groups. During a 4-week period, the students were supposed to do a total of eight tasks in dyads. At the end of each session, the students' speaking development was tested based on two measures. They were also asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire so as to express their immediate experiences. Another close-ended questionnaire was administered at the end of the study with the objective of obtaining insight into their general experiences. The speaking proficiency of both groups had significantly developed compared to the control group; however, there was no significant difference between the speaking proficiency of the voice group and that of the text chat group. While anxiety levels of voice and control groups did not show significant changes, anxiety levels of the text chat group decreased dramatically after the intervention. Data of questionnaires shed more light on statistical results. For instance, the voice chat participants who preferred to work in pairs found it easier to speak to a person they knew, and would feel anxious had they talked to a foreigner. That being said, they were also worried about pronunciation and understanding their partners. Regarding the significant decrease in anxiety level of the text chat group, most of them reported they had no worries about understanding and pronunciation. The questionnaires further bear witness to the overall satisfaction with synchronous communication thanks to the tangible student talk, ease of talking to somebody they knew, and being able to use the target language without reliance on L1.

In another study in Turkey, Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) set out to find out whether asynchronous computer-mediated practices would improve young learners' WTC. Two objectives guided the whole study. The first one was to discover the potential influence of audio-visual activities on learners' speaking scores while the second objective explored

whether the intervention could have a bearing on WTC. Two intact Grade 3 classes were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Over a whole semester, the learners in the experimental group were asked to complete and submit their homework orally through PowerPoint (PPT), and the control group did the same activities in traditional written format. Speaking performance of this level was assessed formatively through in-class assessments. To gauge the speaking ability of learners, the researchers administered pre- and post-speaking tests, the content of which were recorded. Questions covered the textbook topics. WTC measurements were realized through the operationalization of layers three and two in MacIntyre et al.'s model (1998). The measurement was underpinned by two criteria namely extension and response. The extension criterion corresponded to how complex sentences were used while responses were assessed based on the extent to which learners paused or hesitated. The participants in the experimental group enjoyed the chance of consulting the book or parents, rehearsing, and re-recording their responses. The results showed that the experimental group improved in speaking from pre- to post-test. They also outperformed their counterparts in the control group. As for WTC changes, the learners did not produce longer sentences by the end of the intervention; however, they produced sentences with lessor pauses on a gradual basis. This gradual pattern was only detectable from the beginning to the end of the intervention.

A study by Reinders and Wattana (2015) was carried out in a university in Thailand to investigate the extent to which digital game-based learning would affect learners' WTC. To that end, a 15-week program both designed and taught by one of the researchers was implemented. Thirty students all majoring in IT participated in the course. At the end of each unit, students played a popular game. Five of the students were then interviewed to explain their experiences of game playing. The leading assumption in data coding held that a non-threatening environment would lead to learner self-confidence, motivation, and lower anxiety. The results revealed perceivably positive communicative experiences in online game playing with only one exception. One of the students expressed negative experiences due to the difficulty of game tasks, the number of interlocutors, and lack of familiarity with game play. Most interviewees stated that they were more comfortable when they did not know their partners and especially when they were supportive. As for the effect of the game on WTC, almost all of them asserted that game playing increased their self-confidence and motivation while decreasing their anxiety. The fact that interviewees found games helpful for their language development and they were enjoyable appeared to boost their participation. Taken

collectively, games reduced anxiety and increased risk-taking.

Methodology

Participants

The population of this study consisted of EFL teachers in East Azerbaijan province. They were thirty-seven English teachers who were recruited by means of convenience sampling. Seventy-three percent of the sample included female teachers while the remaining twenty-seven percent comprised male teachers. Teachers were mostly from Tabriz. Only five of them were from other cities. The most-reported teaching experience ranged from three to five years. Moreover, more than half of the teachers (62.2%) worked at only language institutes with 13.5 percent of the teachers working at both school and language institutes and 8.1 percent of them working at university and language institutes. More importantly, all the participants were supposed to have experienced online teaching.

Instruments and Materials

Questionnaire. To meet the research objectives, a thirty-five item-questionnaire (see Appendix) was designed and developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was comprised of two parts. The first part included demographic information of the teachers. The following part was designed to draw upon the teachers' perceptions regarding the pre-determined factors gleaned from the literature on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). The teachers were supposed to state how often they used a strategy that they found helpful in promoting WTC in online classes. Therefore, five factors, namely, teacher immediacy, wait-time, motivational strategies, corrective feedback strategies, and topic familiarity were drawn upon to address the teachers' perceptions. The literature review was the main drive for selecting the above-mentioned factors as they had been reported to have a bearing on the WTC of learners. Items 1-10 concerned teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors. Each type of immediacy subsumed five questions. The present study employed the revised version of the Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy Scale in Sheybani's article (2019). The items which were most appropriate for online instruction were included in the main questionnaire. For instance, items like "Looks at the board or notes while talking to the class" or "Moves around the classroom while teaching" were ruled out. Items 11-15 were designed to address teachers' wait-time practices. To that end, five practices that were found

to limit teachers' wait-time practice, thereby decreasing learners' opportunity to communicate, were included (Yaqubi & Pourhaji Rokni, 2013). This section was designed to understand how often these practices were used by the teachers. Motivational strategies covered questions 16 to 25. Items of this section were based on two studies that had explored teachers' perceptions of the most important as well as the most frequently-used motivational strategies (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). For the purpose of the present study, the five most important macro-strategies which were common in both studies were included in the questionnaire. They were: 1) set a personal example with your own behavior, 2) recognize students' effort and celebrate their success, 3) promote learners' self-confidence, 4) create a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere in class, and 5) present tasks properly. In addition, each macro strategy subsumed two items. The fourth part was feedback strategies which focused on both timing and type of feedback. The items were written drawing upon the relevant studies (Montazeri & Salimi, 2019; Tavakoli & Zarrinabadi, 2016; Zadkhast & Farahian, 2017; Zarrinabadi, Ketabi, & Abdi, 2014). As for topic items, Aubrey's (2011) suggestions were taken into account.

Interview. The questions of the interview were designed by the researcher. They were developed both based on quantitative results and the second and third questions of the study. Then, they were validated by two experts in the field. The interviews were conducted via virtual modes of communication.

Procedure

The mixed-methods design was employed to meet the objectives of the study. First, the quantitative data were collected and analyzed. The qualitative data were then collected, coded, and integrated with the questionnaire results. The mixed-methods design was used for two reasons. First, a richer interpretation of the phenomenon was desirable to cater to research questions. Second, contextual clues were needed to obtain a thorough understanding of the sample. The sequential explanatory design was employed to obtain a richer picture of the topic which demanded the close contextual clues provided by the teachers. Since the quantitative data reveal little about the nature of the issue, this study aimed to complement the numerical data with more sensible and context-dependent information.

Initially, the items were written drawing upon items from standard questionnaires or research articles. Having designed the questionnaire, the researcher asked five teachers to read the questions carefully and comment on the relevance of its content. Afterward, the first draft

of the questionnaire was checked and validated by two experts in the field. Indeed, some items were rephrased and revised based on the suggested options by the experts. Therefore, the content validity of the instrument was attained. It is worth mentioning that all care was taken to do piloting since "any attempt to shortcut the piloting stage will seriously jeopardize the psychometric quality of the study" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 75). As a result, thirty teachers were asked to fill out the questionnaire shared with them via Google Form. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. It reached 0.89, which suggested a relatively high internal consistency (see Table 1). Later the questionnaire was distributed to the main sample. It took almost a week till 38 teachers filled out the questionnaire. One participant was excluded owing to the lack of online teaching experience.

As for the next stage, five participants volunteered to be interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the interview. They agreed to have an interview either on Skype or on Telegram which lasted for 15-25 minutes. A semi-structured interview was selected to probe into more specific details regarding teachers' perceptions. All interviews were done in English via voice chat. The data were completed in two weeks. The teachers were asked seven questions about their experiences as well as probes regarding the detailed account of strategies that improved learners' WTC in online classes. Subsequently, interview data were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and typed into Word software. The transcripts were then read and re-read to identify the initial codes. After open coding which is "the process of breaking down and categorizing qualitative data into manageable segments" (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2019), the researcher went through the passage to identify common themes among the initial codes (i.e. second-level coding). The process of coding continued till the data yielded no more categories. To ensure the reliability of the data, the researcher asked two respondents to give feedback on the accuracy of the interpretations.

The quantitative data were analyzed by SPSS software, version 26. Descriptive statistics, including mean, was used to calculate the percentage of each factor. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normal distribution of the data. With respect to the qualitative results, open coding and second-level coding were applied in an iterative process to obtain common themes.

Table 1. *Reliability Analysis*

Reliability	N	Cronbach Alpha
Teacher Immediacy	30	0.727
Wait time	30	0.737
Motivational strategy	30	0.822
Feedback	30	0.773
Topic Familiarity	30	0.775
Total	30	0.898

Results

Examining the Normal Distribution of the Data

To check the normal distribution of the data, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. The results of this test are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) Test*

Variables	N	K-S	Sig
Teacher Immediacy	37	0.660	0.777
Wait time	37	0.955	0.322
Motivational strategy	37	0.791	0.558
Feedback	37	0.825	0.504
Topic Familiarity	37	0.799	0.546

According to Table 2, the significance level of all the variables, including teacher immediacy (0.77), wait time (0.32), motivational strategy (0.55), feedback (0.50), and topic familiarity (0.54) is more than 0.05 which means that the distribution of the data is normal, so it can be used for parametric tests to test the hypotheses.

Response to Research Question One

RQ1: Which strategies are perceived to best promote learners' WTC in online classes?

To answer this question, the mean was used to determine which strategies were perceived to best promote learners' WTC in online classes.

Table 3. *Mean and Percentage of Strategies*

Variables			N	Mean	Mean/Percentage
Teacher Immediacy	Verbal		37	18.37	37.78/33.5 %
	Nonverbal		37	19.40	
Wait time	Self-elaboration		37	3.64	19.37/17.0%
	Turn completion		37	3.56	
	Teacher echo		37	3.70	
	Close ended questions		37	3.86	
	Explicit positive assessment		37	4.59	
Motivational strategy	-		37	41.83	41.83/39.5%
Feedback	Timing	Delayed	37	4.27	19.08/18.0%
		Immediate	37	3.35	
	Type of feedback	Prompt	37	3.91	
		Recast	37	3.78	
		Explicit Correction	37	3.75	
Topic Familiarity	-		37	18.05	18.05/16.0%

Based on Table 3, the variable of motivational strategy has the highest mean among others, which means that 39.5% of the teachers perceived that motivational strategy could best promote learners' WTC. Teacher immediacy includes two variables including verbal (m=18.37, 16.50%) and non-verbal immediacy (m=19.40, 17.0%). As seen in the table, the results suggested that non-verbal immediacy was perceived to be slightly more useful than verbal immediacy in promoting the WTC of learners. Wait time includes five practices, namely self-elaboration (m=3.64, 3.0%), turn completion (m=3.56, 3.0%), teacher echo (m=3.70, 3.50 %), close-ended questions (m=3.86, 3.0%), and explicit positive assessment (m=4.59, 4.0%). The results of this variable indicated that the teachers declared to use explicit positive assessment more compared to the other four practices. In addition, only 17 percent of the teachers reported to use these five strategies which are found to limit learners' participation opportunities. Feedback addressed both timing (m=7.00, 7.0%) and type of feedback (m=11.45, 11.0%). Timing targeted both delayed (m=4.27, 4%) and immediate (m=3.35, 3%) correction while type of feedback incorporated three corrective feedback types, including

prompt (m=3.91, 3.5%), recast (m=3.78, 3.0%), and explicit correction (m=3.75, 3%). The data indicated that teachers perceived delayed feedback to be helpful in sustaining learners' WTC. Moreover, prompts, based on the teachers' perceptions, were mostly used in online classes to correct learner errors. Based on the means of the other variables, it could be concluded that the variables of teacher immediacy (m=37.78, 33.5%), wait time (m=19.37, 17%), feedback (m=19.08, 18%), and topic familiarity (m=18.05, 16%) were perceived to be helpful in promoting WTC in online classes only after motivational strategies (m=41.83, 39.5%).

Response to Research Question Two

RQ2: What are the teachers' perceptions of these strategies in online classes?

Regarding the qualitative results, the teachers perceived motivating learners as one of their key roles in promoting communication in online classes. Most of them stated that establishing a good and friendly relationship with learners was one of the best strategies for learner motivation.

As an example, T5 highlighted that "developing a good relationship with students can motivate them. Also a teacher can establish a friendly relationship among learners and lead them to communicate with each other". Furthermore, praising and rewarding learners were among the most reported strategies for motivating learners.

For instance, T1 stated that "they love to hear things like excellent, well done, great, good job, you know, when they hear this they feel like wow yes I can do something. I'm good at this and they are motivated". It is noteworthy to mention that topic choice and implementing various online tools, for example, games and online polls or questionnaires were reported as other strategies for motivating learners in online classes.

As for teacher immediacy, humor, praising, and asking about learners' personal experiences were frequently reported by the teachers. Based on the qualitative data, T 2 stated that being funny and telling learners a funny story could keep them active in the class. She further added:

"We need to be fun in our classes. We should just not sit at our desks and share the files or read them. I say, for example, stand up, sit down, stretch out, or saying something funny or telling a funny story to them, all of them, help me to keep them active in the class".

Three participants also stated that knowing learners' interests, hobbies, and personal matters helps them in engaging learners in communication. Overall, the qualitative data lent support to verbally immediate behaviors although the questionnaire data indicated that non-

verbal immediacy (m=19.40, 17.0%) was perceived to be used slightly more frequently than verbal immediacy (m=19.40, 17.0%).

Response to Research Question Three

RQ3: What are the perceived pros and cons of online instruction in promoting WTC?

The qualitative data revealed that online instruction contributed to learners' WTC through technological affordances.

First, the use of the audio/video resources in online classes was reported to be effective in promoting communication as expressed in the following comment:

"Maybe one of the aspects of online instruction that involves students more and more efficiently in the process of learning or communication is the fact that I can make use of the internet at the moment. I can show them any picture that I want even if it just comes up in the middle of the class and I'm not ready for it" (T1).

In addition, various online tools were reported to be an asset to sustaining WTC in online classes. T2 and T5 mentioned that the 'pair work' option in online classes worked well in keeping learners active because it offered them the opportunity to work with each other without others listening to them. As another strategy, online polls and questionnaires were perceived to be effective in that they motivated learners to communicate about a particular topic. Games were also mentioned as another advantage of online instruction to motivate learners. Finally, text and audio modes of communication were perceived by T5 to increase shy learners' participation due to "lower social presence".

Regarding the challenges of online instruction, one theme was consistently reiterated (i.e. the lack of eye contact or body language). The data revealed that all the teachers suffered from the virtual classes due to the absence of gestural clues. One of them voiced her concern in the following comment:

"The thing that you could do in a real class no you can't do it online because maybe in real class you look at their face, look at their eyes, and you directly ask them a question, but when it comes to online classes, you don't even know if they're really present or they have just logged in and gone somewhere watching TV or doing something else. So this is the most challenging part … You cannot, you know, look at their face and call their names and ask them a question. If they don't want to, they just don't answer" (T1).

Although quantitative data indicated that the teachers perceived non-verbal immediacy behaviors to be slightly more effective in promoting WTC in online classes (m=19.40, 17.0%), the data from the interviews revealed that communication suffered from the lack of non-verbal clues (i.e. body language and gestural expressions).

Discussion

The present mixed-methods study was conducted to probe into teachers' perceptions of the effective strategies which they employed in their online classes to increase learners' WTC. Initially, a questionnaire was designed to get a snapshot of the strategies which were perceived to promote WTC more in online classes. Next, an interview was conducted to take a deeper look at teachers' strategies as well as the incorporated variables of the questionnaire.

The results of the questionnaires indicated that motivational strategies were mostly used by the teachers to promote WTC. It is worth mentioning that motivating learners was also a salient theme in qualitative reports. Teacher immediacy was the next factor which the teachers perceived to be effective in instigating participation. While questionnaire results appeared to favor non-verbal immediacy slightly more than verbal immediacy, qualitative data entailed accounts of verbally immediate behaviors. With respect to the pros and cons of online instruction in promoting WTC, one facilitating theme was derived, that is, technological affordances. The challenging aspects of online instruction entailed a lack of body language.

Motivational strategies were ranked high in both quantitative data and interview accounts. Motivation has been found to be a significant predictor of WTC in the Iranian context (Fallah, 2014).

One of the most repeated categories for motivational strategies was establishing a good atmosphere and relationship with learners. It was found that teachers contributed a lot to promoting learners' WTC by creating a supportive classroom environment where "they're not afraid to communicate, they are comfortable and they know that no one is going to judge or laugh at them. They are free to communicate" (T1). This finding is in line with the previous study in that "if classrooms produce higher levels of enjoyment, they can foster WTC" (Khajavy, MacIntyre, & Barabadi, 2018, p. 16).

Another reported motivational strategy was praising and positive feedback. This finding corresponds to a study by MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011) which revealed "how the actions of the other person, both verbal and nonverbal, are critically important to the dynamics of WTC" (p. 93). In addition, Fallah's study (2014) showed that immediacy exerted a positive

effect on motivation and a negative effect on shyness. It seems that teachers' praising can lower learners' affective filter and help them venture to participate more.

Topical knowledge as another strategy for learner motivation has been found to correspond to learners' sense of excitement (Kang, 2005). Apparently, learners can eschew communication owing to "a lack of ideas, or their fear of comprehension problems, the possibility of which can be increased by the lack of background knowledge" (p. 283).

Games have been found to enhance learners' WTC (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). In this study, all participants expressed their satisfaction with games and declared that games boosted their self-confidence and motivation while decreasing their anxiety. These findings seem to support the present study in that teachers perceive games to increase learners' motivation.

Teacher immediacy was the next most effective factor in encouraging participation in online classes. The qualitative data also corroborated the questionnaire results since it was replete with teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors. Sheybani (2019) conducted a correlational study to explore the relationship between immediacy and WTC in the Iranian context. The results yielded a positive relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, verbal immediacy showed higher relation to speaking WTC but nonverbal immediacy to listening WTC. It is clear that "a greater likelihood of emotionally and cognitively engaging in a course" can be ensured through immediate behaviors (p. 8).

As for the third question, the teachers reported to use audio/visual resources to promote WTC, which parallels previous studies (Peng, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2011). Media usage (e.g. movies, television, and Internet), were reported to enhance WTC in MacIntyre et al.'s study (2011). Peng's correlational study (2019) indicated a positive correlation between the audio/video resources and WTC. It is likely that audio/visual resources furnish learners with "authentic, contextualized use of the target language", thereby improving "students' sensory stimulation" (Peng, 2019, p. 169). Teachers' use of pictures, videos, and songs in the current study can provide a "rich linguistic context" for learners and foster a sense of enjoyment and interest in online classes (Peng, 2019, p. 170).

With respect to the challenges of online instruction, the teachers voiced concerns about the lack of nonverbal clues (e.g. eye contact, facial expression, and body language). Peng's study (2019) indicated that teachers' voice and facial expressions were directly related to the classroom environment but not WTC, which may suggest that teachers' vocal and facial expressions can create "a wholesome classroom environment" (Peng, 2019, p. 170). However,

teachers' gestures were found to strongly predict WTC.

A study conducted by Peng, Zhang, and Chen (2017) indicated that teachers' nonverbal behaviors like attentive listening, fast and more rhythmic gestures, and a higher degree of precision of pointing contributed to the higher degree of motivation and WTC in the class. That said, teachers can furnish their verbal messages with semiotic resources to keep learners engaged. While social presence is an asset to smooth interaction in real classrooms, the same is not true about online classes due to the lack of paralinguistic clues and lack of social presence (Hampel & Stickler, 2005). Given the potential of nonverbal clues in sustaining WTC in the classroom, learners in online classes with little or no gestural clues may get detached and keep themselves aloof from participation.

Regarding particular strategies which teachers found helpful in enhancing WTC in online classes, text chat, voice chat, and pair work were reported.

Text chat as a strategy to foster WTC is similar to a study by Satar and Özdener (2008). According to their study, although anxiety levels of voice and control groups did not show significant changes, anxiety levels of the text chat group decreased dramatically. It was found that the text chat group had no worries about understanding and pronunciation.

Moreover, Buckingham and Alpaslan's study (2017) found that the asynchronous mode of communication could foster WTC. This finding corresponds to the present study because teachers reported that learners had more time to rehearse and consult their books or parents.

Pair work has been reported to enhance WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2015). According to the teachers, the 'pair work' option in online classes can bring together learners in a less anxiety-provoking environment as expressed in the following comment:

"For example, in Adobe Connect there is a feature by which students are divided into pairs and they can communicate by themselves without others listening to them. In the meantime, teachers can pay a visit to each separate room in the same class" (T5).

Limitations of the Study

As with all studies, this study also suffers from a number of limitations. One of the limitations of the present study is its reliance on merely teachers' perceptions. Given that teachers' perceptions have been incongruent in some cases with their actual practice (Vongsila & Reinders, 2016), the results would have reflected the nuisances of online education more clearly had some classes been observed. Sample size can pose some threats regarding the

generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the findings of the present study should be done with caution.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study puts forward some implications for teachers. The findings suggest that teachers should not rely on one single strategy but use as many facilitating strategies as possible to enhance learners' WTC, a variable which subsumes various individual, environmental, and linguistic factors (Kang, 2005). First, online language teachers should consider the possible connection problems and get better equipped to compensate for the challenges of the online platform. For instance, teachers should rely not only on their strategies but also on the various affordances that technology provides for them to keep learners engaged and motivated. In addition, verbal immediacy behaviors like praising and asking learners to share their experiences and viewpoints assume importance in online instruction when it falls short in providing due nonverbal clues.

Foreign language learners' opportunities for communication are mostly confined to classroom settings where teachers play a crucial role in creating a positive atmosphere, thereby achieving the ultimate goal of language teaching (MacIntyre et al., 1998). But it is often the case that learners, despite being proficient, shrink from communication. Therefore, teachers, as presented in the present study, should make a resolution to treat WTC as a dynamic and contextually-bound variable that can change by teachers' intervention. In the present study, the teachers attached importance to motivational strategies and immediate behaviors for enhancing WTC in online classes. Moreover, this study suggests that online language teachers try out as many online resources as possible to incite learners to participate enthusiastically in discussions. Another practical implication calls for teachers' attention to motivational strategies as a primary methodological concern if they seek for communicative learners. A better understanding of factors that have a bearing on WTC can empower teachers to use multiple strategies to rekindle the enjoyment of speaking in learners.

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Appendix: Questionnaire Items

Teachers' Strategies to Promote Willingness to Communicate of Learners in Online Classes

Teacher Immediacy

1. I use personal examples or talks about experiences he/she had outside of class.
2. I use humor in class.
3. I address students by their first names.
4. I invite students to telephone/meet with me outside of class if they have any question or want to discuss something.
5. I ask questions to solicit viewpoints.
6. I gesture while talking to the class.
7. I maintain eye contact when talking to students.
8. I smile at individual students in the class.
9. I have a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.
10. I use a variety of vocal expressions while talking to the class.

Wait Time

11. To get students engaged in discussions, I self-elaborate on their responses.
12. When a student fails to give a complete answer, I take the floor and complete their turn.
13. When students give the right answer, I immediately repeat their answers.
14. To help students answer the questions, I break a general question into a series of lower level ones.
15. I positively evaluate students' responses with words like 'excellent, very good, great, etc.'.

Motivational Strategies

16. I establish a good relationship with my students.
17. I show students that I respect, accept, and care about each of them.
18. I create a supportive and pleasant classroom climate where students are free from embarrassment and ridicule.
19. I use short opening activities to start each class (e.g., games).
20. I give clear instructions about how to carry out a task by modelling every step that students will need to do.

21. I give good reasons for students as to why a particular activity is meaningful or important.
22. I design tasks that are within learners' ability so that they get to experience success regularly.
23. I encourage students to try harder by making it clear that I believe that they can do the tasks.
24. I show students that their efforts and achievements are being recognized by me.
25. I monitor students' accomplishments and take time to celebrate any success or victory.

Corrective Feedback Strategies

26. Before giving feedback, I take the time to listen to students till they give the whole answer.
27. Upon noticing an error in students' answers, I immediately give feedback.
28. I provide clues to encourage students to self-correct.
29. I reformulate all or part of the incorrect answer.
30. I pinpoint the errors of students and provide the correct answer.

Topic Familiarity

31. I ask students to brainstorm ideas about a particular topic.
32. I do a survey on students' ideas about topics of interest.
33. I use discussion groups to let students of similar interests talk together
34. I let students give voice to their opinions about the least and the most interesting parts of the content list.
35. I assign a class leadership position to a student each week who can make day-to-day content decisions.