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Emotional Intelligence as A Predictor of L2 Communication

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the viable relationship between English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' emotional intelligence and communication in English in a Turkish context. A total of 165 EFL learners were recruited for the study. Data were collected using the Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) and the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale. The collected data were analyzed through both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed that proportionally a great majority of the participants (96%) had high levels of EI; 19% high, 68% moderate, and 13% low levels of WTC were also observed among the participants. Levels of emotional intelligence significantly correlated with EFL learners' WTC in the study sample. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between the four sub-scales of EI and subcomponents of WTC. Perception of emotions and managing emotions were the strongest predictors of WTC. Findings may serve as insights for EFL instructors to reappraise their teaching methods on a par with their students' emotional intelligence and WTC levels and also might help them opt for appropriate teaching materials which address students with diverse abilities and desire for second or foreign language communication.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate; emotional intelligence; individual differences; perception of emotions, utilizing emotions; Turkish EFL context

1. Introduction

   Emotional intelligence (EI) has recently attracted a lot of interest in academic research (Dev et al., 2012; Goleman, 2001; Mayer et al., 2000; Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Schutte et al., 2009; Stough, Saklofske, & Parker, 2009) and second or foreign language (L2) learning research (Akbari & Tavassoli, 2011; Alavinia, 2012; Koçoğlu, 2011). Conceptually, scholars often make a distinction between trait EI and ability EI. Trait EI, or 'emotional self-

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efficacy' encompasses behavioral dispositions from personality domain including empathy, impulsivity, assertiveness, and self-perceived abilities such as elements of social intelligence and personal intelligence (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). Due to its linkage with behavioral tendencies and self-perceived abilities, trait EI is often investigated within personality framework (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Unlike trait EI which concerns one's self-perceptions of his/her ability to "recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information" (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004, p. 278), ability EI, or 'cognitive-emotional ability', relates to one's actual ability to undertake processing such emotion-laden information.

Individual differences and affective factors have been established to greatly affect second or foreign language (L2) learning. Learners' feelings regarding learning environment, their attitudes towards learning situations, their motivation and their desire to be identified with international community, their envisage of themselves as ideal L2 speakers, and their desire to engage in interaction with others, or their willingness to communicate (WTC), play a significant role in helping students to participate in ongoing L2 communication. It follows, then, that perception of one's emotions, or self-awareness, and the ability to regulate and utilize those emotions in order to establish interpersonal relations and adapt to language learning environment might be linked to their willingness to communicate. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and L2 WTC.

1.1. Emotional intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence is defined as "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). Combining intelligence and emotions, Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 185) defined emotional intelligent as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions". Goleman's (1995) perspective of EI included five dimensions that concerned self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Notwithstanding differing perspectives on EI, definitions of emotional intelligence often tend to be complementary rather than contradictory. The various conceptualizations of EI clearly translate into an individual's intrapersonal and interpersonal self-relations, i.e. a relation with one's inner self and a relation with others.

Research into EI in the field of L2 has established that EI can influence learning an L2 either positively or negatively. It is, thus, argued that developing interpersonal skills can enhance L2 learning, leading to successful L2 learning. Evidently, high levels of EI can help students manage their emotions, have more positive communication, and acquire more confidence in themselves, other classmates, and teachers (Sucaromana, 2012). Alavinia, Bonyadi, and Razavi (2012), for instance, found a significant amount of correlation between motivation and emotional intelligence. Pishghadam (2009) investigated the relationship between EI and foreign language learning among Iranian sophomore EFL learners ($N = 508$) and foreign language learning. The findings revealed that emotional factors, more specifically intrapersonal competencies and stress management abilities, greatly affect language learning.

1.2. Willingness to communicate (WTC)

The concept of willingness to communicate has recently attracted a lot of interest in second language communication research (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., in press; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Mohammadzadeh & Jafarigohar, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014; Peng, 2012; Oz, 2014; Shahsavar & Shahsavani, 2014; Yashima, 2012). Willingness to communicate is defined as an individual's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Dörnyei (2005) maintains that "WTC is a composite ID variable that draws together a host of learner variables that have been well established as influences on second language acquisition and use, resulting in a construct in which psychological and linguistic factors are integrated in an organic manner" (p. 210). Thus, WTC is a multi-faceted construct that integrates affective, social-psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables and is potentially capable of describing, explaining and predicting language learners' communicative behavior in an L2. Understandably, L2

WTC builds on the premise that an individual may be unwilling to communicate for a variety of reasons, which eventually exert direct or indirect influence on one's performance in learning an L2.

Scholars suggest that the construct of EI concerns individual differences in the ability to recognize, process, and utilize affect-laden information and personality dimensions (Oz, 2014) which have strong affective core and reflect individual differences in positive and negative affectivity (Petrides et al., 2004; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). As willingness to communicate is also regarded as an individual difference variable (Dörnyei, 2005) with both personality traits like and situational like dimensions (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; MacIntyre, Babin, & Clément, 1999), it would be reasonable to expect the construct of EI to be associated with WTC in learning an L2. Moreover, Oz (2014) found that there is a significant relationship between personality traits and L2 WTC. This further corroborates the interrelated nature of individual differences variables such as personality, emotions, and L2 WTC. However, to the best knowledge of the researcher, only Alavinia and Agha Alikhani (2014), to date, have investigated the link between emotional intelligence and L2 WTC. Given the scarce literature on the relationship between EI and WTC in L2 research, it is assumed that the findings of the present study could fill in this research gap and shed light on an important issue which is under-researched in the field of L2 learning, more specifically, in Turkey. Therefore, the current study sought the would-be correlation between emotional intelligence and L2 WTC in a Turkish context. To this end, the following research questions were designed to guide the current study:

1. What are the Turkish EFL learners' perceptions of EI and L2 WTC?
2. Is there any relationship between Emotional Intelligence and L2 WTC?
3. Is there any significant difference between EI and L2 WTC levels of Turkish EFL learners in relation to gender and age?
4. How well can EI predict the variance in EFL learners' L2 WTC?

2. Method

2.1. Setting and participants

The present study was conducted in an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education program at a major state university in Ankara, Turkey. A total of 165 EFL learners (males = 57 and females = 108) enrolled in the program voluntarily participated in the study and gave consent for data collection. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 (M = 19.90, SD = .95).

2.2. Materials

In this study, two different scales were used to gather data. These scales are briefly described below.

2.2.1. Emotional intelligence

Schutte et al.'s (2009) Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) was used to measure the participants' levels of EI. It is a 33-item Likert scale with four dimensions of *perception of emotions* (PE), *managing one's own emotions* (ME), *managing others' emotions* (MOE), and *utilizing emotions* (UE). The participants rated the statements on a 5-point (ranging from *1. strongly disagree* to *5. strongly agree*) Likert scale. Students who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean score were identified as having 'high' and 'low' emotional intelligence. Students whose scores fell between the extremes were regarded as having 'moderate' emotional intelligence. The internal consistency of the scale was α = .89 in the present study.

2.2.2. Willingness to communicate

The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale (McCroskey, 2005) was used to assess the participants' tendency to approach or avoid initiating communication. It is a 20-item probability-estimate scale. The participants indicated the percentage of times they would choose to communicate in each type of situation, from 0 (never) to 100 (always).

Following McCroskey's (2005) guidelines, total WTC>82 was identified as "high" and total WTC<52 as "low" in willingness to communicate and total WTC between the extremes was considered as moderate. The internal consistency of the scale was α = .93 in the present study.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Data analysis was done to address the research questions formulated for the present study. The statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS 21 statistical package, a comprehensive computer program used to help researchers perform statistical analysis easily and accurately. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages and means were employed to obtain and characterize the participants' perceived levels of EI and WTC. Inferential statistics such as t-test, one-way ANOVA, and regression analyses were also conducted to assess the effect of EI, gender and age differences on L2 WTC.

3. Results

As indicated in Table 1, 96% of the participants fell within the high category of EI, while the rest were in moderate category. The findings also indicated that, in general, 19% of the respondents' L2 WTC was within high category while 68% fell within moderate categories. On the other hand, only a small proportion (13%) of the participants fell within low L2 WTC category.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for EI and L2 WTC

Variables	High	Moderate	Low	Mean	SD
Perception of emotions (PE)	93%	7%	-	37.27	4.90
Managing own emotions (ME)	96%	4%	-	34.52	4.69
Managing others' emotions (MOE)	91%	9%	-	29.73	4.42
Utilizing emotions (UE)	96%	4%	-	24.28	3.42
Overall EI	96%	4%	-	125.83	14.15
L2 WTC	19%	68%	13%	67.63	15.35

The Pearson product-moment correlation test revealed that there were statistically positive significant correlations between four components of EI and L2 WTC. The effect size indices (Cohen, 1988) indicated slight significant correlations for PE, ME, and UE since $r < .29$. However, there was a moderate correlation between MOE and L2 WTC $r > .29$. Additionally, there were statistically positive correlations between overall EI and its components. These findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Correlation between EI and WTC

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1- Willingness to communicate (WTC)	1					
2- Perception of emotions (PE)	.285**	1				
3- Managing own emotions (ME)	.195*	.541**	1			
4- Managing others' emotions (MOE)	.390**	.514**	.564**	1		
5- Utilizing Emotions (UE)	.211**	.614**	.601**	.448**	1	
6- Overall EI	.360**	.830**	.839**	.785**	.791**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Gender differences were found to be significant only in managing others' emotions dimension of EI, t (163) = 2.67, $p < .05$, with females having higher mean scores ($M = 30.39$, $SD = 4.25$) than males ($M = 30.39$, $SD = 4.25$). Interestingly, females scored higher in all dimensions of EI than males. Although there was no statistically significant difference between male and female participants in their WTC, males had higher mean scores ($M = 69.27$, $SD = 14.27$) than females ($M = 66.77$, $SD = 15.90$). The results of one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant difference between participants in relation to their age, $F (4,160) = .96$, $p > .05$.

Moreover, the findings of regression analysis revealed that the overall EI significantly contributed to the prediction of overall L2 WTC, $\beta = .36$. More specifically, perceptions of emotions, $\beta = .21$, MOE, $\beta = .27$, and ME, $\beta = -.19$, were also found to be the predictors of L2 WTC. Furthermore, the predictor components explained a significant proportion of the variance in L2 WTC, $R^2 = .18$, $F (1,163) = 5.76$, $p < 0.01$. As shown in Table 3, the overall EI and managing others' emotions component of EI emerged as the strong predictors of L2 WTC.

Table 3. Emotional intelligence as a predictor of L2 WTC

Predictors	Dependent variable	Standardized coefficients β	t	Sig.
1- Perception of emotions (PE)		.21	2.90	.031
2- Managing own emotions (ME)		-.19	-2.07	.042
3- Managing others' emotions (MOE)	L2 WTC	.27	2.92	.004
4- Utilizing Emotions (UE)		.06	.546	.586
5- Overall EI		.36	4.20	.000

4. Discussion

These findings indicate a high level of EI and a moderately high level of L2 WTC. This means that the participants are able to perceive and regulate their emotions. This eventually leads to a satisfactory level of L2 communication. Furthermore, there were positive correlations between EI components and L2 WTC. This suggests that as students' emotional intelligence increases, their willingness to communicate tends to increase as well. Similar results were found by Alavinia and Agha Alikhani (2014). They conclude that emotional intelligence might be regarded as one of the variables underlying individuals' L2 WTC. Moreover, perceptions of emotions and managing others' emotions were found to be strong predictors of L2 WTC. This suggests that the ability to recognize one's emotions and others' emotions, and the ability to control and regulate these emotions play a key role in fostering enhanced L2 communication among EFL learners. In other words, having higher levels of intra and interpersonal intelligences helps students to establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships with other students in the classroom. This provides a sound context for L2 communication.

The results of the present study also revealed that female respondents have higher levels of EI in both significant and insignificant components. This supports the findings of Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2000), Abdullah et al. (2004), and Alavinia and Agha Alikhani (2014). Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2000) argue that there is little difference in male and female students' performance on intelligence-related mental tests although there are some regular differences in their profiles, more specifically in task-related performance. It is also argued that female students' higher levels of EI can be attributed to the contention that they receive more emotional education at home than boys (Schilling, 1996). This makes them more competent than boys in intelligence-related mental tests (Abdullah et al., 2004; Schilling, 1996). Regarding L2 WTC, males had higher means scores than females although this difference did not reach to a statistically significant level. However, Alavinia and Agha Alikhani (2014) found that females outperformed males both in terms of emotional intelligence and L2 WTC.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to find the potential correlation between Turkish EFL learners' emotional intelligence and their willingness to communicate in English. The findings showed a positive significant correlation between learners' emotional intelligence and their L2 WTC. The present study shed light on the relationship between EI and L2 WTC constructs. This is an important issue which has been ignored by the prior research on L2 WTC. Therefore, it is suggested that further research should put much emphasis on the issue and that emotional intelligence should be explored as one of the antecedents of willingness to communicate in L2 research. Moreover, in light of these findings, it seems reasonable that emotional intelligence should be incorporated into curriculum properly to ensure that it is attached adequate importance in L2 communication in English as a foreign language classrooms. However, as the link between EI and L2 WTC is a new subject of inquiry in L2 research, the findings of this study must be generalized cautiously.

Pedagogically, integrating emotional intelligence into L2 learning curriculum can make the L2 learning experience more effective since higher levels of emotional intelligence can help to foster enhanced L2 WTC in learning an L2. Therefore, promoting emotional intelligence practices (Schilling, 1996) which help to improve students' intrapersonal and interpersonal relations and skills can enhance L2 WTC among students. Given that the ultimate goal of learning an L2 is to be able to communicate with others, it would be, thus, more beneficial for language teachers to take emotional aspects of learners into account so as to overcome, or at least lower, the affective barriers which might impede L2 WTC.

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