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A Comparative study of Young Learners in their Willingness to Communicate from Socio-cultural Perspective

Sona Harareh[1]
Hamed Barjasteh *[2]

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Abstract:

This study embarks upon uncovering the probable difference in willingness to communicate between Iranian male and female EFL learners. To undertake the present research, it was limited to socio-cognitive perspective. More precisely, it aimed to distinguish the types and frequency of socio-cognitive strategies used by Iranian students as far as their gender was concerned. In doing so, 32 advance learners (16 males and 16 females) were asked to fill up a WTC and Socio-cultural strategy use questionnaire. The result revealed that both groups were similar in the cognitive strategy use. In addition, males were more willingness to communicate than female learners. This finding has implication for language teachers, social sciences, psycho-linguistic and socio-linguistic teachers and learner.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, Socio-cognitive strategies, Young learners, Communication apprehension, Triadic Reciprocal Determinism.

1 .Department of English Language & Literature, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran
2. *Department of English Language & Literature, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran, ha_bar77@yahoo.com (Corresponding author)

1. Introduction

Learning and teaching a foreign language has been always a controversial topic among linguists. There is no doubt that communication is conceived to be the fundamental part of human relationships. Many language-teaching professionals believed that in a real situation or out of an institutionalized context, motivation and language proficiency are not adequate for second language learners. According to Williams and Burden (1997), language teaching and learning processes are among the most important and intricate human endeavors, as the emphasis in L2 teaching has been shifting to communication. Studies are needed to guide students' attitude toward communication in second language in different contexts. Willingness to communicate (hereafter WTC) is the learners' tendency to talk to others, which is a psychological issue. This tendency is low, when the learner is in a foreign language setting (MacIntyre, 2007).

Furthermore, strategies are effective ways that the learner uses to perform academic tasks or to enhance social skills. There has been a new trend in the area of language learning from teachers and teaching into learning and learners. Corresponding to this change, researches on the role of the learner has enhanced, exactly after the acceptance of a language approach, focusing on the communication (Demirel, 2009). The most outstanding interest in EFL/ESL has been the process of gathering new information on the field of individual differences affecting the process in learning second language. In learning an L2 language learner vary, with some individual differences such as aptitudes, demographic variables, affective variables, learning styles and learning strategies (Cook, 2001). Among individual differences, the term "learner strategies" generally refers to learners' consciously selected processes. According to the Oxford (2001), strategies are the specific behaviors or thoughts, which learners employ to enhance learning. What turns an ordinary learning activity into a learning strategy is its consciousness.

Studies had shown that some social variables such as gender and attitude have a great role in WTC. Contextual variables such as time, place of communication and the participant’s engagement in communication affect how willing the learners are to communicate sociably (Mehrgan, 2013). Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) have conducted research to find the relationship between some variables such as effectiveness, attitudes, motivation, L2 communication confidence. Attitudes towards intercultural communication influenced WTC. The learners who were internationally oriented had more trend to communicate in target language. These learners were more motivated to study the target language and this motivation led to

competency and confidence in target language communication. This confidence had a powerful impact on WTC in the target language.

Zarrinabadi (2014) asserted that teachers' 'role on learners' WTC in an Iranian setting changed the degree of WTC. Zarrinabadi maintained that teachers' waiting time, error correction, decision on the topic, and support affecting learners. New approaches put emphasis on communicative competence and force the learners to communicate in the target language. Zarrinabadi and Abdi (2011) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' WTC inside and outside the classroom and their language learning orientation. The data had shown that the language orientation was correlated with WTC outside more than inside the classroom. This study was going to have a comparison, in an Iranian context between males and females in WTC.

The purpose is to examine the differences between males and females in their WTC, and to compare them applying of socio-cultural strategies (SCSs) in communication. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following questions were formulated:

1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners in their willingness to participate in communication ?
2. What socio-cultural strategies do male EFL learners use in their willingness to participate in communication?
3. What socio-cultural strategies do female EFL learners use in their willingness to participate in communication?
4. What are the least/most social and cultural approaches used by Iranian EFL learners?

2. Background

By the mid-1980s Bandura had developed a social cultural theory of human functioning. Bandura focused on the external reinforcement schedules of thought processes such as beliefs, expectations, and instructions. In his view, people are not exclusively machines that automatically respond to external stimuli. However, reactions to stimuli are self-activated, initiated by the person. Bandura suggested that a mechanism mediated between stimulus and response, that's the person's cognitive processes. As noticed before Bandura stated that human functioning is the product of the interaction between the environment, behavior, and the person's psychological functioning (Boeree, 2006).

In Social cultural theory (hereafter SCT), he has not only addressed how people acquire cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral competencies, but also how they motivate and regulate their behavior and create social systems that organize and structure their real life. In SCT, the social portion of the title acknowledges the social origins of much human thought and action; the cognitive portion recognizes the influential contribution of cognitive processes to human motivation, affect, and action.

The main part of the ideas that make up social cognitive theory are Observational Learning/Modeling, Outcome Expectations, Perceived Self-efficacy, Goal Setting and Self-regulation.

According to Schunk (2012), "learning occurs either enactively through actually doing or vicariously by observing models perform". Observational learning is the process of watching a behavior and then attempting to perform the same behavior. This process is also explained as vicarious learning or modeling because learning is a result of watching the behavior and consequences of models in the environment. Observational learning is dependent upon the availability of models. Verbal or written descriptions, video or audio recordings, and other less direct forms of performance are also considered forms of modeling.

An outcome expectancy is a person's estimation that a certain behavior will produce a resulting outcome. It is thus a belief about the consequences of a behavior that accrue to the individual (Bandura, 1997). These beliefs are shaped enactively through students' past experiences and vicariously through the observation of others. Outcome expectations are important segments in SCT because they form the decisions people make about what actions to take and which behaviors to restrain.

Self-efficacy also has emerged as an influential concept within SCT. Self-efficacy reflects individuals' beliefs about whether they can achieve a given level of success at a particular task (Bandura, 1997). This concept has proven to be useful for understanding students' motivation and achievement in academic contexts. So, higher levels of perceived self-efficacy have been associated with greater choice, persistence, and with more effective strategy use (Pajares, 1996).

Goal setting is another central process within SCT (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1990). Goals show the cognitive representations of anticipated, desired, or preferred outcomes. Goals are related to students' outcome expectations and their perceived self-efficacy. Goals are a function of the outcomes students expect from engaging in particular behaviors and the confidence they have for completing those learned behaviors successfully. Yet, goals are an important prerequisite for self-regulation

because they provide objectives that students are trying to achieve and benchmarks against which to judge progress.

Bandura believes that humans are able to control their behavior through a process known as self-regulation. Self-regulation is a process by which an individual sets goals for him or herself, observes and monitors the performance in obtaining these goals, and then judges the adequacy of their performance and makes modifications. Bandura states that the individual is controlled by reinforcements only to the extent that he or she is aware of them, values their significance in his or her life, and anticipates their final application. He considers self-regulation as a cognitive component of personality. In fact, social learning and self-regulation are treated as the major causes of personality trait manifestation in humans.

Bandura believes that human behaviors are influenced by three factors known as Triadic reciprocal determinism containing the environment, personal factors, and the behavior itself (Bandura, 1986). Think of this as a 3-piece puzzle we can put together. Essentially, Bandura believes that an individual's behavior influences and is influenced by both the social world and personal characteristics. Reciprocal determinism represents that behavior is controlled or determined by the individual, through cognitive processes, and by the environment, through external social stimulus events.

Janet Shibley Hyde, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, did a study (2005) on gender differences on 46 different meta-analyses, not only in cognition but also communication style, social and personality variables, motor behaviors and moral reasoning. In some studies, gender differences were small; in another part they were virtually nonexistent.

Some of the studies (Chavez, 2001; Ehrman & Oxford 1989; Oxford & Nyikos 1989) found a wide range of gender differences in the frequency and flexibility of strategy use. That is, female students employ a variety of reading strategies incoming to terms with the text and ‘dealing’ with the comprehension of the messages of the text (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Singhal, 2001). On the other hand, in Lee’s study (1994) it was revealed that girls showed more frequent use of cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies than boys in middle school, but not in high school and college.

Nowadays, because of the emphasis on the communication, willingness to communicate has become an important area of research. They researchers attempt to find the most appropriate strategies to help the learners to enhance their willingness to communicate. SCSs are used when learners want to communicate but face some

difficulty. So, the more strategy use illustrates the more WTC. However, the results of this study showed that females use more SCSs but they are less willing to communicate. This study will fulfill this gap by examining the WTC and SCS use by both gender to find out the reason.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 32 students, who enrolled in an advanced language institute, comprised the subject pool of the present study. They were sixteen female (50%) and sixteen (50%) male learners with the age range of 17-23 and the average age of the 20. The subjects had all been learning English for an average of 6 years beginning secondary school.

3.2. Instrumentations

In order to obtain the objectives of the study, two questionnaires were administered, WTC questionnaire, and SCSs questionnaire.

A modified version of Willingness to participate outside the classroom, a questionnaire developed by McIntyre et al. (2001) aimed to observe participants' level of WTC.

The questionnaire contained 27 items in a Likert-type format ranging from 1 to 5 (1= almost never willing, 2= sometimes willing, 3= willing half of the time, 4= usually willing, and 5= almost always willing). The students were asked to indicate their level of willingness by marking the number most suited them immediately after each item. The questionnaire enjoyed high reliability of .81 using Cronbach's alpha in a pilot study at a similar language institute.

Likewise, a SCS questionnaire was adopted from Oxford's (1990) strategy classification system used for the purpose of the study. It aimed to uncover social and cultural strategy of the participant respectively. More specifically, it opted for probing the probable differences in SCS of learners as far as their willingness to communicate are concerned. It comprised of seven questions, three questions about the way students communicate with each other, and four questions about the methods they use in the learning process. More specifically, the first section observes the participants social and the other section uncover their cognitive strategy. Social strategies check learners' types of behavior while they are asking questions (through asking for clarification/verification or asking for correction), cooperating with others (through cooperating with others or cooperating with proficient users of the new language), and empathizing with others (through developing cultural understanding or becoming

aware of others' thoughts and feelings). Cultural strategies probe the method learners use in practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, translating and creating a structure for input and output stratigies.

To ensure the reliability of the present questionnaire, it was piloted in a similar subject using the Cronbach alpha. The finding enjoyed high reliability of .84.

3.3. Procedure

To probe the probable difference in WTC and the kind of SCSs used by male and female, the participants were asked to fill up two questionnaires. They were 32 (male and female) advanced EFL at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Sari, in North of Iran. They were asked to mark the items that described them best, and were assured of the confidentiality.

At the onset of the study, legal permission was taken from academic authorities of ILI. The two groups of EFL students were asked to complete the WTC questionnaire based on their own experience in the real context which aimed to determine student's tendency in four (4) skills out of a classroom. Next, they were asked to fill up the SCS questionnaire so as to specify the frequency of social and cultural strategy used in their WTC. After collecting the data, it was subjected to both descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. Results

In order to probe the first null hypothesis stating that there is not any significant difference between male and female learners in their WTC, an independent sample T test was conducted. The descriptive statistics of the participant in their WTC is presented in the following table.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of male and female students in their WTC

	Gender	N	Mean	Std.	SEM
WTC	Male	16	95.00	11.41	2.85
	Female	16	85.00	15.20	3.80

As the Table 1 represents, the mean of male students had the X=95 with the SD= 2.85 and the female students had the X= 85. With the SD=3.80. Indeed, WTC mean in male students was higher than the one in the female students. However, the mean difference by itself could not reveal the significant effect. In so doing, independent

sample T-Test was conducted using SPSS 21. The results are presented in the following table.

In the Levene's test for equality of variances, the sig is 0.37 (greater than 0.05). It means that the variability in male's score is about the same as the female's score. Put scientifically, that the variability in male and female is not significantly different. At the T-test column, it indicates that with 95% confidence interval of the mean difference, the sig value is 0.000, which is less than the level of significance (P<0.05). The result indicates that there is a significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their WTC. So, the null -hypothesis has been rejected.

To probe the type of SCS employed by male and females' students, the data were collected and frequencies were counted. Figure 1 presents the social strategy employed by learners.

Table 2. Independent sample T-Test of Males and Female students in their WTC

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Dif.	Std.	Lower	Upper
WTC	Equal variances assumed	.808		.376	6.1	30	.000	29 4.75	19.2	38.70
	Equal variances not assumed				6.1	27.8	.000	29 4.75	19.2	38.73

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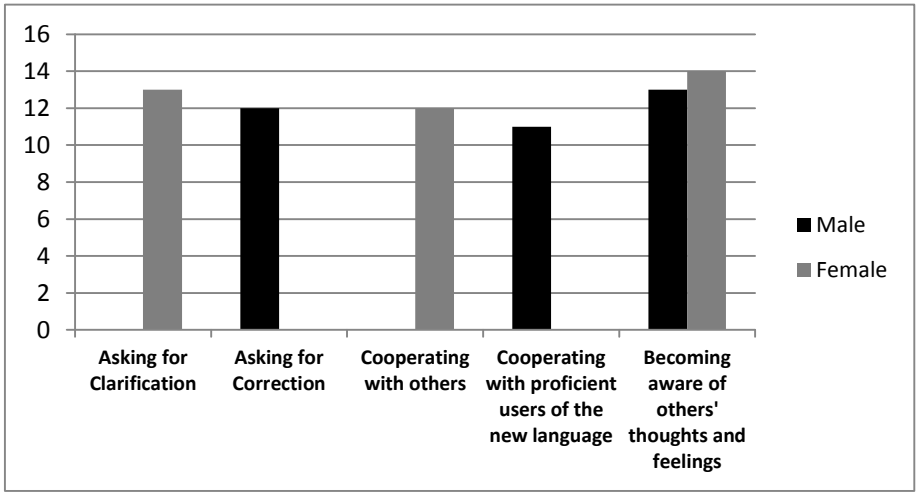

Figure 1. Social Strategies used by Male and Female

As indicated in figure 1 asking for correction and cooperating with others were the most frequent social strategy type by male and asking for clarification, cooperating with proficient users of new language and emphasizing with others through becoming aware of others thought and feeling were the most frequent social strategy used by female learners. The same procedure was conducted to uncover the cultural strategies employed by the participants in their WTC. Figure 2 presents the frequency of the cultural strategy types.

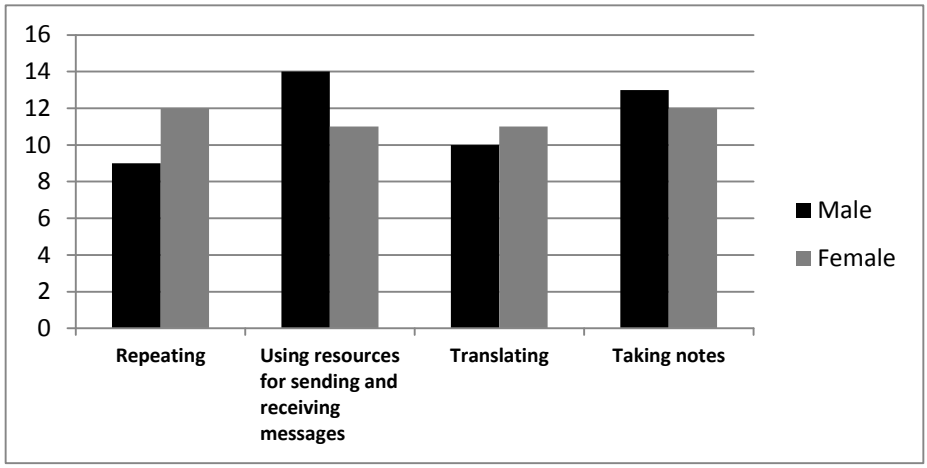

Figure 2. Cognitive Strategies used by Male and Female

As indicated in the above figure both groups practice through repetition, use resources for sending and receiving messages, analyze and reason through translating, and take notes in creating structure for input and output. The findings revealed that there were both similarities and differences in applying the strategies in their WTC. However, it seems that more differences could be seen in cultural strategies than social ones. To answer the last research question stating the most and the least SCT type, the data are summarized in the following table.

Table 3. The Frequency of Social and Cognitive strategy of Iranian EFL learners
F= Frequency; P= Percentage

Strategy Types	Items	F	P
Social Strategy	Becoming Aware of others' Thoughts	27	84%
	Asking for Clarification	17	53%
	Cooperation with Others	17	53%
	Asking for Correction	15	46%
	Cooperating with Proficient Users	15	46%
	Developing Cultural Understanding	5	15%
Cognitive Strategy	Using resources for messages	25	78%
	Taking notes	25	78%
	Repeating	21	65%
	Translating	21	65%
	Getting the idea quickly	7	21%
	Recognizing and using formulas and patterns	5	15%
	Analyzing contrastively	5	15%
	Highlighting	5	15%
	Formally practicing with sounds and writing	2	6.25%
	Recombining	2	6.25%
	Practicing naturalistically	2	6.25%
	Reasoning deductively	2	6.25%
	Analyzing expressions	2	6.25%
	Transferring	2	6.25%
	Summarizing	2	6.25%

As indicated in the Table3, the most social strategy used by male and female is becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings when they want to show their emphasis with people in their willingness to communicate. However, the least social strategy applied by the participants is developing cultural understanding for emphasizing with others. In other words, 84% (n=62) of the participants used the first

social strategy and 53% (n= 62) utilized clarification and cooperation as the most strategy used. Moreover of the 62 participants 15% applied developing cultural understanding as the least one.

Additionally, the most cultural strategies were using resources for sending and receiving messages and taking notes for creating structure in learning process. Formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recombining, practicing naturalistically, reasoning deductively, analyzing expressions, transferring, and summarizing were the least cognitive strategies (6.25%) used by the subjects.

5. Discussion

The importance of communication and the lack of knowledge about the SCSs in L2 learning and teaching led us to carry out this study that focuses on the difference of Willingness to communicate between male and female. This study showed that the males were more inclined to WTC, as mentioned earlier; there were a lot element that led to higher WTC such as gender, L2 communication confidence, anxiety, and context, cognitive and social strategies. Some research certifies that WTC has relationship to self-confidence and self-efficacy (Yashima & Shimizu, 2004). One probable reason why the males had higher WTC was that they were more confident and had high level of self-confidence to initiate speaking, and consequently with lower anxiety. This result is in line with Matsuoka (2005), in a study he confirmed that WTC was negatively correlated to anxiety. Another reason might be that males took risks more than females and females had a greater fear of making mistakes. Yule (2006, 224) reported that women apply more frequent use of hedges because they are not certain about what they are saying. They also use tag questions (also known as tail questions) a lot to look for agreement that shows less assertive which contributes to less WTC.

Individuals with high level of willingness to communicate are more sociable and close friends. In that case, males are more sociable in communication. In particular, males are really good speaker and attract the attention of audiences. During their speech, they try to use great strategies such as eye contact, gesture, intonation and etc. In Iran context, females used to be shy when it comes to speaking. They try to be quieter because of the fear of making mistakes. However, females' attitude had changed through the time, but we cannot deny the social opportunity that males have in Iran.

There is a strong and straight relationship between Willingness to communicate and the use of SCSs in communication. Social strategies (indirect strategies) help the

speaker of the new language to overview and link with the material already known. However, the Cognitive strategies (direct strategies) help the mental process of the new language and the use of subject matter. For any L2 communication to start the speaker needs to process the already known language and make a linkage to the new language (Target language) (Bandura, 2002). L2 WTC is expected to facilitate language learning because higher WTC among students leads to increased opportunity for authentic L2 use (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2002), which is really necessary in developing language (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011).

It is a common belief among L2 students, teachers, and researchers that there is a relationship between gender and Willingness to communicate (Ellis, 1994). In accordance with this perceptions, L2 researchers have hypothesized that males are more extrovert and they have a better potential to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) because they can take more advantages of opportunities in terms of practicing L2 input and communicating in L2 (Ellis, 1994). In this case, Cetinkaya (2005) contended that personality (extrovert vs. introvert) is a crucial factor that affects one's degree of willingness to communicate.

Males had lower communication anxiety and higher perceived communication competence (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002). Thus, males had a higher perception of their communication competence, which led to a higher level of willingness to communicate. They prefer to initiate a communication in a new language than female.

Females tend to be less socially active than males, so most of them are trying to avoid communicating with others. On the other hand, males require communication to facilitate social interaction; therefore, they place a higher value on communication. That is why the males like communicating with people under any circumstances. In brief, males have stronger willingness to communicate than females.

Females tend to avoid social interaction and thus have fewer opportunities to improve their communication skills in second language. Then they will perceive themselves as less competent because they lack experience or practice in the second language communication settings, so they have lower WTC. Furthermore, they are afraid of lose face during the communication then their self-esteem will be hurt. Females have a tendency to have lower self-esteem. Conversely, males often communicate with other peoples in many different kinds of social situations, so they have greatly practiced the using of second language. Then they perceive that they have the competence to communicate with other people. They are self-confident enough to communicate with others in the second language, so they have higher WTC.

Based on the result of this study, females have lower WTC than males. Besides, self-esteem has a positive correlation with WTC. So, it can be inferred that people with low self-esteem are more sensitive to environmental cues. As a result, they will be greatly affected by the possible things which will happen to them, especially the negative feedback, such as ridicule. In order to protect themselves, the persons with low self-esteem intend to avoid the situations in which their self-esteem might be threatened. So they are unwilling to communicate using the second language under many circumstances. Furthermore, most of the persons with low self-esteem believe that they have nothing meaningful to contribute; they think that there is no need for them to express their own idea. Thus they will be less willing to communicate. An individual with low self-esteem is likely to be less willing to communicate (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

In using SCSs they have some similarities and differences. In learning process (Cognition) they have more similarities than social context. For example, they both prefer to use repeating strategy in practicing materials. They both use resources in new language for sending and receiving messages. Both males and females prefer to takes note rather than highlighting the materials for creating input and output structure.

In comparison, in social strategies, males prefer to cooperate with proficient users of the new language more than females. Nevertheless, females opt to ask for clarification rather than to ask for correction. In particular, both genders are similar in cultural strategies rather than social strategies.

Generally, females use more SCSs than males in their WTC, but, it cannot be concluded that females have more capability in communication. In Iranian context, most common assumptions about the communication skills and competence of females and males vastly oversimplify the complex set of behaviors that constitute such competence. We grow up learning that some behaviors and attributes are male identified (hence thought of as masculine) and some behaviors and attributes that are female identified (hence considered feminine). We grow up watching males as a president, an ambassador or even a teacher speaking in higher situational places. Thus, it causes more females' isolation, and makes them less willing in communicates. Yet, being capable in communication is different from having the adequate ability in performing a communication. Both genders have communication competence, but when it comes to performance, males tend to show more ability in performing communication.

Females use more SCSs than males, this may be due to female learners' high degree of awareness of their needs and also due to this possible explanation that look

for more opportunities to engage in the analysis and practice of second language input, but they are less willing to communicate. Females are more aware about the SCS but they have less self-confidence than males to start a communication. However, males just want to engage in a communication without knowing about the strategy use in their communication. Females are more sensitive about the structure and the strategies they use in communication, they prefer to be well-prepared while they are communicating, but male focus on the action of communication and transferring the meaning. Males have more confidence in communication; however females use more SCSs to fulfill their lack of confidence by making their awareness higher in strategy use.

6. Conclusion

The findings revealed that male participants tend to be more willingness to communicate rather than females. On the other hand, females were different in choosing social strategies than males. More specifically, the former prefers to cooperate with other people no matter what language proficiency they have, the latter prefers to cooperate with proficient language users. This controversy does not lie in the participant cognitive strategies in their WTC. It can be concluded that the strategies learners use in their learning process is similar despite the main differences in employing social strategy. A straight forward conclusion for the present study is that every student should provide with an opportunity to participate in classroom discussion. Put it in other word, teachers should minimize perceptual mismatches and debilitative factors in language learning and maximize learning opportunity for students' WTC.

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