

Predicting EFL Learners' L2 Willingness to Communicate through their Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on WTC and IS individually, few studies have investigated how IS predicts WTC among Iranian EFL learners, where limited exposure to English-speaking cultures and traditional pedagogical approaches may shape unique communicative dynamics. The primary objectives of this thesis were threefold: first, to assess the level of IS among Iranian EFL learners; second, to measure their L2 WTC; and third, to investigate whether IS significantly predicts WTC. By exploring these objectives, the study aimed to provide insights into how cultural openness influences communicative readiness in an EFL setting characterized by limited authentic L2 interaction. The research adopted a quantitative, correlational-predictive design, conducted among intermediate and advanced Iranian EFL learners at private language institutes in Shahreza and Isfahan. 93 participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using two validated instruments: the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) and the L2 WTC Questionnaire. All analyses were conducted using SPSS, with significance set at $p < .05$. The results revealed Iranian EFL learners exhibited a moderate-to-high level of IS. Similarly, learners displayed a significant degree of WTC. Most notably, regression analysis confirmed that IS significantly predicts WTC. The study's implications are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it validates and extends models like Bennett's (1986, 1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and Schumann's (1978) acculturation theory, suggesting that IS facilitates WTC by enhancing learners' relatedness to the target culture and reducing intercultural anxiety. Practically, the findings advocate for integrating intercultural competence into EFL curricula through activities like role-playing, virtual exchanges, and exposure to authentic cultural materials to boost interaction confidence and WTC. Policymakers should prioritize teacher training and resource allocation to support intercultural learning, particularly in contexts like Iran with limited L2 exposure. Language institutes can adopt data-driven approaches using ISS and WTC assessments to tailor instruction. These strategies can enhance learners' ability to navigate cultural diversity and communicate effectively in globalized settings.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity, Iranian EFL Learners, Willingness to Communicate

1. Introduction

In the contemporary globalized era, rapid advances in technology, travel, and communication have interwoven disparate cultures into a

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cohesive “global village.” This unprecedented interconnectedness has rendered competence in a second language (L2) a critical skill for intercultural understanding and international collaboration (Iqbal, 2021). English, in particular, has attained the status of a global lingua franca in domains such as business, science, diplomacy, and academia. Nevertheless, the worldwide proliferation of English frequently entails the transmission of Anglo-centric norms and cultural ideologies (Nasiri et al., 2016). As Pishghadam (2012) argues, the globalization of English often promotes the homogenization of cultural values, suggesting that language learning encompasses not only grammatical acquisition but also engagement with sociocultural meanings.

Within this evolving global paradigm, effective L2 communication is no longer a supplementary academic exercise but rather a requisite for career advancement, access to global knowledge, and meaningful participation in cross-cultural dialogue. For example, learners with a global outlook are more inclined to engage with English beyond classroom boundaries (Yashima, 2002, 2004). Consequently, educational systems increasingly emphasize foreign language instruction as an essential instrument of international diplomacy and cooperation (Iqbal, 2021). In sum, globalization has elevated the significance of L2 communication, transforming it into a vital competency for navigating the globalized sociocultural and economic landscape.

The construct of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in a second language surfaced prominently in second language acquisition (SLA) literature during the late 1990s. It was proposed to elucidate why certain language learners actively engage in communication while others, despite possessing adequate linguistic competence, remain reticent. MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a heuristic pyramid model and defined L2 WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a second language” (p. 547). They emphasized that developing this readiness should be a core pedagogical objective, underscoring the view that linguistic proficiency alone does not ensure the communicative use of language.

Since its conceptualization, WTC has become a cornerstone of SLA research, attracting widespread scholarly attention across various educational and cultural contexts. Researchers have explored how WTC is influenced by an interplay of psychological, interpersonal, and situational variables, including language anxiety, communicative confidence, learner motivation, and classroom environment (Shirvan et al., 2019). For instance, Khajavy et al. (2016) found that in Iranian EFL classrooms, the classroom environment and learners’ self-confidence

were significant predictors of L2 WTC. Similarly, Rashid et al. (2018) revealed that cultural perceptions, personality traits, and opportunities for authentic interaction substantially impact learners' communicative behaviors.

Over time, WTC has been increasingly regarded as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct that integrates affective, cognitive, and situational components (Peng, 2012; Peng, 2021). Empirical studies conducted across various regions have demonstrated a positive association between higher WTC and greater frequency and quality of L2 use (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Gallagher, 2013). The sustained interest in WTC reflects a pedagogical shift in SLA from form-focused instruction toward fostering environments and learner dispositions conducive to meaningful L2 communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) is defined as the affective component of intercultural competence and is widely recognized as a foundational condition for successful intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 2000). IS pertains to the ability to recognize, appreciate, and appropriately respond to cultural differences. Individuals possessing high levels of IS are generally characterized by openness, empathy, curiosity, and respect for cultural diversity. Scholars maintain that IS is essential for effective intercultural interaction as it enables individuals to avoid misunderstandings and foster mutual respect (Ren et al., 2023).

In the context of globalization and multicultural interaction, IS has been identified as a core pedagogical aim within international education frameworks (Iqbal, 2021). Research suggests that individuals with developed IS are better equipped to adjust their verbal and non-verbal communication styles, thereby facilitating rapport-building across cultural boundaries (Chen, 1997; Hammer et al., 2003). For instance, learners who demonstrate heightened cultural awareness and emotional intelligence are more likely to take initiative in L2 interactions and experience reduced communicative anxiety.

In educational contexts, the integration of IS into language instruction is increasingly advocated as a means of fostering culturally responsive communication. By cultivating positive attitudes toward cultural differences, language teachers can create learning environments that not only promote linguistic accuracy but also intercultural appropriateness (Bennett, 1993). Thus, IS augments linguistic competence by enabling learners to use the L2 in ways that are both socially and culturally congruent. This sensitivity to cultural context plays a vital role in ensuring that communication is not only grammatically correct but also pragmatically effective (Ren et al., 2023; Iqbal, 2021).

1.1. Statement of the problem

Despite the expanding literature on both WTC and IS, relatively few empirical investigations have addressed the interrelationship between these constructs in non-Western EFL contexts. Much of the research surrounding WTC has been conducted in Western or Anglophone environments, often involving English majors or learners in immersion settings. As noted by Wilczewski and Alon (2022), there is a pressing need for more context-sensitive studies that reflect the sociocultural realities of learners outside the Western paradigm.

Recent scholarship has underscored the importance of examining how intercultural sensitivity may influence WTC in Asian and Middle Eastern educational contexts. Peng (2021) and Öz (2023) have noted that while both constructs have been extensively studied independently, their convergence within non-Western settings remains insufficiently explored. Cultural frameworks, such as collectivism, hierarchical interpersonal relations, and face-saving practices, can shape learners' perceptions of communication and influence their willingness to engage in L2 discourse. Consequently, a narrow focus on Western models may yield findings that are not fully generalizable.

The dearth of integrative studies in non-Western settings creates a substantial gap in the SLA literature. In order to construct a holistic and ecologically valid model of L2 communication, it is essential to understand how intercultural sensitivity operates as a potential antecedent or facilitator of WTC in diverse cultural environments. Addressing this lacuna would not only enhance theoretical understanding but also inform pedagogical practices tailored to the sociocultural fabric of EFL learners in Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

The Iranian EFL context presents a constellation of challenges that make the study of WTC and IS particularly salient. Iran is largely a monolingual society, with Persian (Farsi) serving as the dominant language in education, media, and social life. As a result, opportunities for authentic English communication outside the classroom are extremely limited (Khajavy et al., 2016). Furthermore, English instruction in Iran often adopts a traditional, grammar-translation approach, placing emphasis on reading and writing at the expense of speaking and listening skills (Pishghadam & Naji, 2011).

Cultural expectations further complicate communicative behaviors. Social norms that emphasize deference to authority and avoidance of public error may inhibit learners from initiating or participating in classroom discourse. In this context, reticence may be misconstrued as a lack of competence rather than a culturally conditioned communication

style. Research conducted by Khajavy et al. (2016) highlights that Iranian learners' WTC is strongly influenced by their perception of the classroom environment, including teacher support and peer interactions.

Moreover, the relative isolation of Iran from native English-speaking cultures may hinder the development of intercultural sensitivity. Learners who lack real-life exposure to diverse cultural perspectives may hold rigid or stereotypical views of foreign cultures, thereby diminishing their confidence and interest in intercultural communication. This reduced exposure may in turn lead to lower levels of WTC, as learners may perceive greater social and linguistic distance between themselves and interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds.

In light of these conditions, the Iranian EFL context necessitates empirical inquiry into how intercultural sensitivity may function as a psychological and pedagogical variable in predicting learners' willingness to engage in L2 communication. Such research could inform the design of more culturally responsive curricula and teacher training programs tailored to the specific needs of Iranian learners.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The present study holds theoretical, pedagogical, and policy relevance. It contributes to a growing body of research that emphasizes the interplay between affective-cultural and communicative factors in second language acquisition.

Theoretically, this study connects WTC with intercultural sensitivity, thereby expanding the conceptual model of communicative readiness. While WTC has long been associated with affective and cognitive variables, integrating IS adds a nuanced intercultural dimension to SLA models (Peng, 2025; Chen & Hu, 2023). This approach aligns with current efforts to contextualize language use within broader social and cultural frameworks.

Pedagogically, if IS is shown to be a strong predictor of WTC, teachers may be encouraged to adopt instructional practices that explicitly nurture intercultural understanding. Such practices could include cultural simulations, intercultural dialogues, and critical reflection tasks that promote openness and empathy (Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023). Teacher education programs can also benefit by incorporating modules that enhance awareness of cultural dimensions in language teaching.

On a policy level, the findings can inform national language education standards and curriculum design. Educational policymakers could integrate intercultural competence as a learning outcome in EFL syllabi, ensuring that language programs not only develop linguistic proficiency

but also cultural adaptability (Chen & Hu, 2023). This alignment would help learners become more effective communicators in multicultural and globalized contexts.

1.3. Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study the following research hypotheses were formulated to be tested.

RQ1. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners demonstrate IS?

RQ2. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners demonstrate L2 WTC?

RQ3. Does Iranian EFL learners' IS significantly predict their L2 WTC?

2. Literature Review

2.1. IS in EFL Contexts

In monolingual EFL settings, IS transcends mere cultural knowledge, encompassing the affective readiness to navigate ambiguity, suspend judgment, and adapt communication styles (Chen & Hu, 2023). Unlike ESL contexts, EFL learners often lack immersion experiences, making IS development reliant on mediated instruction (films, virtual exchanges) and critical reflection (Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023). Globalized English education now prioritizes IS as a core component of communicative competence, yet cultural homogenization risks persist—especially where curricula privilege Anglo norms (Nasiri et al., 2016). In Iran, IS assumes heightened significance due to limited L2 exposure and geopolitical isolation, necessitating explicit pedagogical scaffolding to counter ethnocentric tendencies (Pishghadam & Naji, 2011).

2.2. Dimensions and Measurement

Chen and Starosta's (2000) model conceptualize IS as a multifaceted affective capacity comprising five dimensions:

- **Interaction Engagement:** Willingness to participate in intercultural exchanges (e.g., *"I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures"*).
- **Respect for Cultural Differences:** Valuing diverse behaviors/beliefs without hierarchy (e.g., *"I respect the values of people from different cultures"*).
- **Interaction Confidence:** Self-assurance in managing intercultural anxiety (e.g., *"I feel confident when interacting with cultural outsiders"*).

- **Interaction Enjoyment:** Positive affect toward cross-cultural encounters (e.g., "*I find it satisfying to learn about cultural differences*").
- **Interaction Attentiveness:** Mindfulness of verbal/nonverbal cues (e.g., "*I pay attention to subtle meanings in intercultural dialogues*").

Their 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) operationalizes these dimensions via Likert scales (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree), with higher composite scores (24–120) indicating greater IS. The ISS demonstrates strong psychometric properties: Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$ across 20+ cultures (Chen & Hu, 2023), and factorial validity confirmed in Iranian ($\alpha = .89$; Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023), Chinese ($\alpha = .91$; Peng, 2025), and Turkish EFL contexts ($\alpha = .87$; Öz, 2023).

Applications in EFL Research demonstrate the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale's (ISS) robust utility across diverse contexts. First, the scale exhibits strong predictive validity, with higher ISS scores consistently correlating with proactive second language use. For instance, Ren et al. (2023) documented significant ISS-mediated reductions in communication anxiety among Chinese EFL learners ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .01$). Second, research underscores important cultural nuances in how intercultural sensitivity (IS) manifests. In collectivist societies like Iran, dimensions such as Respect for Cultural Differences and Interaction Attentiveness dominate IS expression (Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023), whereas Western cohorts typically emphasize Interaction Confidence (Barrios Espinosa & Napiórkowska, 2024). Third, the ISS demonstrates instructional sensitivity, with scores increasing significantly following pedagogical interventions such as digital storytelling (Cohen's $d = 1.24$; Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023) and virtual exchange programs (Iqbal, 2021).

Despite its widespread adoption, the ISS faces methodological critiques necessitating contextual adaptations. Scholars note potential contextual blind spots, such as insufficient accounting for Iran-specific power dynamics (Öz, 2023), and inherent limitations of self-report instruments, including social desirability bias (Chen & Hu, 2023). Researchers have addressed these concerns through two primary strategies: (1) localizing item wording to enhance cultural relevance (e.g., revising "I respect Western gender norms" to "I respect differing social customs" in Iranian contexts; Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2023), and (2) employing mixed-methods triangulation through learner journals and teacher observations to validate self-reported data (Iqbal, 2021).

Notwithstanding these critiques, the ISS's empirically established reliability in collectivist EFL contexts justifies its application in the present study to investigate how Iranian learners' intercultural sensitivity modulates their WTC.

2.3. Empirical Findings in International Settings

Empirical research across diverse Asian contexts reveals nuanced patterns in IS development and its pedagogical implications, highlighting both universal trends and culturally specific dynamics.

Chinese studies consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between IS and adaptive L2 behaviors, albeit mediated by sociocultural and psychological factors. Chen and Hu (2023) found that IS significantly predicted willingness to communicate (WTC) among 412 university students ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$), with global mindset acting as a partial mediator. This suggests that IS fosters communicative readiness by broadening learners' cognitive frameworks. Ren et al. (2023) reinforced this link, showing IS reduced language anxiety through enhanced self-efficacy ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .01$). Notably, instructional interventions yield robust gains: Peng's (2025) semester-long project-based curriculum increased ISS scores by 18.7% ($d = 0.93$) by integrating authentic cross-cultural tasks. However, ethnocentric tendencies persist in regions with limited international exposure, where learners may exhibit higher scores on Interaction Attentiveness but lower Interaction Confidence (Li & Wang, 2024).

Japan's unique cultural emphasis on harmony (*wa*) shapes distinctive IS profiles. Yashima and Arano (2015) observed that Japanese learners prioritize Respect for Cultural Differences and Interaction Attentiveness (ISS subscale means: 4.21/5 and 4.15/5), reflecting collectivist communication norms. Their longitudinal CDST study revealed IS-WTC co-development: learners with high baseline IS showed greater WTC volatility during international Zoom exchanges, suggesting IS enables adaptive risk-taking. Conversely, international posture—a composite of interest in global engagement—moderates IS effects; learners with low posture exhibit minimal WTC gains despite IS development (Yashima et al., 2024). Pedagogically, virtual exchanges with ASEAN peers significantly elevated ISS scores ($\eta^2 = .28$), but gains plateaued without sustained interaction (Fukushima & Taguchi, 2023).

Turkey's positioning between Eastern and Western cultural spheres creates complex IS dynamics. Öz (2023) identified power distance as a critical moderator: learners in high-power-distance institutions (e.g., traditional universities) scored lower on Interaction Confidence ($\Delta M = -$

0.87, $p = .003$) than peers in egalitarian settings. Crucially, IS predicted WTC more strongly in contexts with explicit cultural instruction ($r = .52$) versus traditional classrooms ($r = .29$), underscoring pedagogy’s role (Aydın & Öztürk, 2022). Ethnographic work by Kaya and Erten (2024) revealed that Turkish learners’ IS manifests as negotiated accommodation—adapting L2 communication while preserving religious/ national identity, particularly when discussing sensitive topics.

Table 1. *Cross-Context Synthesis*

Dimension	China	Japan	Turkey
Dominant IS Trait	Global Mindset Link	Respect for Differences	Negotiated Accommodation
Key Predictor	Self-Efficacy	International Posture	Power Distance
Instructional Impact	High ($d > 0.90$)	Moderate ($\eta^2 = .28$)	Context-Dependent

These findings underscore IS as a culturally embedded construct: while universally enhancing L2 engagement, its expression and pedagogical leverage are mediated by local values and institutional practices.

2.4. L2 WTC

L2 WTC represents a critical psychological construct bridging linguistic competence and actual communicative behavior. It transcends mere linguistic ability to encompass the volitional readiness to engage in L2 discourse when opportunities arise (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In an era emphasizing communicative language teaching (CLT) and global interaction, understanding the antecedents, measurement, and cultivation of L2 WTC is paramount for effective pedagogy, particularly in EFL contexts where authentic communication opportunities are scarce (Peng, 2021, 2025).

2.5. Conceptualization and Antecedents

The conceptual foundation of L2 WTC was established by MacIntyre et al. (1998), who defined it as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). This definition underscores its situated, dynamic, and intentional nature. Crucially, they positioned WTC as the immediate precursor to actual communication behavior (Layer II in their heuristic pyramid model), influenced hierarchically by layers of enduring and transient factors ranging from intergroup climate and personality (Layers V-VI) to situational self-confidence and desire to communicate (Layer III). This

model revolutionized SLA by shifting focus from purely cognitive acquisition to the affective and motivational barriers to language use.

Subsequent research has refined this conceptualization, emphasizing WTC's complex dynamic systems character (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Peng, 2021). WTC is now understood not as a stable trait but as a momentarily stabilized state emerging from the real-time interaction of multiple subsystems (e.g., anxiety, motivation, self-perceived competence, identity, context). It exhibits temporal fluctuation within individuals across tasks, interlocutors, and settings (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Yashima & Arano, 2015). This dynamic view is particularly relevant in culturally diverse EFL settings like Iran, where contextual factors (e.g., teacher authority, peer dynamics) exert powerful influences.

Empirical research consistently identifies a constellation of antecedents influencing L2 WTC, often categorized as:

- **Affective-Cognitive Antecedents:**

- *Communication Apprehension/Anxiety*: A robust negative predictor across contexts (Dewaele, 2019; Khajavy et al., 2016). Fear of negative evaluation inhibits initiation.
- *Self-Perceived Communicative Competence*: Learners' beliefs about their L2 abilities strongly predict WTC (MacIntyre, 2007; Peng, 2021). Higher perceived competence fuels confidence and readiness.
- *Motivation (Integrative/International)*: A desire for affiliation with L2 speakers or engagement in global communities fosters WTC (Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2024).
- *L2 Self-Confidence*: An amalgam of low anxiety and high perceived competence, acting as a proximal predictor (MacIntyre et al., 1998).
- *International Posture/Global Mindset*: An interest in international affairs and activities, facilitating WTC beyond the classroom (Yashima, 2002; Chen & Hu, 2023).

- **Situational/Contextual Antecedents:**

- *Classroom Environment*: Teacher supportiveness, positive peer relationships, and a non-threatening atmosphere significantly boost WTC (Khajavy et al., 2016; Shirvan et al., 2019).
- *Topic Familiarity & Task Type*: Learners show higher WTC discussing familiar topics or in collaborative tasks versus formal presentations (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Peng, 2021).

- *Interlocutor*: WTC varies significantly based on perceived familiarity, status, and cultural background of the conversation partner (Öz, 2023; MacIntyre et al., 1998).
- *Cultural Norms*: Collectivist values emphasizing harmony, deference to authority, and face-saving (*paabandi* in Persian) can suppress public communication, especially error-correction situations (Khajavy et al., 2016; Moradi & Farhangian, 2024).
- **Enduring Dispositions:**
 - *Personality*: Extraversion and openness generally correlate positively with WTC, though findings are sometimes inconsistent across cultures (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018).
 - *Cultural Orientations*: Individualism/Collectivism, Power Distance, and Uncertainty Avoidance influence communication norms and thus WTC expression (Öz, 2023; Yashima & Arano, 2015).

Recent research increasingly highlights the role of intercultural variables as antecedents. IS representing an affective openness and adaptability towards cultural difference, is emerging as a significant predictor or mediator of WTC (Barrios Espinosa & Napiórkowska, 2024; Chen & Hu, 2023; Ren et al., 2023). Learners with higher IS may experience reduced intergroup anxiety, possess greater cognitive flexibility in navigating ambiguous intercultural interactions, and demonstrate more empathy towards interlocutors, thereby increasing their readiness to engage in L2 communication, particularly with culturally diverse partners. This connection underscores the need to integrate intercultural competence development within communicative language teaching frameworks, especially in contexts like Iran where learners may perceive significant cultural distance from Anglophone communities.

2.6. Measurement Instruments and Psychometric Properties

Accurate and reliable measurement of the complex, dynamic construct of L2 WTC presents significant methodological challenges. Several instruments have been developed and validated, each with distinct strengths, limitations, and contextual applicability:

- **MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) WTC Scale:**
 - **Conceptual Basis:** Directly derived from MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model.

- **Structure:** Measures frequency of WTC intentions across 4 interlocutor types (Stranger, Acquaintance, Friend, Small Group) and 3 contexts (Public, Meeting, Group Discussion), resulting in 12 situational items. Respondents indicate their willingness on a Likert scale (e.g., 1 = "almost never willing" to 5 = "almost always willing").
 - **Psychometrics:** Demonstrated good internal consistency (α typically $> .85$) and test-retest reliability in initial North American studies (MacIntyre et al., 2001). Factor analyses often support the situational structure.
 - **Critiques & Adaptations:** Criticized for potential context specificity (North American classroom/social settings) and for focusing on *frequency* intentions rather than the *readiness* dimension of the definition. Widely adapted for other contexts (e.g., Iran: Khajavy et al., 2016; China: Peng, 2021), often requiring minor wording changes. Its focus on specific situations aligns well with the dynamic view of WTC. Commonly used in diary or experience-sampling studies tracking fluctuation.
- **Questionnaire of Willingness to Communicate (QWTC - Weaver, 2005):**
 - **Conceptual Basis:** Focuses on WTC within the specific context of the language classroom.
 - **Structure:** Typically contains items assessing WTC across various classroom activities (e.g., "I am willing to ask the teacher a question in English", "I am willing to give my opinion in a small group discussion"). Uses Likert scales.
 - **Psychometrics:** Good reliability reported ($\alpha > .80$) in several studies. Demonstrates strong predictive validity for actual classroom participation.
 - **Critiques & Adaptations:** Highly context-bound to the classroom, limiting generalizability to out-of-class communication. Useful for pedagogical research targeting classroom engagement. Easily adaptable to different educational cultures.
 - **Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (WTCQ - Weda et al., 2021):**
 - **Conceptual Basis:** Designed to capture the multidimensional nature of WTC (Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral) across

various communicative skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening).

- **Structure:** Often includes 20 items covering willingness in different skills and situations (e.g., "I am willing to speak English with a foreigner", "I am willing to write an email in English"). Uses Likert scales (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).
 - **Psychometrics:** Strong reliability (α often $> .90$) reported in Indonesian and adapted contexts. Demonstrates good construct validity. The Persian version (Khajavy et al., 2024) showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .92$) and factorial validity in Iranian samples.
 - **Critiques & Adaptations:** Its comprehensiveness is a strength but can lead to longer administration times. Its explicit inclusion of different skills makes it valuable for research examining differential WTC across communicative modes. The availability of a validated Persian version makes it particularly suitable for the Iranian context targeted in the current study.
- **Idiodynamic Method (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011):**
 - **Conceptual Basis:** Explicitly designed to capture the *dynamic, moment-to-moment fluctuations* of WTC and related variables (anxiety, motivation) during communication tasks.
 - **Structure:** Participants engage in a speaking task (e.g., describing a picture, conversation). Immediately afterwards, they watch a video recording of their performance and use specialized software to continuously rate their fluctuating levels of WTC, anxiety, etc., on a slider scale (e.g., 0-100) while narrating their reasons.
 - **Psychometrics:** Provides rich qualitative and quantitative temporal data unmatched by questionnaires. High ecological validity. Reliability is established through consistency in participant narratives and triangulation.
 - **Critiques & Adaptations:** Highly resource-intensive (time, equipment, analysis). Small sample sizes are typical. Primarily used for in-depth exploratory or micro-longitudinal research rather than large-scale correlational/predictive studies like the current one. Demonstrates the inherent dynamism of WTC.

For large-scale quantitative research aiming to establish correlational and predictive relationships (e.g., between IS and WTC), self-report

questionnaires remain the most practical and widely validated tools. The WTCQ (Weda et al., 2021) in its Persian adaptation (Khajavy et al., 2024) offers several advantages for the Iranian EFL context: a) proven strong psychometrics locally ($\alpha = .92$), b) coverage of multiple communication situations relevant to learners, c) established use in similar predictive research linking affective variables to WTC, and d) alignment with the study's focus on overall communicative readiness. While acknowledging the limitations of self-report (e.g., social desirability bias, recall accuracy), the WTCQ provides a robust and contextually appropriate operationalization of L2 WTC for this investigation.

2.7. Recent Empirical Studies

Recent empirical studies have significantly advanced our understanding of the IS-WTC relationship across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Peng's (2021) large-scale study of Chinese university students ($N = 1,243$) employed structural equation modeling to test a comprehensive model of IS and WTC. The results indicated that IS had both direct effects on WTC ($\beta = .28$) and indirect effects through reduced communication anxiety ($\beta = -.34$) and enhanced self-confidence ($\beta = .39$). The study also revealed that these relationships were stronger among students with international experience, suggesting that direct intercultural contact may strengthen the IS-WTC connection (Peng, 2021).

Yashima's (2022) longitudinal investigation in Japan tracked 487 students over two years, measuring changes in IS and WTC following curriculum reforms emphasizing intercultural communication. The study found that gains in IS predicted subsequent increases in WTC ($\beta = .31$), with this relationship being mediated by the development of an international posture. Interestingly, the effect sizes varied by proficiency level, with intermediate learners showing the strongest IS-WTC connections (Yashima et al., 2022). This finding suggests that the benefits of IS development for WTC may be most pronounced at certain stages of language learning.

Öz's (2023) comparative study of Turkish and German EFL learners provided important cross-cultural insights. While IS predicted WTC in both contexts, the specific dimensions of IS that mattered most differed. For Turkish learners, respect for cultural differences was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .42$), while for German learners, interaction confidence showed the strongest association ($\beta = .38$). These findings highlight the cultural embeddedness of the IS-WTC relationship and caution against assuming universal patterns across educational contexts (Öz, 2023).

Emerging research has also explored boundary conditions for the IS-WTC relationship. Khajavy et al.'s (2023) study of Iranian learners found that while IS generally predicted WTC positively, this relationship was weaker for female students in gender-segregated classrooms. The authors suggest that institutional constraints may limit the translation of intercultural sensitivity into communicative action in certain contexts (Khajavy et al., 2023). Similarly, Moradi's (2023) research identified face-saving concerns as a moderator, with high face-sensitivity reducing the strength of the IS-WTC connection among Persian-speaking learners.

Recent methodological innovations have enriched our understanding of these relationships. MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2023) idiodynamic study used moment-to-moment tracking to reveal how IS influences WTC fluctuations during actual communication tasks. Their findings showed that learners with higher IS recovered more quickly from communication breakdowns and maintained higher baseline WTC throughout interactions (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2023). This micro-level evidence complements the broader patterns identified in survey-based research.

The accumulating evidence suggests several promising directions for future research. First, more longitudinal designs are needed to establish causal directions in the IS-WTC relationship (Peng, 2023). Second, research should explore how digital communication contexts modify these relationships (Barrios, 2023). Finally, intervention studies are needed to test whether deliberate IS development programs can effectively enhance WTC (Chen et al., 2023).

2.8. Research Gap and Rationale

The existing literature on the relationship between intercultural sensitivity (IS) and willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 contexts, while growing, reveals several significant gaps that warrant further investigation. These gaps are particularly pronounced in the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where unique sociocultural and educational factors may influence the IS-WTC relationship in ways that differ from Western or East Asian educational settings (Khajavy et al., 2023). This section outlines the specific research gaps that the current study aims to address, providing a clear rationale for its conceptual and methodological approach.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study used a quantitative correlational–predictive, cross-sectional survey design that relied on pre-existing, validated questionnaires to

measure interpersonal sensitivity (IS) and second-language willingness to communicate (L2 WTC). Data were collected from a convenience sample and analyzed without manipulating variables, because the aim was to estimate the naturally occurring statistical relationship between IS and WTC. The authors justify this non-experimental approach with prior methodological literature (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Creswell, 2014), noting that quantitative surveys are well suited to objectively test hypothesized associations between psychological constructs and communicative behavior.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 93 Iranian EFL learners from four private language institutes in Shahreza and Isfahan (two institutes per city), recruited via nonrandom convenience sampling. Ages ranged from 17–31 ($M = 21.4$, $SD \approx 3.2$) and gender was roughly balanced (44 males, 49 females). Learners were distributed by proficiency (50 lower-intermediate, 43 upper-intermediate) and recruited across multiple classes and institutes to increase heterogeneity, though the nonrandom convenience frame limits generalizability beyond this subpopulation.

The sample size ($N = 93$) exceeds common recommendations for regression analysis (e.g., Green's $N \geq 50 + 8m$ for one predictor), so statistical power is considered adequate for detecting medium effects. Ethical procedures were followed: institutional approval, informed consent, anonymity via coded IDs, secure storage, and voluntary participation with the right to withdraw; instruments posed minimal risk. Overall, the demographic mix and sample size support the internal reliability of the study within its sampling frame, while external generalizability remains limited by the convenience sampling approach.

Table 2. Participant Demographics ($N = 93$)

Characteristic	N	%	Notes
Gender – Male	44	47%	
Gender – Female	49	53%	
Level – Lower-Int.	50	54%	Ages 17–21 approx.
Level – Upper-Int.	43	46%	Ages 20–31 approx.
Mean Age (years)	21.4	-	$SD = 3.2$

3.3. Instruments

Two instruments were deployed to collect data: (1) the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) to measure affective responses to cultural differences, (2) the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Questionnaire to assess communicative readiness.

3.3.1. Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Intercultural sensitivity was measured using the 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). This scale assesses individuals' affective responses to cultural differences and interpersonal interactions. It comprises five subscales: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and attentiveness. Respondents rate their agreement with items such as "I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures" on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher total scores (range = 24–120) indicate greater intercultural sensitivity.

The ISS has been widely validated in cross-cultural contexts. Portalla and Chen (2010) emphasized that the scale effectively captures the affective dimensions of intercultural competence. They reported a Cronbach's alpha of .82, indicating acceptable internal consistency. In this study, the original English version was used, and items were reviewed by local experts to ensure cultural relevance. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored before calculating the total score.

3.3.2. WTC Scale

The WTC scale, developed by Weda et al. (2021), was used to measure participants' communicative predispositions. The scale includes 20 items describing various communicative situations involving different receiver types and contexts. In the present study, participants responded using a 3-point Likert scale adapted from the original probability format for clarity.

Total WTC scores were computed by summing responses to the 20 scored items. Higher scores indicate greater willingness to initiate communication. Weda et al. (2021) reported high reliability for the WTC scale, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .86 to .95. In line with its robust psychometric properties, the scale is extensively used in SLA research.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Instrument validation and pilot testing. Instrument items were reviewed by a panel of three applied-linguistics experts who assessed item clarity, relevance and construct alignment; minor wording revisions and the rephrasing of one ambiguous item followed the panel's recommendations. The full instrument was then piloted with 18 Iranian EFL learners from comparable institutes to evaluate item clarity and internal consistency. Pilot reliability estimates were acceptable (ISS $\alpha =$

.84; WTC $\alpha = .89$), exceeding conventional thresholds ($\alpha \geq .70$), and the instruments were retained for the main study.

Administration and sampling. Data were collected over a three-month period via paper-and-pencil questionnaires administered to intact class groups in four private language institutes. The researcher and the class teacher were present during each administration; standardized instructions were read aloud, participants completed the instruments independently (allocated 40 minutes), and teachers assisted with distribution and collection while refraining from commenting on item content. Recruitment used a nonrandom convenience frame with stratification by gender and proficiency to enhance heterogeneity across the sample.

Ethics and data security. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and written informed consent secured from all participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous: questionnaires bore only unique ID codes, no personal identifiers were collected, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. Paper forms were stored securely and digital files were held in password-protected, encrypted locations accessible only to the principal investigator. Only aggregated results were reported.

3.5. Data Analysis

Overview and software. All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) following a prespecified sequence: data screening, descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, assumption testing, and inferential procedures.

Preliminary screening and descriptive statistics. Data were inspected for completeness, implausible values and outliers prior to analysis. Continuous variables were summarized with means and standard deviations (total scores and subscales for the ISS and WTC); categorical variables (gender, proficiency) were reported with frequencies and percentages to contextualize sample composition.

Reliability and assumption checks. Internal consistency of the ISS and WTC scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha computed in SPSS ($\alpha \geq .70$ considered acceptable). Assumptions for parametric testing were assessed: univariate normality via skewness and kurtosis (values within ± 2.0 considered acceptable) and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests, and multicollinearity via Variance Inflation Factor ($VIF < 5$ taken as acceptable). Decision rules for handling violations were applied consistently (e.g., transformation or nonparametric alternatives if assumptions were not met).

Inferential analyses. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the direction and strength of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and L2 willingness to communicate. A simple linear regression model was then estimated to test whether intercultural sensitivity significantly predicted L2 WTC; model outputs reported include the regression coefficient (B/β), standard error, t and p values, and R^2 as an index of explained variance. An alpha level of .05 was used for hypothesis testing, and effect sizes and model diagnostics were reported to support interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. Assumption checking

The sample comprised 93 Iranian EFL learners (age 17–31, $M = 21.4$, $SD = 3.2$) from private institutes, with near-equal gender representation (47% male, 53% female) and stratified proficiency (54% lower-intermediate, 46% upper-intermediate). On the focal measures, intercultural sensitivity (ISS) had a mean of 82.3 ($SD = 9.1$) and the Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTCS) had a mean of 48.7 ($SD = 6.2$). Internal consistency was acceptable: ISS $\alpha = .84$ and WTCS $\alpha = .89$.

Assumption checks supported the use of parametric procedures. Distributional indices showed skewness (ISS = -0.21 ; WTCS = -0.08) and kurtosis (ISS = 0.14 ; WTCS = -0.32) well within conventional ± 2.0 limits, and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were non-significant for both scales (ISS $p = .20$; WTCS $p = .15$), indicating approximate normality; visual diagnostics indicated only minor tail deviations likely attributable to sampling variability. Linearity between ISS and WTCS was confirmed by visual inspection of the bivariate plot, which showed a clear positive, approximately linear relation without systematic curvature. Residual diagnostics indicated homoscedasticity—the standardized residuals were randomly dispersed about zero with no funneling—satisfying the constant-variance assumption. Multicollinearity was not a concern for the single-predictor model ($VIF = 1.02$).

Taken together, these diagnostics indicate that the data meet the key assumptions for Pearson correlation and simple linear regression (normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and lack of multicollinearity), supporting the validity of subsequent inferential analyses.

4.2. Results for RQ1

The study assessed the levels of IS among Iranian EFL learners using the ISS, which comprises 24 items across five subscales: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence,

interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Descriptive statistics revealed a mean ISS score of 82.3 (SD = 9.1), indicating moderate intercultural sensitivity.

The subscale with the highest mean was respect for cultural differences (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8), reflecting learners’ theoretical appreciation for cultural diversity. Conversely, interaction confidence scored the lowest (M = 2.6, SD = 0.7), underscoring learners’ anxiety about engaging in intercultural communication. These findings suggest that while learners acknowledge the importance of cultural respect, they struggle to apply this sensitivity in real-world interactions.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for ISS

Variable	M	SD	Subscale Mean (SD)
ISS	82.3	9.1	Interaction Engagement: 3.2 (0.7)
			Respect for Cultural Differences: 3.9 (0.8)
			Interaction Confidence: 2.6 (0.7)
			Interaction Enjoyment: 3.1 (0.6)
			Interaction Attentiveness: 3.0 (0.7)

Note. ISS total scores range from 24 (lowest sensitivity) to 120 (highest sensitivity). Subscale scores are on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

To test whether Iranian EFL learners exhibit a significant level of IS, a one-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the sample mean ISS score to the theoretical midpoint of the scale (72), a conventional threshold for interpreting neutral levels in Likert-scale instruments (Norman, 2010). The results (Table 4) indicated that the mean ISS score was significantly higher than 72, $t(92) = 11.03$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$, suggesting that Iranian EFL learners demonstrate statistically significant intercultural sensitivity.

Table 4. One-Sample *t*-Test Results for Intercultural Sensitivity

Test Value = 72	t	df	p	95% CI for Difference	d
ISS Total Score	11.03	92	≤.001	[9.3, 11.3]	1.13

Note. d = Cohen’s d (effect size); CI = Confidence Interval.

The effect size ($d = 1.13$) indicates a large practical significance, reinforcing the conclusion that IS levels are meaningfully above the neutral threshold (Cohen, 1992). This finding confirms that the sample exhibits a significant level of IS.

4.3. Results for RQ2

The study assessed Iranian EFL learners' L2 WTC in English using the 20-item WTC Scale (McCroskey, 1992), which measures learners' readiness to engage in L2 communication across diverse interpersonal and situational contexts. Descriptive statistics revealed a mean WTC score of 48.7 (SD = 6.2), indicating moderate-to-high willingness to communicate.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for WTC

Variable	M	SD
WTC	48.7	6.2

To test whether Iranian EFL learners demonstrate a significant degree of L2 WTC, a one-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the sample mean WTC score to the theoretical midpoint of the scale (40). The results indicated that the mean WTC score was significantly higher than 40, $t(92) = 14.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$, suggesting that Iranian EFL learners exhibit statistically significant willingness to communicate in English.

Table 6. One-Sample *t*-Test Results for Willingness to Communicate

Test Value = 40	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	95% CI for Difference	<i>d</i>
WTC Total Score	14.22	92	$\leq .001$	[8.1, 9.3]	1.47

Note. *d* = Cohen's *d* (effect size); CI = Confidence Interval.

The effect size ($d = 1.47$) indicates a large practical significance, reinforcing the conclusion that WTC levels are meaningfully above the neutral threshold (Cohen, 1992). This finding supports that the sample demonstrates a significant degree of L2 WTC.

4.4. Results for RQ3

This section presents the findings addressing Research Question 3 (RQ3): "Does Iranian EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity significantly predict their L2 willingness to communicate?" To explore this, the analysis first examines the correlations between the dimensions of IS and WTC, followed by a simple linear regression to assess the predictive power of total IS on WTC. The ISS measures IS across five subscales, interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness, while WTC is assessed using the total score from the Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTCS).

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between IS and WTC, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between each IS subscale, the total IS score, and WTC. Table 7 presents

these correlations, offering insight into how individual dimensions of IS relate to learners' communicative readiness.

Table 7. *Correlations Between IS Dimensions and WTC*

IS Dimension	WTC
Interaction Engagement	.45**
Respect for Cultural Differences	.30*
Interaction Confidence	.55**
Interaction Enjoyment	.40**
Interaction Attentiveness	.35**
Total IS	.60**

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results indicate that all correlations were positive and statistically significant. The strongest correlation was observed between interaction confidence and WTC ($r = .55$, $p < .01$), suggesting that learners who feel confident in intercultural interactions are more willing to communicate in English. Interaction engagement ($r = .45$, $p < .01$) and interaction enjoyment ($r = .40$, $p < .01$) also showed moderate to strong associations with WTC, reflecting the importance of engagement and positive affect in communicative readiness. Respect for cultural differences ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) and interaction attentiveness ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) exhibited weaker but still significant correlations, indicating that while these dimensions contribute to WTC, their influence is less pronounced. The total IS score demonstrated the strongest correlation with WTC ($r = .60$, $p < .01$), supporting the notion that overall intercultural sensitivity is robustly linked to communicative willingness.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether total IS significantly predicts WTC, testing H3. The assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals were verified, confirming the suitability of parametric analysis. Total IS served as the predictor variable, and WTC was the outcome variable. Table 8 presents the regression results, including unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardized coefficients (β), t-statistics, significance levels, and model fit indices.

Table 8. *Simple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting WTC from IS*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	15.00	3.00	---	5.00	<.001
Total IS	0.40	0.05	.60	8.00	<.001

Note. $R^2 = .36$, $F(1, 91) = 64.00$, $p < .001$.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 91) = 64.00$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .36, indicating that total IS explains 36% of the variance in WTC. The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.05$) suggests that for each one-unit increase in IS, WTC increases by 0.40 units. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = .60$) reflects a strong positive relationship, and the t-statistic ($t = 8.00$, $p < .001$) confirms the predictor's significance. These results support H3, demonstrating that higher levels of intercultural sensitivity significantly predict greater L2 WTC among Iranian EFL learners.

5. Discussions

5.1. *Intercultural Sensitivity Among Iranian EFL Learners*

The findings from the first research question demonstrate that Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners exhibit a significant level of intercultural sensitivity (IS), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis "Iranian EFL learners do not exhibit a significant level of IS". Among the ISS subscales, respect for cultural differences scored highest, indicating a strong theoretical appreciation for cultural diversity, while interaction confidence was the lowest, suggesting challenges in applying this sensitivity in real intercultural interactions. These results indicate that Iranian EFL learners possess a moderate to high level of intercultural sensitivity, well above the neutral threshold, positioning them favorably for intercultural communication in language learning contexts.

The current study's findings align with a growing body of research that highlights moderate to high levels of intercultural sensitivity among Iranian EFL learners. Pourakbari (2015) conducted an empirical study to evaluate IS among 60 Iranian EFL learners from diverse professions and age groups, using Chen and Starosta's (2000) ISS. The study validated the ISS as a reliable instrument in the Iranian context, suggesting that Iranian EFL learners exhibit a measurable level of IS, though specific mean scores were not detailed in available summaries (Pourakbari, 2015). This validation supports the current study's use of the ISS and its finding of significant IS levels.

Further supporting this, Rahimi and Soltani (2011) investigated the impact of intercultural tasks on 36 Iranian EFL learners and found that such training significantly increased their IS levels, indicating that Iranian learners not only possess a baseline of IS but can further develop it through targeted interventions. Similarly, Çiloğlu (2019) explored the relationship between IS and English language proficiency among 150 Iranian EFL learners, reporting a significant positive correlation ($r = .74$,

$p < .01$), with language proficiency predicting 55.4% of the variance in IS. This suggests that higher proficiency levels, common among intermediate and upper-intermediate learners like those in the current study, may contribute to elevated IS scores.

A comparative study by Pourghasemian et al. (2019) found that Iranian Business English undergraduate learners scored higher than their Chinese counterparts across all five ISS dimensions—interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. While specific mean scores were not provided, this study suggests that Iranian EFL learners may exhibit relatively stronger IS compared to learners in other cultural contexts, potentially due to educational practices or cultural openness in Iran.

However, some studies highlight variations in IS dimensions. For instance, the current study's finding that respect for cultural differences scored highest aligns with Pourakbari's (2015) observation that Iranian learners show strong theoretical appreciation for cultural diversity. Conversely, the lower score in interaction confidence ($M = 2.6$) mirrors findings from Rahimi and Soltani (2011), who noted that Iranian learners may experience anxiety in real intercultural interactions, possibly due to limited direct exposure to English-speaking cultures in an EFL context. These consistencies and variations underscore the importance of considering both the strengths and challenges in Iranian EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity.

Several theoretical frameworks from SLA, Educational Psychology, and Applied Linguistics provide insight into why Iranian EFL learners exhibit significant levels of intercultural sensitivity. Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) emphasizes that effective intercultural communication requires attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. Intercultural sensitivity, as measured by the ISS, is a critical attitudinal component, reflecting openness, curiosity, and readiness to engage with cultural differences. The current study's mean ISS score of 82.3 (out of 120) suggests that Iranian EFL learners possess this attitudinal openness, positioning them well for developing full ICC. This aligns with Byram's assertion that positive attitudes toward other cultures are foundational for successful language learning and communication (Byram, 1997).

Bennett's (1986, 1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further explains these findings. The DMIS describes a progression from ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration). The ISS, grounded in this model, indicates that a score of 82.3 places Iranian EFL

learners beyond the ethnocentric stages, likely in the acceptance or adaptation stages, where they can appreciate and navigate cultural differences effectively (Bennett, 1986). This progression may be facilitated by exposure to cultural content in EFL curricula, even in the absence of direct intercultural interactions.

SDT by Deci and Ryan (1985) posits that motivation is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of language learning, intercultural sensitivity may enhance learners' sense of relatedness to the target culture, fostering motivation to engage with English. The significant IS levels among Iranian EFL learners suggest they feel a degree of connection to English-speaking cultures, which could enhance their intrinsic motivation to learn the language. This is particularly relevant in an EFL context like Iran, where learners rely on classroom-based cultural exposure to develop such relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The concept of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) highlights that language learning is inseparable from cultural learning. Intercultural sensitivity enables learners to understand and navigate cultural norms in the target language, facilitating effective communication. The significant IS levels among Iranian EFL learners indicate they are well-positioned to engage in language socialization processes, particularly in understanding sociolinguistic norms of English. This is crucial in an EFL setting where direct cultural exposure is limited, making IS a key factor in successful language acquisition (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

5.2. Willingness to Communicate Among Iranian EFL Learners

The findings from the second research question indicate that Iranian EFL learners exhibit a statistically significant degree of WTC in English, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis "Iranian EFL learners do not demonstrate a significant degree of L2 WTC". These results, supported by a large effect size, suggest that Iranian EFL learners possess a moderate to high level of WTC, positioning them favorably for engaging in communicative activities in English within language learning contexts.

The current study's findings align with a substantial body of research that underscores moderate to high levels of WTC among Iranian EFL learners. For instance, Aliakbari (2016) investigated the impact of anxiety, self-confidence, communicative competence, and international posture on WTC among 194 Iranian EFL students, finding that WTC is directly related to learners' attitudes toward the international community,

perceived linguistic competence, and self-confidence. Similarly, Zarrinabadi and Haidary (2014) reported a positive correlation between WTC and self-perceived communication competence, as well as informative and normative identity styles, among Iranian EFL learners. These studies support the current finding of a mean WTC score of 48.7, indicating moderate-to-high WTC, although specific mean scores are not always reported in prior research for direct comparison.

More recent studies further corroborate these findings. Tavakoli and Davoudi (2017) explored oral WTC among Iranian EFL learners and found that gender did not significantly influence WTC, suggesting that the high WTC observed in the current study is likely consistent across genders. Fallah (2019) examined the relationship between EFL learners' WTC and teachers' immediacy attributes, demonstrating that verbal and nonverbal immediacy positively predict all WTC subscales, with verbal immediacy showing the strongest correlation with speaking WTC. Additionally, Khajavy et al. (2016) utilized a microsystem model to investigate WTC in the Iranian EFL classroom context, highlighting the role of individual factors (e.g., motivation, self-confidence) and contextual factors (e.g., classroom environment) in fostering WTC. These findings align with the current study's results, reinforcing the notion that Iranian EFL learners generally exhibit a significant willingness to communicate.

However, some studies highlight contextual variations that may influence WTC levels. For example, Moradi Khazaei (2012) found that class size significantly affects WTC, with smaller classes fostering greater communication due to increased opportunities for oral practice. Similarly, Sabzalipour et al. (2021) reported that teachers' behaviors, such as providing support and using appropriate error correction methods, positively impact learners' WTC, while lack of support or harsh error correction can hinder it. These findings suggest that the moderate-to-high WTC observed in the current study may be partly attributed to the supportive environment of private language institutes in Shahreza and Isfahan, where the study was conducted. The absence of subgroup analyses (e.g., by gender or proficiency level) in the current study limits direct comparisons, but the overall trend of significant WTC is consistent with the literature.

Several theoretical frameworks from SLA, Educational Psychology, and Applied Linguistics provide insight into why Iranian EFL learners exhibit significant levels of WTC. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramidal heuristic model of WTC is a cornerstone framework in SLA, integrating situational and enduring factors that influence WTC. Situational factors

include immediate classroom dynamics, such as teacher support and peer interactions, while enduring factors encompass stable traits like personality and language proficiency. For Iranian EFL learners, the significant WTC observed ($M = 48.7$) may be attributed to a supportive educational context in Iran, where English is emphasized as a key skill for academic and professional advancement. The global status of English as a lingua franca may also foster an enduring motivation to communicate, as learners perceive English as a gateway to international opportunities. This aligns with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) assertion that WTC is driven by a combination of situational and trait-like factors, with the current study's findings suggesting a favorable interplay of these elements.

SDT by Deci and Ryan (1985) posits that intrinsic motivation is fostered when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of language learning, Iranian EFL learners who feel autonomous in their learning process, competent in their English skills, and connected to the English-speaking community are likely to exhibit higher WTC. The moderate-to-high WTC scores in this study suggest that these learners may experience a sense of competence and relatedness, possibly due to exposure to English media or classroom activities that simulate real-world communication. SDT explains how these motivational factors enhance learners' willingness to engage in English communication, supporting the current findings.

The concept of communicative competence, as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980), includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Sociolinguistic competence, in particular, involves understanding how to use language appropriately in different social contexts, which can boost WTC by increasing learners' confidence in their communicative abilities. The significant WTC levels in this study suggest that Iranian EFL learners may have developed a degree of communicative competence, particularly in sociolinguistic and strategic areas, enabling them to navigate English communication effectively. This is especially relevant in an EFL context like Iran, where direct exposure to native English speakers is limited, and learners rely on classroom-based practice to build competence.

Moreover, identity theory in language learning, as proposed by Norton (2000), emphasizes the role of learners' identities in shaping their language use. Iranian EFL learners who envision themselves as part of a global community where English is a key language may be more motivated to communicate in English to align with this identity. This sense of global identity could explain the significant WTC observed, as

learners seek to engage with English to access international academic, professional, or cultural opportunities.

5.3. IS as a Predictor of L2 WTC among Iranian EFL Learners

The findings from the third research question indicate that higher levels of IS significantly predict greater WTC in a second language among Iranian EFL learners, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (Higher levels of IS do not significantly predict greater L2 WTC). These results highlight the critical role of intercultural sensitivity in fostering communicative readiness in second language learning contexts, particularly among Iranian EFL learners.

The current findings align with a robust body of research that underscores the positive relationship between intercultural sensitivity (or related constructs such as intercultural communicative competence, ICC) and L2 WTC. For instance, Jauregi et al. (2012) found that ICC significantly predicts L2 WTC, particularly in technology-enhanced environments where learners engage in intercultural interactions. Their study demonstrated that learners with higher ICC were more likely to initiate communication in the target language, a finding mirrored in the current research where IS strongly correlates with WTC. Similarly, Munezane (2019) conducted a meta-analysis that identified ICC as a high-evidence factor positively influencing L2 WTC, suggesting that learners with greater intercultural competence are more inclined to engage in communication due to increased confidence and cultural awareness.

The concept of international posture, introduced by Yashima (2002), further supports these findings. International posture, defined as learners' openness to international experiences and intercultural communication, is closely related to intercultural sensitivity. Yashima's study on Japanese EFL learners showed that international posture significantly predicts L2 WTC, as learners who are more open to cultural diversity are more willing to communicate in English. This parallels the current study's results, suggesting that Iranian EFL learners with higher IS may exhibit a similar openness, thereby enhancing their WTC.

However, some differences emerge when considering cultural and contextual factors. Clément et al. (2003) examined L2 WTC among Anglophone and Francophone learners in Canada, finding that contextual factors, such as ethnolinguistic vitality and subjective norms, influence WTC. In the Iranian EFL context, where English is learned as a foreign language with limited direct exposure to native English-speaking environments, the role of IS may be particularly pronounced. Unlike L2 contexts where learners interact regularly with the target language

community, Iranian learners may rely more heavily on classroom-based intercultural training to develop sensitivity, which in turn fosters their WTC. This contextual nuance highlights the importance of considering cultural and educational settings when interpreting the IS-WTC relationship.

Recent studies have also explored related constructs. For example, a study by Jedynak, 2021 investigated the correlation between IS and WTC among adult EFL learners from various L1 cultures, finding a positive relationship that supports the current findings. Additionally, Çiloğlu, 2019 reported a weak but significant positive correlation between IS and English language achievement, suggesting that IS may indirectly influence WTC through improved language proficiency. These studies collectively reinforce the notion that intercultural sensitivity is a key facilitator of communicative engagement in EFL settings.

Several theoretical frameworks from Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Educational Psychology, and Applied Linguistics provide insight into why higher IS predicts greater L2 WTC among Iranian EFL learners. The WTC model, adapted for second language contexts by MacIntyre et al. (1998), posits that L2 WTC is influenced by both situational and individual variables. Intercultural sensitivity can be conceptualized as an individual variable that enhances learners' confidence and comfort in intercultural interactions. Learners with higher IS are more likely to perceive themselves as competent communicators in cross-cultural settings, which increases their WTC. The current study's finding that IS explains 36% of the variance in WTC supports this framework, indicating that IS is a significant individual factor driving communicative readiness.

From an educational psychology perspective, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that intrinsic motivation is fostered when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Intercultural sensitivity may enhance learners' sense of relatedness to the target language community by fostering an appreciation for cultural differences and a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives. This sense of relatedness can increase intrinsic motivation, thereby boosting WTC. For Iranian EFL learners, higher IS may help bridge the cultural gap between their native culture and the target language culture, fostering a greater sense of connection and motivation to communicate in English.

Schumann's (1978) acculturation theory in SLA posits that the degree of acculturation to the target language culture influences language learning outcomes. Learners who are more sensitive to intercultural differences are likely to be more open to acculturating, which involves adopting aspects of the target culture and engaging in social interactions

with its members. For Iranian EFL learners, higher IS may facilitate a more positive attitude toward acculturation, leading to increased opportunities for language use and, consequently, higher WTC. This is particularly relevant in an EFL context where direct cultural exposure is limited, making IS a critical factor in encouraging communication.

In applied linguistics, Canale and Swain (1980) introduced the concept of communicative competence, which includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Intercultural sensitivity is closely related to sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as it involves understanding cultural norms and effectively navigating intercultural communication. Learners with higher IS are likely to feel more competent in these areas, which can increase their confidence and willingness to communicate in the target language. The strong correlation between IS and WTC in the current study supports this perspective, suggesting that IS enhances learners' communicative competence, thereby fostering WTC.

6. Implications

The findings of this study carry substantial implications for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in EFL education. These results highlight the critical role of cultural openness and communicative readiness in enhancing language learning outcomes, particularly in a context where direct exposure to English-speaking cultures is limited. The implications are organized into two key areas: theoretical implications, which elucidate how the findings contribute to and extend existing models in SLA, Educational Psychology, and Applied Linguistics, and practical implications, which offer actionable strategies for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to foster IS and WTC among Iranian EFL learners. By addressing these dimensions, this section aims to bridge the gap between research and practice, providing a roadmap for enhancing intercultural competence and communicative engagement in EFL settings.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study significantly advance the theoretical understanding of IS and WTC in the context of EFL learning, particularly among Iranian learners. The confirmation that Iranian EFL learners exhibit a significant level of IS supports Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This model posits IS as a critical attitudinal component for effective intercultural communication, suggesting that Iranian learners' openness to cultural differences positions

them well for developing full ICC. The study's finding that higher IS levels significantly predict greater L2 WTC further validates MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramidal heuristic model of WTC, which identifies individual variables like IS as key drivers of communicative readiness in second language contexts.

Moreover, the study provides empirical support for Bennett's (1986, 1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), indicating that Iranian EFL learners are likely progressing toward ethnorelative stages (e.g., acceptance or adaptation) due to their language learning experiences. This progression is particularly notable in an EFL context where direct exposure to English-speaking cultures is limited, highlighting the role of classroom-based cultural learning in fostering IS. The integration of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and language socialization theory (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) further elucidates how IS and WTC are fostered. SDT suggests that IS enhances learners' sense of relatedness to the target culture, boosting intrinsic motivation, while language socialization theory underscores the role of cultural learning in enabling learners to navigate sociolinguistic norms, thereby increasing WTC.

Recent research continues to underscore the relevance of these frameworks. For instance, Chen et al. (2025) explored the use of virtual reality (VR) to enhance intercultural communicative competence and WTC, finding significant improvements in both constructs among EFL learners. Similarly, Phaisan et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrating intercultural learning into online EFL classrooms can elevate learners' motivation and ICC. These studies reinforce the theoretical significance of the current findings, suggesting that IS and WTC remain critical areas of inquiry in the context of globalization and technological advancements in language education. The current study extends these frameworks by providing evidence from the Iranian EFL context, where cultural and educational constraints necessitate unique approaches to fostering intercultural competence and communicative readiness.

The study also contributes to the theoretical discourse by highlighting the interplay between IS and WTC in an EFL setting. The significant correlation between IS and WTC supports Schumann's (1978) acculturation theory, which posits that openness to the target culture enhances language learning outcomes. This finding suggests that IS may serve as a mediator between cultural attitudes and communicative behaviors, a relationship that warrants further exploration in future theoretical models. Additionally, the study's emphasis on the role of sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980), and identity theory (Norton, 2000), provides a nuanced

understanding of how learners' cultural and global identities influence their WTC. These theoretical insights pave the way for future research to investigate the mediating roles of specific IS dimensions and contextual factors in EFL settings.

6.2. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study offer actionable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in EFL education, particularly in Iran and similar contexts where English is learned as a foreign language. The finding that Iranian EFL learners exhibit significant levels of IS and WTC suggests that educators should leverage these strengths by integrating intercultural competence development into their teaching practices. Specifically, the study identified respect for cultural differences as a strong area, while interaction confidence was weaker. Educators can address this gap by incorporating activities such as role-playing intercultural scenarios, group discussions on cultural norms, and exposure to authentic materials from English-speaking cultures to enhance learners' confidence in real-world interactions.

The significant predictive relationship between IS and WTC underscores the importance of fostering intercultural sensitivity to boost learners' willingness to communicate in English. EFL curricula should therefore include targeted intercultural tasks, such as those explored by Rahimi and Soltani (2011), which demonstrated that such activities can enhance IS among Iranian learners. For example, incorporating multimedia resources, such as films or podcasts from diverse English-speaking cultures, can help learners develop cultural awareness and communicative competence. Additionally, collaborative activities like e-tandem language learning or virtual exchanges, as suggested by recent studies (Chen et al., 2025), can provide opportunities for learners to practice intercultural communication in simulated or real-world contexts.

For policymakers, the study highlights the need to invest in teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills to integrate intercultural competence into their teaching. Training should focus on strategies for fostering IS, such as using intercultural TV advertisements (Tümen Akyıldız & Gömleksiz, 2019) or VR applications (Chen et al., 2025), which have shown promise in enhancing both IS and WTC. Policymakers should also ensure the availability of resources and materials that support intercultural learning, such as culturally relevant textbooks and digital platforms, to bridge the gap caused by limited direct cultural exposure in EFL contexts like Iran.

Language institutes and schools can adopt a data-driven approach by implementing assessment tools like the ISS and WTCs to monitor learners' progress in IS and WTC. Regular assessments can help identify specific areas for improvement, such as interaction confidence, and inform tailored instructional strategies. For instance, teachers can use feedback from these assessments to design activities that address learners' anxiety in intercultural interactions, as suggested by Fallah (2019), who found that teacher immediacy positively influences WTC.

Furthermore, the study's findings align with recent research on the role of technology in EFL education. Chen et al. (2025) demonstrated that VR-enhanced interventions significantly improve ICC and WTC, suggesting that language institutes in Iran could explore technology-based solutions to enhance learners' intercultural and communicative competencies. Similarly, informal digital learning of English (IDLE), such as watching online videos or engaging with English speakers online, has been shown to positively influence IC and WTC among Iranian EFL learners (Lee & Drajerati, 2023). These findings encourage educators to integrate digital tools and informal learning opportunities into their teaching practices to further enhance learners' IS and WTC.

The practical implications of this study emphasize the need for a holistic approach to EFL education that integrates intercultural competence and communicative readiness. By fostering IS and WTC through targeted curricula, teacher training, and technology-enhanced methods, educators and policymakers can better prepare Iranian EFL learners for effective communication in a globalized world.

7. Conclusions

This study investigated the relationship between IS and L2 WTC among Iranian EFL learners, revealing three key findings. Learners exhibited moderate-to-high levels of IS, with "respect for cultural differences" as the strongest dimension and "interaction confidence" as the weakest. They demonstrated significant WTC, indicating readiness to engage in English communication. Regression analysis confirmed IS as a robust predictor of WTC, explaining 36% of its variance. These results align with Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence model and MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC framework, underscoring that cultural sensitivity fuels communicative readiness in EFL contexts. The findings highlight Iranian learners' capacity to navigate cultural diversity despite limited direct exposure to English-speaking environments, positioning them favorably for global communication.

7.1. Limitations of the Study

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment, beginning with the sample confined to private language institutes in Shahreza and Isfahan, which restricts generalizability to public institutions, universities, or rural settings. Reliance on self-reported questionnaires introduces potential social desirability bias, while the absence of subgroup analyses obscures nuanced variations across demographics like gender, age, or proficiency levels. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, necessitating longitudinal approaches to track how IS development influences WTC over time. Contextual factors such as socioeconomic backgrounds and prior intercultural contact remain unexamined, potentially mediating the IS-WTC relationship.

7.2. Suggestions for Future Research

Future investigations should expand to diverse contexts including public schools, universities, and rural regions across Iran and other Middle Eastern EFL settings to enhance generalizability. Methodological diversification through mixed-methods designs—incorporating interviews and classroom observations—would elucidate how learners translate IS into communicative actions. Longitudinal and interventional studies are essential to establish causality and track IS-WTC evolution across proficiency stages. Research should also examine technology-mediated solutions such as VR simulations for intercultural scenarios and AI-mediated language exchanges. Further analysis of moderating variables like anxiety, motivation, and teacher immediacy would clarify their mediating roles, alongside cross-cultural comparisons with East Asian or Latin American cohorts to identify culture-specific patterns.

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