

Gender and Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' gender and their willingness to communicate (WTC). It was also an attempt to investigate the relationship between WTC inside and outside the classroom, in general, and among male and female Iranian English language learners inside and outside the classroom situations, in particular. To this end, 30 advanced learners consisting of 15 males and 15 females were randomly selected from an English Language Institute in Asadabad, Hamedan. They were asked to fill out the WTC questionnaire developed by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Conrod (2001). Applying an independent t-test, it was revealed that Iranian EFL female learners are more willing to communicate compared to their male counterparts. Also, the results of another independent t-test showed that Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate does not differ significantly inside and outside the classroom contexts. Finally, the results of a Two-Way ANOVA revealed that Iranian male and female EFL learners did not differ in their willingness to communicate inside and outside the classroom. The findings of the present study are significant in that they have implications for both language teachers and textbook developers.

Keywords: Gender, Learner-Centered Methodologies, Successful SLA, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Iranian EFL Learners

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate in a second language has been of great interest in the history of language teaching. From the early days of second language acquisition (SLA) research, many studies (e.g., Dornyei, 2003; Seliger, 1977; Swain, 1998) have been carried out aiming at shedding light on this process and intended to help language learners to be able to communicate with great ease and efficiency. These attempts were accompanied in the 1960s with the shift of focus from language teaching and teacher-centered methodologies to language learning and learner-centered methodologies. As a result of the paradigm shift, learners' individual cognitive and affective factors came to be noticed and considered as key concerns accounting for successful second language learning and use. Contrary to the previous teaching methodologies which aimed, to a great extent, at raising language learners who could learn everything about the language and become linguistically powerful, the new methods sought to bring up the learners who were capable of using the language in social interaction and communication (Seliger, 1977). In fact, the use of the target language is one of the main purposes in learning second languages for many L2 learners and it has been widely assumed that the use of the target language is also an indicator of and a necessary condition for successful SLA (Seliger, 1977; Swain, 1998). As Dornyei (2003) points out, competence in the L2 may not be sufficient. Students should be both able and willing to communicate in the L2.

Along with motivation, attitude, anxiety, personality traits, and self-confidence, the learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) was considered a significant affective and psycho-social factor which accounted for learners' variation and successful second language learning (see Dornyei, 2003). WTC was conceptualized as "the individual's personality-based predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication when free to do so" (McCroskey, 1992, p. 17). McCroskey and Richmond (1987) further advanced the construct of WTC to refer to an individual's general personality orientation towards talking. While talking is the key to interpersonal communication, people differ in the amount of talk in which they will choose to engage. As the authors theorized, although willingness is seen as relatively constant across situations, situational variables may influence a person's WTC at a given time in a given context. For instance, the way a person feels on a given day, previous communication with other persons, what that person looks like, or what might be gained or lost through communicating could exert a significant temporary effect on WTC (McCroskey & Richmond).

Moreover, along with situational elements, a set of affective and cognitive factors seem to have correlation with learners' WTC (MacIntyre, Clément, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998). One important factor which has been reported in literature to impact the affective construct of WTC is the learners'

gender. Similarly, in most research studies gender is referred to as a significant factor which can lead to variation in the rate and outcome of second language learning among different language learners (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002). Therefore, due to the importance of gender factor and the paucity of research in this field, the current paper is an attempt to investigate the effect of gender on the learners' WTC in English in the Iranian EFL context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

The term WTC was first introduced in the context of first language acquisition by McCrosky and Richmond in 1987. However, it is now being extensively used in the context of second and foreign language learning. Since the late 90s, attempts have been made to conceptualize WTC to explain an individual's degree of readiness to participate in discourse in an L2 (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) WTC is defined as "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a L2". MacIntyre et al. (2001, p. 369) define WTC in a second language as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice". The WTC model proposed by MacIntyre (1994) consisted of factors like *perceived communicative competence* and *communication anxiety* which affected learners' willingness to communicate as well as their frequency of communication. MacIntyre showed a correlation between lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of perceived competence and second language use. Motivation, attitudes, personality, and other psycho-social variables have been examined as factors which combine to influence the learners' WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998). MacIntyre et al. acknowledge the difference between L1 and L2 WTC probably being due to the uncertainty inherent in L2 use that interacts in a more complex manner with the variables influencing L1 WTC, i.e. individual differences. When WTC was extended to L2 communication situations, it was proposed that it is not necessary to limit WTC to a trait-like variable since the use of an L2 introduces the potential for significant situational differences based on wide variations in competence and inter-group relations (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998).

Yashima, Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) hold that WTC is a conceptual model in which L2 proficiency is not considered a goal to be achieved through L2 learning, but rather it is considered a means to gain interpersonal/intercultural goals. According to Leger and Storch (2009), early models of WTC included two main variables: perceived communication and communicative anxiety. Based

on this model it is predicted that high levels of perceived competence together with low levels of anxiety results in higher WTC and a higher probability of communicative interactions in L2. MacIntyre et al. (1998) have conceptualized WTC in an L2 in a theoretical model in which social and individual contexts, affective and cognitive factors, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioral intention are interrelated in influencing WTC in an L2 and in L2 use.

Conceptualizing the term WTC, some researchers have argued that a fundamental goal of second language education should be the creation of WTC in the language learning process (MacIntyre et al., 2003). In this regard, MacIntyre et al. (2001) suggest that higher WTC among learners leads to increased opportunity for practice and authentic L2 usage in an L2 and authentic. Similarly, Hashimoto (2002) suggests a positive relation between WTC and motivation and L2 communication frequency. Moreover, Chapelle (2001) argues that, in the communicative classroom, conscientious language teachers want motivated students with high WTC in the L2. The author also stated that, a lack of inclination to enter into L2 communication can prevent effective interaction and language production.

2.2. Previous Studies

As was mentioned above, learners' WTC in an L2 has been of great concern for some researchers within the scope of second language investigation (e.g., MacIntyre, et al., 1998; MacIntyre, et al., 1999). This issue has drawn the attention of various language researchers attempting to find out the effect of different factors on the learners' desire to use the second language for the purpose of communication. In this regard, first, we will take a look at some of the important studies conducted in Iranian EFL context.

In one study on Iranian EFL learners, Barjesteh, Vaseghi and Neissi (2011) found out that familiarity with context and receiver type is an effective factor for the situation in which a learner initiates communication. Learners were highly willing to communicate in two context-types (Group Discussion, & Meetings) and one receiver-type (Friend). Zarrinabadi and Abdi (2011) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' WTC inside and outside the classroom and their language learning orientations. The findings indicated language orientations to be more correlated with willingness to communicate outside than inside the classroom. In another study, Riasati (2012) explored Iranian EFL learners' perception of factors that influence their willingness to speak English in language classrooms. Using semi-structured interviews, it was found that such factors as "topic of discussion, interlocutor, teacher, class atmosphere, personality and self-perceived speaking

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ability” (p. 1287) contribute to willingness to communicate among learners. Most researchers working on WTC have tried to identify learners' perception of factors affecting their WTC.

House (2004) found out that factors such as perceived politeness, the role of physical locality, the presence of the opposite sex, topic of discussion and learners' mood affected their WTC in language classrooms. In a similar study, Cao and Philp (2006) identified four major factors which were perceived by learners as having an impact on their WTC: group size, self-confidence, familiarity with interlocutors, and interlocutor participation in the conversation. Other factors that the learners described were familiarity with topic, perceived competence in L2 and cultural influences. In a subsequent study, Cao (2009) explored the factors that can influence learners' WTC in classrooms. These factors include topic, task type (pair, group and team work), interlocutor and teacher. Finally, Baker and MacIntyre (2000) compared French immersion versus non-immersion programs and concluded that the learning context can affect students' WTC to a great extent.

2.3. Statement of the Problem

As seen, apparently, there is rather an adequate volume of research in the literature which has investigated the relationship between different affective and cognitive factors and the learners' desire to use an L2 and communicate in a second language. However, one significant element which seems to have been neglected in these studies is the effect of the gender variable. In most studies conducted in the area of second language research, gender has been considered as a crucial variable which can affect general outcomes in second language learning. Accordingly, due to the paucity of research in this area, the present study was developed in an attempt to answer the following questions.

2.4. Research Questions

1. Is there any significant relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom among Iranian EFL learners?
3. Is there any significant relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom among Iranian EFL learners?

2.5. Research Null Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Iranian EFL learners.
2. There is no significant relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom among Iranian EFL learners.
3. There is no significant relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom among Iranian EFL learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

For the purpose of this study, 30 Iranian advanced EFL learners (15 males and 15 females) were selected randomly from an English Language Institute in Asadabad, Hamedan. Their age range was between 20-25 years old.

3.2. Instrument

In the present study, the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) was used in order to collect the necessary data. This questionnaire is designed in two parts of 27 items testing communication inside the classroom and outside the classroom context. It is a 5- point Likert scale questionnaire (See Appendix) consisting of four skill areas of speaking (8 items), reading (6 items), writing (8 items) and listening comprehension (5 items). Concerning the reliability of the questionnaire, previous internal (alpha) reliability estimates have been reported (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986) at .95 and .91 respectively.

3.3. Procedures

As mentioned earlier, a group of advanced male and female EFL learners participated in this study. During regular class sessions in an English Language Institute, the participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire with great care. The questionnaire administration took approximately 30 minutes. Before starting, in order for the participants to attend with preparation and to answer the questions appropriately they were provided with some general information about the aim and the importance

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of the research. Also, in order to prevent possible misunderstandings, the researcher presented descriptions about the items that seemed unclear or difficult for learners' understanding.

4. Results and Discussions

The whole procedure including the used statistical operations and the obtained results are described for each research question respectively below:

Research question No. 1: *Relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC)*

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics on the WTC of male vs. female learners.

Table 1. Group Statistic

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WTC	Female	15	91	11.60	2.99
	Male	15	79	10.93	5.66

As is seen, female language learners have a higher mean on the questionnaire. The mean for the females is 91 whereas the mean score for males is 79. But, in order to check if this difference is statistically significant or not, an independent t-test was applied. The results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
WTC	Equal variances assumed	6.042	.020	3.018	28	.005	19.33	6.40	6.21	32.45
	Equal variances not assumed			3.018	21.26	.006	19.33	6.40	6.02	32.64

As it is observed, the obtained value for t is 3.018. Because this value is greater than the critical value for t with 28 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance, we can reject the first null hypothesis. Accordingly, it can be concluded that Iranian female EFL learners are more willing to communicate compared with male learners.

Research question No. 2: *Relationship between willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom.*

The second research question aimed to investigate whether Iranian EFL learners are more willing to communicate inside the classroom or outside the classroom context. The obtained data for answering this question is summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Group Statistics

Situation		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WTC	Inside	30	80.20	13.23	2.41
	Outside	30	82.80	13.37	2.44

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As it is shown, Iranian EFL language learners have a higher mean outside the classroom context compared with the inside classroom situation. The mean for the outside classroom context is 82 while the mean score for the inside classroom situation is 80. However, to see if this difference is statistically significant or not an independent t-test was run. The results are summarized in table 4.

Table 4. Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
WTC Equal variances assumed	.024	.878	.757	58	.452	2.60	3.43471	9.47	4.27
Equal variances not assumed			.757	57.994	.452	2.60	3.43471	9.47	4.27

As you can see, the obtained value for t is 0.757. Because this value is smaller than the critical value for t with 58 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance, so the second null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate does not differ within inside and outside classroom contexts.

Research question No. 3: *relationship between gender and willingness to communicate (WTC) inside classroom vs. outside classroom*

In this case, we want to know that if male vs. females' willingness to communicate inside and outside the classroom is statistically significant or not. Between subjects factors and related descriptive statistics are presented in tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Between-Subjects Factors

		N
Situation	Inside	30
	Outside	30
Gender	Female	15
	Male	15

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: WTC

I/O	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Inside	Female	68.33	9.92	15
	Male	71.70	12.52	15
	Total	69.32	10.67	30
Outside	Female	60.72	8.17	15
	Male	61.00	8.51	15
	Total	60.80	8.10	30
Total	Female	65.07	9.87	15
	Male	66.94	11.95	15
	Total	65.63	10.47	30

Table 6 shows that there are some apparent differences between the mean scores for WTC questionnaire between male and female Iranian EFL learners inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, because we have two independent variables each containing two levels and one dependent variable a Two-Way ANOVA should be applied. (see table 7).

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Table 7. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: WTC

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Inside/Outside	1040.57	1	940.57	1.95	.002
Gender	41.22	1	41.22	.434	.513
I/O * Gender	29.61	1	29.61	.312	.579
Error	5321.04	56	95.01		
Total	264934	60			
Corrected Total	6469.93	59			

Running a Two-Way ANOVA shows that gender doesn't play any role in the willingness to communicate within or outside the classroom. Because as it is seen, the value of F with (1, 56) degrees of freedom at .05 level of significance is 0.434 which is smaller than the critical value. Also the interaction effect of the inside-outside classroom situation factor and gender factor is insignificant.

5. Conclusions and Implications

As was mentioned earlier, this study aimed to explore, in general, the relationship between gender and Iranian EFL learners' WTC. Accordingly, for the purpose of the current exploration, three questions were raised. The first question wanted to know, on the whole, if there is any significant relationship between gender and WTC. Obtaining the necessary data and analyzing the results of the study, it was concluded that Iranian female EFL learners were more willing to communicate than male learners. Generally speaking and based on stereotypes, female language learners are more expressive; that is, they talk more about themselves, the problems they have, the important events which have occurred in their life, and even about their future plans. Yet, another important consideration is that female learners value a more active participation in social interactions in comparison with male language learners. This finding is comparable to the results of some previous studies. In a sample of Canadian adolescents, MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2002) found combined English and French WTC to be higher among girls than among boys. Also, Smith (1997) found that adolescent girls engage in conversation more frequently than do adolescent boys, suggesting that the girls may be higher in WTC than the boys. Of course, it should be mentioned that, beside sex, age should be also taken into account, as prior research suggests the possibility that

age and sex might interact to affect WTC (Donovan & McIntyre, 2004). In this regard, Tannen (1990) notes that despite stereotypes of women as being talkative, adult men talk more in meetings, in the classroom, and in mixed-group discussions than do adult women. At earlier ages, however, the pattern appears to be reversed which is the case with the present research. Overall, the evidence suggests that patterns of WTC across different age groups are likely to be different in men and women. Particularly, males appear to increase in WTC as they grow toward adulthood, and females may show a parallel decline in WTC (Donovan & McIntyre, 2004).

The second question aimed at investigating the relationship between WTC inside and outside classroom contexts among Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the study showed that there was no difference between the learners in both situations either inside or outside the classroom. However, the present result differs with that of the study conducted by Zarrinabadi and Abdi (2011). They discovered that language orientations are more correlated with willingness to communicate outside than inside the classroom. One justification for the current conclusion can be the fact that we are living in an EFL country in which there is less authentic exposure to the second language. The formal system of education in Iran concerning English language is not intended to raise students who are orally competent; meanwhile, it concentrates, to a large extent, on the reading skill. The only chance available for nearly all the language learners to get access to the target language is within limited hours in institutions where there is no external motivation to apply the language for real world tasks. There are also some cultural and social barriers to have free conversations among language learners both inside and outside classroom contexts in a traditional society like Iran. Thus, naturally, the contexts for using the second language do not differ that much both inside and outside classroom to lead to significant differences in willingness to communicate. Thus, the culture, within which students are learning, can create variation in their WTC. "The presumed impact of culture on willingness to communicate would be expected to operate more at a trait than a situational level" (BarTaclough, Christophel, & McCroskey, 1998, p. 187). According to Samovar and Porter (1985) since culture shapes human communication behavior, the amount of talking in which a person is engaged would be dependent, at least in part, on that person's cultural orientation (Cited in BarTaclough et al. 1998).

The third and the last question in this study tried to explore the relationship between gender and willingness to communicate inside and outside the classroom. Analyzing the results, it was concluded that Iranian male and female EFL learners did not differ significantly in willingness to communicate again either inside or outside the classroom. However, this result is opposed to the study conducted by Baker and MacIntyre (2000). They reported that girls had greater levels of WTC inside the classroom whereas boys were more willing to use their L2 outside the school context.

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However, in the present study, thanks to the barriers mentioned above, again male and female language learners have less exposure to language and less opportunity to get involved in meaningful conversations. The facilities, the resources, and the instructional materials available for both males and females do not differ inside and outside classroom and they have an equal access to the conditions required for language learning. As it was mentioned above, in an EFL country like Iran, the access to meaningful authentic material is very limited and even does not exist outside the classroom environment. Thus, naturally, gender does not have any place and role in WTC outside the classroom.

Based on the findings obtained in the current study, certain implications and applications for language teachers can be drawn. Obviously and of utmost importance, teachers should try to reinforce more WTC among learners in their classrooms. This can be achieved by more active involvement of the students in meaningful learning activities and conversational drills. By taking advantage of authentic materials, teachers should attempt to create real world tasks in their classrooms that increase the learners' desire to communicate in the L2. In conversation classrooms, teachers should be more sensitive and cautious in introducing appropriate topics which encourage learners to communicate with their peers. According to Riasati (2012, p.1291) "the features of the topic that are important to the learners are topic familiarity, topic interest, topic preparation and discussing a topic the learners are comfortable discussing". Moreover, teachers should devise out some programs intended to activate learners' engagement in L2 communication outside the classroom. Arranging some conversational sessions to be held in real situations outside the classroom can also be very helpful in motivating the learners to communicate in real world tasks. Any strategy which can increase motivation among learners is suggested to implement in the classroom. Motivated learners are more willing to participate in classroom activities and to initiate conversations and discussions in the classroom. Moreover, teachers should try to provide a relaxing and comfortable environment in which students' communication apprehension and anxiety is lowered while their perceived communication competence is increased simultaneously. Teachers who adopt communicative teaching methods including task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be more successful in promoting WTC in language learners. Different types of activities favored in this methodology including group discussions, working with peers, roles plays and all pair-work activities can help providing a secure stress-free environment in which all students are ready to initiate and participate in the learning process. Interaction with friends and peers has a major role in stimulating WTC as MacIntyre et al. (2001) showed that social support, particularly from friends, influenced WTC outside the classroom.

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APPENDIX

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE INSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Directions: This questionnaire is composed of statements concerning your feelings about communication with other people, in English. Please indicate in the space provided the frequency of time you choose to speak English in each classroom situation.

If you are almost never willing to speak English, write 1. If you are willing sometimes, write 2 or 3.

If you are willing most of the time, write 4 or 5.

1 = Almost never willing

2 = Sometimes willing

3 = Willing half of the time

4 = Usually willing

5 = Almost always willing

Speaking in class, in English

.....1. Speaking in a group about your summer vacation.

.....2. Speaking to your teacher about your homework assignment.

.....3. A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first?

.....4. You are confused about a task you must complete, how willing are you to ask for instructions/clarification?

.....5. Talking to a friend while waiting in line.

.....6. How willing would you be to be an actor in a play?

.....7. Describe the rules of your favorite game.

.....8. Play a game in English, for example Monopoly.

Reading in class (to yourself, not out loud)

.....1. Read a novel.

.....2. Read an article in a paper.

.....3. Read letters from a pen pal written in native English.

.....4. Read personal letters or notes written to you in which the writer has deliberately used simple words and constructions.

.....5. Read an advertisement in the paper to find a good bicycle you can buy.

.....6. Read reviews for popular movies.

Writing in class, in English

.....1. Write an advertisement to sell an old bike.

.....2. Write down the instructions for your favorite hobby.

.....3. Write a report on your favorite animal and its habits.

.....4. Write a story.

.....5. Write a letter to a friend.

.....6. Write a newspaper article.

.....7. Write the answers to a "fun" quiz from a magazine.

.....8. Write down a list of things you must do tomorrow.

Comprehension in class

.....1. Listen to instructions and complete a task.

.....2. Bake a cake if instructions were not in Persian.

.....3. Fill out an application form.

.....4. Take directions from an English speaker.

.....5. Understand an English movie.

WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Directions: Sometimes people differ a lot in their speaking, reading, and so forth in class and outside class. Now we would like you to consider your use of English outside the classroom. Again, please tell us the frequency that you use English in the following situations.

Remember, you are telling us about your experiences *outside* of the classroom this time. There are no right or wrong answers.

1 = Almost never willing

2 = Sometimes willing

3 = Willing half of the time

4 = Usually willing

5 = Almost always willing

Speaking outside class, in English

.....1. Speaking in a group about your summer vacation.

.....2. Speaking to your teacher about your homework assignment.

.....3. A stranger enters the room you are in, how willing would you be to have a conversation if he talked to you first?

.....4. You are confused about a task you must complete, how willing are you to ask for instructions/ clarification?

.....5. Talking to a friend while waiting in line.

.....6. How willing would you be to be an actor in a play?

.....7. Describe the rules of your favorite game.

.....8. Play a game in English, for example Monopoly.

Reading outside class, in English

.....1. Read a novel.

.....2. Read an article in a paper.

.....3. Read letters from a pen pal written in native English.

.....4. Read personal letters or notes written to you in which the writer has deliberately used simple words and constructions.

.....5. Read an advertisement in the paper to find a good bicycle you can buy.

.....6. Read reviews for popular movies.

Writing outside class, in English

.....1. Write an advertisement to sell an old bike.

.....2. Write down the instructions for your favorite hobby.

.....3. Write a report on your favorite animal and its habits.

.....4. Write a story.

.....5. Write a letter to a friend.

.....6. Write a newspaper article.

.....7. Write the answers to a "fun" quiz from a magazine.

.....8. Write down a list of things you must do tomorrow.

Comprehension outside class

.....1. Listen to instructions and complete a task.

.....2. Bake a cake if instructions were not in Persian.

.....3. Fill out an application form.

.....4. Take directions from an English speaker.

.....5. Understand an English movie.