



Measuring the Predictability of Iranian EFL Students' Pragmatic Listening Comprehension With Language Proficiency, Self-Regulated Learning in Listening, and Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract

Pragmatic Listening Comprehension (PLC), as a complex process, is influenced by various cognitive, psychological, contextual, social, cultural, and linguistic factors. To make a stride toward understanding the role of such factors in PLC, the present study sought not only to scrutinize to what extent PLC was associated with language proficiency, Self-Regulated Learning in Listening (SRL), and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) but also to examine an empirical path analysis model to predict PLC through language proficiency, SRL, and WTC. To this aim, a group of 269 upper-intermediate and advanced level Iranian EFL learners, whose ages ranged from 19 to 34, participated in the study by answering the 40-item pragmatic multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT), as well as the valid and reliable questionnaires of SRL and WTC. The results of correlational analyses revealed that PLC was significantly and positively associated with language proficiency, SRL, and WTC. These findings were further approved in the path analysis model; language proficiency, SRL, and WTC were significant positive predictors of PLC. The path model disclosed the significant prediction of PLC in terms of the three independent variables of the study. Based on these results, relevant pedagogical implications were proposed with the aim of enhancing the pedagogical knowledge and practice of key educational stakeholders.

Keywords: pragmatic listening comprehension (PLC), language proficiency, self-regulated learning in listening (SRL), willingness to communicate (WTC), English as a second/foreign language (EFL/ESL)

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Introduction

As an essential language skill, listening plays a pivotal role in the development of one's foreign or second language (FL / L2) proficiency (Vandergrift, 2007; Vandergrift & Baker, 2018). In fact, its development is highly required because of its widespread use in everyday interactions (Morley, 2001). Despite its significance as a self-governing and vital element of language learning, the listening skill has been treated as a Cinderella skill, which encompasses an undetectable mental procedure (Jung, 2003) and is also the least understood and researched skill among the four skills (Vandergrift, 2007). Hinkel (2006) asserted that this skill is usually disregarded in language teaching and pedagogy as its instruction requires dealing with different aspects of cross-cultural pragmatics and other variables essential for comprehending interlocutors' proposed meanings. At the same time, following the shift from structural-oriented syllabi to more communicative ones, the tendency to do research on different aspects of pragmatic competence has gradually increased, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Research has evinced that pragmatic competence development is a consequential condition for reaching high proficiency levels in L2 / FL (e.g., Alcón-Soler & Marti'nez-Flor, 2008; Derakhshan, 2019a; Derakhshan, 2019b, Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Derakhshan & Eslami, 2020; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Eslami & Liu, 2013; Glaser, 2018; Shakki, Naeni, Mazandarani, & Derakhshan, 2020; Taguchi, 2013, 2019; Tajeddin & Zand Moghadam, 2012; Usó-Juan, 2013).

In addition, most of the studies in this area have investigated and substantiated the effectiveness of instruction, whether implicit or explicit, input-based or output-based, on pragmatic competence development (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2015; Derakhshan & Zangoei, 2014; Eslami-Rasekh & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008; Fordyce, 2013; Li, 2012; Taguchi, 2015; Yousefi & Nassaji, 2019). Although various studies have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of instruction for pragmatic development, the current study presents an innovative outlook to the field of studies in language learning in the Iranian EFL context, in general, and pragmatic research, in particular. More specifically, scant attention has been dedicated to identifying and examining the factors contributing to pragmatic competence in general and PLC, in particular. Another distinctive feature of the research distinguishing it from the previous ones is probing miscellaneous issues of tentative influential factors on pragmatic competence from broad-spectrum, namely general language proficiency to specific dynamics, including psychological, social, and interactive factors. In fact, PLC is one of the under-researched (Vandergrift, 2007), yet crucial, aspect of listening comprehension, which is significant for developing high levels of language proficiency.

As a stride toward occupying this research gap, the current research tried to explore the predictability of Iranian EFL learners' PLC in terms of SRL, WTC, and language proficiency variables, through adopting a path analysis model. In this respect, two research questions were specified:

1. Does PLC have any significant relationship with Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency, SRL, and WTC?

2. What is the best fit model regarding the variables of language proficiency, SRL, and WTC in relation to PLC of Iranian EFL learners?

Review of the Literature

Pragmatic Listening Comprehension (PLC)

PLC pertains to an individual's ability to grasp a speaker's intention in interaction in a particular situation, beyond the literal meaning of what is uttered (Rose & Kasper, 2001). In other words, pragmatic comprehension involves both the knowledge of speech acts, relating to one's ability to do something or convince the hearer to do the target action and conversational implicature, relating to the speakers' expression of his / her feelings and views through employing indirect utterances to be inferred by the hearer (Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969; Thomas, 1995). Pragmatic knowledge, being normally culture-bound, is utilized by listeners in order to understand and make inferences about the speaker's implied meaning. As Rost (2002) believed, PLC requires knowledge of the linguistic aspect, including lexis, structures, and morphology, as well as awareness of contextual information (Rost, 2002; van Dijk, 1977). PLC involves a complicated process of interaction between linguistic forms, contextual factors, social, conventional, cultural norms, and psychological factors (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Takahashi, 2019). This complexity requires research on various potential contributing factors to the success or failure of pragmatic comprehension by L2 learners or speakers.

Despite the fact that pragmatic knowledge has been researched much in relation to L2 production, little research has been done on the employment of pragmatic knowledge for L2 comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007). However, there is a desideratum for investigating the potential contribution of various psychological, contextual, cognitive, linguistic, and social factors contributing to PLC, if a thorough understanding of this concept is to be achieved (Taguchi, 2019). As a response to this call for research, the present study attempted to examine the potential role of three factors of language proficiency, WTC, and SRL in relation to PLC. In the following section of the literature review, each of these three independent variables is discussed, and their relationship with PLC is determined based on previous research findings.

Language Proficiency and Pragmatic Competence

Triggered by the communicative competence framework of Bachman (1990), in which language competence was conceptualized as a construct encompassing two-key aspects of organizational competence and pragmatic competence, pragmatic competence has been brought into the limelight in many communicative competence model and frameworks (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). LoCastro (2003) defined pragmatic competence as "the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and nonlinguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities" (p. 15). Since its introduction in such models of language proficiency, pragmatic competence increasingly found its place in language pedagogy and research as reflected in various research studies in the field

(Alcón-Soler & Sánchez Hernández, 2017; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Uso-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006).

Pragmatic competence development in L2 / FL is substantial for learners as miscommunication and communication breakdown / failure are very common issues in L2 speaker-L2 speaker and L2 speaker-native speaker interactions (Taguchi, 2011; Timpe-Laughlin, 2019). Such failures are either related to pragmalinguistic (i.e., the means through which meanings and communicative acts are transferred) (Rose & Kasper, 2001) or sociopragmatic competence “the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action which may differ depending on speakers’ and hearers’ speech communities” (Kasper, 1997, p. 10). Results of many previous studies have supported the importance of pragmatic competence development for obtaining high levels of L2 proficiency (e.g., Alcón-Soler & Sánchez Hernández, 2017; Cohen, 2017; Kondo, 2008; Rose, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Taguchi, 2018b; Takimoto, 2007; Tateyama, 2019). Moreover, a large number of studies in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) have been dedicated to examining whether pragmatic instruction, whether in its implicit / explicit or input- / output-based form is effective or not (e.g., Cohen, 2012, 2017, 2019; Cohen & Sykes, 2013; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020, 2021; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Jernigan, 2012; Lyster, 1994; Nguyen, Pham, & Pham, 2012; Shakki et al., 2020; Taguchi, 2011).

Furthermore, as pragmatic ability is a crucial element of language proficiency (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980), its significance in interlanguage development and, more specifically, pragmatic comprehension has been recently appreciated by researchers. In this regard, some studies have attended to language proficiency in association with PLC. One overall finding agreed upon by all these studies is that language proficiency has a strong impact on pragmatic comprehension (Taguchi & Yamaguchi, 2019). It was mainly found that higher-proficiency learners had better comprehension of speech acts and implicature in comparison to lower-proficiency level learners. For instance, Cook and Liddicoat (2002) examined language proficiency in relation to PLC. They uncovered that a significant difference exists between low- and high-proficiency listeners as to processing linguistic and contextual cues for comprehending request speech acts. This is because the low-proficiency listeners were unable to automatically attend to both linguistic and contextual cues because of their reliance on bottom-up processing. This finding was in line with Garcia’s (2004) finding, which showed that higher proficiency listeners have a better comprehension of the intentions of a speaker (i.e., conversational implicature).

In the same line, the results of Taguchi’s (2011) study also uncovered the predictability of pragmatic comprehension in terms of language proficiency. The other studies in this area are those conducted by Bardovi-Harlig (1999), Derakhshan (2019), Koike (1996), Rafieyan (2018), Roever, Wang, and Brophy (2014), Taguchi (2005, 2008a, 2008b), Vandergrift (2007), Yamanaka (2003) which corroborated that high proficient learners outperformed the low proficient ones. Yet, it is apparent that in addition to language proficiency, there exist other variables that can

potentially influence PLC. Two of such variables, which are psychological in nature, namely SRL and WTC, will be discussed in the following sections.

Self-Regulated Learning in Listening

As a constructive process, self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2000), is a broad concept encompassing an array of variables (e.g., cognitive strategies, self-efficacy, and volition), affecting the motivational, metacognitive, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of learning (Panadero, 2017; Tseng & Chen, 2017). Three important concepts in self-regulation are resource management, cognition, and metacognition (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). A learner who is good at regulating his / her own learning utilizes the repertoire of metacognitive, cognitive, emotional, and motivational strategies available to him / her for proactively participating in learning. Such a learner implements these strategies to acquire, recall, and comprehend information and instructions actively through engaging in self-directed and self-activated learning efforts (Zimmerman, 1998). Self-regulated learning was highlighted in educational psychology (Sahranavard, Miri, & Salehiniya, 2018), but it has its origin in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

The social cognitive conceptualization of self-regulation does not make a distinction between cognition and motivation. Neither does it consider internal components and external stimuli as sole contributors to human performance and learning. Rather, it offers a triadic model in which personal features, cognition, and behavior of the learner all communicate with the environment and with each other to influence learners' performance (Bandura, 1986). Thus, in this view, self-regulation refers to the extent to which learners can be "metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process" (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 1). Accordingly, self-regulation requires learners' management of their motivation, behavior, and cognition.

Self-regulation learning has been linked and discussed in relation to the language skills (e.g., Ariyanti, Fitriana, & Pane, 2018), and in relation to self-regulation, importantly the self-regulatory capability and motivational ideas of the listener (Yabukoshi, 2021). SRL is characterized by an active involvement of individuals in their own listening comprehension. Recently, this area of research has attracted researchers' attention as few studies to date have attended to the importance of self-regulated learning in listening comprehension development (e.g., Li, 2017; Nasrollahi-Mouziraji & Birjandi, 2016; Taghizadeh & Saleh Abady, 2016; Yabukoshi, 2021; Zeng & Goh, 2018).

To explain some of these studies in more detail, for instance, through proposing a path analysis model, Nasrollahi-Mouziraji and Birjandi (2016) examined the influential role of Iranian EFL learners' motivational ideas (i.e., goal orientation, listening self-efficacy, and task value) in their self-regulation ability and listening comprehension ability by drawing on the social cognitive and expectancy-value learning theories. Path analysis outcomes uncovered that first, learners' listening comprehension could be positively influenced by their self-regulation and self-efficacy, and second, their self-regulation was positively influenced by perceptions of task value. Furthermore, they uncovered some effective ways for

promoting self-regulated learning and improving listening comprehension ability in the English language teaching context.

Similarly, in a case study done on four EFL Chinese university students, Zeng and Goh (2018) investigated the impacts that the self-regulating strategies in extensive listening activities employed by the four participants have on their achievement and metacognitive awareness. Results showed significant divergences in the metacognitive involvement of the two groups at the self-regulated learning stages. It was found that the listening ability of the students was influenced by these differences.

Despite the potential role that SRL can play in facilitating PLC, there has been a dearth of research examining this associative link. A somewhat pertinent research study was that conducted by Corsetti (2014), which examined the influence of strategy-based listening in PLC. However, no study has examined SRL in association with PLC. To address this gap, the present study attempted to examine SRL as a potential determinant of Iranian EFL learners' PLC.

Willingness to Communicate

The concept of WTC was initially put forward by Burgoon (1976). It was first named as "Unwillingness to Communicate" and defined as "enduring and chronic tendency to avoid or devalue oral communication" (p. 62). It was characterized as a trait-like propensity and a personality feature and to explain personal variances in interaction in the first language. Moreover, Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig (1977) argued that global speech qualities are systematic and long-lasting as they do not normally change from one context to another. Later, McCroskey and Baer (1985) and McCroskey and Richmond (1991), among others, identified the construct of WTC and defined it as a person's inclination to start communication, when the situation arises. According to them, WTC encompassed an amalgam of personality features such as self-esteem, communicative competence, introversion / extroversion, self-confidence, and communication apprehension, all found to be influencing the individual's ultimate willingness and decision to communicate (Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2014).

Moreover, MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) disregarded questioned trait-like view of the concept as they said that it could be best conceptualized as a situational variable, influenced by both enduring and transient factors. In this respect, WTC was regarded as a multidimensional concept encompassing a myriad of instructional, emotional, instructional, cognitive, and cultural variables (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In their conceptualization, MacIntyre et al. (1998) tried to capture as many variables as possible that can influence a learner's WTC in L2.

Six levels exist in this model of WTC. The first level pertains to real interactions in L2. In the second level, the communicative use of L2 is mainly accounted for by one's WTC. The third level shows the tendency to interact with a particular individual and explains WTC in terms of its predictability by state communication self-confidence. The fourth level explains the predictability of WTC

by fixed motivational tendencies, including self-confidence in L2, interpersonal motivation, and intergroup motivation. The fifth level relates to affective-cognitive context variables. Included at this level are social situation, communicative competence, and intergroup attitudes. Variables at this level influence WTC by impacting the variables of the previous levels. The sixth level includes the individual and social context variables. Social setting, referring to intergroup atmosphere, as well as the personal context, covering those personality features connected to interaction, are within this layer (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Since the emergence of this concept, a large body of empirical studies have been done on it, exploring the potential correlates, causes, and consequences of WTC in L2. Among the factors found to be associated with WTC are affect, writing performance in English, attitudes, communicative competence, motivation, communication apprehension, speaking ability, individual characteristics, context, language learning anxiety, emotions, and classroom environment (e.g., Behshad, Amirian, Davoudi, & Ghaniabadi, 2018; Elahi Shirvan, Khajavy, MacIntyre, & Taherian, 2019; Khalaj & Tousi, 2014; Khajavy, MacIntyre, & Barabadi, 2017; Lee & Lee, 2020; Öz, Demirezen, & Pourfeiz, 2015; Peng, 2015; Riasati, 2018; Yashima, MacIntyre, & Ikeda, 2016). But to date, no research has been dedicated to examining the role of WTC in PLC. The only study conducted in this regard was Mehrpak, Gholami-Mehrdad, & Ahmadi's (2016) study, which examined the influence of instruction regarding speech acts on Iranian EFL students' WTC. So the present study is unique in the sense that it examines the role of WTC in PLC aspects, including implicature and speech acts. All in all, in order to add to the nascent literature on the correlates and contributors of PLC, the current research attempted to the correlational and predictive link of Iranian EFL learners' SRTL, WTC, and language proficiency with their PLC.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The present study setting included two provinces of Khorasan Razavi and Golestan, Iran. More specifically, EFL learners from the three universities of Hakim Sabzevari, University of Gonabad, and Golestan University, two institutes of Hezare Sevom (two branches) in Mashhad and Radmehr in Gonabad, and finally, eight high schools in Gonabad participated in this study. The underlying reason for selecting this wide range of participants was to have a rich set of data from miscellaneous groups based on pragmatic features like socioeconomic status, power, and levels of language proficiency. The participants were chosen based on convenience sampling.

The initial sample comprised 483 EFL learners who voluntarily accepted to cooperate in this study. To assess the language proficiency of the participants, the updated version of Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) was administered in 2019. This test is usually used as a quick reliable measure of a student's general language ability (Brown, 1989). Moreover, to get access to the participants for the following stages, they were asked to type their complete demographic information, including telephone number, email address, age, and gender, at the beginning of the OOPT. The possible range of score for this test is between 0 to 120. After screening

out the missing data, out of 483 test-takers, only 269 of them were selected for further consideration. Their overall scores were between 90 to 120 with the mean score of 108 and the standard deviation of 15.58. The rubric for the test shows that those participants who get 90 or above are considered upper intermediate or advanced learners, categorized in C proficiency level of the 269 participants in this phase, 0.58 were male, and 0.42 were female. They were aged between 16 to 36 years.

Instrumentation

The only instrument (with three sub-instruments) developed and used in this research was an online software named “Self-regulation English Pragmatic Comprehension” (SREPC), accessible through the www.Srepc.ir web address. The instrument included four parts; the Demographic Information Set, two questionnaires of SRLL and WTC, and, finally, the three subsections of the pragmatic multiple discourse completion tasks (PMDCT) of routines, implicature, and speech acts, each of which is explained in detail as follows:

The Demographic Information Set

The demographic information set elicited information such as name, telephone number, age, gender, job, major, years of learning / teaching English, and language proficiency levels from the participants.

The Self-Regulated Learning in Listening (SRLL) Questionnaire

Kobayashi (2017) developed and validated a SRLL questionnaire for assessing the construct of SRLL and its relationship with PLC. The SRLL questionnaire includes four parts of self-efficacy, knowledge of cognition, awareness of metacognition and regulation of cognition, and strategic behavior, each of which including 3, 3, 6, and 6 items, respectively. The items are answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 (0–20%), 2 (20–40%), 3 (40–60%), 4 (60–80%), 5 (80–100%)). To make these items more understandable for the participants of the present study, five English teachers individually translated the SRLL questionnaire from English into Persian, and, in the end, they reached a consensus on the semi-final version of the Persian questionnaire. Then, this version was piloted with 37 participants. Next, five translators did a back-translation of the scale from Persian to English. The new version was then compared with the original English SRLL questionnaire. Finally, the inconsistencies were resolved, and the teachers and researchers agreed on the final version of the Persian scale.

The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Questionnaire

The 17-items WTC questionnaire was developed and validated by Weaver (2005) for assessing the construct of WTC and its relationship with PLC. Answers given to these items ranged on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., a) Definitely not Willing, b) Probably not Willing, c) Probably Willing, d) Mostly Willing., and e) Definitely Willing). In the present study, the process of adaptation and validation of the WTC questionnaire was done similar to those performed for the SRLL questionnaire.

Pragmatic Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (PMDCT)

The present study deals with the comprehension of major elements of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), namely routines, implicature, and request, apology, and refusal speech acts. To this aim, an instrument was adopted and validated to measure the participants' ILP comprehension in English. The integrated instrument provides observations of learners' PLC by inquiring their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge in contextualized situations and in an interactive pathway with the test-taker. The answers of the respondents to PMDCT are observable test scores which were validated by the pragmatic experts and resorted according to the viability of native-speaker criteria. Liu (2006) states that "the observed score is generalized as a universe score and interpreted as covering the whole universe of possible items and responses" (p. 7). Then, the universe score, checked by Cronbach's alpha or interrater reliability, can be generalized to a target score across the target domain, which is the display of interests manifested by an array of observations. Meanwhile, the validation of the pragmatic test heavily rests on practical or theoretical arguments (Roever, 2011). The last stage is to have pedagogical implications for the features of the construct under study such as admission programs and also making decisions about test takers' language proficiency for putting them in appropriate channels of remedial instruction.

Grounded in the above logic, and for the sake of reaching potential objectivity, the PMDCT was chosen as the test battery for the present study. PMDCT covers some situations premeditated to bring about a certain pragmatic aspect like speech act. Each test-taker reads the PMDCT and answers to a prompt in the written mode. Dissimilar to the written discourse completion test (WDCT), in PMDCT, the test-takers should select the best alternative among three, four, or five alternatives. Actually, in the PMDCT, there is a key that is the most pragmatically appropriate response, and there are two, three, or four other distracters that are inappropriate. Ahn (2005, as cited in Birjandi & Rezaei, 2010) mentions that PMDCT is easy to administer and is time-saving with regard to administration and evaluation. However, this fact exists that developing good distractors and the best alternative for each item is hard.

In the present study, the PMDCT was adapted and validated, taking into account the PLC knowledge of test-takers. As Linde (2009) states, the PMDCT is a good instrument for collecting data to assess various pragmatic competence aspects such as routines, implicature, as well as speech acts. The PMDCT in our study has a standard multiple-choice format of one answer and four distractors (one distractor was added to the existing distractors to meet the research aim of this study) which covers 16 written questions and 40 listening questions for assessing EFL learners' comprehension of routines, implicature, request, apology, and refusal speech acts. Within each situation, the test takers were supposed to opt the most appropriate answer.

This PMDCT is an integrated set of two PMDCTs designed by Xu (2015) for routines and Derakhshan (2014) for implicature and speech acts. The reliability of Xu's (2015) test was reported to be .86, and that of Derakhshan's (2014) test was found to be .78. The internal consistency of the test was examined by employing KR-21 formula in order to ensure that the merged PMDCT in the test battery is

reliable. The reliability index was .81. The different sections of the PMDCT used in the study are explained briefly below:

Multiple-Choice Pragmatic Discourse Completion Test (MPDCT) for Routines. The respondents were presented with 16 questions related to routines in a written mode as the first part of pragmatic comprehension test. The alternatives of each item were increased from four to five based on the three pragmatic experts' opinions and comments. The items for this part were adapted and validated from Xu's (2015) study.

Pragmatic Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (PMDCT) for Implicature and Request, Apology, and Refusal Speech Acts. This test includes 16 listening conversations for routines and 24 listening conversations for speech acts (eight refusals, eight requests, and eight apologies), followed by a multiple-choice question which was adapted from the instrument developed by Derakhshan (2014). It should be noted that the interrater reliability of the three pragmatic experts was high as a result of adding one option to the previous ones (i.e., the correlation was .93 at the significance level of .05).

Procedure

In this research, the objective was to investigate potential factors contributing to Iranian EFL learners' PLC. To achieve this aim, the following stages were done: for the first phase of data collection regarding the addition of a distractor to each item of the PMDCT, semi-structured interviews were done with four experts (two males and two females) in the field of pragmatics. Subsequently, the interview data were transcribed and analyzed. Then the SREPC software, being accessible through the www.srepc.ir web address, was developed. It included three parts of demographic information set, SRL questionnaire, WTC scale, and also three sub-parts of PMDCT. Responding to each part was obligatory to go to the next part. Also, for answering each part, specific amount of time was allocated. Moreover, the software was designed in a way that each test-taker's performance and responses were recorded online, and then the data for each participant was exported into CSV for MS Excel, XML, PHP array, Open Document text, CSV, JSON, PDF, Open Document Spreadsheet, YAML, LaTeX, CodeGen, Microsoft word 2000, MediaWiki Table, and SQL.

After the software was developed, the participants were asked to voluntarily take part in this study. Meanwhile, permission for collecting data from the universities, institutes, and schools was gained. The participants were completely briefed about how to respond to each part of the questionnaires and pragmatic tests in the software, and they were informed that their data would be kept confidential and were collected exclusively for academic research purposes. The data for this study was collected electronically, and each participant's data was transferred into the SPSS (version 22) and AMOS (version 24) statistical packages. The reliability for each of the scales was computed through Cronbach's alpha coefficient procedure and Kuder-Richardson Formula 21 (KR-21).

Results

The study intended to explore the probable relationships among Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency, SRLL, WTC, and PLC and to find the best fit model for the explanatory variables of this study. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov revealed that the data were normally distributed, so a parametric test of Pearson Product moment correlation was utilized.

Results of Research Questions

This section includes the answer to each of two proposed research questions:

Result of Research Question One

1. Does PLC have any significant relationship with Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency, SRLL, and WTC?

To answer this research question, Pearson correlation was employed (Table 1).

Table 1

Results of Pearson Correlation Among the Variables

		PLC	Language Proficiency	WTC	SRLL
PLC	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N	269			
Language Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.49**.	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00			
	N	269	269		
WTC	Pearson Correlation	.68**.	.42**.	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00		
	N	269	269	269	
SRLL	Pearson Correlation	.65**.	.33**.	.61**.	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00	.00	
	N	269	269	269	269

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

Based on Table 1, a significant positive association exists between PLC and other variables: SRLL ($r = .65$, $p = .000$, $\alpha = 0.01$), WTC ($r = .68$, $p = .000$, $\alpha = 0.01$), and language proficiency ($r = .49$, $p = .000$, $\alpha = 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson correlation between the sub-constructs of PLC, overall WTC, SRL, and language proficiency.

Table 2

Results of Pearson Correlation Between the Sub-Constructs of PLC, and Overall WTC, SRL, and Language Proficiency Scores

		WTC	SRL	Language Proficiency
IMP	Pearson Correlation	.77	.61	.47
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00	.00
	N	269	269	269
SA	Pearson Correlation	.82	.62	.51
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00	.00
	N	269	269	269

Based on Table 2, IMP correlated positively and significantly with WTC ($r = .77, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), SRL ($r = .61, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), and language proficiency ($r = .47, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$). Moreover, SA correlated positively and significantly with WTC ($r = .82, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), SRL ($r = .62, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), and language proficiency ($r = .51, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$).

Table 3 shows the results of the Pearson correlation between the sub-constructs of SRL, and overall PLC.

Table 3

Results of Pearson Correlation Between the Sub-Constructs of SRL and Overall PLC

		SE	KC	AM	SB
PLC	Pearson Correlation	.75	.69	.58	.60
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.00	.00	.00
	N	269	269	269	269

Based on Table 3, all four sub-constructs of SRL correlated positively and significantly with overall PLC; SE ($r = .75, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), KC ($r = .69, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), AM ($r = .58, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$), and SB ($r = .60, p = .00, \alpha = 0.01$).

Result of Research Question Two

2. What is the best fit model for the variables of language proficiency, SRLL, WTC, and PLC of Iranian EFL Learners?

Regarding the second research question, a path analysis model was proposed. To examine the structural relations, the proposed model was tested using the Amos 24 statistical package. To see if the proposed model fits our data, some fit indices were examined; the magnitude of Chi-square should be non-significant, the Chi-square / *df* ratio which should be between 2 and 3, the cut values of the comparative fit index (CFI), the normed fit index (NFI), as well as the good fit index (GFI) should be greater than .90, and finally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be smaller than .80 (Schreiber et al., 2006). The results of estimating these indices on our data are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Goodness of Fit Indices

	X2/df	GFI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Acceptable Fit	< 3	> .90	> .90	> .90	< .08
Model	2.17	.92	.94	.91	.05

Based on Table 4, all the goodness of fit indices were within the acceptable range; NFI (.91), X2 / *df* (2.17), RMSEA (.05) CFI (.94), and GFI (.92). The finalized path analysis model of the study is presented in Figure 1.

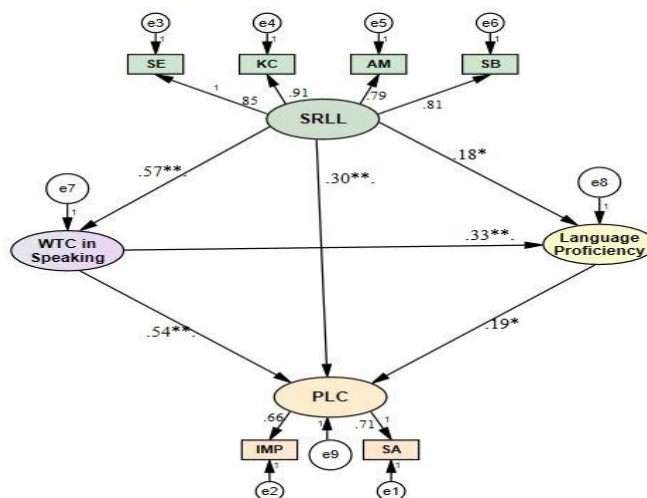


Figure 1

The Model of Interrelationship Among PLC, SRLL, WTC, and Language Proficiency

According to Figure 1, PLC is predicted positively and significantly by SRL ($\beta = .30, p < 0.05$), WTC ($\beta = .54, p < 0.05$), and language proficiency ($\beta = .19, p < 0.05$). Moreover, it was found that both SRL ($\beta = .18, p < 0.05$) and WTC ($\beta = .33, p < 0.05$) positively and significantly predicted language proficiency. Finally, a direct positive path was found from SRL to WTC ($\beta = .57, p < 0.05$).

Discussion

To elaborate on the research findings, it was identified that Iranian EFL learners' PLC and their language proficiency were moderately interrelated. In other words, there was a significant difference between the performance of Iranian EFL learners with high, medium, and low language proficiency in the PLC test. The variation pattern for their performance was high > medium > low. The results lend support to the previous literature on the association of language proficiency and PLC (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Derakhshan, 2019a; Garcia, 2004; Koike, 1996; Rafieyan, 2018; Roever et al., 2014; Taguchi, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Taguchi & Yamaguchi, 2019; Vandergrift, 2007; Yamanaka, 2003). The reason for a moderate correlation between language proficiency and PLC rather than a strong relationship may be traced back to some reasons accounted for in this study. The first one is applying a self-report as a measure of the participants' language proficiency. In fact, due to practical constraints because of our large sample size, self-report of language proficiency level was the most convenient measure. To this aim, the researchers inserted a self-report section in the software so that the participants check their self-perceived language proficiency level in a range of 1 to 9 scores.

Despite the imprecision of self-report measures, in Shameem's (1998) study, the self-report language proficiency measure was found as a relatively valid and reliable measure as a strong positive relationship was found between the participants' actual test scores and their self-report language proficiency levels. Another reason for a moderate relationship may be that language proficiency encompasses different components of lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic competencies, among others. Therefore, learners who have high grammatical or lexical competence may not be necessarily pragmatically competent (Xiao, 2015). Moreover, it may also be partly due to the reason that EFL learners have usually little opportunity to be exposed to sufficient pragmatic input such as conventional and nonconventional implicature and speech acts (Derakhshan, 2014, 2019a). EFL learners' English use and learning are normally limited to the classroom context (Farashaiyan & Hua, 2012). Matsumura (2003) concluded that while language proficiency had no significant effect on PLC, exposure to target language forms and functions played an outstanding role in EFL learners' pragmatic achievement. However, he simultaneously accounted for language proficiency as a mediator variable in the relationship between PLC and exposure to English.

It can also be mentioned that the relationship between language proficiency and PLC can be mediated by psycholinguistic factors like motivation. According to Xu and Wannaruk (2016), EFL learners with higher motivation may have positive attitudes toward the target language and desire to integrate with L2 culture, and as a consequence, may endeavor more to develop their language competencies in all

aspects of language learning such as PLC. The process of language learning, even at the highest levels, such as pragmatic comprehension of implicature and speech acts in ILP system can be facilitated through a high level of motivation where the input, lasting for a short period of time, can be converted into intake in the long-term memory and result into learning (Ellis, 2008).

Another variable predicting PLC in this study was SRL with the four sub-constructs of self-efficacy, knowledge of cognition, awareness of metacognition, and strategic behaviors. This finding corroborates previous accounts highlighting the role that learners' cognitive and psychological factors play in their PLC (Taguchi, 2019). The results of the present study are also in line with Nasrollahi-Mouziraji and Birjandi's (2016) findings which revealed the significant effect of each sub-component of SRL on English listening achievement of Iranian EFL learners. While in their study, path analysis results determined self-efficacy as the strongest predictor of listening achievement, the proposed model in our study identified self-efficacy as the contributor to PLC, subsequent to the knowledge of cognition. However, the magnitude of the effect of knowledge of cognition (.91) in our proposed model does not downplay the high explanatory power of self-efficacy (.85) for PLC.

The results of the present study are also in correspondence with the postulations of the socio-cognitive and self-expectancy theories, which underscored the significant impact of the sub-constructs of SRL (i.e., self-efficacy, motivational beliefs, knowledge of cognition and strategic behavior, and awareness of metacognition) on development of learners' language competencies. Moreover, the results of the present study were in line with Zeng and Goh's (2018) study, which accentuated the usefulness of SRL for cultivating EFL learners' L2 listening comprehension.

The last variable investigated in relation to PLC in this study was WTC. The findings of the present research indicated a strong positive relationship between Iranian EFL learners' PLC and their WTC. As the path analysis model indicated, some variations in PLC achievement scores can fairly be accounted for by the variations in WTC. These results are to some degree in line with the findings of Mehrpak et al.'s (2016) study, which revealed that a positive significant relationship exists between Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension of speech acts and WTC in English. As there is a scarcity of research examining the link between WTC and PLC, the results of this research should be compared with outcomes of studies conducted on the association of WTC and language skills. In this regard, WTC was also found by previous researchers to be positively linked to Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability (Khalaj & Tousi, 2014) and writing performance (Behshad et al., 2018).

All in all, the results of this research lend support to the theoretically-rich argument that learners' PLC, as a part of ILP, is influenced by an array of linguistic, contextual, psychological, cultural, cognitive, and social factors (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rost, 2002; van Dijk, 1977; Takahashi, 2019).

Conclusion

To recapitulate what was stated till now, the main goal of the current research was to examine the associative as well as predictive links of language proficiency, WTC, and SRLL with Iranian EFL learners' PLC. In a nutshell, the outcomes of current research uncovered the positive association of the four variables of this study. More importantly, these findings were supported by the path analysis results, which demonstrated the predictability of Iranian EFL learners' PLC in terms of their WTC, language proficiency, and SRLL. Thus, it can be concluded that PLC, as a complex process undertaken by L2 / FL language learners, is influenced by learners' linguistic (i.e., language proficiency) and psychological (i.e., WTC and SRLL) variables, among others.

All in all, the findings of the present study can contribute to the knowledge and practice of teachers and learners as key stakeholders in the context of English language teaching and learning. In this respect, EFL teachers can enhance their learners' PLC ability by taking account of learners' psychological and linguistic background into account. In addition to providing opportunities for exposure to the pragmatically appropriate input and interactions in the classroom, teachers can tailor input and instruction to learners' language proficiency level. In other words, teachers can present different authentic and pragmatically-rich input and activities according to whether learners are of high, medium, or low language proficiency. In addition, for the successful PLC of students to happen, teachers can teach various SRLL to learners. As Taguchi (2018a) cogently elaborated, self-regulated learning strategies are potentially valuable guidelines intended for conquering the problems of learning pragmatics, straightly coaching learners how to being alert to pragmatic components such as listening aspects and how to screen, govern, and assess their personal learning developments. By doing so, students can become autonomous language learners who can take responsibility for their own learning in general and PLC in particular.

When students' knowledge repertoire is equipped with sufficient and useful strategies for self-regulating their learning process, they can more effectively tolerate and solve pragmatically the thorniest challenges and take the lead for their own learning (Derakhshan, Malmir, & Greenier, 2021). Such a SRLL teaching can be instilled into the instructional courses by dedicating some time and materials to teaching these strategies each session to the learners. Moreover, students' WTC can also play a role in their PLC. Based on this account, teachers can enhance their students' WTC by creating a humanized, motivating, interesting, and personalized learning environment. When learning is linked to students' needs, interests, and personal lives, it is more likely to increase their positive attitudes toward the course, and, in turn, enhance their WTC. Meanwhile, they can make learners aware of how their increased WTC inside and outside of the classroom can foster their PLC. This is because when they interact more in the target language, they find more opportunities to be exposed to the language input. Through communication and interaction with other L2 users (whether peers, teachers, or native speakers), interlocuters can play the role of a listener and also a speaker; they can engage in negotiation of meaning, discuss instances of pragmatic failure or

miscommunication, develop better metalinguistic and pragmatic awareness and knowledge, receive interactionally-modified input, find an opportunity to produce interactionally-modified output, and, thus, arrive at better PLC.

However, similar to any research attempt, this study also has some limitations. First of all, the present study data were collected only from Iranian EFL learners due to their easier accessibility to the researchers. Therefore, the findings must be cautiously generalized to all EFL learners from other cultural contexts. Second, as a large number of participants were involved in the study, the examination of their language proficiency through taking proficiency tests was not feasible, and, as a result, language proficiency data of the participants were collected through a self-report measure. Thirdly, in this study, only quantitative means of data collection and analysis were employed. Future studies can broaden the scope and depth of their research by adding more qualitative research instruments and analytic techniques.

As with any research undertaking, the results of this study were affected by many variables that were not to be controlled for in this research. Future studies may be interested in controlling for factors such as learners' gender, age, and years of learning English, and then investigate the link between the factors of this study. Last but not least, as stated in the literature review, PLC is influenced by many linguistic, contextual, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural variables. However, due to feasibility issues and space constraints, only three variables of WTC, SRTL, and language proficiency were examined in relation to PLC. Future studies can continue this nascent line of research by exploring other important but less attended-to variables in this regard.

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