Research Article

Exploring EFL Teachers’ Socioaffective and Pedagogic Strategies and Students’ Willingness to Communicate with a Focus on Iranian Culture

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One of the most important factors related to learners’ willingness to communicate (WTC) is teachers’ use of socioaffective and pedagogic strategies, which are tightly related to cultural context of education. The present qualitative study, using focus group interview, investigated 19 EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers’ perspectives about their socioaffective and pedagogic strategy use in intermediate classes, with a focus on Iranian culture, as an effort to understand to what extent these strategies are facilitating or debilitating of students’ WTC. Using Creswell’s six steps of inductive analysis, two main themes of facilitating and hindering factors emerged. The findings are suggestive in terms of contribution of several cultural and social factors related to the interaction between EFL teachers and students and its relation to WTC. It also discusses the implications of the study for EFL teachers.

1. Introduction

With the advent of communicative approaches to language learning, classroom participation has assumed paramount importance, because it is believed that learners’ competence in English as a second language (L2) is developed through performance [1]. This importance has diverted researchers’ attention to the construct of willingness to communicate (WTC).

WTC is “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” ([2], p. 547). It depends on both personal traits and situational factors [3], which can be changed under varying circumstantial conditions. Therefore, these conditions should be given due attention in second language pedagogy. In fact, from a context-sensitive view, a student’s low or high WTC may be the result of several external and situational factors residing in the immediate context [4]. Out of the external variables, teachers play a determining role in en-gendering WTC. Mercer and Howe [5] found that teachers’ use of certain interactional strategies affects students’ participation in class and consequently their educational outcomes. Therefore, besides their content knowledge, teachers’ specific strategies, such as socioaffective and pedagogic strategies may push the learners forward by manipulating other variables in the classroom environment or stop them short of learning.

Social strategies have been defined as communicative strategies that assist in conveying messages to others and as a result expedite the teaching process [6], and affective strategies involve lowering affective filter [7]. Pedagogic strategies are procedures that serve as the basis for a teacher’s classroom behavior and activities (Feinman-Nemser and Flodden, 1986, Shulman, 1986, 1987, as cited in [8]).

There is a growing body of literature recognizing the important role of teachers in fostering interaction and participation in L2 classrooms. Some of these studies focused on teachers’ attitude and teaching style [9–11], involvement [4, 10], and teacher immediacy [9–12]. They have employed various methodologies; for example, Zarrinabadi [11] examined the effect of teachers on Iranian university students’ WTC utilizing a focused essay technique. He asked
students to write about their feelings and situations in which they were most willing or unwilling to communicate in L2. The results revealed that teachers’ wait time, support, error correction, and decision on the topic had a main impact on students’ willingness to communicate. Using a questionnaire survey and taking a structural equation modeling approach, Fallah [12] tested a model of L2 communication that examined the potential connections among WTC in English, three individual differences (shyness, motivation, and communication self-confidence) and one situational variable (teacher immediacy) in Iranian EFL context. The findings of his study indicated significant positive paths from motivation and communication self-confidence and negative paths from shyness to self-confidence and motivation and from teacher immediacy to shyness.

Most of the studies (e.g., [11, 12]) have been informative regarding teacher’s role in classroom interaction and learners’ WTC; however, to the best knowledge of the authors, the decisive role of teachers regarding their use of socioaffective and pedagogic strategies and learners’ WTC, within cultural context of Iran, has not been focused. Hence, the purpose of this study, employing a qualitative research, is to explore Iranian EFL teachers’ perspectives toward socioaffective and pedagogic strategy use in engendering WTC in the classroom within cultural context of Iran.

1.1. Willingness to Communicate (WTC). WTC was originally developed in the field of first language (L1) communication by McCroskey and Baer [13], who regarded it as “a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers” (p. 6). However, MacIntyre [3] adapted it for L2 studies as a situated construct which is influenced by both immediate situational factors and more enduring ones. MacIntyre et al. [2] devised a pyramid shape structure called heuristic model, composed of several layers, to show the range of potential influences on WTC in the L2. Differentiating between stable enduring influences (such as personality traits) and situation specific influences informing communication behavior (e.g., desire to communicate with a specific person), the model assumed importance [14].

The construct has assumed an important role in second language acquisition due to the interactive opportunity it can create first in the classroom and then in authentic situations. Willingness to communicate functions as a path to language learning inasmuch as higher levels of WTC contribute to more frequent L2 use [15], and this increased interaction is thought to promote successful L2 development [16, 17]. Empirical studies have not only found that L2 WTC is related to some inherently stable individual factors such as personality, age, and gender [18–20] but they have also discovered that it is related to some situational and contextual factors, such as topic, interlocutors, group size, cultural background, teacher, and classroom social environment [21] [4, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 22, 23]. From among these situational factors teachers’ socioaffective and pedagogic strategies, as one of the learner external variables [24], are the main focus of the present study.

1.2. Socioaffective and Pedagogic Strategies. Since learning is both affective and cognitive in nature [6, 25, 26], teachers need to deploy both socioaffective and pedagogic strategies to enrich classroom interaction and to aid learning. Pedagogic strategies are the knowledge of both handling specific language items and knowledge about techniques and procedures which facilitate learning [8]. Some of these strategies which may affect teacher-student interactional patterns and relationships are teachers’ error correction, wait time, [11], and their ability of adaptation (congruence) [27], to name a few. Socioaffective strategies are about student-teacher relationships (building rapport). Brown [6] defined socioaffective strategies as a set of emotional and instructional strategies used to facilitate and accelerate the process of teaching and learning through tackling students’ emotions. These strategies, according to Brown, pertain to social mediating activity and emotional interaction with others. O’Malley and Chamot [28] also defined them as strategies that are related to social mediating activity and transacting with others. Examples of these characteristics include being kind, supportive, caring, approachable, entertaining, and friendly [29] and teachers’ verbal and nonverbal immediacy [11, 12], politeness, and fairness. As Daly and Kreiser [30] noted, teachers enhance their interpersonal relationship with their students hoping that if they are liked by their students, they will pay more attention to their instructions, will participate more actively, and as a consequence, learn more.

The way the socioaffective and some pedagogic strategies are expressed in the classroom varies from one situation to another depending on the sociocultural contexts of each educational setting. To affirm this view, Scollon [31] pointed to Goffman’s [32] notion of “participation frameworks” suggesting cultural and philosophical beliefs determine listening and speaking roles assumed by people, which in the L2 classroom correspond to communication, teaching, and learning. This culture on the part of teachers, according to Ainscough [33], is not only the result of formal training, experience, and peer interaction but also teachers’ personal theories, which are “deep-seated beliefs.”

To avoid confusion and overlap, in this paper, we have used the term socioaffective strategies to refer to those instructional strategies that improve teacher-student rapport and pedagogic strategies to refer to the instructional strategies that assist the teacher in transmitting the teaching material.

1.3. Cultural Practices in Iran. Teachers are the main role players in EFL classes, and their strategies may affect learners’ WTC in the classroom within each cultural context. What governs this pattern in Iran may pertain to some cultural values in the country affecting the social context at the macro level and the classroom context at the microlevel.

Iran has been categorized as a collectivist culture in several studies [34–37]. However, some other scholars
believe that Iran is very high on the in-group collectivism (the extent to which individuals are attached to their families and circles of friends) and rather low on the institutional collectivism (the extent to which members of the societies respect broader societal interests versus individual interests) [38, 39]. This orientation has led Iranians to demonstrate closeness to family and in-group members (close friends) and lack of trust to out-group [39, 40], which might affect their interaction pattern and communicative behavior in social context, including classroom context.

Authoritarianism and the support for hierarchy in the society is also a feature of the Iranian culture [34, 38, 40]. Javidan and Dastmalchian [39] depicted this very well:

The strong authority relation with the parents, especially the father, is further reinforced at school where children have to show deep respect for their teachers. They learn through their daily lives that it is best to accept the teacher’s words and not challenge them. (p. 132)

This hierarchy starts from family and continues to school and finally to the society, which might have a decisive role affecting the degree of interaction, which, in turn, highlights the important role of the teacher and socioaffective and pedagogic strategies he or she uses in the classroom to raise students’ WTC. Iran also scores high on uncertainty avoidance; in other words, people have low tolerance of ambiguity and unstructured situations, and they feel uncomfortable in novel or unknown situations [35]. Considering masculinity vs. femininity dimension, in a study conducted by Hofstede [41] and Saboori et al. [35], Iran was found to be a relatively feminine country, in which the emotional and social role differentiation between genders is not high.

So far, numerous studies have been conducted attempting to examine teachers’ role in classroom interaction and communication, generally, and WTC, particularly; however, none of them paid due attention to the role of culture in Iranian context, except for studies conducted in Chinese cultural context [4, 10, 23]. Furthermore, to the best knowledge of the researchers, most of the studies probed into the issue from learners’ point of view ignoring to address teachers in data collection. Moreover, none of these studies have used the focus group interview for data collection. In fact, the focus group is “synergistic” because it creates an environment that results in a deep and insightful discussion [42]. Accordingly, the present study was prompted to answer the following question. What are Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of socioaffective and pedagogic strategy use in engendering WTC in the classroom within cultural context of Iran?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants. Initial participants of this qualitative study were 25 female EFL teachers selected through purposeful sampling, in which the site and participants were selected in accordance with the criteria we had in mind [43], including high proficiency and teaching experience from four popular English institutes in Tabriz, Iran. We conducted the research in private language institutes in Iran because compared with the state schools, these institutes are more willing to adapt themselves to communicative approach to language teaching. On average, the classes included 15 female students (with the age range of 15–24, M = 18.06) taking intermediate general English courses. The researchers selected the most proficient teachers (hired with the entrance score of +100 in TOEFL, PBT, or IELTS score of 7.5 and recommended by the observers on-site) with an age range of 28 to 55 and teaching experience of 6–22 years purposefully so that they would be “information rich” ([44], p. 169). Six of these participants participated in the pilot study (see Table 1), and 19 of them took part in the main study (see Table 2). They all spoke Azeri Turkish as their native language. Twenty one of them were holding a master’s degree in TESOL; three of them had a B.A. in TESOL; and one of them had a Ph.D. in TESOL.

2.2. Instruments. The method of data collection for the teachers’ perspectives was focus group interview. A set of questions were designed by the researchers to explore teachers’ socioaffective and pedagogic strategy use with a focus on cultural context of Iran. The study consisted of two phases, the pilot and main. We consulted Cresswell [45] for the number of participants and followed Krueger’s [46] guidelines about participants, environment, moderator, analysis, and reporting to provide structure to the focus group interview. We used a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions to allow for any additional questions and ideas raised during the interview [45]. The interview, in the pilot (N = 6), was face to face and was recorded on two high-tech mobile phones in case one of them malfunctioned and the other would record the information. The main study focus group was conducted through Telegram (Telegram is a widely used social network in Iran. It permits forming a group of any size, and easily provides a discussion forum both synchronic and asynchronic. It also registers the time and date of the interaction) (social media); therefore, we used an Asus laptop to gather the data from the desktop Telegram.

2.3. Procedure. The researchers divided the participants into four groups. Six of them participated in the pilot, and 19 teachers participated in the main study. The interview questions were given to teachers a week before the interview in the pilot study, while they were sent through Telegram in the main study. Having explained the goal of the research and procedures in detail in both the pilot and main study, we secured their consent before their participation and assured anonymity. The interview took three hours in the pilot study and a week in the main study.

It is worth noting that we resorted to technology (i.e., Telegram, a social network) to gather data in the main study for several reasons. First, because of the teachers’ tight schedule, it was difficult to specify a certain time to meet for the interview. Second, teachers’ writing on Telegram would facilitate the process of analysis; for data transcription, it
would not be required. Indeed, such interviews save researchers the time and cost of transcription, because the textual data are self-transcribing [47]. Another advantage is that approaches mediated through text supply data otherwise unavailable in face-to-face approaches. In addition, as the participants were going to write their ideas in the group on Telegram, it would eliminate the need for member check after the transcription. Last, some participants are not as talkative as the others in the focus group interview, but they may have a better chance to participate on-line, which is another potential advantage of mediated approaches that they can even out power differences and encourage full participation from all members [48].

Having taken into consideration all the points mentioned above, the researcher started the interview. After informing the participants, we made a group on Telegram and added them to the group. The interview was mostly synchronic (usually after 9 p.m.), with one of the researchers as the moderator, and sometimes asynchronic (usually during the day). The researcher intervened and gave a feedback to the interviewees regularly to keep them active and interactive.

2.4. Data Analysis. The recordings of focus group interviews, in the pilot, were transcribed verbatim by the researcher following the instructions provided by Friedman [43]; that is, we used a standard orthography and included features of imperfect speech, such as hesitation markers, cutoffs and restarts, pauses, and fillers. However, we excluded nonverbal speech owing to the recording system (smart phones). The transcription yielded 5,074 words.

In the main study, the data were copied and pasted on the Microsoft Word file. The interview yielded 16,188 words. The researchers followed Creswell’s [45] six steps of inductive analysis, in both phases, to abstract the data (see Appendix for an example of coding process). In the first cycle, having read the text several times, we coded the data. In the second cycle coding, patterns within the data were developed and categorized. Finally, two overarching themes with some minor themes evolved. To achieve reliability, we had a second coder, already skilled in coding, who double-codemany random samples from different sections of the dataset as recommended by Revesz [49]. To take into account the chance agreement, the researchers applied Cohen’s Kappa coder reliability, which is calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of decisions made. The level of interrater reliability by Cohen’s Kappa was found to be 0.76.

3. Results and Discussion

Two specific themes emerged from the focus group interview, depicting the perspectives of EFL teachers toward socioaffective and pedagogic strategies deployed in EFL classes to raise WTC within cultural context of Iran. These themes include (a) facilitating factors and (b) hindering factors (Table 3). Quotations used within each theme indicate verbatim remarks by the participants.

3.1. Facilitating Factors. The participants’ remarks regarding facilitating factors, as Table 1 indicates, included (a) developing positive relationship, (b) choice of the topic, and (c) teaching style, which are as follows.

3.1.1. Developing Positive Relationship. Developing positive relationship included immediacy, fairness, and teacher support, and the full explanation of which is as follows:

(1) Immediacy. Immediacy, which was originally developed by Mehrabian [50] was defined as communication behaviors that “enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (p. 203). It can be expressed verbally or nonverbally. Scholars have related immediacy to the motivational trait of approach-avoidance meaning “people approach what they like and avoid what they don’t like” ([51], p. 22). It has been found by several researchers to affect students’ WTC [10–12], to name a few. Teachers’ immediacy is important in the hierarchical setting of Iran [39, 40, 52], in which obedience from teachers is expected [39]. This hierarchical setting does not allow some communication behaviors, which may create an imbalanced relationship between teachers and learners and silence learners. For example, considering space, teachers are advised to

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approach the students to be perceived as caring and immediate [53]; however, one of the teachers pointed to the accepted rules of intimacy between teachers and students in Iran, mentioning that

I just try to award my students by giving positive grades. We can’t pat them on the back or touch them as a sign of admiration. They’ll get shocked if we do it. I prefer to keep distance to be on the safe side. (ID: 4, age: 43)

As a result, learners do not expect proximity from teachers. One of the participants stated when they walked into the classroom during group or pair work to monitor their students’ activities, they caused interruption or withdrawal on the part of the students, because they felt insecure when monitored closely by the teacher.

However, another participant said that she tries to be standing up most of the time in a position to reach all the students and encourage WTC. Another strategy to express immediacy by teachers in this study was to address students by the first name basis. Nonetheless, as seniority still affects communicative behavior in Iran, and addressing a student by first name is not a common practice in the educational setting, the teachers stated that they considered the language learners’ age while addressing them. What the teachers found interesting was their older students’ tendency to be called by their first name because they said they felt comfortable to join the communicative activate.

Humor, as another motivational teaching strategy [54], was emphasized by the teachers. They pointed to the determining role of laughter and humor in the atmosphere of the class especially when engendered by the teacher himself/herself. They asserted that it eases the tension and opens the atmosphere to participation except in some classes with too many noisy students, in which they preferred to be somewhat more serious in order to be able to control them.

To encourage students’ participation, eye contact was also mentioned as one of the facilitating factors. One of the teachers said “some of the reticent students who don’t want to participate usually sit somewhere out of sight, so when you keep eye contact with them you make them involve” (ID: 18, age: 32). As Richmond asserted “when there is little eye contact between students and teacher, students do not know when to ask, or how to approach the teacher” (2002, p.73).

(2) Teachers’ Support. One of the determining teacher factors that encourage learners’ WTC is teachers’ support [10]. The teachers noted that they avoided being contentious toward their students. These teachers noted that they encouraged more participation through a variety of strategies. For instance, they gave the students the talking turn and avoided being the sole speaker; otherwise, the learners would become bored and not listen; as a result, they would withdraw and not participate. One of the teachers shared a recollection of her school years as a student stating,

One of my teachers used to turn his back to us and write on the board without explaining the lesson. He asked questions and then answered himself. We felt suffocated in the class because we were not allowed to talk or we would be called names (ID: 2, age: 32).

The teachers said they tried to listen to their students attentively while putting on a welcoming expression, respect their ideas by thanking them for sharing their ideas, and be sympathetic to their problems. Teachers’ listening to their students as a counselor, in or outside the class, attentively acts as a reinforcement and can change their students’ communication behavior [55]. Caring teachers, according to Steele [56], respect their students through encouraging words and the “often-stated belief” that students can remove learning barriers. One of the teachers noted when questions and problems are dealt with respectfully, they do not feel humiliated, and as a result, they are more willing to talk. She added she convinces the students that what they say is interesting and worthy of attention. As in Iranian culture, girls’ silence is a sign of politeness; one of the teachers felt the need to remind the reticent students of their power and to encourage them to express their opinion on the issues raised in the class. One of the teachers said, “when I feel a student is

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<th>Main categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Facilitating factors</td>
<td>Developing positive relationship</td>
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<td>Immediacy</td>
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<td>Teachers’ support</td>
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<td>Fairness</td>
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<td>Teachers’ enthusiasm</td>
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<td>Choice of the topic</td>
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<td>Teachers’ congruence</td>
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<td>(2) Hindering factors</td>
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<td>Institutional expectations</td>
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not able to answer my question, I provide a model answer or call upon another student to answer and finally I go back to her for the answer” (ID: 12, age: 34).

(3) Fairness. Another effective strategy the teachers employed in their classes was to ensure fairness to prevent the students’ unwillingness to participate. In the educational setting, needs-based fairness has been advised by Ruth and Berry [57]. Fairness, in this logic, does not mean that teachers provide equal support and instruction to all the students but more to those who need to achieve academically (Collins, 2003, Forlin and Forlin, 2002 as cited in [57]). Despite seeming reasonable, needs-based fairness may not sound fair in some situations from the students’ point of view. For instance, the teachers maintained that female students were more sensitive about teachers’ treatment and they sometimes complained about their discriminatory behavior. For example, when the teacher admired a student over her achievement, the others expected to be praised, too; otherwise, they would avoid participation.

In addition, teachers considered unfair treatment detrimental to the atmosphere of the class believing that in case of unfair treatment students start distancing, lose confidence in them, and become reticent. In general, teachers’ fair treatment might affect classroom atmosphere because it may affect students’ cohesiveness. Clement et al. [58] found that classroom interaction and learning were considerably affected by student cohesiveness because learners in a cohesive group may feel more motivated to study and do learning tasks (Peng, 2009, as cited in [59]).

(4) Teachers’ Enthusiasm. Teachers’ enthusiasm, active presentation, and dynamism cause pupils to like him or her [30], which may reduce tension in the classroom atmosphere and foster participation. The interviewed teachers agreed that their liveliness encouraged the learners’ WTC. One of the teachers stated “I disagree with the idea that a teacher needs to nod and say things like ok and then move on to another student. This kills life in the class and hinders participation” (ID: 10, age: 37). As Steele stated, teaching without passion has a “pedestrian quality.” The teacher presents the lesson but doesn’t try to make the experience memorable [56]. Recalling a school memory, another teacher said “one day I noticed the teacher was so energetic, lively and the next day she looked tired and angry, then I didn’t dare to speak. I preferred to keep quiet” (ID: 8, age: 36).

3.1.2. Choice of the Topic. Several researchers emphasized the importance of topic in raising interaction (Cao and Philip, 2006) [4, 11, 60]. In addition to learners’ familiarity with the topic and register done by Cao [4], the participants believed that in order to encourage their learners’ involvement, they brought their personal life and experience to classroom. This built confidence and encouraged them to talk about their own real-life problems, interests, and experiences. They said since students are mostly the same age, have more or less similar problems at school, society, or even families, and share homogeneous cultural background, the real-life examples are more tangible to them. They also noted that the topics raised by the students are so appealing that the whole class can become involved. One of the teachers believed that the conversation largely depends on the attitude the teacher has toward the topic. One of the teachers believed that in order to involve all students in the discussion, she usually writes a range of topics on the board and the students vote; the teacher chooses the topic, which gets majority of the approval.

3.1.3. Teaching Style. Challenging activities and teachers’ error correction strategies were mentioned as the most important facilitating factors related to teaching style. Each of these factors merits a detailed elaboration, which is as follows.

3.1.4. Challenging Activities. The teachers stated that challenging questions such as referential questions can force even the most reserved to state their ideas. The literature about referential questions confirms that these questions make for longer and more complex student utterances than display questions [61]. In addition, they believed when it comes to a warm up, asking a general question is important. For instance, one of the teachers said, “I usually ask serial questions rather than disjointed ones to encourage talk” (ID: 24, age: 39). Another one noted, “If the teacher can engender a series of questions and responses based on the responses she gets from her students, a better conversation and exchange of ideas will be witnessed” (ID: 6, age: 30). They also pointed to the significance of using different questions to challenge the learners to take part and as a result, increase the amount of time allocated to student talk. One of the teachers believed that in order not to miss the engagement of low-proficiency students in challenging activities, teachers need to give more “talking time” to them, so that they can express themselves.

3.1.5. Error Correction. As one of the commonly applied strategies in the classroom, error correction has always been a controversial issue in L2 classes. Some of the previous studies [62–65] found very strong preferences for metalinguistic and recasts among Iranian EFL learners, and Japanese EFL learners and learners of Japanese, respectively. Unlike Kaivanpanah et al.’s [62] findings which did not reveal any clear preference for immediate versus delayed CF in oral communication, the results of Zhang and Rahimi [64] study indicated that the immediate corrective feedback was ranked the first by both high- and low-anxiety Iranian EFL learners. In fact, their study echoes Mackey’s [66] view that CF is the most effective when it is given in context at the time when the learner makes an error. Whatever is the approach to corrective feedback, the principle purpose, especially in oral interaction, is not to interrupt the flow of speech. When asked about the type of feedback provided in the classes in order not to impede the progress of interaction, the participants said they avoided correcting them on the
spot, unless the mistake was so serious that they had to stop them and have on the spot correction. The teachers also stated they tried to wait for some time to see if the students were able to finish their sentences or correct themselves. They mostly agreed with correcting their mistakes indirectly or by eliciting self-correction.

One of the controversial issues among participants was peer-correction. Some of them believed students prefer teacher-correction rather than peer-correction, which is a mentality rooted in teachers’ authority; however, some allowed peer-correction because they believed it could lead to all students’ attentiveness and participation in the class.

3.1.6. Teachers’ Cognitive Congruence. Cognitive congruence or teacher’s adaptability refers to the ability of teachers to express themselves in a comprehensible language by using concepts students use and explaining them in ways students can easily understand [67]. Teachers’ congruence or adaptability according to interviewees affects EFL learners’ WTC. As one of the teachers said when the lesson is beyond the students’ comprehension level, they withdraw and become reticent. The teachers agreed that when students do not grasp the concepts, they lose their confidence; therefore, they even avoid the teacher’s eye contact. One of the teachers believed that “by encouraging students to let us know whether they understand the lesson or not, we can help them become more involved” (ID: 25, age: 55).

3.2. Hindering Factors. Some other factors were mentioned as debilitating ones to interaction: (1) teachers’ role, (2) teaching style, and (3) institutional expectations.

3.2.1. Teachers’ Role. According to Murray and Christison [68], “Student-teacher interactions mostly reflect the dominant societal values such as those related to gender, class, ethnicity, or race. Classroom discourse, then, can either perpetuate the power imbalances of society, or challenge those power relations” (p. 49). Regarding the educational context of Iran, the teachers in this study said that teacher-centered classes are more common in Iran. Most teachers prefer to hold the floor and not leave it to the students in order not to have problems with time and class management; in addition, just few of them encourage talk in the classroom. As a result, teachers talk most of the time [69].

3.2.2. Teaching Style. As it was already mentioned (Section 1), the teaching style may affect students’ participation pattern [9–11]. The teachers agreed that the dominant teaching style in the educational system of Iran affected the students’ expectations and participation patterns. They asserted that due to the effect of sheer teacher-centered methods at schools, students expected to be spoon-fed in these institutes as well; therefore, they adopted more passive roles in the class. They also added, owing to the dominant system of education, students did not have a sense of cooperation and did not develop the social skill of working in groups or pairs which might encourage WTC (Cao and Philip, 2006) [14, 70]. As a result, teachers were not in favor of the pair/group work. Besides, the participants said they actually did not know how to implement the group/pair work strategies appropriately in the class. As Murray and Chrisitson [68] noted, cooperative learning is a complicated practice because it is based on a set of skills and principles, and it requires that learners realize the value of group work, develop the necessary language skills for group work, be given time to practice the skills, and learn how to process their experiences as a group and think about them.

3.2.3. Institutional Expectations. As Richards [71] said “Different types of institutions create their own “culture,” that is, settings where people interact and where patterns emerge for communication, decision making, role relations, and conduct” (p. 97). The participants were complaining about the intensive syllabus they were dictated by the institutes to follow and advised to fully adhere to it, which they believed affected communication patterns in the class and teachers’ freedom to encourage more interaction. Sharing her teaching session, one of the participants said, “I told the students while speaking about cats that I don’t like them and that they give me bad vibes! The supervisor who was observing the class later told me that we are not supposed to talk about our feelings or experiences!” (ID: 5, age: 28). Another teacher highlighted the role of materials covered in the class and mentioned “discussion topics are the ones related to book material which don’t sometimes apply to students’ real life or their interests” (ID: 11, age: 37); as a result, learners are not willing to talk most often. As Alagheband [72] said in Iran, decision making considering planning, curriculum development, material development, and methodology is within the powers of central government, which despite its advantages in creating unity and order, seizes the opportunity from individuals and does not leave a room for their creativity.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study attempted to examine Iranian EFL teachers’ perspectives toward socioaffective and pedagogic strategy use in engendering WTC in the classroom, with a focus on culture. The results of the study revealed some facilitating factors such as developing positive relationships, choice of the topic, teaching style, and teachers’ enthusiasm and some hindering factors including teachers’ role, teaching style, and institutional expectations.

The data gathered through the focus group interview indicated that immediacy behaviors such as using students’ first name, eye contact, appearance, and sense of humor strengthen the relationship with students, which is decisive in enhancing WTC. However, considering the space, they were distant due to accepted power rules in the system of education, which is a manifestation of Iranian culture. Regarding humor, the study confirmed the results from the
recent research [73–75] indicating that humor leads to a safe, supportive, and motivating environment. The teachers’ sense of humor also encourages the inhibited students to participate when they find the atmosphere congenial and welcoming.

The study also highlighted the impact of teachers’ supportive behavior on learners’ WTC. When teachers respect their students by using praise words, sympathize with their students, place a value on what learners say, and make them believe in themselves, they find the courage to participate. This corroborates Kang’s [16] findings, which indicated that teachers’ friendly and supportive behavior was effective in students’ involvement. Confirmed by the previous research (Cao and Philip, 2006) [11, 16], the importance of topic was also highlighted by this study. According to the participants, students volunteer to participate when the topic is related to their real life and interest. They also believed teachers’ attitudes toward the topic is important to arouse enthusiasm in learners. Teachers’ enthusiasm was found to be another facilitating factor in engendering learners’ talk. It appears when teachers are lively and enthusiastic, they affect classroom social climate; as a result, they may encourage WTC. The teachers also found discriminatory behavior detrimental believing that it is exclusive; therefore, it leads to students’ distancing and unwillingness to communicate. Teachers’ congruence was discovered to be another influential factor in the learners’ WTC. Therefore, it is suggested that EFL teachers use specific discourse moves to make the input more comprehensible and prevent learners’ reticence. For instance, using certain discourse moves such as clarification requests and comprehension checks would make input more comprehensible [76].

Another point emphasized by the teachers was challenging students by asking referential questions rather than display questions to encourage talk. This is also recommended by McNeill [61], who believed that these kinds of questions trigger longer and more complex responses. Regarding error correction, although the results revealed self-correction and peer-correction to trigger talk in the classroom, the students still preferred teachers’ correction. This may refer to Iranian predisposition to uncertainty avoidance, which also affects their learning pattern. In fact, the students trust their teachers as a source of knowledge to alleviate their anxiety in case of being exposed to complicated learning situations.

In addition to facilitating factors, the results of the study revealed some hindering factors in students’ participation, in general, WTC, and in particular, in the class. Most of these hindering factors trace back to the cultural context of Iran, which affects the system of education and teacher-student interaction. It was revealed that the teacher’s role in class determines students’ roles; therefore, in teacher-fronted classes, students are not afforded enough opportunity to express themselves. In essence, in countries with high levels of power distance, such as Iran, daily lives of children partially dictate them to obey those in positions of authority; therefore, they learn to accept the teacher’s words and not challenge those [39].

However, despite the fact that teachers are the source of knowledge and must be in control of the class, they should create a balance between their role and students’, so that students adopt a more active role and take on the responsibility for their own learning. In fact, except for some teacher-fronted tasks requiring high levels of complex teacher talk and very little learner participation, others should result in more active learner participation [69]. As Murray and Christison [68] stated, “In terms of language development, English language learners can expect to get more input, more complex language input, and more opportunities to refine communication through natural talk while participating in well-designed cooperative learning activities” (p. 191). In spite of this fact, cooperative learning, according to the results of this study, is not widely practiced in EFL classes in Iran. As Javidan and Dastmalchi [39] noted, Iran is very low in institutional collectivism but high in ingroup collectivism; consequently, this in-group collectivism leads to strong family orientation and reduction in “radius of trust.” In such cultures, members learn to trust their ingroup members but not outsiders. This tendency also affects the way children are educated. According to Javidan and Dastmalchi [39], “In Iran all academic work is based on individual achievement and entails little if any group work; little opportunity is provided for children to learn collective action throughout the 12 years of schooling and even in university classes” (p. 132). This may deny the students the chance to share their learning and ideas with the others and hinder the interaction among students.

Therefore, the results of this study suggested that the teachers in EFL contexts, especially in educational systems similar to the context of this study, need to be cultural-wise and try to create cohesion and trust between members in the class and encourage group activities. The results also showed that institutional expectations and rules are limiting and do not allow creativity for the teachers and students. In fact, Iranian cultures’ static orientation toward the present and respect to tradition and adaptability [35] on the one hand and power rules on the other hand affect individuals’ decision-making abilities. However, according to Alagheband [72], although one of the goals of education in any society is enhancing the status-quo, it should also be the source of development. Therefore, it is suggested that institutions take into account the ongoing learning needs and make some changes to the system to fulfill the EFL learners’ present needs.

Nonetheless, an important point which merits a mention here is to avoid stereotyping cultural characteristics. Besides, although “culture is always a collective phenomenon, it can be connected to different collectives and within each collective there is a variety of individuals” ([77], p. 3). However, Murray and Christison [68] noted that cultures are not static but dynamic and prone to changes, especially in this era of vast communication; therefore, any shift in people’s belief and value may be the consequence of intercultural interactions, which may especially be true about EFL teachers and learners. In addition, the way the learners’ identity is shaped through encountering experiences in the learning environment should not be ignored. These personal
experiences may either reinforce previous values and beliefs or reshape them [68]. In spite of the abovementioned debilitating factors present in the educational context of Iran, what was gleaned from the data (as the data are driven from a small-scale study in one region in Iran, a city in East Azarbaijan, with its own particular geographical and ethnic group characteristics interwoven with cultural background, the ideas expressed by teachers in this study might be suggestive rather than conclusive) bears a witness to the idea that the communication rules in educational setting of Iran have started to be relaxing, at least in language classes. For instance, the teachers face some students who resist discipline in the classroom and do not wait for the teachers’ permission to talk, or they feel intimate enough to give compliments on the teachers’ appearance, which was considered a kind of por’ru (rude) behavior in the past [40]. In addition, the teachers said that they sometimes let their students correct not only their peers but also the teacher. This was not the case that some decades ago as one of the teachers said from her personal experience as a student that the teacher would not let them express their opinion.

Since teachers’ socioaffective and pedagogic strategies may have a great influence on students’ WTC, it is imperative that teachers integrate them into their teaching. The EFL teachers should sometimes question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in their own environment (Byram, 1997, as cited in [78]) and substitute them with facilitating classroom practices.

5. Limitations and Further Research

The findings of the study highlighted the importance of teacher factors in boosting learners’ WTC; however, they are subject to at least three limitations. First, as the study was part of a larger study for the Ph.D. dissertation, the sample size was small due to practicality problems in terms of time and scope. Therefore, further research with larger sample size regarding the role of teachers would be more worthwhile and generalizable to Iranian culture. Second, as Iran is a multilingual and multicultural country, a future study investigating teacher factors in the other regions or a focus group made up of teachers from different regions would yield more results that are representative. Another limitation refers to the gender of the participants. The classes in the educational system of Iran (except for university classes) are segregated; as a result, we were able to choose merely female teachers, teaching to female students. Conducting research with male teachers may render different results because males and females have different communication styles [79].

Appendix

Eliminate causes of stress (immediacy) as much as you can and you will see the result in form of a more relaxed atmosphere (immediacy) in the class. You could also try using encouraging words plus more words of praise (support) and attentive listening (support) to whatever they say, important or not, and you will have their appreciation as well as increased participation in an attempt to win your approval. Risk of humiliating oneself is a key barrier to their self-expression, so if you can clarify the fact that they are there to learn and no matter what they say, they will not be laughed at (support), you earn their trust and hence their cooperation. In addition, challenging questions (challenging activities) can force even the most reserved to defend themselves and their ideas... last but not the least is the fact that since you are mostly dealing with girls, you have to constantly remind them of their powers (support), that they are allowed (and it is ok for them) to express their ideas.

Data Availability

We will provide the data used for this study if it is required by the journal.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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