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Original Research

Listening Self-efficacy and Ambiguity Tolerance: Are They Associated with Listening Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate?

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Abstract

This study explores the association among listening self-efficacy (LS), ambiguity tolerance (AT), listening anxiety (LA), and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Iranian EFL learners. Drawing upon previous research, which highlights the significance of these traits in language learning outcomes, this study investigated their associations in an Iranian EFL context. A sample of 100 Iranian EFL learners participated in the study, completing established scales including Kim's (2005) Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale, Kassem's (2015) Listening Self-Efficacy Scale, MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) Willingness to Communicate Scale, and Ely's (1995) Second Language Ambiguity Tolerance Questionnaire. Employing a cross-sectional research design, the authors examined how LS and AT relate to LA and WTC, and their predictive power in language learning outcomes. The Pearson correlation results revealed significant correlations between LS and WTC, and AT and LA, highlighting the importance of these personality traits in language learning contexts. Regression analysis indicated that LS, AT, and WTC significantly predicted LA, with LS emerging as the strongest predictor. Additionally, LS and LA significantly predicted WTC, with LS being the primary predictor. These results carry practical implications for educators, learners, and practitioners in the EFL classroom. Teachers can implement strategies to foster LS and AT, reduce LA, and promote WTC among learners, thereby enhancing language learning experiences. Learners can actively work on developing self-awareness and adopting positive attitudes toward language learning. The findings highlight the importance of considering personality traits in language teaching and learning and provide practical insights for enhancing language learning experiences in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Ambiguity Tolerance; Listening Anxiety; Listening Self-Efficacy; Willingness to Communicate.

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension represents one of the major components of oral speech communication which provides a foundation for the development of other aspects of speech communication and cognitive development (Kim & Petscher, 2021; Masalimova et al., 2016). According to Hedge (2000), 45% of the time a person is engaged in some form of communication is taken up by listening when compared to other language skills. Furthermore, as Fung and Macaro (2021) and Smojver (2007) argue, not only is listening comprehension considered the most frequently used language skill, but it is also a necessary prerequisite to other language skills. Vandergrift (1999) considers listening comprehension to be a highly integrative skill, which means that it can help improve language learning/acquisition and that it can help enhance the betterment of other language skills.

Apart from the crucial role of listening comprehension in learning a language, to Floyd (1985), listening is a process that entails hearing, attending to, understanding, evaluating, and responding to spoken messages (as cited in Bozorgian, 2012). In addition to drawing on the listener's background knowledge, listening involves more than giving consideration to linguistic input and knowing the different aspects of cognitive demands made upon the listener (Chen & Chen, 2021; Sadighi & Zare, 2006; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). In effect, a listener's ability to increase the efforts required

for listening comprehension can be influenced by many affective variables. Therefore, successful language learning, especially developing the listening skill, cannot be merely attributed to the way the learners are taught, the skills they develop, or the strategies they deploy in their learning (Rahimi & Abedi, 2014).

Affective variables in foreign language education encompass two interrelated aspects: personal learner characteristics such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, and the dynamics between learners as well as between learners and instructors, which involve teaching approaches, the learning atmosphere, and interpersonal interactions (Dong et al., 2021; Minghe & Yuan, 2013). Ellis (2004) states that these variables are among the other ones--namely abilities, learner perceptions about L2 learning, and learning strategies--which are responsible for individual differences in learning a language. In listening comprehension ability, as Rubin (1994) claims, the roles these variables play are likely related to attention and memory performance. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) acknowledge such a claim and argue that learner characteristics will shape the way in which listeners respond to a listening activity and thus influence the listening outcome. In general, the language learner's backgrounds and feelings may have an impact on what he/she learns (Cheng-Chang, 2013).

While listening comprehension is a crucial part of language acquisition that supports the development of speaking, reading, and writing abilities (Karimi, 2021; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), further research is still needed to explore the listener-related factors that influence success in listening comprehension. This is because a clearer insight into the learner factors influencing L2 listening comprehension may help clarify some challenges encountered by L2 learners and, as a result, inform the methods by which listening comprehension is taught in an L2 teaching/learning context (Vandergrift & Baker, 2015).

While previous research has examined bivariate relationships among these variables, no study to our knowledge has tested a model that simultaneously includes listening self-efficacy, ambiguity tolerance, listening anxiety, and willingness to communicate in a single regression framework within an Iranian EFL context. This integrated approach allows us to examine the unique predictive power of each variable while controlling for the others, thereby revealing relative effect sizes and possible mediation patterns not evident in separate studies.

In light of this, to better understand the issue within the context of EFL teaching in Iran, this study examined the potential relationships between EFL learners' listening self-efficacy and ambiguity tolerance, and their listening anxiety and willingness to communicate in Iranian EFL classrooms. The study aimed to sensitize EFL teachers to the above-mentioned learner variables that may act as negative or positive factors during the process of learning English as a foreign language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ambiguity Tolerance

Tolerance of ambiguity, according to Chapelle and Roberts (1984), refers to an individual's capacity to remain rational and composed when faced with situations where the meaning of all stimuli is unclear. Put differently, ambiguity tolerance describes the spectrum of responses—from avoidance to attraction—toward stimuli that are experienced as novel, intricate, ever-evolving, or subject to various contradictory meanings (McLain, 1993). Thus, people with high ambiguity tolerance tend to interpret unclear circumstances as “desirable”; others with low ambiguity tolerance as “sources of threat” (Budner, 1962; Peng, 2021). Erten and Topkaya (2009) argue that ambiguity is an unavoidable aspect of acquiring a new language, and that a moderate level of ambiguity actually supports more effective language learning.

2.2. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy relates to beliefs learners have about themselves as learners (Graham, 2007). More clearly speaking about self-efficacy not as a personality characteristic, Maddux (2009) and Myyry et al. (2021) claim that it is concerned not with what individuals believe they *will* do but what individuals believe they *can* do to reach a desired end in specific domains and certain circumstances. Such beliefs play an important role in nearly every aspect of a person's life, including his/her foreign language learning career (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Jabbarifar, 2011). As this trait is domain-specific, individuals are more likely to have high self-efficacy in one domain and low self-efficacy in another (Bárkányi, 2021; Smith et al., 2011). In other words, depending on different aspects of language, people tend to display different degrees

of self-efficacy. In listening, self-efficacy relates to listeners' beliefs or confidence in their capacity to plan and implement the necessary actions to comprehend speech across different listening situations (Smith et al., 2011).

2.3. Willingness to Communicate

The construct of willingness to communicate (WTC) was formerly employed in the first language communication setting, but now it forms an essential part of fluent speech production in a second language, as an ultimate goal for most L2 learners (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). Generally speaking, MacIntyre (1994) considers this construct as a rudimentary and constant personality characteristic in the interpersonal communication process. He also claims that this stable pattern forms individual differences over a period of time and across various situations. Therefore, it appears that consistency and stability are two key factors of this construct. On the contrary, MacIntyre et al. (2011) confine the definition of WTC to an educational language setting and conceptualize it as “a situation-based variable” which is representative of an intention to engage in communication with a specific individual at a given moment. Inspired by MacIntyre (1994), Ellis (2004) perceives WTC as a construct partially on learners' personality and partially on their inherent motivation to perform specific functions in the classroom.

2.4. Listening Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety lies among the variables that can account for the emergence of individual variations in the successful learning of a second language (Liu & Yuan, 2021; Wang, 2010). In the realm of listening skill, anxiety develops a response to listening, which may manifest emotionally through feelings such as sadness, anger, or fear, or physically through symptoms like an accelerated heartbeat and sweating (Melanlioglu, 2013). Melanlioglu (2013) argues that this variable generally manifests itself when learners encounter a given listening situation that is more different or newer than they have ever faced before and that it is enhanced when the listener cannot hear what is said, misunderstands what is heard or draws mistaken inferences from utterances.

The logic behind combining all these four variables in one whole correlational study design is rooted in theories that inform their interrelatedness. On the one hand, the study draws upon Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, suggesting that self-efficacy beliefs affect individuals' anxiety levels and their intentions to behave in certain ways. In the L2 listening context, learners with stronger self-efficacy are expected to experience less anxiety and greater willingness to engage in listening tasks. Moreover, ambiguity tolerance as the capacity to cope with incomplete or uncertain information—has been linked to reduced anxiety and increased willingness to communicate (Ely, 1995). This study integrates these constructs in a single model, extending earlier work that examined them in isolation. On the other hand, according to Krashen's (1985) Input hypothesis and Swain's (2000) output hypothesis, both comprehensible input and output are needed for successful acquisition of language skills. Accordingly, meticulously planned output activities (production) can help enhance the learner's conscious receptive knowledge of the language forms. From this perspective, receptive and productive skills are interrelated and go hand in hand throughout the language learning process. Although Krashen's (1985) Input and Swain's (2000) Output Hypotheses emphasize the role of comprehensible input/output in acquisition, they do not directly account for affective variables such as self-efficacy or anxiety. Therefore, the present study complements the input/output framework by examining how these individual differences interact to affect listening comprehension and communication outcomes.

Moreover, learner personality traits can be said to help promote or impede the development of these language skills. For example, when learners feel under time pressure during a listening activity, this induces anxiety because they have to respond to this receptive input by answering specific questions in speaking or writing (output production) (Arnold, 2000; Graham, 2006; Mendelsohn, 1994; Vandergift & Goh, 2012). Therefore, the authors of the present article hypothesized that addressing these four factors in an integrated study may reveal how learner traits such as anxiety, self-efficacy and ambiguity tolerance can jointly contribute to or impede receptive skills (listening in this study) and productive skills (as partly reflected in willingness to communicate as it can apply to both receptive and productive language skills) in line with the output hypothesis mentioned above.

2.5. Related Study Findings

Some studies have focused on tolerance of ambiguity among English language learners in different contexts. The findings by Atef-Vahid et al. (2011) revealed that Iranian EFL learners with a high rate of tolerating ambiguity tended to attain higher scores on cloze tests, while those with a low level of ambiguity tolerance were likely to get lower scores.

Bagheri and Rassaei (2021) and Zarei (2012) found that a high level of ambiguity tolerance can significantly influence the performance of Iranian EFL university students on a C-test, which is a comprehensive written evaluation of overall language skills and part of the reduced redundancy test family. The C-test comprises five to six short, authentic, and complete texts, with the first and last sentences left intact. Starting from the second sentence, the "rule of two" is followed: starting with the second word of the second sentence, the second half of every second word is deleted. Numbers, proper names, and single-letter words remain untouched, while the deletions are otherwise carried out mechanically. This process repeats until the necessary number of blank spaces has been formed. The texts are organized by increasing difficulty, with the simplest texts presented first (Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1981, as cited by Karimi, 2011). In another study, Dewale and Ip (2013) reported a significantly negative strong correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and ambiguity tolerance among 73 secondary school students in Hong Kong. In other words, the more tolerant of ambiguity the participants were, the more relaxed they felt during their English lessons.

The studies conducted by Chu et al. (2015) and Myyry et al. (2021) demonstrated that the students with higher ambiguity tolerance obtained significantly higher scores in overall Chinese proficiency than those with moderate or low ambiguity tolerance. Although these studies have emphasized a high level of ambiguity tolerance in EFL learners' success in a specific aspect of language, Baran-Lucarz's (2009) findings showed that "not only AT [ambiguity tolerant] learners are not better than AIT [ambiguity intolerant] students in the case of non-instructed FL pronunciation, but that actually it is more advantageous to have a lower level of AT in this language situation" (p. 96). El-Koumy (2000), however, suggested a moderate level of ambiguity for this purpose. His findings showed that participants in the middle tolerance group achieved meaningfully better scores in reading comprehension compared to those in the low and high ambiguity tolerance groups.

Kim and Petscher (2021) and Xu's (2011) found that listening anxiety could be decreased by increasing self-confidence among EFL learners. Their findings also showed a meaningful association between listening self-efficacy and willingness to communicate. Furthermore, it was found that listening self-efficacy contributes to the prediction of willingness to communicate. Likewise, Liu and Lin (2025) found that diminished rates of listening anxiety enhanced listening performance. Therefore, increasing listening self-efficacy can reduce listening anxiety and, in turn, reduced anxiety can then positively improve listening comprehension (Chen & Chen, 2021; Liu & Lin, 2025; Mills et al., 2006; Sadighi & Zare, 2006).

Research evidence exists regarding the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on listening comprehension. Tabrizi and Saeidi (2015), for example, found a statistically significant and positive correlation between self-efficacy and listening comprehension ability among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In accord with these findings, Rahimi and Abedini (2009) also found that a high rate of self-efficacy in listening comprehension positively influenced the learners' listening test outcome. In another study carried out by Todaka (2013) in the Japanese context, it was found that EFL learners' listening self-efficacy beliefs and listening comprehension were significantly associated.

Dewale and Ips (2013) and Hoang and Wyatt (2021) found that anxiety and tolerance of ambiguity were negatively related in foreign language learning. Furthermore, the findings indicated a negative relationship between low ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate. In the same vein, Karimi (2021) and Vahedi and Fatemi (2016) found that ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate were highly correlated with each other. Based on these findings, high ambiguity tolerance can facilitate willingness to engage in speaking, while low ambiguity tolerance, as a debilitating variable, can hinder willingness to participate in communication.

In line with the above-mentioned studies, Sharif and Ferdous (2012) focused on sources and suggestions to lower anxiety in listening comprehension. Based on the results, the sources of listening anxiety were linked to categories pertaining to teachers and learners (39%), materials and process (95%), and other categories (47%). In this study, it was thus postulated that creating a low-anxiety classroom environment helps EFL learners to become more actively involved in listening activities. Similarly, Vogely (1998) identified some sources of anxiety accompanying listening comprehension among foreign language learners. The participants' reported sources were related to categories concerning input characteristics (51%), process-related aspects of listening communication (30%), instructional factors (6%), and personal factors (13%). In a separate study, Chang (2008) identified the primary factors contributing to listening anxiety in learning English as a foreign language as low confidence in understanding spoken English, the compulsory nature of English listening courses, and concerns about the difficulty of tests.

Among other variables, willingness to communicate has also attracted the attention of a number of researchers over the years. They have concentrated on willingness to communicate in connection with other diverse variables involved in L2 learning, including motives to communicate with the instructor, intensive immersion programs, rehearsal and strategic planning, dynamics of factors involved in WTC, affective variables and teacher immediacy, and critical thinking (Amiryousefi, 2018; Chen & Chen, 2021; Grant, 2018; Jamalifar & Salehi, 2017; Peng, 2021; Riahi et al., 2017; Syed & Kuzborska, 2018; Yu, 2011).

Concerning the variables addressed by the current study, Akbarzadeh and Narafshan (2016) examined the association between anxiety-provoking elements and willingness to communicate in English language classrooms. They reported a negative relationship between these two variables among 350 female high school students in Iran. These factors encompassed the fear of making grammatical errors, anxiety about insufficient vocabulary knowledge, the impact of teacher feedback, and a lack of positive self-perception.

In another study, Piechurska-Kuciel (2015) examined the role of predictors underlying L2 WTC among 621 Polish adolescents who were learning English in the context of secondary grammar school. Her findings indicated that levels of language anxiety were a powerful predictor of L2 WTC among the participants. Also, Sadat Vahedi and Hosseini Fatemi's (2016) study with undergraduate EFL students indicated that ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate were highly correlated.

In another study on 304 senior high school students in the Chinese context, Wang and Liu (2017) reported that the students were not highly willing to communicate in English. Additionally, it was discovered that the participants were undergoing a considerable amount of anxiety in their English classroom, which might adversely affect their willingness to communicate. Bashosh et al. (2013) investigated the association between foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate among 60 Iranian EFL undergraduates majoring in English translation. The results revealed no significant correlation between the two variables. However, Riasati (2018) found that Iranian EFL students showed a willingness to speak English in the classroom that was above moderate levels, and this willingness to communicate had a negative correlation with language learning anxiety. Findings by Setiawati et al. (2023) indicated that learners who enjoy high self-efficacy exhibit favorable behaviors toward their English listening abilities, making a lot of effort while tackling challenging tasks. Likewise, Zhang and Xu (2024) found that L2 listening anxiety and self-efficacy both directly and indirectly influence EFL listening comprehension, mediated by metacognitive awareness. This mediation effect was further consolidated by Sadeghpour and Najafi Sarem (2025), who observed that metacognitive scaffolding strategies contributed to diminished listening anxiety and improved engagement by EFL learners in Iran. Another study by Canaran et al. (2024) showed that listeners' control over input was moderately and positively associated with their self-efficacy levels, which, in turn, had a strong positive correlation with proficiency in L2 listening. Solhi and Derakhshan (2026) found that enjoyment had a positive effect on the association between motivation in L2 listening and self-efficacy, with boredom and anxiety contributing adversely to this relationship.

The present study draws on an aspect probably not yet touched upon in the literature, i.e., investigating the four interrelated variables in one integrative study. To this end, this study was launched to investigate any possible relationship between EFL learners' listening self-efficacy and ambiguity tolerance and their listening anxiety and willingness to communicate. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the researchers proposed the research questions as follows:

1. Is there any relationship between the participants' listening self-efficacy, listening anxiety and willingness to communicate?
2. Is there any possible relationship between the participants' ambiguity tolerance, listening anxiety and willingness to communicate?
3. Which variable best predicts listening anxiety: listening self-efficacy, willingness to communicate, or ambiguity tolerance?
4. Which variable best predicts willingness to communicate: listening self-efficacy, listening anxiety, or ambiguity tolerance?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants comprised senior EFL students at the University of Zanjan, Iran. To select the participants, the researchers used 3 intact classes encompassing 120 EFL students, out of whom 100 EFL students responded to the questionnaires and returned them to the researchers. The participants were female EFL students, and their age range fell within 20-28 years old. Despite convenience sampling, the three intact classes were representative of the university's senior EFL cohort in terms of age and language proficiency (upper-intermediate). Also, it is worth mentioning that a priori power analysis for multiple linear regression was conducted. With three predictors, $\alpha = .05$, a moderate effect size ($f^2 = .15$), and power = .80, the sample size needed was 77 participants. The current sample of 100 exceeds this minimum, providing adequate statistical power to detect medium effects

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale

To obtain the data pertinent to listening anxiety, the researchers used the Foreign Language Listening Anxiety Scale developed by Kim (2005). This questionnaire contains 33 Likert-type items scored on a 4-point scale, ranging from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1). The items are meant to measure the listeners' rate of anxiety under diverse pressure factors, such as getting stuck on one or two unknown words (item 1), hearing words pronounced differently from the way they are pronounced by the listener (item 3), the listener's worry not to understand a fast speaker (item 4), stress and intonation unfamiliarity (item 31), etc. This scale has revealed high levels of validity and reliability in ample studies (Ipek, 2009; Kimura, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wu, 2011). Kim (2005) reported an internal consistency alpha of .93. This alpha in the present study was calculated at .86.

3.2.2. Listening Self-efficacy Scale

The Listening Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Kassem (2015) comprises forty items, which require the participants to respond to a four-point rating scale. This scale ranges from 4 points for strongly agree to 1 point for strongly disagree. The negative items are reversely coded. The scale focuses on five main components: (1) progress, (2) observational comparison, (3) physiological states, (4) strategic awareness, and (5) challenge. However, the items are not organized explicitly under these five components. Rather, they are randomly arranged to focus on diverse aspects of these components, such as pleasure at listening, handling challenging listening materials, volunteering to answer questions, etc. Kassem used expert judgment (three EFL professors) to ensure the validity of the scale. He also piloted it with 30 EFL students and reported an internal consistency alpha of .92. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha was calculated at .76.

3.2.3. Willingness to Communicate Scale

To collect the data pertinent to willingness to communicate in a foreign language learning classroom, the researchers administered an adapted version of MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) Willingness to Communicate Scale. This questionnaire requires the participants to answer 27 items in four skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing to measure their willingness to communicate during the class tasks on the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. These items contain a five-point Likert-type response ranging from almost always willing to never willing. According to MacIntyre et al. (2001), this scale proved to be valid and reliable. Separate alpha levels were indicative of high consistency for each skill: speaking (8 items, $\alpha = .81$), comprehension (5 items, $\alpha = .83$), reading (6 items, $\alpha = .83$), and writing (8 items, $\alpha = .88$). The overall internal consistency of this instrument was calculated at .85 in the present study.

3.2.4. Second Language Ambiguity Tolerance Questionnaire

To measure the participants' tolerance of ambiguity, the researchers used an adopted version of a questionnaire used by Li and He (2016). The questionnaire was initially created by Ely (1995) to measure Spanish students' ambiguity tolerance related to second language learning. In this questionnaire, the participants are expected to respond to 12 Likert-type items using a four-point scale that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. High scores are representative of low ambiguity tolerance, whereas low scores reveal a high rate of tolerance for ambiguity. The items focus on different challenging situations to extract the amount of tolerance the respondents show in the face of such situations in an EFL learning context. Measured using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of this instrument was calculated at .71.

3.3. Procedure

Regarding data collection, the above-mentioned questionnaires were directly distributed among the participants by the researchers themselves. The selection of the participants was done using the convenience sampling approach. They obtained the instruments directly and in a paper-and-pencil format. The researchers explained to them the purpose and importance of the study, as well as how they were expected to complete the questionnaires. It is worth mentioning that the participants had at least one week's time to return them. The researchers, then, employed Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses in order to answer the research questions posed above.

4. Results

4.1. Statistical Assumptions

It is worth mentioning that prior to analysis, all major assumptions of Pearson correlation and multiple regression were checked and confirmed. To this end, normality of data distribution for all the variables was verified via the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results (all p -values $> .05$), and linearity and homoscedasticity were confirmed by visual inspection of the scatterplot.

4.2. Results for the First Research Question

The initial research question aimed to explore potential correlations between participants' listening self-efficacy, listening anxiety, and willingness to communicate. To address this, the researchers performed a Pearson correlation analysis, the results of which appear in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Results for Listening Self-Efficacy, Listening Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate*

		Listening Self-Efficacy	Listening Anxiety	Willingness to Communicate
Listening Self-Efficacy	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	1.000		
	P value	-		
Listening Anxiety	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	-0.701	1.000	
	P value	0.001	-	
Willingness to Communicate	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	0.474	-0.358	1.000
	P value	0.011	0.028	-

Note. $N = 100$. $p < .05$.

As indicated in Table 1, the participants' listening self-efficacy strongly and negatively correlated with their listening anxiety [$r = -.70$, $p < .05$]. The results also revealed a moderate and positive relationship between listening self-efficacy and willingness to communicate [$r = .47$, $p < .05$]. Likewise, the results showed a significantly negative correlation between willingness to communicate and listening anxiety [$r = -0.35$, $p < .05$].

4.2. Results for the Second Research Question

This question was formulated to examine any possible relationship between the participants' ambiguity tolerance, listening anxiety and willingness to communicate. Again, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed to answer this question. The results appear in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Results for Ambiguity Tolerance, Listening Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate*

		Low Ambiguity Tolerance	Listening Anxiety	Willingness to Communicate
Low ambiguity Tolerance	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	1		
	P value	-		
Listening Anxiety	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	0.640	1.000	
	P value	0.001	-	
Willingness to Communicate	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	-0.309	-0.358	1.000
	P value	0.076	0.028	-

Note. $N = 100$. $p < .05$

The data in Table 2 revealed a strong relationship between the participants' low ambiguity tolerance and listening anxiety [$r = .64$, $p < .05$]. Also, the results indicated a significant and negative relationship between willingness to communicate and listening anxiety [$r = -0.35$, $p < .05$]. However, the correlation between low ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate did not turn out to be significant ($r = -.30$, $p > .05$).

4.3. Results for the Third Research Question

This research question was formulated to examine the ability of listening self-efficacy, willingness to communicate and low ambiguity tolerance to predict listening anxiety. To answer the question, a multiple regression analysis was run. Table 3 below shows the results.

Table 3. *Regression Results for the Predictability of Listening Anxiety*

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	Coefficients			Model Summary			ANOVA	
		Standardized	T	Sig.	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	Sig.
		Beta							
Listening Anxiety	Listening self-efficacy	-.503	- 3.439	.002	.769	.591	.556	18.526	.001
	Willingness to communicate	-.286	2.015	.048					
	Low ambiguity tolerance	.301	2.027	.047					

Note. $N = 100$. Predictor variables: listening self-efficacy, willingness to communicate and low ambiguity tolerance; Dependent variable: listening anxiety; $p < .05$.

As indicated in Table 3, the model turned out to be significant ($F = 18.26$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .59$), explaining that 59 percent of the changes in listening anxiety can be predicted by the independent variables. Thus, listening self-efficacy ($\beta = -.50$, $p < .05$), low ambiguity tolerance ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$), and willingness to communicate ($\beta = -.286$) all contributed significantly to the prediction of listening anxiety. However, listening self-efficacy was the best predictor, indicating that a one-unit increase in listening self-efficacy was associated with a 0.50-unit decrease in listening anxiety.

4.4. Results for the Fourth Research Question

Lastly, the fourth question of the study aimed to explore the ability to predict the participants' willingness to communicate by listening self-efficacy, listening anxiety and ambiguity tolerance. To answer this question, another multiple regression analysis was performed. Table 4 below reveals the results.

Table 4. Regression Results for the Predictability of Willingness to Communicate

Dependent	Predictor	Coefficients			Model Summary			ANOVA	
Variable	Variable	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	Sig.
		Beta							
Willingness to Communicate	Listening self-efficacy	.428	2.280	.032					
	Listening anxiety	-0.301	2.125	.039	.545	.297	.258	4.765	.042
	Low ambiguity tolerance	-.098	-.468	.654					

Note. $N = 100$. Predictor variables: listening self-efficacy, low ambiguity tolerance; Dependent variable: willingness to communicate; $p < .05$.

As indicated in Table 4, the model turned out to be significant ($F = 4.76$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .29$), explaining that 29 percent of the changes in willingness to communicate can be predicted by the independent variables. Thus, listening self-efficacy ($\beta = .42$, $p < .05$) and listening anxiety ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$) both contributed significantly to the prediction of willingness to communicate, with the former being the best predictor, which indicates that one unit of increase in listening self-efficacy will lead to a .428 unit increase in willingness to communicate. However, low ambiguity tolerance, as expected from the correlation tables, could not significantly predict willingness to communicate ($\beta = -.09$, $p > .05$).

5. Discussion

As previously mentioned, this study sought to investigate any possible link between EFL learners' listening self-efficacy and ambiguity tolerance and their listening anxiety and willingness to communicate in Iranian EFL classes. The findings obtained for the first research question revealed that listening self-efficacy negatively correlated with listening anxiety and positively with willingness to communicate. Also, a negative correlation was observed between listening anxiety and willingness to communicate. These findings are in line with those of Kim and Petscher (2021) and Xu (2011), indicating that listening anxiety can be decreased by increasing self-confidence among EFL learners. Other research findings have also revealed a significant association between listening self-efficacy and willingness to communicate (Canaran et al., 2024; Chen & Chen., 2021; Mills, 2006; Sadighi & Zare, 2006; Setiawati et al., 2023; Solhi & Derakhshan, 2026; Zhang & Xu, 2025).

The answer to the second research question revealed a strong positive relationship between low ambiguity tolerance and listening anxiety and no significant correlation between low ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate. The first finding confirms some other similar findings (Atef-Vahid et al., 2011; Bagheri & Rassaei, 2021; Dewale & Ip, 2013; Sadabadi, 2014; Zarei, 2012). As for the second finding for this question, other related findings are mixed, some supporting and some others disconfirming the finding of this study (Amiryousefi, 2018; Chen & Chen, 2021; Grant, 2018; Jamalifar & Salehi, 2017; Peng, 2021; Riahi et al., 2017; Syed & Kuzborska, 2018; Yu, 2011). The mixed findings may have been due to different research contexts, sample sizes, age differences, etc. Also, these mixed findings might be due to some opposing personality traits like extroversion/introversion among the respondents, as extroverted persons are more apt to derive energy from others (Eysenck & Chan, 1982) and, hence, manage ambiguities more readily than introverted persons. Thus, the existence of these two personality types might have neutralized any kind of correlation between ambiguity tolerance and willingness to communicate. However, since introversion/ extroversion was not measured, this explanation remains speculative. Future research should include measures of these personality traits to test this hypothesis directly. This idea can raise awareness of the fact that studies dealing with human traits can be seen as solving jigsaw puzzles, the completion of which entails that we have all the parts at hand. This calls for a great bulk of studies to contribute to the completion of this puzzle. Still another explanation for this non-significant relationship might be due to the assumption that Iranian EFL learners may rely on compensatory strategies such as repetition requests or note-taking, which buffer the negative effect of low ambiguity tolerance on willingness to communicate.

Based on the predictive role of low ambiguity tolerance in listening anxiety and the interactions between the variables under study, it seems necessary for EFL teachers to be mindful of learner variables that can facilitate or hinder

the process of foreign language learning. In this regard, Horwitz et al. (1986) and Fung and Macaro (2021) suggest that teachers should be able to identify specific sources of learner anxiety as well as teach anxious learners how to deal with an existing anxiety-provoking context and make the learning environment less stressful. Moreover, concerning second language ambiguity tolerance, Dewaele and Ip (2013) propose that EFL teachers should promote learners' ambiguity tolerance by deliberately speaking about it, emphasizing the significance of flexibility, of the inevitable process of error-making in foreign language learning, along with introducing specific strategies to cope with language learning ambiguity. Therefore, according to the findings of this study, EFL teachers should help learners develop their awareness of listening cognitive and metacognitive strategies, provide comprehensible input, positive feedback, an anxious-free and supportive atmosphere, and engage learners in EFL learning activities to promote listening self-efficacy, ambiguity tolerance and willingness to practice English communication and reduce listening anxiety in an EFL context.

6. Conclusions

The above-mentioned findings advocate the idea that individual factors a learner brings to an educational context play a significant role in learning English in general and listening comprehension in particular. In other words, as Hsieh (2008) asserts, merely attending foreign language courses and being exposed to the language does not ensure successful or positive learning outcomes.

Therefore, when investigating various factors that influence foreign language learning and when planning EFL learning activities, learner variables should be considered. One main reason for this consideration can be the notion that these variables and the interactions between them may facilitate or impede language learning. However, since this research was a correlational study, the findings should be generalized with due reservations. For a more comprehensive conclusion, further experimental studies in diverse research contexts are required. Also, this study could only focus on the female learners due to the small number of male learners in those intact classes. Therefore, further studies could compare any possible differences between the two genders in the present research context. Moreover, shared method variance from the use of a single self-report questionnaire at one time point may have inflated relationships; future research should consider multi-method data collection. In addition, because we did not assess personality factors such as introversion/extroversion, we cannot confirm their role in the non-significant finding mentioned earlier; future research should include such measures. Finally, future studies can be launched to focus on diverse language proficiency levels and across different age ranges to provide for a more complete picture of the findings and contribute to a more comprehensive related literature.

Generative AI Use Statement

The authors used generative AI tools solely for language polishing and formatting assistance, and all content, analysis, and conclusions presented in this article remain the authors' own original work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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