Research Article

Perceived Language Proficiency and Autonomous Motivation as Predictors to Perceived Communicative Competence in English

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: The current study, following a sequential mixed-methods design, mainly aimed at investigating the possible predictors of perceived communicative competence (PCC) in English in perceived language proficiency (PLP) and autonomous motivation to learn English.

Methodology: In doing so, 204 homogeneous university English-major students participated in this study based on convenience sampling, and a pool of six students joined the interview sessions based on purposive sampling. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and the multiple regression were conducted to analyze the data.

Results: The results obtained from the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient confirmed that there was a medium, positive correlation between PLP and PCC in English, and also between autonomous motivation to learn English and PCC in English. Moreover, it was found that PLP was the best predictor of PCC in English. Following inter-coder reliability, the commonalities emerged from the students' responses to the interviews yielded seven common themes, entailing good sense, desire to learn, participation, engagement, disengagement, teacher support, and ability to communicate fluently.

Conclusion: The study yielded deeper insight into the effective role of factors, such as good sense, desire to learn, participation, and engagement in enriching their PLP and PCC. At the end, some practical implications are suggested for EFL learner and teachers.

1. Introduction

As a multifaceted skill, communication should be taught everywhere and learners can learn it more effectively in a group (Celce-Murcia, 2001), and language, as a means of communication, has a central role in the students' intellectual, social, and emotional development (Jalilzadeh, et al., 2024; Pishghadam & Naji, 2011). Lee (2020) highlights the effectiveness of second language (L2) communication approaches and theories within the realm of instructional communication Murcia, 2001; Brown & Lee, 2015), and language, as a means of communication, has a central role in the students' intellectual, social, and emotional development (Pishghadam & Naji, 2011). In this regard, language proficiency has undergone major changes in the field of language education from starting from Lado's (1961) language skills and components to Canale and Swain's

(1980) communicative competence, then to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) organization and pragmatic competence, and also to Purpura's (2004) grammatical and pragmatic knowledge. Obviously, for achieving a comprehensive communication, we are in need of learning the four language skills, as in learning the native language, in which one needs to listen first, then to speak, then to read, and finally to write. Meanwhile, Indramawan and Akhyak (2013) pinpoints that communication skills are the basic language skills in the curriculum which all students should master. In this respect, Modarresi (2021) declared that collaborative output-based tasks are conducive to language proficiency development in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

With the shift from a structuralist and reductionist language paradigm to a wholistic and anti-reductionist

language paradigm, researchers focused on promoting language proficiency as perceived by the learners. For instance, Rajagopalan (2005) declared that instead of actual ability, self-perceived language ability seems to be conducive to L2 users' confidence in language learning and teaching. However, learners show differences in communication in the target language since they have their own perceptions of communicative ability while learning English language. According to Khajavy et al. (2016), over the last decades, the change and revisions in the field of L2 teaching were remarkable. In the same vein, Tursunovich (2023) remarks that the inclusion of communicative competence in the learning programs is a crucial prerequisite for contemporary foreign language programs offered by universities. As a matter of fact, communication plays a pivotal role in shaping our lives and enhancing our personal growth.

Moreover, research into the psychological aspects of motivation have regained interest in L2 learning, focusing on factors like integrative motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) and active/passive motivation (Pishghadam et al., 2019). Moreover, the effectiveness of motivation was examined in the light of cognitive psychology in terms of "intrinsic motivation" (i.e., doing something as an end in itself) and "extrinsic motivation" (i.e., doing something as a means to some separable outcome) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Indeed, motivation is conceived as a key factor in language learning since long-term effort and proficiency are interrelated (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). Meanwhile, according to Deci and Ryan (1985), autonomy is a necessary precondition for increased motivation. Sinclair (2000) described autonomous learning as a capacity that involves learners' willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.

In this respect, the concept of L2 self-confidence consists of two elements, namely perceived competence and a lack of anxiety (Clément, 1986). Perceived competence is defined as the learners' self-assessment of their L2 skills (Peng, 2009). As for the importance of perceived competence, Jeno et al. (2020) state that language achievement can be achieved by reducing dropout intention through perceived competence. Indeed, what may influence language development is not the actual language competency but students' perceptions of their language competency (Kamhi-Stein & Mahboob, 2005). Since the introduction of communicative language teaching approach in 1970, communicative competence started to outweigh mastering linguistic structures (Freeman & Anderson, 2011). However, according to Ellis (2005), L2 learners' communicative performance is affected by various factors such as social and cultural factors (Ellis, 2005; Pishghadam & Attaran, 2015). One of these factors is the extent to which students can develop independent motivation which would elevate their perception of language proficiency.

This study will be of significance to the second language acquisition (SLA) field for the following reasons. First, it would provide the field with insights into the degree to which EFL learners' perceptions is related to their language proficiency and motivation for language learning.

Second, in providing such information, the study can broaden our view about the criteria based on which we can realize the differential degrees of EFL learners' educational success and qualifications. Many studies have been conducted that the need for PCC, as evaluated by the learners themselves, include other factors that can promote students' learning development (Tziava, 2003; Wilby, 2020; Mohammadi & Modarresi, 2023). A major problem lies in the fact that English is preferred to Arabic due to the fact that it is used internationally (Pishghadam & Naji, 2011). Taguchi et al. (2009) mention that L2 learners of English in Iran learn English to join leading universities, to pursue their studies abroad, and to find new information. Two decades ego, English lessons mostly included a reading passage with new vocabulary introduced by a teacher who translated and then provided the students with explicit grammatical rules (Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). Actually, students are required to pass a three-credit general English course at the university with a focus on structure (Noora, 2008). However, new pedagogical tools such as artificial intelligence and hint-based instruction are more recently used in the Iranian context to enrich learning (Vameghshahi & Ghonsooly, 2023; Rounahi & Modarresi, 2023).

Although the concept of perception has been explored in the filed of L2 learning and teaching (Brown & Lee, 2015), there is a severe lack of research on the linkage between perceived language proficiency and perceived communicative competence in the Iranian context. Moreover, regarding the psychological process underlying communication at a particular point in time, the interrelationship between the perception of students' language proficiency and being motivated to learn English as L2 communication has not been fully considered. Actually, learners of English as a foreign language find communication skill as a challenging skill to master. For example, there exist various learning culture, styles and strategies; however, L2 learners cannot become proficient unless they use the ones that work best for them. Therefore, delving into the association between PLP, autonomous motivation, and PCC is what the present study pursues.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.2. English language proficiency

Historically, proficiency is associated with receptive and expressive language, syntax, vocabulary, semantics, and other areas that demonstrate language abilities (Hinton, 2011), and language proficiency includes four areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Native-level fluency requires a lexicon of between 20,000 and 40,000 words whereas the elementary oral fluency may require 3,000 words (Wang & Sun, 2020). Important research in SLA has, according to Housen and Kuiken (2009), found a positive between the triad measures of language proficiency in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) and language proficiency. In this context, CAF has already caught the attention of certain researchers in SLA despite being a relatively new idea in the field of

applied linguistics (e.g., Majidi et al., 2020; Skehan, 2009). The dynamic character of CAF was highlighted by Norris and Ortega (2009), who proposed an organic method to explore CAF in L2 learning. Subsequently, Lu (2011) examined many syntactic complexity metrics and provided ESL teachers with surprising insights into how to use these metrics as indicators of university students' writing skill.

Medgyes (1999) asserts that L2 users frequently suffer from the sense of underachievement when they compare themselves with native speakers. As for the effectiveness of language proficiency and CAF measures, Yan et al. (2021), using univariate and multivariate statistical analyses, found a positive association between language proficiency and individual fluency features. The fact of the matter is that English language proficiency has been extensively assessed in English language studies (Barrot, 2018). Due to their perceptions of language knowledge and lack of L2 confidence, individuals avoid participating in conversation whereas in order to improve their language skills and build confidence in using L2, L2 learners need to interact with the L2 group, which is reflected in Skehan's (1991) idea of communicative skills for learning. Meanwhile, contextual elements, including the time and location of the contact as well as the interlocutor's identity, invariably play a prominent role in influencing students' perceptions (Wang, 2020; Wen & Clément, 2003; Yashima et al., 2004). The skill that students should develop is the ability to produce their WTC in order to advance their L2 competency and alter the dynamics of conversational contact.

1.1.2. Motivation and second language acquisition

In recent years, studies of motivation and self-regulation have focused on task performance (Teng & Zhang, 2018), and according to self-determination theory, autonomy is required for an activity to be rewarding (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The current literature acknowledges that learner autonomy refers to the intricate process by which learners can make choices for what and how they learn (Lamb & Reinders, 2007; Smith, 2008; Teng & Zhang, 2018). For example, Raoofi and Maroofi (2017), on their large-scale study, found that intrinsic value could strongly predict writing scores on both descriptive essay and argumentative essay. Little (2007) and Benson (2007) proposed a more dynamic notion of learner autonomy, highlighting that autonomous learning comprises both language skills and the interaction between students and the teacher. In the most recent line of enquiry, Wilby (2020) examined the relationship between self-regulation, writing task motivation, and essay scores and found that learners improved significantly following the treatment phase.

The existing literature witnesses the close linkage between language learning, learner autonomy, and motivation, (Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 1996; Law et al., 2020). Ushioda (1996) postulated that "autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners" (p. 2). Historically, five interconnected elements make up Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of motivation,

namely integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning context, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation. Considering the two orientations, an integrative orientation refers to a desire to communicate and to at least partially identify with the L2 community's members (Noels, et. al., 2000). In the realm of SLA, the relationship between motivation and various important factors such as language development, stroke, willingness to communicate, and emotioncy has already been explored (Dörnyei, 2019; Khorsand & Modarresi, 2023; Pishghadam & Khajavy, 2014); Although a considerable amount of literature has been published on the association between language proficiency, learning motivation and learner autonomy in language learning, relatively little has been carried out to investigate how autonomous motivation can be made related to .PLP and PCC.

1.1.3. Communicate competence in English

Historically, communicative language ability is mostly associated with the acquisition of language skills and language components (Lado, 1961) which was criticized because of its reductionist nature and to communicative competence including grammatical, sociocultural, strategic, and discourse competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Later, Bachman (1990) developed a model of measurement for communicative competence including language knowledge, strategic knowledge, and physiological competence which was mainly criticized for its distinct nature and lack of attention to the interaction between the constructs (Larsen Freeman, 2002). Indeed, the existing literature witnesses that the concept of language competency is used by those who evaluate a person's language ability (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; MacIntyre, et al., 2003; Modarresi, et al., 2021). Researchers recognized the importance of communication techniques in L2 learning studies (Abbasian & Modarresi, 2023; Canale & Swain, 1980; Croucher, 2013; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). For instance, Cohen and Swain (1976) defined strategic competency as a component of communicative competence that includes tools used to address communication-related issues. In this respect, Bialystok (1990) raised two crucial issues: using the psychological process of speech production as a foundation for the study of communicative competence, and teaching language structure rather than language learning methodologies.

Concerning the importance of communicative competence in English, psychological and social factors such as motivation, emotions and engagement are found to be effective in enhancing it in many studies (Pishghadam et al., 2019; Modarresi, 2022). In this regard, Celce-Murcia, et al. (1995) developed another model of communicative competence with five competencies entailing linguistic competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, and actional competence. This model's primary objective was to further develop sociolinguistic competence, which was a distinct component of discourse competence. Language competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic

competence make up the three components of communicative competence in this approach, and each one refers to the knowledge of contents and the capacity to use it (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007).

The current study employs two theoretical frameworks to carry out the research. The first one refers to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative competence who developed a more complete model with two major components including organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The second theoretical underpinning is based on Pintrich's (2004) academic motivation theory, which highlighted this variable as a crucial factor in predicting students' language achievement. Moreover, a significant factor for L2 learning is the concept of perception based on which what a learner *believes* with respect to his perceived success can be more determining in his/her experiences of L2 learning than what he *actually* achieves in learning a L2. In this sense, PLP and PCC can be seen as an aspect of the constructivist approach to learning based on which individuals have their own personal meanings to the world. The current study set out to provide answers for the following questions:

1) Is there any significant relationship between PLP, autonomous motivation to learn English and PCC in English?

2) Do PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English predict PCC in English?

3) How do the students react to the role of PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English in PCC in English?

3. Methodology

The current study initially adopted a quantitative approach employing a correlational design, complemented by a qualitative interview phase to undertake the current research. To clarify, the study made use of a sequential mixed-methods design entailing a qualitative phase to increase the strengths of both methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

3.1. Participants

Initially, the sample consisted of 247 BA English-major students (females: n = 152, 61.50%; males: n = 95, 38.50%; Mean age = 21.42, SD = 1.08) from Islamic Azad University of Quchan and Islamic Azad University of Mashhad, Iran, selected based on convenience sampling. They had already passed their English four-credit courses of English structure, and English conversation. However, at first stage, the homogeneity of the participants was specified based on their scores on the Oxford placement test (OPT) as the researcher just selected those participants whose scores on OPT used in this study were at intermediate level. Out of 247 participants, 204 students (females: n = 131, 64.02%; males: n = 73, 35.08%; Mean age = 21.31, SD = 1.02) gained scores of 30 and 44. Moreover, six students (females: n=4, 66.7%; males: n = 2, 33.3%; Mean age = 21.83, SD = 1.36) participated in the qualitative phase of the study based on purposive sampling and following data saturation method (Dörnyei, 2007). The data were gathered until no new

information was added.

3.2. Instruments

To evaluate the overall language knowledge of the participants, OPT was used as a language proficiency test which contained 60 multiple choice items. The scoring criteria categorized the students into four levels: elementary (1-14), pre intermediate (15-29), intermediate (30-44), upper intermediate (45-50), and advanced (51-60). The students who were classified in intermediate level were included in the study.

To explore the learners' perceived English proficiency, the scale developed by Eslami and Fatahi (2008), in English language was used, which was developed based on the two previous instruments validated by Butler (2004) and Chacón (2005). This scale includes 12 items which are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5); the lowest score one could obtain on the questionnaire was 12 and the highest score one could obtain was 60. The reliability estimate of the questionnaire was 0.78.

To measure autonomous motivation to learn English, 16 items from Noels et al. (2000) were used which were already translated and validated by Khodadady and Khajavy (2013). The questionnaire ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) on a 7-point Likert scale; the lowest score one could obtain on the questionnaire was 16 and the highest score one could obtain was 112. The reliability estimate of the questionnaire was 0.80.

To measure PCC, following Khajavy et al. (2016), six items from Peng and Woodrow (2010, adapted from Weaver, 2005) were used on an 11-point can-do scale ranging from 0% to 100%; the lowest score one could obtain on the questionnaire was 6 and the highest score one could obtain was 66. The reliability estimate of the questionnaire was 0.75. Students were asked to show the percentage of the time they felt competent communicating in English.

Finally, to explore the students' perspectives of the role of PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English in PCC in English, the semi-structured interview questions including three major interview questions, designed by the researchers, were used. Two experts in the field of ELT who have been teaching English courses at Islamic Azad University of Quchan checked the content validity of the questions. The revised questions were as follows: 1) Can you imagine yourself using English effectively to communicate effectively with your teacher and classmates? 2) Do you think by coming to the English class might change you as a person, for example, your perception and your self-concept? and 3) When the teacher motivates you more, do you have a better feeling of improving your language ability?

3.3. Data collection procedure and data analysis

The researcher collected the relevant data in six weeks from January 2023 to May 2023. During the first month, she

administered the proficiency test of OPT online to the students. Those students who were classified in intermediate level joined the study. Initially, the students were explained how to respond to the questionnaires. During the second month, she administered perceived English proficiency to the students. During the third month, the researcher distributed autonomous motivation scale to the students. During the fourth month, she distributed PCC to the students. Since the students who responded to the questionnaires were from two universities, the related data were collected at different intervals. It should be noted that 31 participants, altogether, sent their answers to the questionnaire by e-mail or Telegram because of their absence in the face-to-face sessions. In the fifth month, she gathered the qualitative data in face-to-face sessions by means of the semi-structured interview questions which were recorded and transcribed before the responses were classified based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each interview was a bit different in length which took approximately between 20 and 30 minutes so that the interviewer could ensure that the interviewees' responses reached saturation.

To find the answer to the first research question, the researcher performed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and to find the answer to the second research question multiple regression was run. To answer the last research question, she used "theme-based categorization" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 245) to label the responses emerging from the open-ended interview questions. Following the guidelines by Krippendorff (2004), the inter-rater reliability for coded transcripts were also taken care of.

3. Results

4.1. PLP, autonomous motivation to learn English and PCC in English

To find the answer to the first research question of the study, the researcher ran descriptive statistics and the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Before performing the inferential statistics, the assumptions of normality for the scores were checked. The scatter-plot showed that the relationship was positive since the points are close to each other. Moreover, the skewness and kurtosis showed that the distribution of the scores was normal since skewness and kurtosis were between -2 to +2 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

As shown in Table 1, the means and standard deviations of the scores were as follows: PLP (M = 32.39; SD = 5.63), autonomous motivation in English (M = 64.71; SD = 9.27), and PCC (M = 28.37; SD = 5.39).

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics for the Variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation
PLP	32.39	5.63
autonomous motivation	64.71	9.27
PCC	28.37	5.39
Valid Number	204	

Table 2.
Correlations among the Variables

		PCC
PLP	Pearson Correlation	.38
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	204
autonomous motivation	Pearson Correlation	.32
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	204

As displayed by Table 2, the results obtained from the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient indicated that there was a significant correlation between PLP and PCC in English [r=.38, n=204, p<.05], with higher scores on PLP was associated with higher scores on PCC in English. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between autonomous motivation to learn English and PCC in English [r=.32, n=204, p<.05], with higher scores on autonomous motivation to learn English was associated with higher scores on PCC in English, based on the guideline proposed by Cohen (1992).

4.2. The possible predictors of PCC in English in PLP and autonomous motivation

The second research question of the study dealt with the predictors of PCC in English in PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English. Before running multiple regression, the assumption of multicollinearity was checked and the independent variables showed some relationship with each other (r=0.50). Moreover, the tolerance values for both variables were not less than .10 so that the multicollinearity assumption was not violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2011), and this was also supported by the VIF value which was below the cut-off of 10. Moreover, the normal probability plot of the regression standardized residuals displayed a reasonably straight diagonal line from bottom left to top right, indicating no major deviations from normality. Then, outliers were checked by inspecting the Mahalanobis distances and since the number of independent variables was two, following Tabachnick and Fidell's (2001) guidelines, the critical value in this case did not exceed 13.82 since it was 11.41. Moreover, the model (which included scores on PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English) indicated 17.2 percent of the variance in with PCC in English scores. To assess the statistical significance of the results, the ANOVA test indicated that the model reached statistical significance (F=20.94, p<.001). Finally, to determine which variable(s) could contribute to the prediction of PCC, the researcher checked beta under standardized coefficients in the output, labeled coefficients.

As shown in Table 3, the largest beta coefficient was .30,

Table 3.
Coefficients

Model		UC		SC	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.62	2.59		4.85	.00
	PLP	.29	.07	.30	4.11	.00
	autonomous motivation	.09	.04	.16	2.25	.02

which was for PLP. This means that this variable made the strongest contribution to explaining PCC, when the variance explained by all other variables in the model was controlled. The Beta value for the other variable was also significant since the significant value for autonomous motivation to learn English was also less than .05 so that that it also made a significant contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable. However, the best predictor of perceived communicative competence in English was PLP.

4.3. Content analysis of the responses obtained from the interviews

The last question of the study explored the EFL learners' reactions towards the role of PLP and autonomous motivation to learn English in PCC in English. Having gathered the information from the semi-structured interview questions with six participants, the results were analyzed and categorized based on thematic analysis. The researcher asked the questions in English, and the commonalities emerged from the interviews are reported below:

The results emerged from the interviews revealed that students had a great desire for being able to speak in English while learning English and this issue has galvanized them to choose English major. Students who were interviewed agreed that they could have a good perception and sense by improving their language proficiency so as to have a positive attitude towards English as an international language for both oral and written communication and for both inside and outside the classroom. They believe that lack of environment in which they speak English outside the class is one of the reasons why they do not become involved in fulfilling the learning tasks.

The students also mentioned that they would like to perceive themselves as being able to use English effectively to communicate with foreigners. To them, teachers and parents would look at them differently if they can speak English well. They could imagine that they can find native English-speaker friends in the future by learning English. They wanted to try their best to improve their English proficiency both in and out of the language classroom. They mentioned that when the teacher provides a two-way interaction and do not dictate his or her power, they could feel better and learn English better. To them, gaining mastery over English language would help them find a good job with a satisfactory income. They believed that they would like to improve their English so that they can be a successful and professional English teacher in the prospective future. Finally, they believed that they can express themselves and their voices to the world using English language if they have independent motivation and adequate language proficiency to learn and communicate.

Afterward, the researcher assessed the inter-coder reliability of the data collected from the interviews conducted with the students, specifically regarding their perspectives on reading engagement by means of instruction. After completing the coding process, the researcher shared the coded data with her colleague, who

had PhD in applied linguistics. Subsequently, the second person coded the responses by identifying shared characteristics and arrived at broadly comparable findings, albeit with slight variations. The inter-coder agreement of the findings was ensured as both coders reached the same conclusion. By the recommendations proposed by Campbell et al. (2013), the researcher initially computed the ratio of coding agreements to the total number of agreements and disagreements. Eleven frequent themes were identified, with at least one researcher applying a code to each. Among these themes, seven were identified when both coders had used the same code. Hence, the inter-coder dependability would have been 63% based on the seven divided by 11 calculation. Some of the excerpts provided by the participants along with the codes are reported in the following table.

As illustrated in Table 4, the commonalities emerged from the students' responses to the interviews with the students included: *good sense, desire to learn, participation, engagement, disengagement, teacher support, and ability to communicate fluently*.

Table 4.
Some Excerpts Emerged from the Interviews

Participants	Excerpts	Themes
Interviewee A	I have such a good vibe when I understand the films and vocabulary in terms of receptive skills.	good sense
Interviewee B	I am eager to enrich my language skills so that I try not to miss any class and opportunity in this regard.	desire to learn
Interviewee C	In face-to-face interaction with the teacher and classmates, I participate actively in the conversations.	active participation
Interviewee D	As I see myself capable of speaking and writing in English language, I believe that I have become involved in accomplishing tasks during last terms.	engagement
Interviewee E	I do study idiomatic expressions and I know lots of idioms but whenever I see an idiom that is new to me, I become disengaged.	disengagement
Interviewee F	I am in favor of teachers who are patient and offer hints and prompts so that I can find the answer.	teacher support
Interviewee C	I think that I am able to take role in front of the class I English at normal rate.	ability to communicate fluently

4. Discussion

The results of this rather large-scale research are interesting and informative. The results of the study showed that the association between PLP and PCC in English was statistically significant; moreover, the association between autonomous motivation to learn English and PCC in English was also statistically significant. The results of the study revealed that the best predictor of the best predictor of PCC

in English was PLP since this variable made the strongest contribution to explaining PCC in English. Finally, the results emerged from the content analysis of the students' responses yielded seven common codes.

Concerning the first and second objectives of the study, the obtained results of the study are consistent with the study conducted by Liu (2008) who concluded that the use of communication facilitate the learning process and use of L2 in real context. The results of the study are also in line with the study undertaken by Rahimi and Sadeghi (2011) who confirmed the effectiveness of PCC on receptive skills in the Iranian context. Similarly, Gardner (2000) explains that autonomous motivated individuals express effort in attaining a goal, show persistence, attend to the tasks with their own perceptions to attain language knowledge, and have expectancies about their learning independency. This implies that those students who had a higher level of autonomous motivation perceived themselves more competent, and in turn were more motivated to enrich their language proficiency. In line with the finding of the current study, Ehrman, et al. (2003) concluded that the higher the PLP in language skills, the more frequently the students opt for using communication strategies. In the realm of L2 communicative ability, the previous study by Vandergrift (2003) also point to the more effective language use by L2 users who reflect on their own learning. It should be noted that in Ghonsooly et al.'s (2012) study, the results revealed that in the Iranian context where students are not required to speak English to satisfy their everyday life needs, learning English for communicative purposes did not seem very important.

Concerning the third objective of the study, the results emerged from the interviews showed that psychological traits and factors such as desire to learn, engagement and participation could help students gain better perception of their language ability that is consistent with the previous findings in the Iranian context (Pishghadam, et al., 2016; Modarresi, 2019). Results of the present study shed more light on the preferences of Iranian university students. The results of the study are in line with output hypothesis put forward by Swain (1995, 2005) who states that being involved with output or meaning expression leads to better attention and focus on the target language. Moreover, the findings of the study are in agreement with the previous studies which showed that student motivation and active participation are highly correlated with better academic performance (e.g., Stewart, 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010**)**), and that increasing students' motivation and involvement are significant factors which reduces the rate of school drop-out among students (e.g., Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Modarresi & Javan, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study add novel insights to current literature as it extends the extant knowledge on how perception may affect learners' language proficiency and communicate competence. Indeed, students define the concept of perception differently because perceptions are not fixed. For instance, a learner, who has been studying English language for several terms and who is able to converse fluently, may feel that he/she is not successful when he/she cannot understand a dialogue in an original film. Moreover, the current research indicates that the motivational factors contribute to the present situation and future perception of their language proficiency and those who are successful in their career can pursue some aspects of motivation; meanwhile, the motivational feedback from the teacher is can be the reason for integrating students to the EFL learning situation and help them to regulate their own progress with resort to communicate competency. Actually, the attention devoted to the students' perceptions is of great value since students would develop their language proficiency when they feel that they are in the right path. This research has yielded a deeper insight into the effective role that autonomous motivation can play in promoting communicative competence as perceived by the students.

Teachers can usefully employ the factors related to language proficiency and communicative competency to recognize EFL learners' perceptions of success and teach accordingly. Teachers should improve their own motivations in teaching practice and think of the society and the altruistic factors that improve the international communication and act as scaffolding for the students so that the students can see them supportive in their attempt communicate inside and outside the class and this in turn would enhance students' motivation (Rouhani & Modarresi, 2023). Teachers who are more concerned about their students' perceptions and individual differences are more prone to be taken as a perfect exemplary for the students. L2 teachers should recognize more the nature and significance of students' needs, wants, and potentiality and that perception is not a fixed trait but it is shaped by other learners' communicative competency. EFL learners can foster their ability in English language use by having a greater sense of their language self and L2 ego (Farsad & Modarresi, 2023) and working on the components of communicative competence independently. They are suggested to participate actively to expand their mental capacity with focus of problem-solving and abstract thinking and in such ways, they can improve their PLP and communicative competence.

Although this study suggests some informative insights, it has a number of limitations. First, care should be taken in terms of the external generalizability of the findings since the sample is not representative of all intermediate EFL learners. Moreover, more longitudinal research with a longer duration can investigate the extent to which PLP and PCC can improve academic achievement. Finally, more research is needed to establish the validity of the findings and approve the effectiveness of the mentioned activities in the context of private English institutes. Actually, the line research on the effect of learning motivation and willingness to communicate in the last decades is not country-specific because similar pattern and also different patterns has been found in some other countries (Dörnyei, 2005). This can be taken as an indication of the fact that such research has

external validity. Secondly, the findings highlight the fact that perception is important in developing language proficiency in the context of Iran. Research is needed to be conducted regarding students' perceptions of engagement and grid in learning English in relation to perceived language skills like speaking and writing skills. Finally, research is needed to examine the association of PLP and communicate competence with students' willingness to communicate and communication anxiety.

Declarations

Competing interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the participants included in the study.

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