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The Impact of Psycholinguistic Tasks on Willingness to Communicate among Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated the differential effects of five psycholinguistic task types—jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making, and opinion-exchange—on the willingness to communicate of Iranian EFL learners.

Methods: Adopting a quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest design, the study involved 150 intermediate-level female learners from private language institutes in Khoy, Iran. Participants were screened using the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and divided into five intact classes, each receiving a specific task-based instructional treatment. Learners' WTC was measured before and after the 10-session intervention using MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) WTC questionnaire. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and a one-way ANOVA.

Results: Findings revealed a statistically significant main effect of task type on WTC (p = .001). Post-hoc analyses indicated that while all tasks contributed to increased WTC, the opinion-exchange tasks yielded the most significant improvements compared to other task typologies.

Conclusions: These results suggest that tasks promoting personal agency, subjective expression, and reduced evaluative pressure are particularly effective in fostering communicative engagement in foreign language contexts. The study highlights the importance of context-sensitive task design in enhancing learners' affective and communicative outcomes in EFL classrooms.

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Introduction

Despite the growing emphasis on communicative competence in language learning (Nie et al. 2024; Skehan, 2023), Iranian EFL learners often struggle with initiating and sustaining communication in English (Davari & Javadinejad, 2026; Ebrahimi et al., 2025; Shirazizadeh et al., 2024). A close review of the relevant literature on task-based language teaching (TBLT) highlights the fact that the empirical studies of language tasks have disregarded their impact on the learner factors (e.g. Bryfonski et al., 2024; Li, 2024). Willingness to communicate (WTC), among various psychological and learner factors, plays a central role in determining learners' engagement and success in language learning (Galdeano & García, 2024). It is conceivable that tasks as instructional units may affect and modify particular learner factors including WTC in instructed second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005). However, this affective dimension is frequently overlooked in pedagogical planning, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. While TBLT has gained attention globally, the specific influence of psycholinguistic task types—those that engage cognitive, linguistic, and emotional processes simultaneously—on learners' WTC remains underexplored in the Iranian context (e.g., Chegini, 2023; Ghiabi et al., 2025; Shirazizadeh et al., 2024). Opinion-sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, information-exchange, and jigsaw tasks are characterized as psycholinguistic because they are grounded in interactional processes—such as turn-taking, negotiation of meaning, and feedback mechanisms (Pica et al., 1993; Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2020). As recent evidence corroborates (e.g., Bryfonski et al., 2024; Bryfonski et al., 2025), these task-mediated mechanisms actively shape learners' cognitive and linguistic processing by affording opportunities to comprehend modified input, elicit corrective feedback, and restructure their interlanguage output during communicative exchanges.

Existing local research tends to focus on the effects of TBLT on linguistic outcomes such as grammar (Yousofi & Mohammadi, 2023), vocabulary (Sahebkheir & Nouri, 2025), and oral fluency (Gorjian & Mir, 2025), while comparatively less attention has been paid to learners' psychological willingness to communicate. Although recent studies have begun to investigate Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate and its learner- and context-related determinants (Shirazizadeh et al., 2024; Ebrahimi et al., 2025), the role of specific task types in fostering such willingness remains insufficiently explored. Moreover, most studies are conducted in English as a

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second language (ESL) environments, where learners have greater exposure to authentic language use, making their findings less applicable to Iranian classrooms characterized by exam-oriented instruction, limited interaction opportunities, and teacher-centered methodologies (Davari & Javadinejad, 2026). The few studies that do address affective factors (e.g., Aramaki , 2026; Abdi Tabari & Goetze, 2024; Jackson, 2025; Sato et al., 2025) rarely differentiate between task types or investigate how specific psycholinguistic features—such as mental effort, interactional demands, or emotional engagement—impact learner outcome. This lack of empirical data in task design and analysis could limit the effectiveness of current approaches and fail to account for the dynamic interplay between cognition and emotion in language learning.

The consequences of ignoring this gap are significant. Iranian EFL learners may possess adequate linguistic knowledge but remain reluctant to use English in real-life situations due to fear of negative evaluation (Ebrahimi et al., 2025). Without targeted interventions that enhance both WTC, learners risk disengagement and reduced academic performance. Furthermore, the continued reliance on one-size-fits-all instructional strategies may undermine learner engagement and fail to meet global standards that prioritize communicative competence (Albarqi, 2025). Although previous research has demonstrated that TBLT and task-related conditions can influence Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate (Jamalifar & Salehi, 2020; Rahimi, 2022), and recent research has highlighted the situational and contextual nature of Iranian learners' WTC (Shirazizadeh et al., 2024), limited empirical attention has been given to the differential effects of specific psycholinguistic task types on WTC. Investigating how learners' willingness to communicate varies across task types such as opinion-exchange, information-gap, decision-making, problem-solving, and jigsaw tasks can therefore provide a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between task characteristics and WTC.

Literature Review

Grounded in the heuristic pyramid model of MacIntyre et al. (1998), modern investigations in language teaching conceptualize WTC not as a static personality disposition, but as a dynamic construct susceptible to immediate instructional interventions. Investigating this situational perspective within the Iranian EFL context, Khajavy et al. (2018) employed structural equation modeling to examine how classroom environment and task characteristics govern L2 communication. Their findings demonstrated that classroom climate and immediate task-mediated

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variables directly predict learners' situational WTC above and beyond their baseline individual traits. Khajavy et al. underscored that when learning tasks offer clear communicative purposes, students' perceived competence rises, and communication apprehension decreases, thereby catalyzing oral participation.

Expanding on this situational perspective, Shao et al. (2020) tracked moment-to-moment fluctuations in L2 learners' communicative willingness. Utilizing a dynamic systems framework, they revealed that WTC is inherently non-linear, exhibiting continuous shifts driven by the real-time interactional affordances of classroom activities. Their empirical evidence indicated that task structure and peer interaction patterns act as powerful situational triggers that can transform an otherwise reticent learner into an active speaker during collaborative tasks. In contrast, rigid, teacher-dominated interactions suppress communicative initiation.

Nevertheless, the degree to which task design alone can override individual psychological predispositions remains a subject of ongoing debate. Offering a critical perspective, Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2021) investigated the relative contributions of individual versus environmental factors on speaking willingness. While acknowledging that task conditions exert an undeniable immediate influence, Mystkowska-Wiertelak demonstrated that stable individual traits—such as baseline foreign language anxiety, perceived communicative competence, and self-confidence—account for a substantial proportion of the variance in learner participation. Her findings serve as an important caveat for TBLT researchers, highlighting that while task manipulation provides an essential communicative context, it interacts continuously with learners' internal psychological baselines rather than completely displacing them.

A growing body of literature indicates that the relationship between task type and communicative behavior is mediated by learner affect. Operating within the paradigm of Positive Psychology in SLA, Botes et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis examining the nexus between positive emotional states and L2 achievement. Their findings established that Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is one of the strongest positive predictors of active language engagement and WTC, exerting a countervailing force against foreign language anxiety. When pedagogical tasks stimulate intrinsic interest and intellectual enjoyment, learners demonstrate a marked willingness to undertake communicative risks.

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In a related vein, Feng et al. (2023) explored the dynamic relationship between emotional experience and moment-to-moment speaking willingness during collaborative tasks. Utilizing high-frequency affective tracking, Feng et al. identified a reciprocal relationship between psychological safety, enjoyment, and WTC. When tasks minimize evaluative threat and establish an emotionally supportive atmosphere, learners' willingness to communicate increases noticeably. Conversely, tasks that induce evaluative stress or cognitive overload led to immediate communicative withdrawal.

As mentioned earlier, psycholinguistic task typologies (e.g., Pica et al., 1993; Ellis, 2003) classify communicative activities based on their internal interactional demands. Opinion-exchange tasks are characterized by open-ended, divergent communicative outcomes where participants express subjective perspectives, personal values, or idiosyncratic interpretations without the constraint of reaching a single predetermined "correct" answer. Empirical research strongly supports the psychological benefits of this task structure. Toyoda et al. (2021) demonstrated that tasks affording opportunities for open-ended personal expression systematically elicit higher situational WTC than highly constrained, convergent drills. When learners are invited to share authentic personal opinions, their communicative orientation shifts from linguistic form-monitoring to genuine self-expression, thereby mitigating self-directed evaluative anxiety. Extending this line of inquiry, Dodd (2024) investigated learner discourse patterns during discussion- and opinion-based tasks. Dodd found that such tasks enhance WTC by promoting learner agency and establishing high levels of psychological security. Because opinion-sharing tasks lack a rigid binary of "correct" versus "incorrect" solutions, learners experience lower fear of negative evaluation by peers and instructors, allowing them to initiate turns more freely and sustain longer conversational stretches. Similarly, Gao et al. (2024) examined the psychological mechanisms operating within different communicative task designs. Their findings corroborated that task encouraging personal investment, subjective opinion-sharing, and personal narratives generate higher affective engagement, which directly translates into elevated situational WTC.

In contrast to opinion-sharing tasks, information-gap and jigsaw tasks are characterized by two-way information distribution and convergent goals, where communicative completion depends strictly on the obligatory exchange of complementary data. Khamraeva and Berdieva (2023) investigated the communicative dynamics of information-gap tasks in instructed language settings.

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They demonstrated that the structural necessity of exchanging missing information compels learners to initiate communication. In information-gap conditions, silence directly impedes task completion; thus, the structural design of the task generates a functional communicative requirement that activates participation across proficiency levels. This mechanism was further detailed by Johari et al. (2025) and Lambert and Aubrey (2025). Johari et al. (2025) highlighted that information-gap and problem-solving configurations impose functional communicative pressure that directs the learner's focal attention toward informational transmission and objective resolution rather than linguistic form and self-monitoring. Lambert and Aubrey (2025) corroborated that carefully designed task parameters create obligatory interactional conditions where learners bypass communication apprehension due to the explicit, structured nature of the communicative goal. However, while information-gap tasks generate high interactional necessity, they may simultaneously induce higher cognitive load and communication pressure compared to open-ended opinion-exchange activities.

The current literature demonstrates that psycholinguistic task typologies influence L2 communication through distinct cognitive and affective pathways. Opinion-exchange tasks enhance WTC primarily via affective resonance, personal agency, and the reduction of evaluative pressure (Dodd, 2024; Gao et al., 2024; Toyoda et al., 2021), mediated by positive emotions such as foreign language enjoyment (Botes et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2023). Conversely, information-gap and jigsaw tasks stimulate oral production through structural and interactional necessity (Johari et al., 2025; Khamraeva & Berdieva, 2023; Lambert & Aubrey, 2025).

Nevertheless, while previous studies have investigated these dimensions in isolation or across broad ESL contexts, a comparative empirical investigation assessing the simultaneous, differential impact of five distinct psycholinguistic task types (opinion-sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, information-exchange, and jigsaw) within the EFL classroom remains scarce. Furthermore, the interplay between task-induced cognitive demands and situational WTC among Iranian EFL learners requires systematic empirical clarification. The present study addresses this empirical gap by evaluating the differential effects of these psycholinguistic task typologies on learners' WTC.

The findings of this study can therefore illuminate how specific task features—such as mental effort, interactional demands, and emotional engagement—either facilitate or hinder their

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willingness to participate in English communication. This research provides insights into how task selection and adaptation can foster a psychologically supportive learning environment that encourages sustained interaction. Rather than relying on linguistically driven tasks, educators can use the findings to design activities that match with learners' affective needs and communicative goals. By foregrounding the psychological impact of task design, the findings could also invite a rethinking of how we can better support learners' WTC. Considering the foregoing argument, this study attempted to address the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent does the psycholinguistic task type (opinion-sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, information-exchange and jigsaw) significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' WTC?

RQ2: Which psycholinguistic task (opinion-sharing, decision-making, problem-solving, information-exchange or jigsaw) shows a significant difference in Iranian EFL learners' WTC?

Material and Methods

Participants

The target population of the study comprised intermediate-level female EFL learners enrolled in private language schools in Khoy, Iran. The accessible population consisted of 172 intermediate-level learners enrolled in five intact classes at different private language institutes in the city. Participants were initially identified through their performance on a standardized English proficiency examination. Specifically, the researcher administered the proficiency examination to the learners in the five intact classes and calculated the mean and standard deviation (SD) of the scores for the accessible group. To ensure a relatively homogeneous level of English proficiency, only learners whose proficiency scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the mean were considered eligible for inclusion in the study.

Of the 172 learners enrolled in the five intact classes, 150 learners met the proficiency criterion and participated in the study, whereas the remaining 22 learners, although members of the same intact classes, did not meet the predetermined proficiency criterion and were therefore excluded from the statistical analyses. Importantly, these 22 learners remained members of their respective intact classes and participated in the regular classroom activities; however, their proficiency and research data were not included in the analysis. Thus, the final analytical sample consisted of 150

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intermediate-level female EFL learners, with 30 eligible participants represented in each of the five intact classes. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years and had studied English for approximately two to three years at the selected private language institutes. All participants were native speakers of Azeri and were learning English as a foreign language. Given the availability of the learners and the use of intact classes, the sampling procedure was essentially purposive and convenience-based rather than random.

Following the participant-selection procedure, the 150 eligible learners were categorized into five groups of 30 participants according to their respective intact classes. Each group received one of the five task treatments investigated in the study: jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making, and opinion-exchange (sharing perspectives). Because the groups were based on intact classes, individual participants were not randomly assigned to the five conditions. Rather, each intact class participated in the instructional treatment associated with one task type. The five classes were taught by five instructors, three female and two males. All instructors had at least five years of English language teaching experience and held an M.A. degree in either Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or English Literature. Their comparable levels of teaching experience and academic qualifications helped provide relatively consistent instructional conditions across the five classes.

Instruments/ Materials

The research instruments included a proficiency test and a WTC questionnaire. An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to select the participants of the study (Allan, 2004). The assessment tool consists of 60 multiple-choice questions, divided into three primary sections including: a sentence completion exercise, a grammar evaluation, and a vocabulary assessment. According Allan (2004), as a standard test, it possesses acceptable levels of reliability and validity. This test consists of 60 items in two parts: Part one with the first 40 multiple-choice items estimates reading comprehension, and part two with 20 multiple-choice items examines grammatical knowledge. The participants were supposed to answer the test within 65 minutes.

To assess the participants' inclination to take part in classroom communication prior and subsequent to the treatment of the study, MacIntyre et al. (2001) WTC questionnaire was used. This self-report questionnaire comprises 27 items scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. It enables the researchers to determine the degree to which learners feel disposed to get involved in

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the communication processes of the pertinent learning tasks. MacIntyre et al. (2001) contended that this instrument has acceptable reliability (.89) and validity and constitutes a suitable instrument for evaluating the learners' propensity to communicate in classroom contexts. In this research, Cronbach's reliability coefficient was employed to evaluate the credibility of this self-reported questionnaire in the EFL context of Iran. The outcome of the analysis indicated that the consistency index of this questionnaire (.85) was deemed acceptable for the current sample.

Finally, Pica et al.'s (1993) psycholinguistic typology of tasks was used to design appropriate tasks for the groups of the study. As mentioned above, this typology splits tasks into five distinct categories comprising: a) jigsaw activities; b) information-exchange exercises; c) tasks for solving problems; d) decision-making exercises; and e) opinion-sharing activities. Pica et al. (1993) contended that the foregoing task categories could be distinguished from each other on the basis of four main criteria including: a) relationship between participants; b) interaction necessity; c) objective focus; and d) result alternatives. Interactant relationship delineates the relationships among group members and specifies the members who hold, furnish, and demand information. It draws a distinction between one-way activities in which one participant holds and provides the pertinent data and two-way activities in which the participants take part in the foregoing processes reciprocally. Interaction requirement criterion differentiates tasks which urge the learners to interact with their peers and the ones which consider this issue to be voluntary. Goal orientation differentiates convergent tasks which compel the learners to concur with each other in regard to the task outcome and the divergent tasks, which permit the learners to oppose their peers' perspectives. Lastly, outcome options criterion discriminates the closed tasks which demand the learners to achieve a pre-specified outcome from the open tasks which allow the learners to reach a number of feasible outcomes. It should be added that to ensure the content validity of the materials, they were rigorously reviewed by three language experts.

Procedure

First, OPT was administered to the 172 learners enrolled in five intact classes. Based on the OPT results, 150 learners whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the group mean were included in the study. The remaining 22 learners, although members of the same intact classes, did not meet this proficiency criterion; therefore, their scores were excluded from the analysis. The 150 eligible learners, 30 from each intact class, constituted the study sample. Before

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the treatment, they completed the WTC questionnaire as a pretest within 20 minutes. Subsequently, each intact group received instruction based on its assigned psycholinguistic task type.

To be more specific, in the jigsaw group, the learners were requested to integrate their pertinent information with their peers' information to achieve the predetermined outcome of the relevant tasks (e.g. completing a diagram). In the information-gap group, the learners were encouraged to negotiate with the other members to identify their complementary pieces of information and to carry out the tasks based on the germane instructions (e.g. spot-the-difference tasks). In the problem-solving group, the learners were prompted to discuss the relevant task problem, utilize the obtainable information and reach the pre-specified outcome of the task (e.g. finding ways of surviving in a desert island). In the decision-making group, the learners were provided with a specific problem and were made cognizant of the fact that it had some feasible solutions (e.g. making a decision on the best way of cleaning the house). The learners were encouraged to confer with their peers to handpick one of the probable outcomes. In the opinion-exchange group, the learners were prompted to enter into discussion with their peers and informed that they did not need to achieve a pre-determined resolution (e.g. prompting the learners to inform their peers about their favorite books and to justify their choice of the books). The instruction lasted 10 sessions in five weeks (i.e. two sessions a week). Finally, the WTC questionnaire was administered as the posttest to investigate the effect of psycholinguistic tasks on the learners' willingness to take part in classroom communication. The participants completed the questionnaire at posttest in approximately 20 minutes of the class time.

Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest design to investigate the effects of five psycholinguistic task types on Iranian EFL learners' WTC.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the proficiency test and the pretest and posttest administrations were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the participants' performance. The normality of the score distributions was examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to determine whether the assumptions required for parametric analyses were satisfied. Subsequently, inferential statistical

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analysis was conducted using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences in WTC scores across the five task groups.

Results

Descriptive statistics across pretest and posttest administrations for the study's variable are presented by treatment group in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for WTC and Self-Efficacy Across Treatment Groups (n = 30 per group)

Variable	Group	Pretest M(SD)	Pretest [Min, Max]	Posttest M(SD)	Posttest [Min, Max]
WTC	Jigsaw (JG)	3.35 (0.42)	[2.40, 4.10]	3.68 (0.44)	[2.70, 4.40]
	Information-Gap (IG)	3.05 (0.51)	[2.10, 4.00]	3.94 (0.46)	[2.90, 4.80]
	Problem-Solving (PG)	3.28 (0.45)	[2.30, 4.10]	3.71 (0.48)	[2.60, 4.60]
	Decision-Making (DG)	3.28 (0.46)	[2.20, 4.20]	3.51 (0.41)	[2.60, 4.30]
	Opinion-Exchange (OG)	3.32 (0.49)	[2.30, 4.20]	4.26 (0.45)	[3.30, 5.00]

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and score ranges) for WTC across the five treatment conditions before and after the intervention. At baseline, mean WTC scores across all five groups clustered closely between 3.05 (SD = 0.51) and 3.35 (SD = 0.42) on the 5-point scale. Following the intervention, all treatment groups demonstrated increases in WTC, with the Opinion-Exchange group showing the highest posttest mean (M = 4.26, SD = 0.45), followed by the Information-Gap group (M = 3.94, SD = 0.46).

Subsequent inferential analyses were conducted to determine the statistical significance of these observed between-group differences. To satisfy the assumptions of parametric analysis, normality was examined using skewness and kurtosis coefficients along with standard error ratios. In line with Field (2018), absolute z-ratios (statistic/SE) within ±1.96indicate acceptable normality at p > .05. As reported in Table 2, the ratios for both variables across both test administrations fell within this range, confirming univariate normality.

Table 2. Normality Indices for WTC (N = 150)

Measure	Phase	Skewness Statistic	SE	z_(skew)	Kurtosis Statistic	SE	z_{kurt}
WTC	Pretest	.324	.198	1.64	-.549	.394	-1.39
	Posttest	-.334	.198	-1.69	.188	.394	0.48

Note. Standard errors correspond to N = 150. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests also confirmed non-significant deviations from normality (p > .05).

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Addressing the First Research Question (RQ1)

Prior to assessing post-intervention differences, a one-way ANOVA was conducted on WTC pretest scores across the five groups. The result indicated no statistically significant difference at baseline, $F(4, 145) = 2.14$, $p = .079$, $\eta_p^2 = .056$, confirming initial group equivalence.

To answer RQ1, a one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted on posttest WTC scores. Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was non-significant, $F(4, 145) = 0.67$, $p = .612$, satisfying the assumption of equal variances. As detailed in Table 3, the main effect of task type on posttest WTC was statistically significant, $F(4, 145) = 11.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .237$. The partial eta squared indicates a large effect size.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA on Posttest WTC Scores

Source	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Between Groups	9.082	4	2.271	11.241	< .001	.237
Within Groups	29.289	145	0.202			
Total	38.371	149				

Addressing the Second Research Question (RQ2)

To address RQ2, Tukey's HSD post-hoc test was performed to identify the specific locations of between-group differences. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Tukey HSD Post-hoc Comparisons for Posttest WTC

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	SE	*p*	95% Confidence Interval
Opinion-Exchange (OG)	Jigsaw (JG)	0.58*	0.116	< .001	[0.26, 0.90]
	Decision-Making (DG)	0.75*	0.116	< .001	[0.43, 1.07]
	Problem-Solving (PG)	0.55*	0.116	< .001	[0.23, 0.87]
	Information-Gap (IG)	0.32*	0.116	.046	[0.01, 0.64]
Information-Gap (IG)	Decision-Making (DG)	0.43*	0.116	.003	[0.11, 0.75]
	Jigsaw (JG)	0.26	0.116	.172	[-0.06, 0.58]
	Problem-Solving (PG)	0.23	0.116	.284	[-0.09, 0.55]
Problem-Solving (PG)	Decision-Making (DG)	0.20	0.116	.418	[-0.12, 0.52]
	Jigsaw (JG)	0.03	0.116	.998	[-0.29, 0.35]
Jigsaw (JG)	Decision-Making (DG)	0.17	0.116	.585	[-0.15, 0.49]

* Significant at p < .05.

As shown in Table 4, the Opinion-Exchange group ($M = 4.26$) scored significantly higher in posttest WTC than the Jigsaw group ($p < .001$), Decision-Making group ($p < .001$), Problem-Solving group ($p < .001$), and Information-Gap group ($p = .046$). Additionally, the Information-Gap group ($M = 3.94$) showed significantly higher WTC than the Decision-Making group ($M = 3.51$, $p = .003$). No other pairwise comparisons were statistically significant.

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Discussion

The first research question aimed to determine whether different psycholinguistic task types exert a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' WTC. Results revealed a statistically significant main effect of psycholinguistic task type on WTC. This finding directly addresses the first research question by empirically demonstrating that learners' WTC varies as a function of task type. The present finding is strongly supported by a growing body of recent empirical research demonstrating that classroom tasks significantly influence learners' WTC. For instance, Khajavy et al. (2018) found that classroom environment and task-related variables significantly predicted Iranian EFL learners' situational WTC, even after controlling for trait-level factors such as motivation and anxiety. Similarly, Shao et al. (2020) reported that task structure and interactional patterns significantly shaped Chinese EFL learners' moment-to-moment WTC. More recently, Borkowska (2023) showed that tasks emphasizing meaning-focused interaction led to higher WTC compared to form-focused activities, attributing this effect to reduced evaluative pressure and increased communicative authenticity.

The significant effect of task type on WTC highlights the situational and dynamic nature of willingness to communicate, a core assumption in contemporary WTC theory. According to MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic pyramid model, WTC is not a stable personality trait but a context-sensitive construct that fluctuates depending on immediate classroom conditions. Task type, as a situational antecedent, operates at the upper layers of the WTC pyramid and can exert an immediate influence on learners' readiness to initiate L2 communication. Despite broad support, some recent studies have reported weaker or nonsignificant task effects on WTC. For example, Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2021) found that while tasks influenced learners' engagement, individual difference variables such as self-confidence and trait anxiety accounted for a larger proportion of variance in WTC than task type alone.

These discrepancies may be attributed to contextual and methodological differences. In instructional settings where learners enjoy greater exposure to authentic communication or possess higher baseline proficiency, task type may play a less decisive role. In contrast, in EFL contexts characterized by limited L2 exposure and exam-oriented instruction—such as Iran—task design may become a primary driver of situational WTC. Thus, the present finding does not contradict

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disconfirming studies but rather complements them by highlighting the context-dependent salience of task effects.

The second research question sought to determine whether different psycholinguistic task types exert distinct effects on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and, more specifically, to identify which task types lead to significantly higher levels of WTC. Implicit in this question was the assumption that communicative tasks are not homogeneous in their impact and that certain task designs may be more facilitative of learners' communicative readiness than others. To address this question, a Tukey HSD post-hoc analysis was conducted following a significant omnibus ANOVA. The results indicated that only two pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance ($p < .05$). Although variations were observed across all task conditions, the opinion-exchange group achieved the highest level of posttest WTC, followed by the information-gap group, while differences involving other task types (e.g., decision-making, problem-solving, and jigsaw tasks) did not reach statistical significance.

These findings provide a clear answer to the second research question: psycholinguistic task types differ selectively—not uniformly—in their effects on WTC. Thus, the hypothesis of differential task effects is partially supported, suggesting that only certain task characteristics generate sufficiently strong affective and interactional conditions to produce statistically detectable gains in learners' willingness to communicate.

The effectiveness of opinion-exchange tasks is consistent with recent empirical findings. Botes et al. (2022) demonstrated that tasks promoting learner enjoyment and emotional involvement significantly increased L2 WTC. Similarly, Dodd (2024) reported that discussion-based tasks fostered higher WTC by enhancing learners' sense of agency and emotional security. Toyoda et al. (2021) found that tasks emphasizing personal expression significantly predicted situational WTC, even after controlling for trait-level motivation and anxiety. These findings directly support the present result that opinion-exchange tasks are particularly effective in promoting WTC. The strong performance of information-gap tasks is also supported by recent studies. Khamraeva and Berdieva (2023) and Gao et al. (2024) reported that tasks requiring obligatory information exchange increased learner participation and communicative initiation. These studies suggest that interactional necessity (meaningful reasons to speak) remains a powerful driver of WTC, particularly for learners who may be reluctant to speak voluntarily.

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One possible explanation for this finding is that opinion-exchange tasks underscore the importance of affective–motivational fit in task design. These tasks foreground learners' personal beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, thereby increasing emotional engagement and reducing performance pressure. Recent research conceptualizing WTC as a dynamic and emotion-driven construct argues that learners' moment-to-moment WTC is strongly shaped by enjoyment, perceived autonomy, and emotional safety (Feng et al. 2023; Gao et al. 2024). Opinion-exchange tasks appear to activate these affective mechanisms more effectively than cognitively constrained task types.

The information-gap task, which ranked second, seems to promote WTC through a different pathway—namely, communicative necessity and task-induced interactional pressure. In these tasks, communication is essential for task completion, which pushes learners toward interaction even when intrinsic motivation may be moderate. Recent task-based studies indicate that functional pressure to exchange information can increase situational WTC by shifting learners' attention away from self-evaluation and toward task success (Johari et al. 2025; Lambert & Aubrey, 2025). In contrast, the absence of statistically significant differences involving problem-solving, decision-making, and jigsaw tasks suggests that higher cognitive or procedural demands may neutralize potential gains in WTC. Although these tasks are communicative, they may increase cognitive load, coordination demands, or concern about correctness, thereby limiting learners' WTC spontaneously.

Not all recent research has found clear advantages for opinion-exchange or information-gap tasks. For example, Leeming et al. (2024) reported that individual differences such as self-confidence and perceived competence sometimes outweighed task effects. Similarly, Margas (2023) found that emotionally supportive classroom climates could mitigate task-related differences in WTC. These mixed findings suggest that task effects are context-sensitive. In settings where learners already experience high autonomy and emotional support, task type may play a reduced role. In more teacher-centered contexts, however, task design may become a critical determinant of learners' WTC—helping explain the strong task effects observed in the present study.

The findings of this study contribute to TBLT and affective dimensions of second language acquisition by demonstrating that task type plays a differential role in shaping learners' WTC. The superior performance of opinion-exchange tasks supports theoretical models that conceptualize WTC as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct rather than a stable learner trait. In particular, the

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results support socio-cognitive and interactionist perspectives, which emphasize the importance of meaningful interaction in promoting communicative engagement. Tasks that allow learners to express personal views and negotiate meaning appear to create conditions that enhance perceived communicative competence, thereby strengthening WTC.

Moreover, the comparatively weaker outcomes associated with decision-making and psycholinguistically demanding tasks suggest that cognitive load and task complexity may mediate the relationship between task design and affective outcomes. This finding extends existing TBLT research by highlighting that not all communicative tasks equally support affective variables, even when they are interaction-oriented.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study offers clear guidance for classroom practice. Teachers and curriculum designers should prioritize opinion-exchange and meaning-focused tasks that encourage learners to articulate personal ideas, share experiences, and engage in authentic dialogue. Such tasks appear particularly effective in fostering learners' willingness to participate in communication, which is essential for continued language development. Information-gap tasks can also be productively incorporated as a secondary option, especially when structured to ensure balanced participation and clear communicative goals.

The findings of this study open several avenues for further research. One important direction concerns the generalizability of the results across different learning contexts and learner populations. Future studies could examine whether the differential effects of task types on WTC are replicated with learners of varying proficiency levels, age groups, or cultural and educational backgrounds. Longitudinal designs would also be valuable to explore whether the positive effects of opinion-exchange and information-gap tasks are sustained over time. Further research could also investigate the role of task design features that may mediate learners' affective responses. Variables such as task complexity, topic familiarity, group size, and mode of interaction (e.g., face-to-face versus online tasks) warrant closer examination to determine how they interact with task type in shaping WTC. In addition, future studies may benefit from adopting mixed-methods approaches that more deeply integrate quantitative outcomes with learners' lived experiences. Classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, or discourse analysis could shed light on the interactional processes through which specific tasks foster or inhibit communication. Examining teachers' perspectives and instructional decision-making related to task implementation would

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also complement learner-focused research and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how task-based instruction influences communicative outcomes in real classroom settings.

Declaration of interest: None

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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