

Willingness to Communicate in English as a Second Language among Malaysian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Learning English as second language is a complex process. To become a fluent speaker of the language, students must be willing to communicate in the target language. Unfortunately, as often observed in many L2 classrooms, many students choose to remain quiet rather than take the opportunity to use the language to communicate with their fellow classmates and instructors. Researchers attributed this behaviour to the students' willingness to communicate in the second language. However, research involving Malaysian students and willingness to communicate is still lacking. Therefore, this study attempts to fill in the gap by examining the level of willingness to communicate in English as a second language among 239 undergraduates at a Malaysian university campus in northern Malaysia. In addition, this study also aimed to determine whether the level of willingness to communicate in English among the undergraduates differs according to gender. Questionnaires were used to elicit responses from the students. Findings indicate that Malaysian undergraduates have a moderate level of willingness to communicate in the target language; gender does not influence willingness to communicate; and perceived competence in the target language appears to be the deciding factor of their willingness to communicate in English as a second language.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate, second language, university students, perceived competence

Introduction

English language is a compulsory subject in the Malaysian education system. Students start to learn the language as young as when they were in kindergartens and all the way up to the tertiary level. Considering the number of years that the students had to learn the language, by the time they graduated from the university, they are expected to become a confident and fluent speaker of the language. Unfortunately, a sizable portion of them still has difficulty speaking in English even though they can understand the language quite well. This could be traced back to their behaviour when they were learning the language. Many of them did not take the opportunity to speak the language and instead preferred to keep quiet even during language class.

Studies after studies have been conducted to identify the variables that can explain second language learners' learning behavior. Motivation, attitude, aptitude, and beliefs about language learning were some of the popular areas for investigation. Currently, the variable related to speaking or communication that has attracted the attention of many second language

acquisition researchers is the construct known as ‘willingness to communicate’ (WTC) which was proposed by McCroskey and his research associates back in the 1980s (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987).

McCroskey and his research associates conceptualised the WTC construct as a stable personality trait that can be used to explain why certain individuals tend to communicate more than others and vice versa. Their initial studies confirmed the existence of the construct. Since then, many studies on WTC, including cross-cultural research, were conducted by various researchers (Barraclough, Christophel, & McCroskey, 1988; Sallinen-Kuparinen & McCroskey, 1991; Burroughs, Marie, & McCroskey, 2003).

The WTC construct was later tested in the L2 environment by MacIntyre and Charos (1996). They found that the WTC construct could be used in L2 acquisition research as well. Since then, Second Language Willingness to Communicate (L2-WTC)) has been tested in various L2 contexts and settings by researchers all over the world. There were studies involving undergraduates from Iran (Ghoonsoly et al., 2014; Alimorad & Farahmand, 2021), Libya (Aomr, Goh, and Kapol, 2020) Turkey (Başöz & Erten, 2018), China (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhang, Beckmann, & Beckmann, 2022; Kun, Senom, and Peng, 2020), Bangladesh (Alam, Ansarey, Abdul-Halim, Rana, Milon, & Mitu (2022), Pakistan (Ubaid, Ramanair, & Rethinasamy, 2022), Korea and Taiwan (Lee, Lee, & Chen Hsieh, 2019) and Thai (Suvongse & Chanyoo, 2022). These studies normally report the level of L2-WTC of their various research participants.

The primary instrument used in early WTC research was a questionnaire developed by McCroskey and Baer (1985) called the Willingness to Communicate Scale. It has good predictive ability of a person’s communication tendency and is very reliable. However, since the scale was developed to be used in the first language (L1) communication research, many L2 researchers feel the need to modify and even come up with a new scale to be used in their L2 research environment. Some of the more popular L2-WTC scales are the WTC Inside and Outside the Classroom scale developed by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Conrod (2001), the L2-WTC scale developed by Weaver (2005), and the WTC in English scale developed by Peng and Woodrow (2010). Nevertheless, adaptations of existing scales and the development of new scales by L2 researchers continued to be carried out. This is so that the scales would better suit the purpose and context of their studies.

The problem with having all these different kinds of L2-WTC scales is that it makes it difficult to compare properly and accurately the results of one study from another study. One way to make such comparison possible is for the researchers to provide an interpretation of the level of L2-WTC as indicated by the participants in their studies. For example, they can label the level of L2-WTC as high, moderate, and low. Doing so would enable comparisons of findings to be made by other researchers. Ghonsooly et al. (2014), for example, assigned ‘high WTC’ for a total score of 80% and above, ‘moderate WTC’ for scores between 60%-80%, and ‘low WTC’ for scores below 60%. The labelling system was adapted from Liu and Jackson’s (2008) research on Unwillingness to Communicate.

Researchers believe that the involvement of several variables lead to the varying levels of WTC among people. McCroskey and Richmond (1987), for example, listed variables which have received a lot of attention from researchers in the field of communication and psychology, such as, “introversion, self-esteem, communication competence, communication apprehension, and cultural diversity” (p. 25) as the “antecedents” (p. 25) of WTC. MacIntyre (1994) suggested

that a combination of communication competence and communication apprehension is the cause of WTC; based on his causal modelling. Meanwhile, Donovan and MacIntyre (2005) suggested that a person's biographical data such as age and sex lead to the differences in the level of WTC among people. Even though they found no significant difference between the male and female participants in terms of their L2-WTC in their study, the researchers still recommend for age and sex to be investigated. This is to provide insights into how WTC "could be fostered across the life span" (p. 271). Some of the more recent findings are classroom environment (Alam et al., 2022), fear of losing face, teacher status (Suvongse & Chanyoo, 2022), L2 speaking anxiety (Lee, Lee, & Hsieh, 2022), and trust (Ito, 2022).

L2-WTC is relatively new in the field of L2 acquisition. As such, there is still much to know about it. Due to that, Liu (2013) called for more research on WTC to be conducted. Başöz and Erten (2019) echoed Liu's recommendation and suggested that some elements of qualitative research on aspects of WTC should be added to the normally pure quantitative research. Apart from that, research on L2-WTC involving Malaysian participants is needed since there is a lack of information regarding Malaysian learners' L2-WTC. In addition, there is a need to determine whether gender plays a significant role in determining the participants' level of L2-WTC (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005). Finally, there is a need to explore the variables that lead to the variability of L2-WTC among the participants. Inspired by previous researchers' suggestions, and to fill in the research gap as stated earlier, the present study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of L2-WTC among Malaysian undergraduates?
2. Does the level of L2-WTC differ according to gender?
3. What are the factors that lead to the decision to communicate or not to communicate in English as L2 among Malaysian undergraduates?

Method

This research follows the mixed-method research design. A quantitative survey was used to collect quantitative data; and a qualitative survey was used to collect qualitative data.

239 second semester undergraduates (Male = 88; Female = 151) at a university in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia took part in the study. They were 18 to 20 years of age. The mean age was 19 ($SD = 0.21$). All of them were non-English major. Their proficiency in English as L2 was that of a false beginner to intermediate level.

A questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. The questionnaire was made up of three parts. Part A elicited demographic information such as age and gender from the participants. Part B contained the L2-WTC scale. The items for the scale were adapted from Peng and Woodrow (2010). There were altogether ten items in the scale. The items were translated into Malay and were checked by two senior lecturers to see whether the Malay version managed to retain the original intended meaning of the English version. As for the rating system, unlike in the original scale in which the participants were asked to rate each statement as 1=*definitely not willing*, 2=*probably not willing*, 3=*perhaps not willing*, 4=*perhaps willing*, 5=*probably willing*, and 6=*definitely willing*, this adapted scale asked the participants to read each statement and rate it on a 1=*very low* to 6=*very high*. It was felt that this adapted rating system would be easier for the participants to understand and use rather than the original one. The total scores for the participants could range from 10 to 60, with higher

scores indicating higher level of L2-WTC. Part C contained an open-ended question which was marked as optional for the participants to reply to. The open-ended question asked the participants to name one factor that influenced their decision to communicate or not to communicate in L2.

The questionnaires were administered to the participants with the help of their respective English lecturers. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, a brief explanation regarding the objective of the study was given to the participants. They were also told that their participation in the study was voluntary and that it was okay for them not to participate in the study if they did not feel like it. The participants were given up to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher for data cleaning and analysis.

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the quantitative data. To identify the level of L2-WTC among the participants, the mean score was computed. To determine whether gender played a significant role in determining the level of L2-WTC among the participants, a *t*-test for independent samples was utilised. Lastly, to know the factors or variables that influenced the participants' decision to communicate or not to communicate in L2, the *KJ Method* (Scupin, 1997), a form of thematic analysis, was used.

Results

This study investigated matters related to L2-WTC among second semester undergraduates at a university in the northern area of Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 239 undergraduates participated in this study. Many of the participants were female (63%) and between ages 18 and 20. All the participants rated their level of L2-WTC for all ten items in the L2-WTC Scale; however, for the optional open-ended question which asked them to name one factor that influenced their decision to communicate or not to communicate in the target language, only forty of them responded to the question. The Cronbach Alpha for the L2-WTC scale was .88 which suggests that the scale is a reliable instrument for collecting data for this study. Results for each research question are provided below.

RQ1: What is the level of L2-WTC among Malaysian undergraduates?

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics analysis was utilised. The following cut-offs based on Liu and Jackson (2008) were used to assign meaning to the level of L2-WTC: 0-3.59 = *Low*, 3.6-4.79 = *Moderate*, and 4.8-6.0 = *High*. Table 1 summarizes the participants' responses to all ten L2-WTC scale items. The mean score and standard deviation for each item is also presented to show levels of L2-WTC across the items.

Table 1. Mean score and standard deviation for L2-WTC in English

Item	Mean	SD
1	4.17	.966
2	4.12	1.078
3	3.87	.955
4	3.93	.976
5	4.56	.954

6	I am willing to ask my friend sitting next to me in English how to say an English phrase to express the thoughts in my mind.	4.53	.986
7	I am willing to ask my friends in English the meaning of a word I do not know.	4.72	.931
8	I am willing to ask my friend sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word.	4.74	.949
9	I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Malay into English in my group.	4.13	1.121
10	I am willing to translate a spoken utterance from Malay into English in my group.	3.93	1.094
Total		4.2703	.693

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean score that represents the overall level of L2-WTC among the participants is 4.27 ($SD = .69$). This indicates that the overall L2-WTC of the participants is moderate. Among the many communication activities in the classroom, the participants indicated that they were most willing to communicate in L2 when asking the person next to them to give the meaning of an English word that they probably did not know (Items 7 and 8). The participants also indicated that they were most *not* willing to speak when it involved having to perform oral activities such as giving a speech and role-play in front other people (Items 3 and 4).

RQ2: Does the level of L2-WTC differ according to gender?

To answer the second research question, a *t*-test for independent samples was carried out. The results of the *t*-test are given below.

Table 2. Group statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
L2-WTC in English	Male	88	4.19	.71	.08
	Female	151	4.32	.68	.06

As can be seen in Table 2, female participants obtained a higher mean score compared to male participants. This suggests that female students are more willing to speak in English compared to male participants.

Table 3. *t*-test

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
L2-WTC in English	Equal variances assumed	.086	.769	-1.432	237	.153	-.13284	.09274	-.31555	.04986
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.414	174.889	.159	-.13284	.09396	-.31828	.05259

However, the independent samples *t*-test, indicated that there was no significant difference in scores for males ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .71$) and females ($M=4.31$, $SD=.67$); $t(238) = -1.43$, $p = .15$ two tailed). Also, the magnitude of the difference between the two mean scores was small (eta squared = .008). In other words, gender does not influence the level of WTC among the participants.

RQ3: What are the factors that lead to the decision to communicate or not to communicate in English as L2 among Malaysian undergraduates?

To answer the third research question, a thematic analysis using the KJ method (Scupin, 1997) was conducted. Responses from the participants were analysed and then, grouped together based on their similarities. A theme which described each group was then given. Four themes emerged from the participants' responses. Table 4 shows the themes and the number of participants' responses that belong in each theme.

Table 4. Factors that influence L2-WTC

	Factors that influence L2 WTC in English	No. of responses
1	Perceived Competence	21
2	Environment	8
3	Anxiety	7
4	Utility	4

As can be seen in Table 4, the number one factor that influences L2-WTC among the participants is their perceived competence in the target language. More than half of those who responded to this open-ended question indicated this. At a distant second place is the environmental factor which includes both teacher and friend's temperaments and reactions. The third factor that influences L2-WTC is anxiety arising from having to speak in the target language. And the final factor given by the respondents of this question is *utility* which refers to the practicality of speaking English while performing their day-to-day activities.

Discussion

The first objective of this study was to identify the level of L2-WTC among Malaysian undergraduates. Findings indicate that Malaysian undergraduates have a moderate level of L2-WTC. This suggests that the participants are open to speak in the target language if 1) opportunity is given to them; for example, when the teacher asks questions directly to the students, and 2) they know what to say or how to respond appropriately and correctly; unlike students with low-WTC who might refuse to answer questions in the target language. Participants with high-WTC, on the other hand, most probably would actively be seeking for opportunity to speak in the target language by volunteering to answer the teacher's questions and even by initiating communication with the teacher.

This finding concurs with the findings by Aomr et al. (2020) on Iranian students, Başöz (2018) on Turkish students, and Ghoonsoly et al. (2014) in which their students also indicated that their L2-WTC is moderate. The finding of this study differs from the findings concerning Chinese students by Liu (2013) and Kun, Senom, and Peng (2020) in which the Chinese students indicated that their level of L2-WTC is high. However, a notable difference between the students in Liu's study versus the participants in this study and studies mentioned earlier is that the participants in Liu's study are majoring in English language. Such students tend to

have good mastery of the language, confidence, and fluency to speak in the target language unlike students who are not majoring in English language.

As for the speaking activities that the participants are most willing to do, in Table 1, it can be seen that the top two speaking activities are asking ‘my peer sitting next to me in English the meaning of an English word’ (item 8) and asking ‘my group mates in English the meaning of a word I do not know’ (item 7). The bottom three speaking activities that the students are least willing to do are translating ‘a spoken utterance from Malay into English’ (item 10), doing ‘a role play standing in front of the class in English’ (item 4), and giving ‘a short speech in English to the class’ (item 3). These results suggest that the participants are most willing to communicate in the target language when there is an actual need for them to do so; such as, asking for help about something.

The second objective of this study was to determine whether gender plays a significant role in determining the level of L2-WTC. Findings show that even though the L2-WTC score for female participants is higher than male participants, gender does not play a significant role in determining the level of L2-WTC for the participants in this study. This could be due to two reasons. Firstly, the number of male participants in this study is small ($n = 88$). Secondly, both male and female participants are similar in terms of their background and possibly even their learning experience since they are at the same university. A similar observation was reported by Liu (2013) in which even though the mean score of the female students is higher than that of the male students, *t*-test indicates that the difference is not significant.

The third objective of the study was to find out factors that are related to students’ L2-WTC. Findings show that ‘perceived competence’ is the number one factor that affects the participants’ L2-WTC as stated by those who answered the open-ended question in the questionnaire. It can be implied that these students lack the confidence to speak in the target language due to their perceived level of competence in the target language. In other words, even if their English language level is good, if the participants feel that the level is inadequate, that feeling or negative mindset will hinder their L2-WTC. McCroskey listed self-perceived communication competence as one of the antecedents to WTC (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Also, MacIntyre’s (1994) study confirmed that self-perceived communication competence is related to L2-WTC.

There are several implications for this study. Instructors need to encourage and give opportunity for the students to speak more in the target language. Since this study has shown that students will communicate in the target language when there is a need for them to do so, and that they would communicate more with their friends or peers compared to their instructor, perhaps, the instructor can arrange for pair-work activities and get the students to talk, discuss, and share ideas with the person next to them before being asked to share their opinion with the class. This is so that the students would start to build some confidence communicating in the target language. It is hoped that this gradual shift in communication confidence would encourage the students to communicate in the target language more frequently.

This research is important in several ways. First, since there is a lack of information regarding Malaysian undergraduates in L2-WTC studies, this study helps to fill in the gap by involving Malaysian undergraduates as the participants for this study. Second it helps to identify the level of L2-WTC among Malaysian undergraduates, and the classroom communication activities that they are most willing and least willing to do. This information will help instructors plan their lessons as well as enable them to provide effective support and

guidance to the students. Third, this research shows that gender is not a significant factor in determining the students' level of L2-WTC. Due to that, instructors need to be aware that there are other possible factors that influence L2-WTC. Finally, this research has identified perceived competence as the main factor that influences the participants' decision to communicate or not to communicate in the target language. Instructors need to help the students to change this mindset so that they would see the value in communicating in the target language irrespective of what they think of their competency in the target language.

Conclusion

This research examined L2-WTC among Malaysian university students. Results indicated that the students' have a moderate level of L2-WTC. In addition, gender does not play a significant role in determining the level of L2-WTC among the students. Finally, the main reason cited by the students to explain their decision to communicate or not to communicate in the target language is their own perceived competence in the language. Future studies might want to involve a larger sample size and participants from different campuses. The relationship between L2-WTC and other emotions, socio-cultural factors, students' beliefs, students' learning styles, and even instructors' teaching styles, could also be an area of investigation as they can provide more valuable information regarding L2-WTC.

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