

Exploring Factors Influencing Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English among Rural Malaysian Students: A Case Study of Rural and Urban Contexts

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Abstract

English is considered the second language (L2) in Malaysia; however, many Malaysian rural students face shortcomings in making use of this language in their daily life, and this can impact their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English. Besides, these students may encounter difficulties in their academic life when they move to cities to pursue their undergraduate studies as the mode of delivery in several universities is English. Numbers of studies demonstrated that high WTC is required for facilitating English communication skills among learners. Using a qualitative case study approach with nine participants, this paper investigates the factors that shaped the trait-like WTC of rural Malaysian students prior to and after their enrolment at a private university in Selangor. The themes that emerged from the first research question are limited exposure to English, cultural values impacting English use, and low self-confidence in English. From the second research question, the findings are gaining awareness on the importance of English, sociocultural background inhibiting English oral communication, personality factors hindering English use, and experiencing English in the new context. By focusing on the pre-university context, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of WTC among rural ESL learners and highlights the need for targeted language programmes to enhance communicative competence in rural areas. Practical implications for early interventions in language learning are also discussed to better support rural students before they transition to higher education.

KEYWORDS: *Willingness to Communicate in English, L2 Communicative Competence, Cultural Values*

1. INTRODUCTION

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in second language acquisition (SLA) is a pivotal concept which refers to readiness to engage in a communication in a suitable opportunity (MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002 cited in Tabatabaei & Jamshidifar, 2013). WTC also serves as the final psychological step between language competence and actual language

use, highlighting its importance in the learning process (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clement & Noels, 1998). Even proficient individuals may refrain from communication if they lack WTC, highlighting its importance in effective language acquisition. WTC causes authentic communication, allowing learners to practice, boost their fluency, and receive feedback, contributing to overall language proficiency.

In urban contexts, English is more frequently used in daily life than rural ones, and it often confines to classroom settings, where the grammar and writing are more emphasized than spoken communication. This real-life language practice deficiency limits learners' WTC and consequently deters learners from acquiring competence and confidence to communicate in English (Tai, 2020). For instance, in rural Malaysian settings, English is not used outside classrooms (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019), decreasing students' opportunities to engage in meaningful oral communication.

Additionally, cultural norms in rural areas can impact WTC. In many rural Malaysian communities, local languages dominate daily interactions, and English is often viewed as less relevant for communication (Nair-Venugopal, 2000 cited in Sin, 2016). This perception, coupled with the strong influence of collectivist cultural values, can deter learners from using English. The fear of standing out or making mistakes in public, which contradicts social expectations, further diminishes WTC. Learners may hesitate to speak in English to avoid negative judgment or criticism, which results in fewer opportunities for language practice.

These dynamics reveal the importance of understanding L2 WTC in rural contexts, where external constraints such as limited exposure and cultural expectations significantly shape learners' WTC. Although students may possess the linguistic competence necessary for communication, these environmental and social factors can suppress their inclination to speak, affecting their language development.

Moreover, one of the gaps in literature related to L2 WTC is that majority of the studies conducted on urban context, but the research on rural areas, particularly in Malaysia is at scarce. The lack of attention to rural students who depart to the cities to pursue their undergraduate studies with limited English skills and low L2 WTC generate a knowledge gap. Therefore, discovering how these factors form WTC before and after rural students move to higher education is important for enhancing effective educational strategies.

Research Questions

According to the above-mentioned rationale and gap of knowledge, this study tries to shed the light on the factors influencing L2 WTC among Malaysian rural students by investigating within the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Malaysian rural undergraduate students regarding the factors impacting their trait-like WTC in English while residing in their rural areas before enrolling in the university college in Selangor, Malaysia?
2. What are the perceptions of these students concerning the factors influencing their trait-like WTC in English after the enrolment?

Significance of the Study

In order to escalate the success in language learning, it is important for the educators and policy makers to highlight the importance of L2 WTC among rural students. In these contexts where

exposure to the L2 is insufficient, boosting L2 WTC by means of communicative teaching approaches and tackling psychological barriers is of great importance (Zheng & Xu, 2022).

Moreover, the research offers valuable insights for educators designing interventions to improve spoken English in the Malaysian rural context. This research can then be invaluable in creating targeted language programs meant to serve the rural student, and ultimately assist with ensuring they reach English proficiency. The study provides insights for better and context-specific pedagogical practices that are deeply rooted in the cultural and social landscapes of SLA; thus, it improves our understanding toward pedagogy aiming to provide equitable conditions on second language learning processes over underserved rural settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges Faced by Rural Malaysia Students

Malaysian education system encounters challenges for supplying various rural areas with required supplies. Scarcity in resources, such as competent English teachers, materials, and technology may deter fruitful instruction and result in inadequate curriculum that is not capable of preparing students for actual English communication (Hamid & Idrus, 2021).

The difficulties encountered by rural students in learning English are various. A major problem is the difference in educational quality between urban and rural areas. For example, urban schools generally have better resources and thus more experienced teachers provide students with several practices to use the English language authentically. However, rural students, may not be exposed to using this language frequent enough due to a lack of opportunity for authentic communication and rely mostly on textbooks (Arnold et al., 2021).

Another issue which is related to the socio-cultural context is that English is not the language of communication in rural areas in Malaysia, resulting in a cultural viewpoint that undervalues the necessity of learning English. This under emphasis can lead to the students' discouragement to attempt in language learning, further aggravating their unwillingness to communicate in English. Moreover, family and folks' attitudes toward English can alter students' confidence and motivation, as they may experience pressure to follow the local language practices rather than using English as a means of real communication (Abdullah, Kamal & Harun 2022).

1. 2.3 Willingness to Communicate in Low-Exposure Environments

According to Borasheva (2023), WTC is essential for language acquisition. In ESL contexts, higher WTC can result in more practice and enhanced language skills. Nevertheless, rural students encounter barriers to increase their WTC due to limited exposure. Psychological factors such as low self-confidence and anxiety, along with contextual influences like lack of supportive peers or teachers, inhibit WTC (Karnchanachari, 2019). Cultural norms that favour collectivism over individual expression may further discourage English communication (Verma, 2001).

These challenges create a cycle of low WTC and limited language use. Cultural norms in these communities often prioritize local languages, making English seem less relevant, which reduces students' motivation to engage in English communication. Educational settings also play a role, as teachers' attitudes and methods can either foster or hinder WTC. Supportive environments that encourage open communication help build confidence, while traditional, rote-based

methods limit students' practice opportunities.

In summary, rural students' WTC is shaped by social, cultural, and educational factors. Addressing these challenges and fostering supportive environments can enhance WTC, leading to better English proficiency and confidence.

L2 WTC Model Based on MacIntyre et al.

The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model, particularly as conceptualized by MacIntyre (1994), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that influence individuals' propensity to engage in communication in a second language (L2) (Borasheva, 2023). This model emphasizes the interplay between individual characteristics and situational variables in determining WTC.

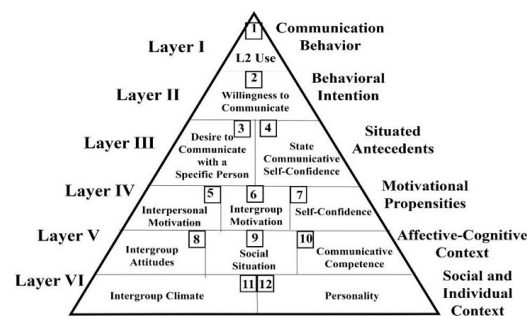


Figure 2.1 MacIntyre (1994) WTC Model

The model outlines several key factors influencing willingness to communicate (WTC) in rural students learning English. Cognitive factors include learners' beliefs and perceptions about their language abilities; low self-efficacy can lead to decreased confidence and reluctance to engage. Affective factors relate to emotions, with high anxiety negatively impacting WTC, while positive experiences can enhance it. Situational context highlights the importance of supportive environments and authentic communication opportunities, as limited exposure can hinder WTC. Interpersonal variables emphasize the role of relationships with peers and teachers, where supportive interactions boost WTC, while negative experiences can decrease it. Finally, behavioral outcomes link WTC to actual communication behavior, suggesting that understanding these factors can help create better learning environments that encourage meaningful English practice.

Key Studies of WTC on L2 Learners

Numerous studies have significantly contributed to the understanding of learners' L2 WTC. Baker and MacIntyre (2000) and Clément et al. (2003) highlighted the impact of learning contexts, noting that English education in rural Malaysia often prioritizes grammar over oral communication (Rosli Talif & Mukundan, 1994; Razali, 2013; Zulkefly & Razali, 2019). MacIntyre and Charos (1996) identified L2 anxiety and self-perceived communicative competence as key indicators of WTC, supported by findings from Peng and Woodrow (2010); Safaei et al. (2014); and Karnchanachari (2019). Cameron's (2015) study found regarding the role of perfectionism and exposure. Cultural values, particularly face-protection, were shown to hinder communication (Wen & Clément, 2003; Nagy & Nikolov,

2007). Markus and Kitayama (1991) emphasized the influence of interdependent cultural norms, while Cao (2011) and Yashima (2002) highlighted the importance of self-assessment in shaping attitudes. Jung (2011) noted how cultural factors inhibit public communication among Asian learners, and MacIntyre et al. (1998) reinforced the impact of personality traits. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) found that study-abroad participants typically exhibit higher WTC, a trend supported by Alishah (2015) and Horwitz (2016) regarding the benefits of informal contexts. Collectively, these studies emphasize the complex interplay of contextual, cultural, and personal factors influencing L2 WTC.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing the trait-like WTC in English among Malaysian rural undergraduate students prior to and after their enrolment in a university college in Selangor. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding their WTC, providing rich, nuanced data that quantitative methods may not capture.

Participants

The participants for this study will consist of nine Malaysian rural undergraduate students who are currently enrolled more than a year in a private university college in Selangor. These participants will be selected through a purposive snowball sampling technique. This method is effective for reaching individuals within specific, often hard-to-access populations, such as rural students. For maximizing the depth and description of the findings, the researchers have selected both female and male participants from Chinese, Malay and Indian backgrounds. Figure 3.1 demonstrated the pseud names of the participants and the procedure of recruiting them in the study.

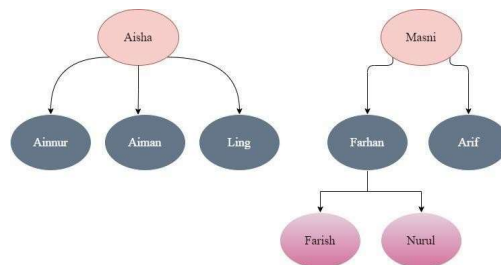


Figure 3.1 shows the Snowball Selection of the participants

Data Collection Methods

In order to triangulate the data, three data collection methods were used:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews explored participants' opinions on the factors affecting their WTC in English while living in rural areas and after moving to the city. These interviews encourage open expression within a guided framework.
2. Focus Group Discussions: Group discussions foster interaction and collective insights into participants' WTC experiences. Open-ended questions will guide dialogue on factors influencing WTC in rural and new contexts.

3. Solicited Journal Diaries: Participants maintained diaries over three months, documenting their thoughts and experiences with English, offering a longitudinal view of their evolving WTC.

Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews, focus groups, and journal diaries were analysed using thematic analysis manually. This approach involves coding the data to identify key themes and patterns related to the factors influencing trait-like WTC.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring they understand the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assured that their identities remained anonymous in any reporting of the findings, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Limitations

While this qualitative study aims to provide valuable insights into the WTC experiences of rural students, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of rural students in Malaysia. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, as participants may present their experiences in a manner that aligns with social expectations or personal beliefs.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding of the first research question

The themes emerged from the first research question (RQ1) include participants' limited exposure to English communication; lack of confidence in using English; and cultural values impacting English oral communication use. Figure 1 shows the themes and sub-themes emerged from the RQ1:

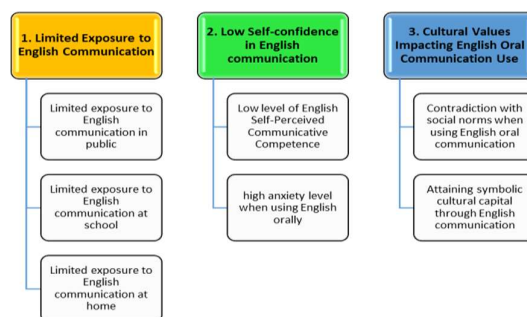


Figure 4.1 Shows the RQ1 Findings

• Limited Exposure to English Communication

Participants experienced limited exposure to English communication across three main settings: public, school, and home in rural context. In public, speaking English felt unnatural in Malay-speaking communities, with Arif noting,

"... not many people talk English outside... you won't really find anyone chatting in English."

At school, English learning focused on grammar and memorization rather than communication, as Nurul mentioned,

"We learned English at school just to pass exams."

At home, the use of native languages prevailed due to limited family proficiency in English, further hindering participants' ability to practice and improve their English communication skills.

These findings align with Baker and MacIntyre (2000) and Clément et al. (2003), who highlighted the significant impact of learning contexts on L2 WTC. Studies in Malaysia also confirm that English education in rural areas focuses primarily on grammar and translation, with little emphasis on oral communication (Rosli Talif & Mukundan, 1994; Razali, 2013).

- Low Self-confidence in English Communication

The second key findings of the RQ1 revealed that participants had low self-confidence in English communication, influenced by their perceived communicative competence and high anxiety. Lee shared,

"I learned English for a long time, but I wasn't good at speaking... I had no confidence,"

With many comparing themselves to native speakers. Aisha remarked,

"If I couldn't speak like the native speakers one day, it meant I never really learned how to speak English at all."

Anxiety over public judgment and limited practice opportunities further discouraged participants, making English communication feel overwhelming. This finding aligns with previous research (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Peng & Woodrow, 2010) showing that L2 anxiety and SPCC are key indicators of L2 WTC. Students' perfectionist tendencies, fear of judgment, and comparison to native speakers worsened their anxiety. Their rural upbringing, limited exposure to English, contributing to their low confidence. Similar results have been observed in other studies by Safaei et al. (2014) and Cameron (2015).

- Cultural Values on Impacting English Oral Communication Use

The third finding of RQ1 shows that cultural values significantly affect students' English WTC. Speaking English publicly often contradicts rural social norms, with participants like Masni stating,

"People around here don't really accept it... they either get surprised or ask why you're using English!"

Farhan similarly noted facing ridicule, discouraging practice. However, English proficiency is also seen as a means to attain symbolic cultural capital, with Arif expressing,

"I aspired to learn English because it can elevate your status."

This duality of disapproval and prestige shapes students' engagement with English communication. The finding revealed that cultural values in rural Malaysia suppressed students' WTC in English due to the negative perception of English as a westernized, conceited behavior. Fear of being judged and criticized in public further discouraged English use, echoing findings from Wen and Clément(2003) and Nagy and Nikolov (2007).

2. Findings of the RQ2

The themes emerged from the RQ2 include gaining awareness, socio-cultural background, personality and experiencing English oral communication which are presented in the figure 2.

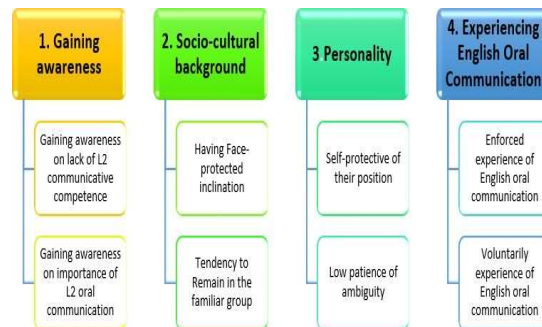


Figure 4.2 Shows RQ2 Findings

- **Gaining Awareness**

The emerged theme, “Gaining awareness” from RQ2 reveals participants' growing awareness of their limited English oral communication skills upon entering university. Lee expressed frustration, saying,

"This was so bad. I knew something that I could not use."

Participants frequently compared themselves to others, leading to a decline in communicative competence, as Aiman noted feeling disheartened before a presentation after seeing a classmate's fluency. The second sub-theme highlights participants' recognition of the importance of English communication for academic success and career prospects, with Arif emphasizing,

"I would like to be ready in any situations like presenting, meeting sessions."

After relocating to Selangor, Malaysian rural undergraduate students gained new perspectives on oral English communication, becoming aware of their weaknesses and the importance of using English in real-life settings. This shift in awareness led to changes in their attitudes and behaviors towards English communication. This finding aligns with studies by Markus and Kitayama (1991), Cao (2011), Peng and Woodrow (2010), and Yashima (2002), which highlight how self-assessment and environmental changes impact L2 WTC.

- **Socio-Cultural Background**

This finding suggests that the socio-cultural factors shaping participants' attitudes toward English communication in their new environment. The first sub-theme, Face-protected Orientation, shows how participants were cautious to avoid disapproval. Aiman shared,

"I do not want the audience to think that I am weak in English,"

leading to self-correction and hindering fluency. Farhan expressed dissatisfaction with his accent, saying,

"I was ridiculed for my pronunciation," increasing his anxiety.

The second sub-theme, In-group Consistency, reveals that participants preferred interacting with hometown friends. Aiman found it easier to communicate with them, but Farhan noted that this limited exposure to English slowed his progress.

The study found that cultural factors such as face- protection and in-group cohesion significantly impacted students' L2 WTC even after living in Selangor for more than a year. The fear of losing face in conversations and the tendency to remain in familiar groups limited their English communication, though some improvement occurred as students' oral skills grew. This aligns with studies like Wen and Clément (2003) and Jung (2011), which emphasize other-directedness and face-protection as key inhibitors in public communication among Asian learners.

- Personality

The third finding focuses on participants' personalities and how they influenced English communication. The first sub-theme, Self-protective of their Position, reveals that participants often avoided initiating conversations in unfamiliar settings, especially with strangers. Masni shared,

"I need to assess how friendly the person is before talking," reflecting a desire for security.

This self-protective approach limited their opportunities to practice English. The second sub-theme, Low Patience of Ambiguity, highlights participants' discomfort with unclear or complex conversations. Nurul admitted,

"I would only push through if the conversation was important," showing a reluctance to engage in difficult or unproductive exchanges, especially with non-native speakers.

Another result from the study indicated that participants' L2 WTC was influenced by their personalities, particularly being self-protective and having low patience for ambiguity. The self-protective personality made students hesitant to communicate in unfamiliar or formal settings due to fear of losing face, while their low tolerance for ambiguous conversations led to lower L2 WTC. This aligns with the findings of MacIntyre & Charos (1996), MacIntyre et al. (1998), and Wen & Clément (2003), who noted that personality traits significantly impact learners' WTC.

2.1

2.2 Experiencing English Oral Communication

This finding focuses on participants' experiences with English oral communication after moving to Selangor. The first sub-theme, Enforced Experience of Oral Communication in English, highlights the obligatory nature of English use in academic settings. Participants like Aisha initially felt anxious about class presentations but gained confidence through practice. Masni said,

"I became more comfortable as I got to know my international classmates."

Over time, this exposure improved their communication skills. The second sub-theme, Voluntary Experience of Oral Communication in English, emphasizes participants' personal efforts to engage in English. Ainnur noted,

"Interacting with international classmates helped me progress."

These experiences boosted their willingness and confidence to communicate.

The study's findings revealed that exposure to oral L2 communication in real-world settings significantly enhanced the Selangor students' efforts to improve their L2 WTC. Both compelled and voluntary exposure to English, particularly through academic activities and casual interactions, played vital roles in reducing anxiety and improving communication skills. These findings align with Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide's (2008) study, which demonstrated that study-abroad participants had higher L2 WTC than those studying at home, emphasizing the importance of diverse learning environments. Alishah (2015) and Horwitz (2016) also found that informal and voluntary contexts support language learning by reducing anxiety and enhancing L2 WTC.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings from RQ1 reveal that rural students lacked willingness to communicate (WTC) in English due to limited exposure, low self-confidence, and cultural norms discouraging English use. Rare opportunities for English practice in rural settings, coupled with anxiety and low perceived competence, significantly hindered their WTC. Cultural values further discouraged English communication in public.

For RQ2, upon moving to Selangor, students initially struggled with English communication, primarily due to their previous environment. However, with time and increased exposure, through enforced and voluntary practice, their self-awareness and confidence improved, significantly enhancing their WTC. This study highlights the crucial role of WTC in English communication, as higher WTC leads to better language use, greater confidence, and improved oral proficiency, essential for academic and professional success.

Implication of the Study

The study emphasizes the need for increased English exposure in rural areas, urging educational authorities to create community programs, clubs, and workshops that connect students with proficient speakers. Targeted language support programs should focus on boosting students' self-confidence and reducing anxiety through practical training and peer mentoring. Additionally, educators must consider cultural values in curriculum design, integrating relevant content to help students navigate their identities. Promoting social integration through diverse activities will encourage interaction among students from various backgrounds. Lastly, institutions should implement longitudinal support to monitor progress and provide ongoing encouragement for developing willingness to communicate.

Future Research Directions

Further research should investigate the long-term effects of rural students' experiences in

urban settings on their language development and WTC. Additionally, exploring the impact of specific interventions aimed at increasing exposure and confidence in English communication could provide valuable insights for refining educational strategies.

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