

Exploring Rural Students' Perceptions of Situational Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English in a New Urban Context: A Case Study in a Malaysia

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Abstract

In Malaysia, English is important for education and social mobility, yet rural students often enter university with lower proficiency due to the limited exposure to this language in their rural contexts. This qualitative case study investigate show a group of 9 rural Malaysian undergraduates at a private university in Selangor perceive factors influencing their situational WTC in English after moving to this new urban context. Through interviews, focus groups, and solicited diaries, insights from these students reveal that interactional factors, such as discussion topics, interlocutor type, group size, and setting formality, significantly shape their WTC. Additionally, emotional aspects like state self-confidence, anxiety, and mood were found to impact their readiness to engage in communication. The findings highlight the need for supportive educational environments that enhance familiarity and address emotional well-being, promoting effective English communication practices among rural students who have moved to urban academic contexts. This study contributes to the literature on situational WTC and offers practical implications for educators and policymakers regarding rural students.

KEYWORDS: *Willingness to Communicate, Situational WTC, Rural Students, English Language Proficiency, Emotional Factors*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

English is regarded as a second language (L2) in Malaysia and holds significant importance in the realms of education, employment, and social mobility (Santhanasamy, 2021). Proficiency in English communication is crucial for students, especially at the university level, where much of the curriculum and scholarly work is conducted in English. For rural students, however, this proficiency does not always develop at the same pace as their urban counterparts due to several socio-economic and educational limitations. Rural students typically have limited exposure to English during their early education, as their communities often rely more on the local languages (Handayani & Johan, 2019). As a result, rural students often enter university with lower levels of English proficiency and experience greater challenges in adapting to environments where English is the medium of instruction (Ng & Yunus, 2021).

When rural Malaysian students transition from their home environments to urban university settings like Selangor, they are confronted with new linguistic and social landscapes. This transition provides opportunities for language growth but also poses challenges related to communication. Upon enrolling in university, these students must navigate a more linguistically diverse environment, where English is not only a tool for learning but also for social integration. Their willingness to communicate (WTC) in English plays an important role in shaping their ability in communication skills. WTC as a comprehensive model is defined as an individual's readiness to initiate communication in an L2 when given the opportunity (MacIntyre et al., 1998), becomes a critical factor for their academic and social success.

In this context, situational WTC—the inclination to communicate in specific moments due to situational and contextual factors—plays a significant role in shaping rural students' communication behaviours. Factors such

as classroom dynamics, peer relationships, perceived proficiency, and anxiety interact to either enhance or inhibit students' situational WTC (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Understanding how these situational factors affect rural students' L2 communication after enrolling in an urban university setting like Selangor in Malaysia is a key to facilitating their language development and overall academic performance.

While several studies have been conducted on trait-like WTC, which focuses on a person's overall tendencies to communicate in a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998), there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding how rural students perceive situational variables that affect their English WTC after transitioning to urban university life. Most studies on WTC have examined broader or more generalized contexts, overlooking the specific challenges that rural students face as they adjust to their new academic and social environments. Situational WTC is inherently dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by immediate factors such as classroom participation, social interactions, emotional states, and self-confidence (Cao, 2011). For rural Malaysian students, these situational factors are intensified in an urban university setting, where they may feel isolated or anxious about their language abilities compared to urban peers. Addressing this gap of knowledge is crucial for identifying effective educational interventions that can support these students to overcome barriers of communication and succeed academically in their new environment.

1.2 Research Objective

To address the mentioned gap in literature, this study attempts to uncover how a group of rural Malaysian undergraduates at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia perceive the factors influencing their situational WTC in English in the new urban context.

1.3 Research Questions

According to the mentioned objective, this study attempts to seek the following research questions:

1. How do interactional factors influence rural Malaysian students' situational WTC in English at a university in Selangor?
2. How do emotional factors affect rural these students' situational WTC in English at the university in Selangor?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for educators, language instructors, and policymakers, as it sheds light on the specific challenges faced by rural Malaysian students in urban university environments. By understanding the situational factors affecting these students' WTC in English, this research can help inform strategies to improve their communicative competence and enhance their learning experiences. The findings could lead to more targeted interventions and language support systems that account for the unique backgrounds of rural students transitioning into urban academic contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.5 The Concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

WTC is a central construct in second language acquisition (SLA), describing an individual's readiness to initiate communication in a second language (L2) when given the opportunity. First conceptualized for use in first language (L1) settings, WTC was later adapted to SLA contexts to better understand why some learners are more inclined to engage in conversation than others (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In the Malaysian context, where English is a L2 and serves as a medium of instruction in education and a critical skill for career advancement, WTC is particularly significant. The way Malaysian students, especially those from rural areas, approach L2 communication is influenced by multiple factors, and understanding WTC offers insights into their communication behaviours and language development.

1.6 Trait-Like vs. Situational WTC

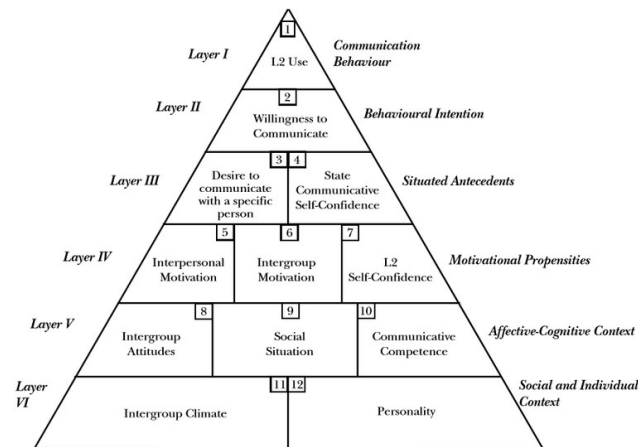
WTC can be divided into two key categories: trait-like WTC and situational WTC. Trait-like WTC refers to a relatively stable characteristic that predisposes individuals to communicate across a range of situations and settings. It is considered a general attitude towards communication and is shaped by factors such as personality, motivation, and perceived competence. Students with high trait-like WTC are generally more likely to initiate communication regardless of the context. This construct has been closely tied to psychological traits such as extroversion, which is often associated with higher WTC due to the individual's social orientation and desire for

interaction (Dörnyei, 2005). In rural Malaysian settings, where English exposure is often limited and cultural norms may discourage public speaking, trait-like WTC tends to be lower compared to urban populations, potentially limiting students' communication behaviors when they transition to university settings in urban areas. In contrast, situational WTC is dynamic and context-dependent. It refers to a learner's readiness to communicate in specific moments, depending on immediate factors such as the setting, topic, and type of interlocutor (Cao, 2011). Situational WTC determines how a student who generally possesses low trait-like WTC might become more willing to engage in communication due to certain circumstances, and vice versa. For instance, a rural Malaysian student might feel more comfortable communicating in informal settings with familiar peers, but may experience reluctance or anxiety in formal classroom environments. This flexibility is a key aspect of understanding communication behaviours in L2 learning, particularly for students transitioning from rural areas to more linguistically diverse university environments in urban settings like Selangor.

1.7 Theoretical Perspectives on WTC

The study of WTC in SLA is often framed within a multi-layered model that incorporates both long-term, stable factors (trait-like) and momentary, context-specific factors (situational). The most influential model of WTC was developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), which conceptualizes WTC as the result of a complex interaction between psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors. At the base of this pyramid model are enduring influences like personality traits and intergroup attitudes, which shape general communication tendencies. As one moves upward in the pyramid, situational variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety play more immediate roles in determining WTC at any given moment.

Figure 1.1 The pyramid model of WTC (from MacIntyre et al., 1998)



For Malaysian students, these layers manifest in various ways. Trait-like WTC may be shaped by the students' perceptions of English as L2 and their proficiency in it, influenced by rural schooling experiences that offer limited exposure to English. Meanwhile, situational WTC is shaped by more immediate contextual factors, such as the type of interaction (e.g., formal versus informal), the role of the interlocutor (e.g., teacher versus peer), and the learners' emotional state in that moment (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

1.8 Situational WTC Model

The situational WTC model focuses on how external, immediate factors affect a learner's decision to communicate in a given situation. It operates on the assumption that communication behaviours are fluid and depend on variables that are specific to the interaction at hand. Interactional factors, such as the type of interlocutor, discussion topic, and group size, heavily influence situational WTC. For instance, learners may feel more comfortable communicating in small groups or with familiar individuals, as opposed to large, formal settings where there is a higher chance of evaluation or judgment (Cao & Philp, 2006). For rural Malaysian students transitioning to university, factors like the formality of the setting and the perceived power dynamic between them and their interlocutor (e.g., a lecturer) can either enhance or diminish their situational WTC.

Emotional factors also play a critical role in the situational WTC model. Variables such as self-confidence and anxiety fluctuate depending on the learner's mood, the task at hand, and their prior experiences with L2 communication. In rural contexts, where exposure to English may be more limited, students often struggle with self-confidence in using English, leading to higher levels of communication anxiety in formal academic settings.

(Horwitz, 2001). When these students transition to urban university environments, situational WTC may be especially influenced by their perceived proficiency relative to their urban peers and the social or academic stakes of each interaction. For example, a student may be more willing to participate in an informal group discussion but reluctant to communicate in a graded classroom debate where their language skills may be evaluated. Figure 1.2 presented the situational L2 WTC and the antecedents influencing it.

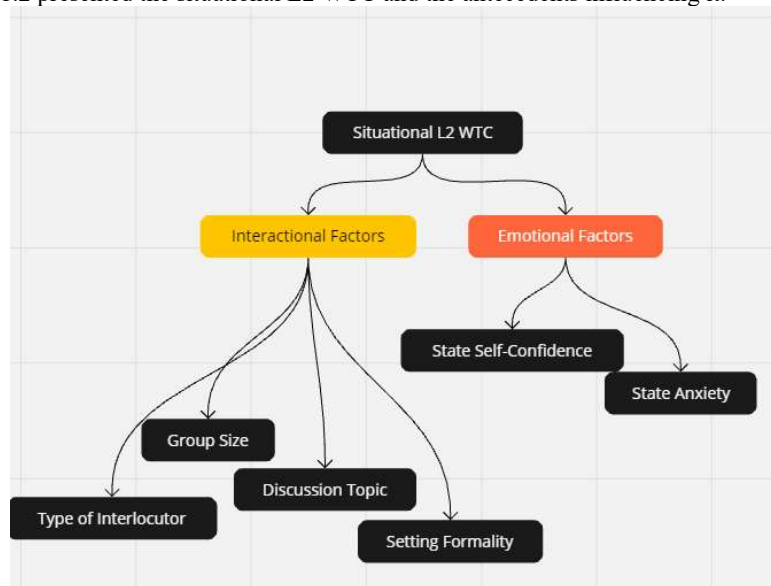


Figure 1.2 presents the Situational L2 WTC model

1.9

1.10 Important Studies on Situational L2 WTC

Previous research has highlighted the dynamic nature of L2 situational WTC, demonstrating that it fluctuates depending on the context and prior experiences. MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) found that WTC is a continuously changing system, where each communicative state influences the next. Kang (2005) similarly emphasized that WTC varies throughout a conversation, impacted by situational factors. Studies also show that interlocutors play a significant role in shaping WTC. McCroskey and Baer revealed that the number and familiarity of interlocutors can either heighten or reduce a speaker's willingness to engage in communication. Sato (2020) supported these findings by showing that factors such as security, enthusiasm, and responsibility in interaction are influenced by the conversation partners. Additionally, research by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Kang (2005) identified topic familiarity, physical context, and linguistic factors as crucial in creating a conducive environment for L2 WTC. Lee and Lee (2020) expanded the scope by exploring WTC in digital environments, discovering that younger students exhibit higher WTC in digital contexts due to greater exposure to technology. Further research by Lee and Drajati (2020) developed instruments to measure these situational variations in WTC, contributing to a deeper understanding of its dynamics across various contexts.

1.11 2.7 Conclusion

The concept of WTC, particularly the distinction between trait-like and situational dimensions, provides valuable insights into the factors influencing second language learners' communication behaviours. For rural Malaysian students transitioning to urban universities, understanding both their trait-like tendencies and the situational factors that affect their WTC is crucial. Situational WTC, in particular, highlights the importance of context in shaping students' willingness to communicate, emphasizing the need for supportive, anxiety-reducing environments that foster communication readiness. By addressing both trait-like and situational elements, educators can better support rural students in their language learning journeys, helping the mover come barriers to effective communication in English and ultimately enhancing their academic success.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.

The research design for this study is a qualitative case study. This approach was selected to provide in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals within a new urban context, allowing for a rich

exploration of the complex factors affecting language communication.

2.1 Participants and Context

The study focuses on understanding the perceptions of nine Malaysian rural students. The participants are selected through purposive sampling, ensuring individuals with specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives are included. Additionally, snowball sampling is employed, where initial participants help identify and recruit additional participants from their networks, facilitating access to hard-to-reach populations. Then in participants are first-year undergraduate students who have recently transitioned from their rural communities to an urban university environment in Selangor, Malaysia. By including both female and male students from different ethnicity (Indian, Chinese, Malay), the research aims to capture a broader spectrum of experiences and perceptions, enriching the data collected. These students face unique challenges and opportunities in their new academic setting, making them ideal subjects for exploring how situational factors influence their communication behaviours in English. Figure 3.1 demonstrated the pseud names of the participants and the way they were recruited in the study by their counterparts.

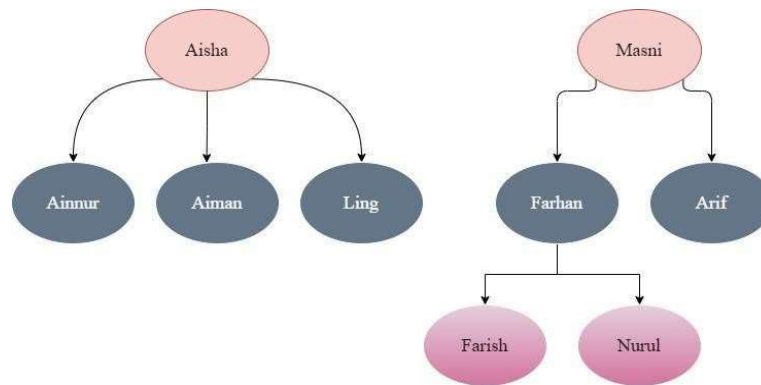


Figure 3.1 Shows the Procedure of Snowball Sampling Selection

2.2 Data Collection Methods

To gather comprehensive data, a multi-method approach is employed, incorporating semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and solicited diaries.

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** This method allows for flexibility in data collection while maintaining a structured framework to explore specific topics related to WTC. The interviews are designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences, feelings, and perceptions regarding their situational WTC in English since the time they moved to the university.
2. **Focus Group Discussions:** Focus groups facilitate interactive discussions among participants, enabling them to share and compare their experiences and perceptions in a communal setting. This method encourages participants to express their views on situational WTC, allowing for the emergence of themes that may not surface in individual interviews.
3. **Solicited Diaries:** Participants are asked to maintain diaries documenting their daily experiences related to communication in English for 30 days. This method captures the nuances of their interactions and emotional states overtime, providing valuable contextual data that highlights specific situational factors affecting their WTC.

2.3

2.4 Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Validity is enhanced through triangulation of data collection methods and member checking, while reliability is established by maintaining a consistent approach to data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are paramount, with informed consent obtained from participants, who are assured of their right to withdraw at any time and the confidentiality of their responses. The study adheres to ethical guidelines to protect the welfare and rights of participants throughout the research process.

2.5

2.6 Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and solicited diaries will be analysed thematically. This involves manually coding the data to identify patterns and themes related to situational WTC. The analysis process will include reading through the transcripts and diary entries multiple times

to immerse in the data, generating initial codes, and grouping these codes into broader themes. Thematic analysis will allow for a comprehensive understanding of how situational factors influence the participants' willingness to communicate in English.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.

According to the research questions of this study (RQ1 and RQ2), the following themes were emerged which is presented in this figure.

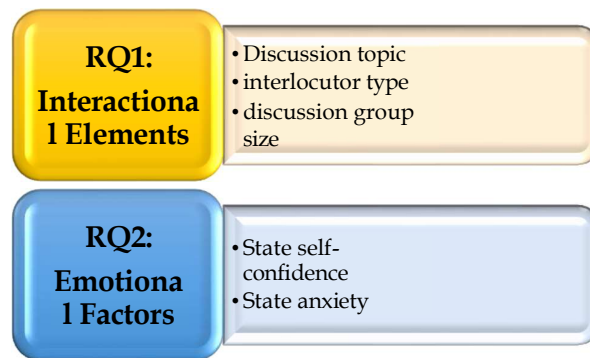


Figure 4.1 presents the findings of the study

3.1 Findings of the First Research Question

The analysis of the data revealed significant insights regarding how interactional elements influence rural Malaysian students' situational WTC in English at the university in Selangor. The findings are organized around four primary interactional elements: discussion topic, interlocutor type, discussion group size, and setting formality.

3.2 Discussion Topic

A prominent theme that emerged from the data is the influence of the discussion topic on students' WTC. Participants indicated a strong preference for engaging in conversations entered on significant, familiar, and interesting issues. Many respondents emphasized that their WTC in English was highest when the topic was relevant to their academic field or personal interests. For instance, Farhan and Farish noted that they felt more inclined to participate when discussions related to their areas of study, highlighting a direct connection between prior knowledge and WTC. Conversely, topics outside their expertise, such as history or politics, led to reluctance in participation. Arif articulated this sentiment, stating,

"If people talk about stuff I don't know, like History or Politics, I usually stay quiet because I don't know much about those things."

Additionally, while male participants often expressed boredom with unengaging topics, female participants like Nurul maintained a positive outlook, finding potential value even in seemingly dull discussions.

3.3 Interlocutor Type

The type of interlocutor also played a significant role in shaping the students' WTC. Most participants preferred to communicate with familiar individuals rather than strangers or more educated peers. They reported feeling more comfortable engaging with friends and family, which fostered a sense of security. Several participants, including Aisha and Arif, expressed a lack of confidence when conversing with individuals perceived as more knowledgeable, leading to increased anxiety. However, a few participants appreciated the opportunity to engage with informed interlocutors, feeling that such interactions enhanced their learning. This dichotomy reflects the importance of familiarity in the communication dynamic, with most preferring known interlocutors to alleviate apprehension.

3.4

3.5 Discussion Group Size

The size of the discussion group significantly impacted the participants' situational WTC. All respondents reported feeling less comfortable speaking in larger groups, preferring smaller or paired settings where they felt more confident and had more opportunities to contribute. During focus group discussions, participants shared that larger groups increased their anxiety and decreased their willingness to communicate. Masni illustrated this

anxiety, stating,

"My issue isn't just with English; it happens in my own language too... Everytime I have to give a presentation, I get nervous."

This suggests that while smaller groups promote engagement, larger groups can inhibit participation and lead to silence.

Setting Formality

The formality of the setting also emerged as a crucial factor influencing WTC. Participants indicated that formal contexts, especially when interacting with unknown or more educated interlocutors, led to decreased confidence and increased anxiety. The perceived pressure in evaluative environments compounded their apprehension, making them less willing to participate. Participants expressed a preference for informal settings where they felt more at ease, emphasizing their eagerness to communicate in friendly environments. Overall, the findings highlight that participants' WTC is significantly influenced by the nature of the discussion topic, the type of interlocutor, the size of the discussion group, and the formality of the setting, with a preference for familiar and comfortable contexts that enhance their confidence in English communication.

3.6 Discussion on the Findings of the First Research Questions

The findings align with existing literature, emphasizing the significance of interactional elements in shaping situational WTC among language learners. Previous research indicates that familiarity with discussion topics and interlocutors enhances learners' confidence and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Additionally, the preference for smaller, informal group settings resonates with studies highlighting that anxiety decreases and engagement increases in less evaluative contexts (Henderson et al., 2019). These insights underscore the importance of creating supportive communication environments that promote English usage among rural Malaysian students transitioning to urban academic settings.

3.7 Findings of the Second Research Question

The analysis of emotional factors revealed that rural Malaysian students' situational willingness to communicate (WTC) in English is significantly influenced by state self-confidence, state anxiety, and mood.

3.8 State English Self-confidence

State self-confidence is a temporary belief in one's abilities that varies depending on the specific situation or context. State self-confidence emerged as a crucial determinant of the students' situational WTC. Participants noted that their confidence fluctuated based on several factors, including their familiarity with the topic, the knowledge level of their interlocutors, and the formality of the setting. For example, Farhan expressed confidence in discussions with peers, stating,

"I feel pretty confident speaking English...I interact with my classmates regularly...without any issues."

However, he reported a drop in confidence during presentations in front of knowledgeable lecturers, highlighting that external evaluation could heighten anxiety and diminish willingness to speak:

"I lost my confidence and felt anxious during my presentation, worrying they might say I was doing it all wrong."

This finding aligns with prior research that underscores the role of self-efficacy in language learning, suggesting that familiarity and competence in a subject can enhance confidence levels (Bandura, 1997). Participants also acknowledged that unfamiliar topics or formal settings significantly reduced their confidence. Arif stated,

"If people talk about stuff, I don't know...I usually stay quiet because I don't know much about those things," indicating that when discussing challenging subjects, a lack of vocabulary and uncertainty about conveying thoughts effectively led to hesitancy. This aligns with MacIntyre et al. (1998), who noted that perceived competence in a subject area directly correlates with WTC.

3.9 State Anxiety in English

State anxiety is a temporary feeling of fear or tension that arises in response to a specific situation or event. State anxiety was another critical emotional factor impacting WTC. Many respondents reported that negative prior experiences, such as mockery or harsh criticism, heightened their anxiety levels, especially in the presence of unfamiliar interlocutors or larger groups. Masni described her anxiety, stating,

"I grew more anxious while speaking with people who made jokes of my English errors...I thought they may make fun of me again."

This illustrates how past negative experiences can influence current willingness to communicate. The findings corroborate the work of MacIntyre (1995), who suggested that anxiety can act as a barrier to effective communication, particularly in second-language contexts. Participants indicated that their anxiety increased with the size of the group, especially when unfamiliar individuals were present. Arif noted, *"People like that make me nervous, and I usually try to avoid them."* This trend suggests that a comfortable and familiar environment is vital for reducing anxiety and enhancing WTC.

3.10 Mood

The students also acknowledged that their mood significantly affected their situational WTC. Participants reported that feelings of fatigue, anxiety, or depression diminished their readiness to engage in English conversations. Farhan described how unresolved personal issues could lead to a lack of motivation to communicate:

"When I'm not in the mood, it's usually because I've got a bunch of problems to deal with." Nurul confirmed that being in a bad mood often resulted in silence:

"When I'm feeling sad, I usually don't feel like talking." This reinforces the idea that emotional well-being is critical for effective communication and aligns with previous studies suggesting that positive moods can enhance social engagement and willingness to communicate (Dewitte, 2008). In summary, the findings reveal that emotional factors, including self-confidence, anxiety, and mood, significantly influence the situational WTC of rural Malaysian students. Addressing these emotional elements is essential for fostering a supportive language learning environment that enhances students' willingness to communicate in English.

3.11 Discussion on the Second Research Question

The findings highlight the critical role of emotional factors in shaping situational WTC among rural Malaysian students. Aligning with MacIntyre (1995), the study underscores that heightened anxiety, particularly in unfamiliar or evaluative contexts, significantly reduces WTC. Furthermore, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory emphasizes the importance of confidence in influencing communication willingness; students reported increased confidence when discussing familiar topics with peers. The results also support Dewitte's (2008) assertion that positive emotional states enhance communication readiness. Ultimately, addressing these emotional aspects is essential for creating an environment conducive to effective English communication among students.

5. CONCLUSION

3.12

In conclusion, this study reveals that both interactional and emotional factors significantly impact the situational willingness to communicate (WTC) among rural Malaysian students in English at a university in Selangor. The findings highlight that familiar discussion topics, known interlocutors, smaller group sizes, and informal settings foster a more supportive environment, enhancing students' confidence and encouraging participation. Additionally, emotional factors such as state self-confidence, anxiety, and mood play pivotal roles in shaping WTC. Participants expressed that their confidence fluctuated based on context, while negative past experiences heightened anxiety and diminished willingness to engage. These insights align with existing literature, emphasizing the necessity of creating encouraging environments that address both interactional and emotional dimensions to promote effective English communication. By fostering familiarity and emotional well-being, educators can better support rural students in overcoming barriers to communication, facilitating their transition to an urban academic context and ultimately improving their language proficiency.

3.13 Implication of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for educators and policymakers in promoting effective English communication among rural Malaysian students. By recognizing the significance of interactional and emotional factors, educators can create supportive learning environments that prioritize familiar discussion topics, small group interactions, and informal settings to enhance students' confidence and willingness to communicate. Additionally, addressing emotional well-being—by reducing anxiety and fostering positive moods—can further encourage participation. Training programs for teachers should include strategies for building students' self-efficacy and managing anxiety, ultimately facilitating smoother transitions for rural

students in urban academic contexts and improving their overall language proficiency.

3.14 Future Direction of the Study

Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of interactional and emotional factors on rural Malaysian students' willingness to communicate in English. Studies could investigate how these factors evolve as students gain more exposure and experience in urban academic settings. Additionally, examining the role of cultural influences on WTC can provide deeper insights into the unique challenges faced by rural students. Incorporating a diverse range of participants from various backgrounds and institutions will enhance the generalizability of findings. Finally, interventions aimed at improving emotional resilience and communication strategies should be developed and tested to further support students' language learning journeys.

4.

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