



THE OCCURRENCES OF WTC AMONG MALAYSIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN AN ESL ONLINE CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

The English language is regarded as an important mode of communication in Malaysia, particularly in higher education institutions and the workplace. The perception that graduates lack English communication skills renders them unemployable upon graduation. Therefore, a great deal of effort has been expended to produce students who can communicate effectively in a variety of social and professional settings. The Ministry of Education has taken numerous steps to improve the English proficiency of students. This study examines pre-university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in a digital setting at a local university. This study employed a qualitative methodology and included 12 classroom observations. The classroom observation data was subjected to an inter-rater reliability analysis, and the results revealed that the mood and role of the English Language Instructors (ELIs) significantly influenced the occurrences of WTC in English among pre-university students. The findings of this study are intended to provide stakeholders, curriculum developers, and ELIs with a better understanding of the teaching and learning factors that must be considered in order to ensure students' WTC in English.

Keywords:

Willingness To Communicate (WTC), Occurrences, Online Classroom, Classroom Observation, Pre-University Students

Introduction

English is considered the second language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Melayu, which is the country's official language. Students are required to learn English in primary and secondary school; to continue their education at the tertiary level, they must achieve at least a band 2 score

on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) exam. However, pre-university students are required to have a minimum band score of 2 for university admission.

Students would have received a total of 11 years of English language instruction, including six years in elementary school and five years in secondary school. After completing this, it is hoped that they will be competent users of the language, particularly in terms of oral communication, when they continue their education at the tertiary level. Nonetheless, this is not always the case. David, Thang, and Azman (2015) argued that despite the fact that Malaysian students receive 11 to 13 years of formal English instruction in school, their command of the language is far from adequate. This is likely due to their reluctance to speak the target language, which results in their low proficiency (Thang, Thing & Jaafar, 2011). Aside from that, some students who are proficient English speakers may be unwilling to communicate in the language. This is likely due to the fact that their WTC depends on their willingness to initiate communication when they have a choice and when they are willing to do so freely.

Regarding the WTC model, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) explained that students' willingness to communicate in the target language affects their proficiency level. This is supported by Kang (2005), who states that as students' proficiency in the L2 increases, their willingness to communicate in the target language will also increase. This suggests that there may be a correlation between students' willingness to communicate and their English proficiency, which could impact their employability after graduation. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Malaysia increased by 4.4%, according to a survey conducted by the Malaysian Department of Statistics in 2022, which revealed that graduate unemployment is becoming a problem not only in Malaysia, but globally as well. It was discovered that many local university graduates continue to lack aptitude, confidence, and communication skills (Department of Statistic, 2022). This was supported by The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, which hypothesised that 50 percent of graduate students lacked English communication skills. According to a recent report by the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (Medac), 232,000 graduates were unemployed nationwide, and given the current economic climate, it would be difficult for them to find employment (Hani, 2021). In other words, it is unfortunate that university students who are unable to communicate effectively in English end up unemployed or have limited employment opportunities. Even though these students are qualified, their inability to communicate effectively in English reduces their marketability.

The objective of this study is to;

- i) To examine the occurrences of WTC among Malaysian pre-university students in an ESL online classroom.

The research question of this study is;

- i) Are there any occurrences of WTC among Malaysian pre-university students in an ESL online classroom?

English Language Teaching and Learning in Malaysia

According to the Malaysian education system, English is the second language in Malaysia, as stated in Article 152 (Abdul Aziz, 2008; Gill, 2002), after Bahasa Melayu, the country's national language. It was formally taught as a required subject in primary and secondary

schools. Students must pass the English language subject in order to continue their studies. In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language in accordance with the education policy (Gill, 2005).

In the last 30 years, there have been three significant changes in Malaysian English language teaching and learning (Azman, 2016). The first change occurred in 1982, when the Malaysian government and the Ministry of Education established the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary School (KBSR) through communicative language education that is student-centered and uses English in context (Abdul Hakim, Radzuwan & Wan, 2018). This approach, however, was phased out due to less-than-satisfactory results in the pedagogical aspects of teaching English communicatively (Musa et al., 2012). This was also influenced by Malaysia's education system, which was more exam-oriented, with a greater emphasis on writing and reading rather than listening and speaking, which were the core elements of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach.

One of the ultimate goals of the education system is the development of bilingual competence; primarily the dual language policy, i.e. "to uphold Bahasa Malaysia and strengthen the English language." Therefore, one of the primary goals of the policy is to ensure that by the end of their 11th year of education, every student in Malaysia has at least an operational proficiency in two languages (including English). The alignment of Malaysia's English language curriculum and assessments with CEFR is thus one method for raising the standard of English in the country.

Consequently, a CEFR-aligned course syllabus may influence the WTC of pre-university students, given that the primary objective of CEFR is to improve students' oral English language fluency. It is expected that aligning the curriculum and examinations with CEFR will increase students' spoken English proficiency in comparison to the previous curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, which was not CEFR-aligned and was more exam-oriented than action-oriented (Abdul Hakim et.al., 2018)

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English

Willingness to communicate in a second language is a theoretical model based on McCroskey and Baer's (1985) original conceptualization of WTC as a personality orientation toward oral communication in the native language (L1).

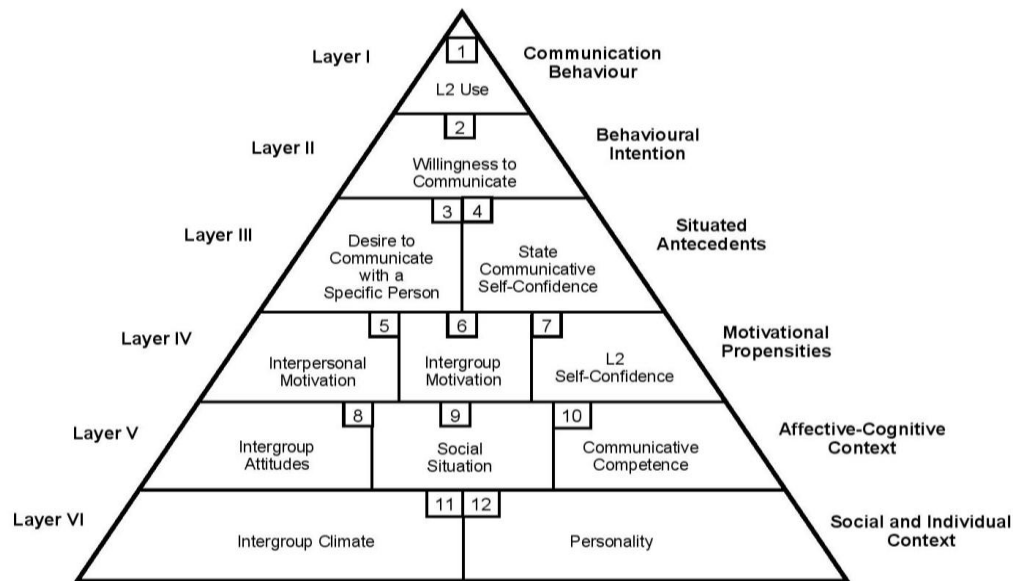


Figure 1 : Willingness to Communicate in L2

Source: MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, Noels (1998)

In 1994, MacIntyre proposed that future researchers measure WTC by combining personality traits with situational data (p. 140). This is because these two variables are interconnected and influence learners' WTC. To that end, one of the earliest significant models of L2 WTC (1998), which would have a significant impact on second language research, saw WTC as a combination of "transient and lasting impacts" (MacIntyre et al., 1998: 546). L2 WTC is defined as "a willingness to engage in conversation with a specific person or persons at a specific time, using an L2" (MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, & Noels, 1998: 547).

The concept of WTC was developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998). They presented a variety of personality, affective, and situational factors that could be included in a six-layer theoretical model, each of which influences target language usage. In this model, the authors demonstrated that both long-term and short-term effects drive communication willingness. According to MacIntyre et al., as a language learner progresses up the pyramid, they gain more control over the act of communicating in the target language.

The above model by MacIntyre et al. (1998) depicts the Willingness to Communicate within the classroom. The model has a total of twelve constructs across its six layers. MacIntyre et al. placed communication behaviour as the top layer of the model, which includes not only speaking activities, but also reading newspapers and watching TV in L2.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach which used classroom observation as the instrument to collect data to answer the research question above. To measure the reliability and validity of the classroom observation, the researcher compared the results gathered from three inter-raters and cross-checked the findings for agreement in measurement. The inter-raters were appointed to ensure the reliability of the online classroom observation that was conducted. McHugh

(2012) stated that the importance of inter-rater reliability lies in the fact that it represents the extent to which the data collected in the study are correct representations of the variables measured. The measurement of the extent to which the inter-raters assign the same score to the same variable is called inter-rater reliability Agreement; it occurs when both the researcher and observer have the same findings of the classroom observation. The inter-raters majored in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and has around 25-27 years of teaching experience.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observation was the research instrument used in this study. Observation in the classroom is a primary source of information because the phenomenon takes place in a natural setting, which will be in the classroom (Merriam, 2009). The researcher will have the opportunity to observe first-hand what takes place during the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Stake (2010), stated that the act of observation entails observing and recording students' interactions and behaviour. Instead of a traditional face-to-face classroom, the classroom observation in this study took place in a digital setting, where English lessons were delivered online using educational platforms selected by the English Language Instructors (ELIs), such as Google Meet, ZOOM or Microsoft Teams.

In the online classroom observation, students' interaction and engagement when the lesson was carried out by their ELIs played a significant role in their WTC in English in an ESL online classroom. Giffin (2020) stated that looking at students' engagement during online learning is important to ensure that students are socially present online. However, it can also be challenging for ELIs to ascertain that their students are socially present and engaged during online lessons, as students may not be comfortable turning on their webcams (Kish, 2018).

Therefore, 12 Science Foundation classes were selected for this study to be observed by the researcher. These classes consisted of 22 students per class, with students being classified based on their SPM English results when they entered the university in the first semester of 2020/2021. The lessons were conducted using synchronous instruction, which was delivered in real time.

The number of classes observed was selected based on the element of voluntary involvement of six English language instructors who consented to participate in the observation; each English language instructor was allocated two classes. Two of the six English language instructors were men. Three of the English language instructors were full-time university lecturers, while the remaining three English language instructors were part-time secondary school English teachers with the background of more than 5 years of teaching experience in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).

Observations were made twice in a digital ESL classroom using Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, to observe students' WTC in English as they interacted with the language instructor, as well as with their peers in an online setting. The students' WTC would be based on an adapted WTC classroom observation checklist (Cao, 2009). For the purpose of the study, the observable elements that occurred in the checklist were noted as one (1) while no occurrences were noted as zero (0).

Observation of the overall classroom revealed that webcams were turned off (students were not required to turn on their webcams during online class). Additionally, the majority of the participants expressed their interest in communicating in the target language only when their English language instructors prompted them. Both the researcher and the raters agreed unanimously that the students responded appropriately when required to do so. Otherwise, they preferred to remain silent in class. As observed, some students preferred to communicate with their instructors via Google Meet's chat box rather than verbally. This could be due to their reluctance to speak or their internet connection being unstable, restricting them from using the microphone, or the audio being defective.

One of the difficulties encountered while conducting an online classroom observation was the researcher's inability to observe the participants' body language and facial expressions because the participants' webcam was turned off. This would not be an issue if the observation took place in a face-to-face classroom, allowing the researcher to observe students' interaction and WTC in English with their peers.

In summary, the main findings from the observation data showed elements of VA, AQ, AC, GG, GF, PO and RO occurred very frequently throughout the 12 classroom observations, with PO being the most frequent with 12 occurrences, followed by AQ and AC with 11 occurrences each, VA and GF with 10 occurrences each, and GG and RO with eight occurrences each. VC and GP did not occur at all during the 12 classroom observations as shown in table 4.11.

Results and Discussion

The table below presents the data generated from the 12 classroom observations to quantify the different types of observable elements of students' willingness to communicate during the online English classes. These data were collected from six English language instructors who, at the request of the researcher, volunteered to have their classes observed. This sample size of six English language instructors was chosen because they volunteered to be observed by the researcher. The required data was collected using the observation checklist (Appendix C). The number of lessons that were observed by the researcher were 12 lessons in total with two lessons per English language instructor. Their classes were conducted twice a week with three hours per class which started from 8 am to 11 am, and 2 pm to 5pm.

Table 1: Classroom Observation Results

Lecturer/ Class	Volunteer to answer VA	Volunteer to comment VC	Give (answer to) group (T- solicit) GG	Give (answer to) individual (T-solicit) GI	Give (answer to T-solicit)- Private response GP	Ask (the teacher) question AQ	Ask (the teacher) clarification AC	Give feedback GF	Talk (to) another student in group TG	Present (own) opinion (in class) PO	Respond to an opinion RO
L1 C1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
L1 C2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
L2 C1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
L2 C2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
L3 C1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
L3 C2	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
L4 C1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
L4 C2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
L5 C1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
L5 C2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
L6 C1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
L6 C2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total	10	0	8	3	0	11	11	10	3	12	8

In summary, the main findings from the observation data showed elements of VA, AQ, AC, GG, GF, PO and RO occurred very frequently throughout the 12 classroom observations, with PO being the most frequent with 12 occurrences, followed by AQ and AC with 11 occurrences each, VA and GF with 10 occurrences each, and GG and RO with eight occurrences each. VC and GP did not occur at all during the 12 classroom observations.

Table 2: Summary of Results for Online Classroom Observation

Item	Code	Results
Volunteer to comment	VC	0 occurrences
Give private respond	GP	0 occurrences
Give feedback	GF	10 occurrences
Give answer to group	GG	8 occurrences
Respond to opinion	RO	8 occurrences
Give answer to individual	GI	3 occurrences
Talk to other students in group	TG	3 occurrences
Present opinion	PO	12 occurrences
Ask Question	AQ	11 occurrences
Ask Clarification	AC	11 occurrences
Volunteer to answer	VA	10 occurrences
Give feedback	GF	10 occurrences

This is evidently seen in the finding that the students who were observed as workers actively participated either verbally or by writing in the chat box function in Google Meet during online class. For example, students responded to the teacher's questions and expressed their opinions voluntarily. Students who answered verbally were confident and not shy to voice out their responses to the class. These attributes depicted from the online classroom observations are very much related to the individual factors that were highlighted in the findings of RQ1, which is self-confidence. This finding corroborates with the findings of Hashimoto (2002) that students with high self-confidence have higher WTC in English which influenced their online participation. The attribute corresponds to Layer 1 of the WTC Model (MacIntyre et al., 1998), which is *communication behaviour*.

Taylor (2002) identified lurkers (moderate participants) as another online trait. The current study's findings also support Taylor's online personality as data from the online classroom observations revealed that there were lurkers among the participants. This could be seen as the lurkers would occasionally interject when they felt like it. It was evident when the participants stated during the interview session that they would respond if they were in the mood during class that day. It is also worth noting that the participants indicated that they would respond because they feel sorry for their English language instructors when no one else was participating or responding in class. This was the point at which these students decided to speak up and respond so as not to embarrass the language instructor in class. According to the research study by Le et al. (2018), the way lurkers participated in class may be related to their online social presence, which affected their WTC in English in an ESL online classroom. The study, which involved Vietnamese high school students, found that the greater their social presence, the less likely they were WTC during online classes because they did not feel safe in

that particular environment. This could also be related to language anxiety, which was identified as one of the individual factors influencing students' WTC in English.

Taylor (2002), identified shirkers (passive participants) as the next online trait. This group would prefer to remain silent throughout the online class despite the English language instructors' efforts to engage the them by asking questions. Their online participation was influenced by a number of factors as noted by Vonderwell and Zachariah (2016), i.e. technology and interface characteristics, content-area experiences, students' roles and responsibilities, and information overload. According to Vonderwell & Zachariah's data, the interface of technology impacted students' participation and interaction. Hillman et al. (1994) defined learner-interface interaction as the interaction between a student and technology used to facilitate the educational process. This may have an effect on the quality and quantity of interactions among: 1) peers, 2) students and instructors, and 3) students and content (Swan, 2004). With regards to the current study, the digital platform used for online classes was Google Meet, and students were able to communicate in class in one of two ways: by turning on their microphone or by typing their responses in the provided chat box. However, even with these interfaces that enable students to communicate with their peers or instructors, shirkers would remain passive in class, leading them to be unwilling to communicate in class.

This finding could suggest that students' online traits also plays a role in students' oral proficiency in English whereby students who are identified as workers could most probably have better oral proficiency as compared to students who are lurkers and shirkers. This could also be related to the students' being exposed to CEFR aligned syllabus.

Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative approach to collect data on pre-university students' WTC in a digital ESL classroom at a public university in Sabah, Malaysia. The WTC model (McIntyre et al., 1998) was used as a framework in this study to investigate students' WTC in an ESL context. The primary goal of this research was to look into the occurrences of students' WTC in English in a digital ESL classroom. Hence to answer the research question of this study, classroom observations were used to collect the data required. The findings of the study revealed that students preferred face to face classes over online classroom because they feel more present in class when they are surrounded by their classmates and engaged in hands-on discussions with their group members and ELIs.

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