MOMENT-TO-MOMENT FLUCTUATIONS IN WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: AN IDIODYNAMIC STUDY OF MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS

Fatin Nabila Abd RAZAK*[1]
Nur Ida Aniza RUSLI[2,3]
[1]Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
[2]Universiti Teknologi MARA Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia
[3]Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia
[1]fatinnabila@upm.edu.my
[2,3]idaaniza@uitm.edu.my

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**Corresponding author*
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the moment-to-moment fluctuations in Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among Malaysian ESL undergraduates during small-group speaking tasks. Six English major students were divided into two groups of three, and each group completed a guided discussion. Afterwards, the participants carried out video-based self-ratings using the Idiodynamic Software, followed by stimulated recall interviews. The findings show that learners' WTC did not progress steadily but shifted sharply within the same interaction as they responded to real-time conversational conditions. WTC increased when learners discussed familiar or personally meaningful topics, received supportive peer responses, or perceived a communicative purpose such as persuading or maintaining conversational flow. In contrast, WTC declined when learners lacked topic knowledge, stepped back to allow others to speak, or experienced brief insecurity or idea exhaustion. These rapid shifts, occurring within seconds, indicate that WTC operates as a real-time state shaped by immediate emotional and situational cues rather than fixed personal traits. The study contributes to Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST)-informed WTC research and demonstrates the value of the idiodynamic method for capturing micro-level communicative behaviour. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive and emotionally attuned classroom practices that can support learners' willingness to participate in L2 communication.

Keywords: willingness to communicate (WTC); idiodynamic method; state-level WTC; dynamic WTC; English as a second language

Introduction

The ability to communicate in English effectively has become a key indicator of global readiness and a valuable asset for academic, professional, and social advancement. In multilingual and multicultural societies such as Malaysia, English holds the status of a second language (L2). The language also plays a crucial role in national development, international engagement, and competitiveness. Consequently, proficiency in English has become a crucial asset for university graduates aiming to obtain jobs in the competitive job market. Nevertheless, possessing linguistic knowledge and structural mastery alone does not guarantee effective language use. The successful application of language skills often depends on learners' willingness to engage in communication, particularly in authentic and spontaneous interactions.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has long been regarded as a stable personality trait that influences whether an individual is likely to initiate communication in a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Nevertheless, emerging evidence suggests that WTC is a dynamic construct that shifts in response to momentary changes in emotions and situational conditions that arise during real conversational events. In some situations, the learner may have the confidence and motivation to speak. Contrarily, in other situations, the learner may be unsure or reluctant to speak. Thus, it is important to explore WTC by examining it at the specific conversational level due to the rapid and situation-based changes (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015).

Despite the growing recognition of WTC as a dynamic construct (e.g., Li et. al.,2024; Nematizadeh, 2021; Nematizadeh & Cao, 2023; Peng, 2020; Wood, 2016), research in the Malaysian context has primarily examined WTC through questionnaire-based and cross-sectional approaches. For example, Muhammad and Ismail (2024) investigated factors influencing Form Six students' WTC using a survey design, while Razak et al. (2025) examined the relationships among communicative confidence, motivation, international posture, and WTC among Malaysian undergraduates using PLS-SEM. Although these studies have contributed substantially to understanding the antecedents of WTC, they primarily capture learners' general communication tendencies rather than the moment-to-moment fluctuations that occur during actual communicative events. Consequently, the application of dynamic methodologies such as the idiodynamic method remains limited in Malaysian learners' WTC changes in real time during communication.

Accordingly, this study investigates the dynamic nature of WTC in English among six Malaysian undergraduates majoring in English. Using the idiodynamic method, it captures moment-to-moment changes in learners' communicative readiness during guided communicative tasks, with participants rating their WTC while watching their own video-recorded performance and then taking part in stimulated recall interviews. This approach enabled a micro-level analysis of how and why WTC shifts during conversation, treating WTC as a continuously changing experience rather than a fixed

learner trait. By doing so, the study sheds light on the emotional and situational factors that encourage or discourage real-time communication, and its findings carry practical implications for language pedagogy and policy, particularly for developing emotionally responsive and socially supportive classrooms that foster meaningful communication.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Willingness to Communicate: From Trait to State

In second language acquisition (SLA), WTC is a crucial concept. Initially, WTC was first studied in first language (L1) communication research and was originally thought to be a fixed personality characteristic (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). This personality-based opinion suggests that individuals tend to behave consistently across different situations (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). Early research on L2 learners followed this view by designing instruments based on L1 models to measure individual learners' tendencies to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Nevertheless, the communicative behaviours of learners cannot be completely explained through solely fixed characteristics. For example, situational factors, including interlocutor familiarity, perceived linguistic competence, or classroom atmosphere, result in differences in learners' WTC moment to moment (Cao, 2014; MacIntyre, 2020). Besides that, emotional factors such as anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), boredom (Pawlak et al., 2020), shame (Galmiche, 2017), enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), and love towards the L2 (Pavelescu, 2023) have also shaped learners' willingness to use the language. These findings led the researchers to consider WTC as a factor that changes depending on the situation and emotion, rather than seeing it as a fixed personality trait.

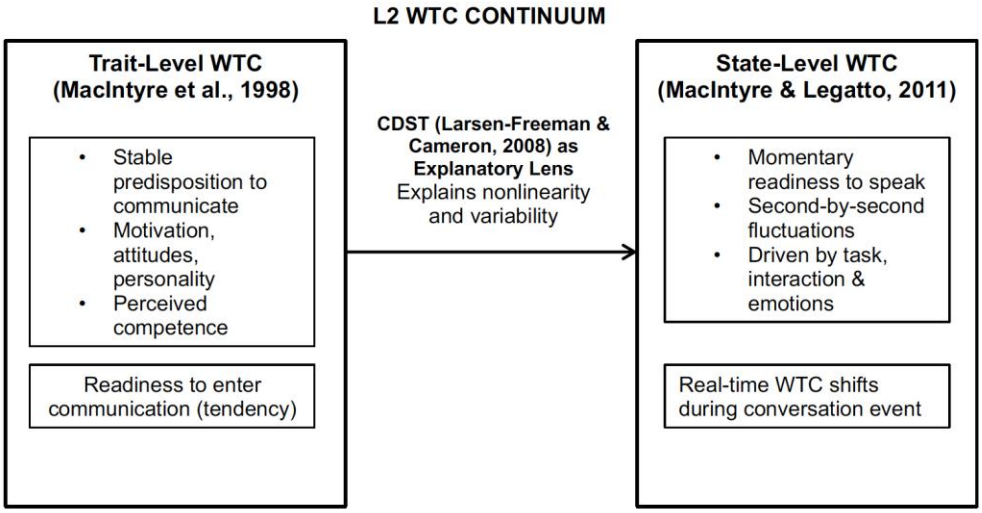
The dynamic view of WTC, which is now widely accepted, is based on Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). According to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), complex dynamic systems are inherently variable and nonlinear, which means their patterns may shift in both gradual and sudden ways. This theoretical view is supported by time-serial WTC studies showing that learners' communication readiness fluctuates across seconds or minutes, influenced by continuously evolving interactional conditions (Henry et al., 2021). Thus, CDST offers a useful lens for understanding why WTC should be studied as a state-level construct. State-level WTC refers to a learner's momentary readiness to initiate or engage in communication in a specific communicative situation. Unlike trait-level WTC, which represents a relatively stable predisposition toward communication, state-level WTC is dynamic and subject to rapid fluctuations in response to changing cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and contextual conditions during interaction (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011).

Figure 1 presents the conceptual evolution of WTC from a trait-based perspective to a state-based perspective. The left side of the continuum represents the traditional conceptualisation proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), in which WTC is viewed as a relatively stable predisposition influenced by enduring learner characteristics such as motivation, attitudes, personality, and perceived competence. The centre of the continuum introduces CDST as the theoretical framework that explains why learners' communicative behaviour may vary across situations and

within a single interaction (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). From this perspective, WTC emerges through the continuous interaction of cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and contextual factors. The right side of the continuum represents the state-level conceptualisation of WTC proposed by MacIntyre and Legatto (2011), where WTC is understood as a momentary readiness to communicate that may change from second to second during communication. Therefore, the figure illustrates not a replacement of the trait perspective by the state perspective, but rather a conceptual continuum in which stable communication tendencies and dynamic situational fluctuations coexist.

Figure 1

Continuum of Trait-Level and State-Level WTC with CDST as the Connecting Lens



This conceptualisation is particularly relevant to the present study, which adopts the idiodynamic method to examine WTC at the state level. By capturing learners' moment-to-moment fluctuations during communicative tasks, the study seeks to investigate the factors associated with changes in communication readiness as they emerge during real-time interaction. In doing so, the study moves beyond the examination of general communication tendencies by exploring on the dynamic processes underlying learners' willingness to communicate.

Investigating State-Level WTC Through the Idiodynamic Method

To investigate state-level WTC, researchers have increasingly adopted methodologies capable of capturing learners' moment-to-moment communicative experiences (e.g., Henry et al., 2021; Lee & Liu, 2022; Li et al., 2024; Nematizadeh & Cao, 2023). One such methodology is the idiodynamic method introduced by MacIntyre and Legatto (2011), which was specifically designed to examine rapid fluctuations in psychological variables during communication. The method combines video-recorded communicative tasks, self-rating procedures, and stimulated recall interviews, allowing participants to evaluate their experiences while reviewing their own

recorded performances. Consequently, the method provides detailed insight into how communicative readiness changes during interaction.

According to MacIntyre and Ducker (2022), the idiodynamic method enables researchers to trace second-by-second changes in psychological states such as confidence, anxiety, motivation, and willingness to communicate as learners respond to evolving interactional conditions. Unlike approaches that examine communication tendencies at a single point in time, the idiodynamic method captures fluctuations as they occur, making it particularly suitable for investigating state-level WTC from a CDST perspective.

The usefulness of the idiodynamic method has been demonstrated in recent studies. For example, Aubrey (2022) employed the idiodynamic method to investigate the relationships among anxiety, enjoyment, and breakdown fluency during L2 speaking tasks performed by university students. The findings revealed considerable variation in the ways anxiety, enjoyment, and fluency interacted within individual learners across the task. Through stimulated recall interviews, the study identified multiple influences on these fluctuations, including task design factors, task implementation factors, cognitive-linguistic challenges, and learners' evaluations of their own performance. Aubrey (2022) argued that examining these processes at the individual level provides insights into dynamic communicative experiences that may be obscured when analyses focus solely on group-level patterns.

Furthermore, He et al. (2021) employed the idiodynamic method to investigate moment-to-moment fluctuations in foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) among Chinese university students during English classroom activities. Using self-ratings linked to video-recorded classroom interactions and stimulated recall interviews, the researchers found that learners' anxiety exhibited substantial intra-individual and inter-individual variation throughout the learning process. The study further identified both external factors, such as task type and teacher feedback, and internal factors, including gender differences and self-efficacy, as contributors to fluctuations in anxiety levels. The findings demonstrate the capacity of the idiodynamic method to capture dynamic affective processes and reveal factors associated with second-by-second changes that may not be readily observable through conventional retrospective measures.

Similarly, Lee and Liu (2022) employed the idiodynamic method to investigate fluctuations in WTC among seven Chinese EFL university students participating in online English classes. Participants rated their WTC while reviewing recordings of their classroom performance and subsequently took part in stimulated recall interviews. The findings revealed that learners' WTC fluctuated throughout the online sessions as a result of the interaction between trait-like factors. The authors concluded that the idiodynamic method provides valuable insights into the dynamic nature of WTC by capturing fluctuations and their contributing factors as they emerge during real-time communication.

Collectively, the findings of Aubrey (2022), He et al. (2021), and Lee and Liu (2022) demonstrate that the idiodynamic method is capable of capturing rapid fluctuations in learners' affective and communicative experiences while simultaneously identifying factors associated with these changes. Despite the growing use of this methodology in international contexts, its application in Malaysian WTC

research remains limited. Therefore, the present study employs the idiodynamic method to examine how Malaysian undergraduate learners' willingness to communicate fluctuates during communicative tasks and to explore the situational and emotional factors associated with these moment-to-moment changes.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design supported by idiodynamic analysis to examine micro-level, moment-to-moment fluctuations in learners' WTC during an actual speaking task (MacIntyre & Ducker, 2022; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022). While the primary aim was to capture the subjective and dynamic nature of WTC, the design also incorporated quantitative rating data generated through the idiodynamic software for visualising WTC fluctuations in real time.

Participants

The participants in this study were six Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in an English major programme at a public university. Although the sample size is small, it is appropriate for idiodynamic research, which typically relies on small-N, intra-individual case analyses rather than generalisation to populations. Prior idiodynamic studies (e.g., Aubrey, 2022; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011) also employ samples ranging from one to six participants because the focus is on detailed moment-by-moment fluctuations rather than large-scale trends. The participants were all intermediate to advanced users of English, which was determined based on their coursework and university placement records. The choice to focus on undergraduates majoring in English is strategic and pedagogically relevant. As English majors, these students are expected to demonstrate higher levels of language engagement and proficiency. By evaluating students of English majors, this study can clearly determine and explore the situational and emotional factors influencing WTC without the confounding effect of poor proficiency. The six participants were grouped into two groups (three students each) to encourage small-group interactions.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved three stages: (1) Video Recording of Communicative Task, (2) WTC Rating Using Idiodynamic Software, and (3) Stimulated Recall Interviews.

Video Recording of Communicative Task

A structured communicative task for groups was developed to assess learners' changing WTC. The task was developed as part of the regular classroom lesson. Both groups were offered a number of topics that were relevant to their personal and academic interests. Familiar and non-threatening topics were intentionally selected to

allow learners to select a topic that matches their preferences or knowledge. This approach helped to minimise anxiety due to unfamiliar topics. Besides, learner control improves engagement with the task and interpretability of affective responses (Li et al., 2024; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015).

This approach guarantees a balance between experimental control and ecological validity. The study remains authentic without affecting analytical focus by carrying out the task in a real classroom environment and managing topic selection and group dynamics at the same time. According to Peng (2012, 2014), in WTC-related studies, ecological validity demands placing learners in natural communication environments. In these environments, meaning-making is co-constructed. The flexibly structured task design follows this rule by encouraging instant communication in familiar classroom norms.

The duration of each group discussion was approximately between 15 and 20 minutes. Each group discussion was recorded visually using a fixed camera directly in the idiodynamic software. They were informed that the recordings would be used for retrospective self-assessment and interview purposes. Participants were encouraged to build on each other's contributions, express agreement or disagreement, and explore their perspectives collaboratively. Nevertheless, no competitive or evaluative framing was used to reduce performance pressure.

WTC Rating Using Idiodynamic Software

Immediately after the communicative task, each participant individually reviewed their video-recorded performance using the Idiodynamic Software. The software was downloaded from https://petermacintyre.weebly.com/idiodynamic-software.html (MacIntyre & Ducker, 2022). While watching the playback, they rated their WTC in real time on a scale ranging from −5 to +5. The participants clicked the mouse whenever they perceived a shift in their willingness to speak. These continuous ratings were saved and subsequently visualised as line graphs showing second-by-second fluctuations.

Stimulated Recall Interviews

Following the rating session, each participant took part in a semi-structured interview. The interview was designed to elicit insights into the reasons behind their WTC peaks and troughs. These interviews, adapted from protocols used by MacIntyre and Ducker (2022), included open-ended prompts such as "What were you thinking or feeling at this moment?" and "What influenced your willingness to speak here?" This interview technique allowed participants to explain the emotional and contextual triggers behind the peaks and dips observed in their rating graphs. The interviews were conducted in a quiet setting, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis integrated quantitative visualisation of WTC fluctuations with qualitative thematic analysis of stimulated recall interview data. First, individual WTC ratings generated through the Idiodynamic Software were plotted as time-series graphs for each participant. These graphs were visually examined to identify notable fluctuations in WTC, including sharp increases, sharp decreases, sustained peaks, and prolonged periods of low communicative readiness. Specific time points corresponding to these fluctuations were marked and matched with the video recordings of the communicative tasks.

Subsequently, participants' explanations during the stimulated recall interviews were examined in relation to the identified fluctuation points. Segments of interview data referring to increases or decreases in WTC were extracted and compiled for analysis. This process enabled the researchers to link changes in WTC ratings with participants' descriptions of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences during the interaction.

The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts through repeated reading while cross-referencing the corresponding WTC graphs and video recordings. Second, initial codes were generated to capture factors associated with increases and decreases in participants' WTC during specific moments of interaction. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories based on similarities in meaning and function. Fourth, these categories were reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete dataset to ensure coherence and consistency. Fifth, broader themes were developed and refined to represent the key factors underlying fluctuations in WTC. Finally, the themes were defined and reported using representative interview excerpts. To address the study's aim, the resulting themes were organised into broader emotional and situational categories that explained how different factors encouraged or discouraged participants' willingness to communicate during real-time interaction.

Although a second researcher independently reviewed the coded data, inter-rater reliability was not calculated numerically. Instead, discrepancies in code interpretation were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached. One discrepancy arose from a participant's statement, "I don't know how to continue the conversation". One researcher initially coded the excerpt as "topic unfamiliarity", interpreting the participant's difficulty as stemming from insufficient knowledge of the discussion topic. The second researcher coded it as "declining interest and engagement", interpreting it as an inability to generate further ideas despite understanding the topic. Following discussion and re-examination of the surrounding interview context, both researchers agreed to classify the excerpt as "topic unfamiliarity", as the participant subsequently explained that limited knowledge of the topic restricted the ability to contribute further to the discussion.

A second discrepancy involved the statement, "They talked about their hobbies, like scuba diving and arts, and I felt left behind". One researcher initially coded the excerpt under "topic unfamiliarity", interpreting the participant's reduced willingness to communicate as a result of limited familiarity with the discussion topic.

The second researcher coded the excerpt as "perceived exclusion from the conversation", focusing on the participant's feeling of social detachment during the interaction. Following discussion and review of the surrounding interview context, the researchers agreed to classify the excerpt as "perceived exclusion from the conversation" because the participant emphasised feeling disconnected from the group's shared experiences rather than simply lacking knowledge of the topic.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and reminded that participation was voluntary. All names and identifiers were anonymised in reporting, and video recordings were stored securely with restricted access.

Results

This section reports the findings obtained from the idiodynamic ratings and the stimulated recall interviews with six Malaysian undergraduates. The idiodynamic rating graphs illustrate how each learner's WTC changed from moment to moment during the group speaking task, while the interview data were used to clarify the experiences and conditions associated with these changes. In other words, the fluctuations observed in the graphs were interpreted in light of how the participants described their thoughts, feelings, and reactions at specific points in the interaction. By viewing the numerical shifts together with learners' explanations, the analysis highlights how their WTC increased or decreased depending on emotional or situational factors. For clarity, the results are presented in two parts: the first part shows a detailed account of two contrasting cases, and the second part summarises the emotional and situational themes that emerged from all six participants.

Integrating Idiodynamic Graph and Interview Insights

Participant 1

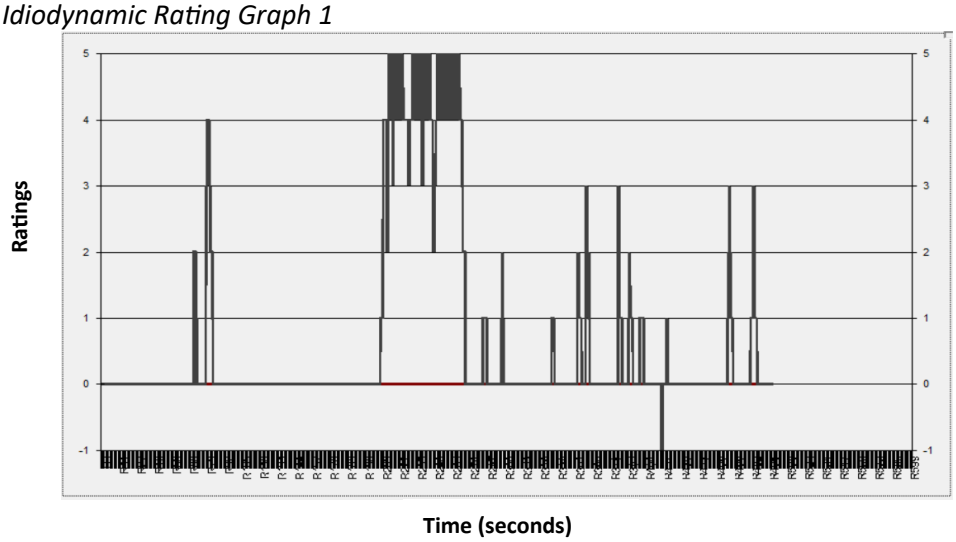
In Figure 2, Participant 1's WTC displays repeated positive movements, rising sharply into higher values between +3 and +5, with several of these peaks sustained over consecutive intervals, forming short periods of stabilised high willingness. Only minor dips are present, and these are brief, with Participant 1 quickly returning to positive levels of WTC.

The fluctuations observed in Figure 2 align closely with Participant 1's reflections during the stimulated recall interview. The repeated positive peaks between +3 and +5 correspond to moments she described as feeling "comfortable" and eager to "contribute" once the discussion shifted to a topic she was familiar with. She stated that she became more willing to speak when discussing her favourite shows and expressed a desire to persuade her peers to watch the movie, *Criminal Minds*, explaining that she "really want[ed] them to listen" even though she still felt nervous. This feeling of "good cautious anxiety" appears to have sustained her willingness rather than hindered it, possibly reflected in the plateaus of high WTC in

the graph. In contrast, the minor dips towards lower values align with her report of becoming less communicative when the group discussed content she was "not really familiar with." She emphasised that when a topic was "not [her] cup of tea," she preferred to listen rather than speak, suggesting that brief low points in the graph reflect reduced engagement during topical disconnection. She also noted that greater communicative ease emerged towards the end of the interaction when the conversation became "more relaxed," supporting the presence of stable high intervals later in the graph. Participant 1's narrative suggests that her willingness was shaped by topic familiarity and persuasive intent, leading to sustained peaks, while brief lows reflected temporary disengagement when she could not relate to the content being discussed.

Figure 2

Idiodynamic Rating Graph 1



Participant 2

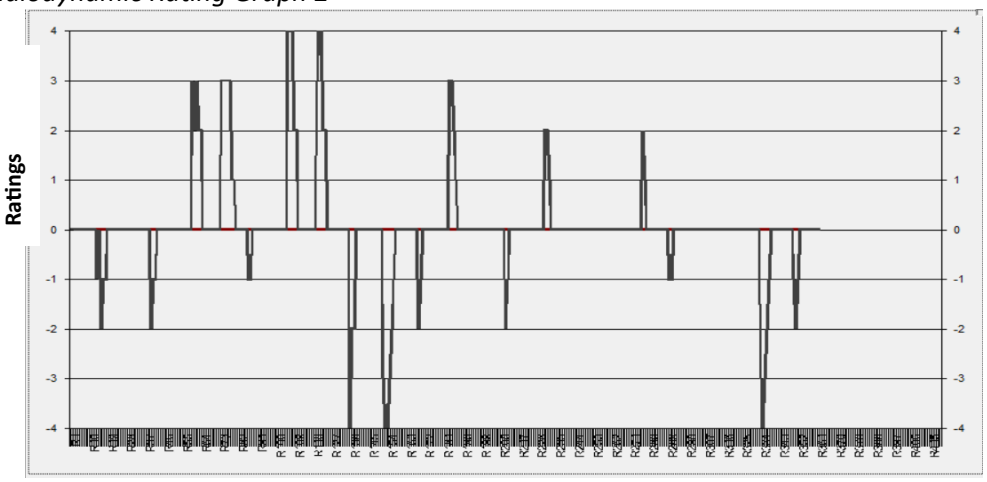
Figure 3 shows wider fluctuations across both positive and negative ranges, with several extended downward shifts reaching values below -3. These steep low dips appear repeatedly and often persist longer than the positive spikes, which rise intermittently to values between +2 and +3 before dropping again. The pattern seen in Figure 3 is characterised by frequent reversals between upward and downward movements, showing alternating periods of suppressed and heightened willingness.

The variability illustrated in Figure 3 is consistent with Participant 2's account of fluctuating emotional and situational conditions during the task. The pronounced downward dips into negative ratings mirror her description of feeling "awkward," "insecure," and "left behind" when she lacked relevant experiences to contribute. She explained that she had "no strong hobbies" to talk about and felt unable to match her peers' enthusiasm in topics such as scuba diving and arts, which she believed placed her at a conversational disadvantage. Negative dips in the graph likely reflect this reduced willingness to participate. She also reported insecurity about her language

ability, stating that fear of being judged for grammatical mistakes made her "not really willing to talk," a perception that aligns with steep declines showing suppressed readiness to communicate.

Figure 3

Idiodynamic Rating Graph 2



However, upward spikes between +2 and +3 coincide with moments she remembered as meaningful, such as when she discussed caring for newborn babies. She described that moment as "exciting" because she "finally had something to talk about," suggesting that these peaks reflect short bursts of communicative confidence triggered by relatable content. Participant 2 also noted that positive peer responses temporarily encouraged her to speak more, stating she felt "more confident" when others reacted energetically, which aligns with short positive bursts in her WTC levels. Overall, the graph and interview together indicate that her WTC rose briefly when she had relevant experience to share and declined when she perceived a lack of topic knowledge or linguistic insecurity.

Comparison of Participants 3-6

Across the four participants (P3-P6), the idiodynamic patterns show that moment-to-moment WTC was more of a situational response to emerging interactional conditions (Table 1). High peaks commonly appeared when learners engaged with familiar or personally meaningful topics, especially when they had relevant experience to share or sensed that their peers were interested in their ideas. Positive shifts were also triggered by peer acknowledgement, such as attentive body language or invitations to elaborate, which encouraged learners to speak even when they felt mildly anxious or uncertain.

By contrast, low points were rarely caused by loss of interest or lack of confidence alone. Instead, declines occurred when learners lacked topic knowledge, when they chose to let others take the conversational floor, or when ideas were exhausted, leading to declining interest and engagement. These patterns suggest that WTC was actively negotiated within the group dynamic, rising to maintain interaction

and falling to accommodate others or manage cognitive gaps. In this sense, WTC operated as a fluid communicative behaviour shaped by real-time interactional demands rather than fixed learner traits.

Table 1

Summary Table for Participants 3-6

Participant	Observed WTC Pattern	Triggers of High WTC	Example Quote	Triggers of Low WTC	Example Quote
3	Stable-high with rapid shifts	Enjoys topic, confident in English, supportive peer signals	"I always have something to say… I could sense they wanted me to talk."	Pausing to avoid interrupting	"I didn't want to interject with their flow."
4	Positive fluctuations with hesitation	Encouraging body language and questions	"They tried to get into my topic… it made me want to talk."	Topic unfamiliarity; self-doubt	"I don't know how to continue the conversation."
5	Strategic increase to keep talk going	Initiates when silence threatens group flow	"I spoke because I was afraid we would stop speaking."	Steps back to listen to excited peers	"I should just listen… I don't want to be rude."
6	Topic-driven peaks with exhaustion drops	Strong enthusiasm for personal interests	"Something I really want to master… that's why I was excited."	Running out of ideas/content	"I ran out of things I wanted to say."

The patterns observed across these four cases suggest that the moment-to-moment changes in WTC were not random but closely tied to the students' immediate experiences during the interaction. The fluctuations shown in the idiodynamic graphs tended to rise when learners were able to contribute meaningfully or felt encouraged to speak, and they declined when they lacked ideas, were unsure about the topic, or chose to let others take the floor. These observable movements reflect a combination of personal feelings and interactional demands that shifted throughout the task. To illustrate these influences more clearly, the emotional and situational factors reflected in the six participants' explanations are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Emotional and Situational Factors Influencing Real-Time WTC Fluctuations

Domain	Thematic Factor	Description Based on Idiodynamic–Interview Integration	Representative Quote
Emotional Factors	Personal excitement or interest	WTC increased when learners talked about something they liked, valued, or had personal experience with.	"I really wanted them to try watching *Criminal Minds*."

	Desire to persuade or share	Some learners spoke more actively when they had a communicative purpose (e.g. convincing, informing, influencing others).	"I wanted to persuade them… I really wanted them to listen."
	Anxiety and self-consciousness	Temporary dips appeared when learners worried about language accuracy, judgment, or unfamiliarity with the topic.	"I'm scared my grammar will be wrong and people will judge."
	Declining Interest and Engagement	When ideas ran out, WTC dropped even if learners were still interested or willing to communicate.	"I ran out of things I wanted to say."
Situational Factors	Topic familiarity/unfamiliarity	Topic choice directly affected moment-to-moment WTC. Familiar topics produced peaks, unfamiliar ones led to hesitation.	"I don't know how to continue the conversation."
	Peer response and encouragement	Affirming questions, eye contact, and body language increased WTC, whereas silence or disinterest caused hesitation.	"They tried to get into my topic… it made me want to talk."
	Turn-taking and conversational flow	Dips sometimes represented willingness to let others speak rather than withdrawal from communication.	"I should just listen… I don't want to be rude."
	Maintaining group interaction	WTC increased when learners felt responsible to sustain the conversation, especially when silence threatened flow.	"I spoke because I was afraid we would stop speaking."

The findings indicate that learners' WTC was shaped by a combination of emotional and situational factors that operated dynamically throughout the communicative task. Among the emotional factors, personal excitement, interest in the discussion topic, and a desire to share ideas or persuade others were associated with increases in WTC. These factors often produced noticeable peaks in the idiodynamic ratings, particularly when learners were discussing topics that aligned with their personal experiences or interests. Conversely, anxiety, self-consciousness, and reduced conversational engagement were associated with declines in WTC. Such declines were observed when learners became concerned about language accuracy, anticipated negative evaluation, or felt they had exhausted the ideas they wished to contribute or to sustain the conversation.

Situational factors were equally influential in shaping moment-to-moment fluctuations in WTC. Topic familiarity emerged as one of the most consistent influences, with learners displaying greater willingness to communicate when discussing topics they knew well and lower willingness when confronted with unfamiliar content. In addition, peer responses and interactional dynamics played a significant role in regulating communication readiness. Supportive verbal and non-verbal feedback encouraged participation, whereas a lack of engagement or opportunities to contribute often resulted in hesitation. The findings also revealed that fluctuations in WTC were not solely driven by learners' emotional experiences. Rather, learners continuously adjusted their participation in response to the evolving

interaction, sometimes increasing their willingness to maintain conversational flow and, at other times, reducing their participation to accommodate other speakers. These findings suggest that WTC is best understood as a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon that emerges through the interaction of emotional experiences and situational conditions during communication.

Discussion

This study examined how Malaysian ESL learners' willingness to communicate shifted from moment to moment during a group communicative task, and how emotional and situational conditions shaped these changes. The idiodynamic graphs clearly showed that WTC did not remain constant. Instead, learners increased their participation when they were able to talk about familiar or personally meaningful topics, when they sensed supportive responses from peers, or when they felt responsible for keeping the conversation going. Conversely, drops in WTC were triggered when learners lacked topic knowledge, experienced momentary insecurity, ran out of ideas, or chose to step back to allow others to speak. These findings support previous research that conceptualises WTC as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon that evolves during communication rather than a fixed individual trait (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015).

A key finding of this study is that fluctuations in WTC were shaped by the interaction of emotional and situational factors. Emotionally, learners reported increased willingness when they felt excited, interested, or motivated to share their opinions, whereas anxiety, self-consciousness, and declining interest and engagement were associated with temporary declines in WTC. Situationally, topic familiarity, peer encouragement, conversational flow, and opportunities for participation influenced learners' readiness to speak. Importantly, these factors rarely operated independently. For example, familiar topics often increased learners' confidence and enthusiasm, while supportive peer responses encouraged learners to maintain their participation even when they initially felt nervous. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that WTC emerges through the interaction of multiple influences rather than a single determinant (Peng, 2012, 2014; He et al., 2021). The findings also provide a better understanding of reduced WTC. While previous studies have shown that declines in WTC are often associated with factors such as anxiety, limited linguistic resources, topic unfamiliarity, or unfavourable interactional conditions (He et al., 2021; Peng, 2012, 2014), the present study found that lower WTC did not always indicate communicative withdrawal. In several instances, participants intentionally reduced their participation to allow others to contribute, maintain conversational harmony, or avoid repeating ideas. This suggests that temporary declines in WTC may sometimes reflect strategic and socially responsive interactional choices rather than reduced WTC.

From a CDST perspective, these findings illustrate how WTC emerges through the continuous interaction of emotional experiences and situational conditions during communication. Rather than being determined solely by stable learner characteristics, communication readiness developed in response to evolving interactional circumstances, including changes in topic, peer reactions, and conversational dynamics. The observed fluctuations therefore support the view that WTC is best

understood as a state-level construct that is highly sensitive to real-time communicative conditions (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011).

Methodologically, this study contributes to the growing body of idiodynamic research by examining real-time WTC fluctuations among Malaysian ESL learners. While previous Malaysian studies have primarily relied on survey-based approaches to examine general communication tendencies (Muhammad & Ismail, 2024; Razak et al., 2022;2025), the present study demonstrates the value of combining idiodynamic ratings with stimulated recall interviews to investigate how communication readiness changes during actual interaction. The findings therefore provide localised evidence that WTC among Malaysian learners is not merely an individual emotional readiness, but a dynamic and socially situated communicative behaviour.

Conclusion

The moment-by-moment analysis conducted in this study shows that Malaysian undergraduates' willingness to communicate is not a static reflection of confidence or personality, but an immediate response to what is happening as they speak. Learners did not simply "decide" to communicate more or less; instead, their willingness shifted in real time as they encountered familiar or unfamiliar topics, received encouragement or silence from peers, or attempted to maintain the flow of the conversation. Importantly, temporary declines in WTC did not always signify communicative withdrawal. In several instances, learners intentionally reduced their participation to allow others to contribute, maintain conversational harmony, or avoid repeating previously expressed ideas. This finding suggests that lower levels of observable participation may sometimes reflect strategic and socially responsive interactional behaviour rather than a genuine unwillingness to communicate. These shifts demonstrate that WTC is shaped by emotional readiness and situational demands that unfold within the same interaction, producing sharp rises and dips that cannot be captured through static surveys or general self-ratings. The findings therefore support the view of WTC as a dynamic, evolving state situated between trait-based tendencies and momentary interactional cues. By using an idiodynamic approach in a Malaysian context, this study provides empirically grounded evidence that WTC in local classrooms is best understood as a fluid communicative behaviour that emerges from real-time social engagement, rather than as a stable characteristic of individual learners. Although the study offers fine-grained insights into real-time WTC, it is limited by the use of a single communicative task, which may not reflect the broader range of interactions students experience. Future research may extend this work by examining larger groups, comparing different task types, or integrating additional classroom variables to explore how WTC develops across varied interactional contexts.

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