



Willingness to Communicate in English among ESL Undergraduates in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Students' unwillingness in communicating (WTC) English has many factors especially in second language acquisition. This study investigates the willingness to communicate (WTC) in English among ESL undergraduates in Malaysia. A hypothesised model that integrates WTC in English, motivation, self-efficacy, mindset, and performance was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The results show that the personality of learners are directly affecting motivation and WTC in English. Further, the results also demonstrate that both motivation and academic achievement influences WTC in English indirectly through self-efficacy. The final model correlates well with the data, thereby indicating the potential of academic achievement can contribute to ESL communication.

Keywords: Willingness to communicate; low proficiency; second language acquisition; speaking

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INTRODUCTION

Communication has become increasingly important among L2 learners. In the past, the L2 communicative competence was developed via performance and exchange of information (Ellis, 2008) and it is said that second language interaction can facilitate

language development by providing learners with opportunities in receiving comprehensible input, to produce and to modify their output, to test out hypotheses, and to notice gaps existing in their interlanguage (Ellis, 2008). MacIntyre and Charos (1996) believe that communication is a goal in itself, rather than a means of facilitating language learning. This recognition on the actual use of the L2 as an important part of L2 learning has led to a growing frame of research into the willingness to communicate, a vital construct within the discipline of L2 practice.

However, in the recent years, Willingness to communicate (WTC) has given the oppor-

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tunity of accomplishing communication when free to select to do so is of unique significance in revealing learners' communication psychology and promoting communication engagement in class. MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1998) have recommended that a right goal for L2 education is to create WTC within the language learning process, so that it will produce learners who are inclined to searching for communication opportunities and in fact to speak in them. Nevertheless, the model does not state if academic proficiency is another factor in contributing to WTC. Generally, there is a need to find out if academic achievement affects WTC in L2 context.

Previous research has focused much attention on learners' characteristics, for example motivation, language anxiety, aptitude, and language learning strategies, and their influence on L2 learning (Gardner, 2009). Little research (e.g. Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004) has been conducted in a foreign language learning (EFL) context where there is usually no immediate linguistic need for learners to use English in their daily life. Therefore, the researcher is investigating to contribute in finding out the WTC in the Asian context, especially in Malaysia.

The poor academic achievement and the willingness to communicate in English could be partially attributed to students' motivation, self-efficacy, and mindsets. Therefore, such factors influencing learners' WTC in the Malaysia context may differ from other Western and Asia countries. Thus, such investigation is needed to determine how the English as Second Language (ESL) undergraduate students' academic achievement and willingness in communi-

cating in English is related to the constructs that were considered as possible variables in contributing to deficiencies in their speaking of English.

The current study aims to find out the relationships among the factors considered in influencing Malaysian undergraduates by using WTC as an important means of enhancing English language capability. Additionally, the current study will determine the proposed model (Figure 1) correlate with the data.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

When the purpose of learning English is also defined in terms of communication, issues such as if learners will communicate in English when they have the chance or what is affecting learners' willingness in communicating are important. A model was developed by MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998), "Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model" includes psychological, linguistic, and communicative variables to describe, explain, and predict second language (L2). Willingness to communicate is being ready in entering into a discourse at a particular time with a particular person or persons, using L2 (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels, 1998). The model was being tested by re-searchers and scholars since its existence. WTC is a concept whereby, learners are given the freedom to choose to use or not a second language, English, to speak in this investigation. In the MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) version of WTC, the factors causing WTC in a second language are linguistic, communicative and social psychology. The team believed that a learner's choices to speak the lan-

guage or not depends on the situation they are in and the decision to speak depends on their self-confidence. Moreover, it is being suggested that if a learner is given proper guidance, he or she will be able to get out from the fear and speak.

Despite the rich findings from previous research, most of the previous studies have been conducted in Western countries, in particular, among Canadian Anglophone students learning French as a second language (e.g. Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2002). Additionally, previous re-search has focused much attention on learner characteristics, such as motivation, self-efficacy, mindsets, and their influence on L2 learning (Gardner, 2009) in the Western countries. In a Malaysia ESL context, empirical research into L2 WTC is still at a nascent stage. The recent study done by Yousef, Jamil & Razak (2013), investigated WTC in Malaysia context focusing on learning communication strategies. The results showed that motivation influences the two components of communication confidence and WTC indirectly through two variables of self-perceived communication competence and communication apprehension.

Another near comparison study was done by Asker (1998) stated that Hong Kong students showed lower level of L2 WTC. A research was done in the Asia country, China, Wen and Clement (2003) studied the WTC of college learners and presented a Chinese conceptualisation of WTC based on the houristic WTC model of MacIntyre et al. (1998). The variables investigated in the study were other-directed self, face protection, and a submissive way of learning. Another Asia qualitative research done by Peng (2007) identified eight factors classified into two contexts, mainly, individual context and social context which influenced L2 WTC.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was conducted at the University Sains Malaysia (USM). Similar to any other university in Malaysia, USM has the requirements to pass the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for students who wish to be qualified to enter the university. The study included 50 undergraduates from first and second year students of Computer Science, Engineering, Language Studies, Edu-

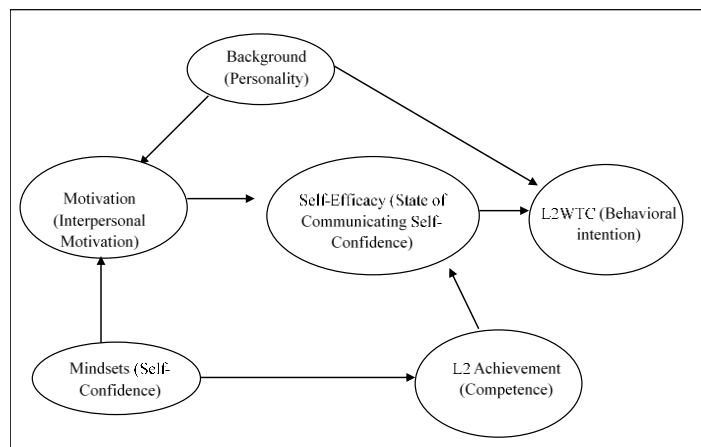


Figure 1: Proposed Model

cational Studies, and Management. This study was carried out based on proactive approach (Marcoulides & Saunders, 2006), where samples are chosen involving conducting simulation studies of the hypothesised model (Figure 1) with relationships among targeted factors. This approach is chosen because this study has its basis in theory and relevant literature.

Procedure

The current study involved a two-stage process, where the instrumentation was validated using confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs), and the hypothesised structural relationships among factors were tested. Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) was used in testing the hypothesised relationships and maximum likelihood estimated was used for estimation purpose.

Instruments

The questionnaire used in the study to measure students' willingness to communicate is based on the WTC scale. The questionnaire used in the study included 52 items in all. A 7-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) were used to measure. The items of the questionnaire and scale were translated into the national language, Bahasa Melayu so the surveys can be collected back as expected. A back translation method was employed to verify the compatibility of item translations from English to Bahasa Malaysia. The WTC

scale used in this study contained 16 items. In the Personality section 10 items were utilized to measure learner's extraversion/extraversion dimension of personality. The learners were asked to respond on a 9-point scale. They were explained to select a number between 1 and 9 according to the degree of their perception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From this further application of the study, all variables were selected for the overall use in the main study as planned. They were chosen based on the high internal consistency levels as shown above and therefore they were considered appropriate for the intended subjects in the research. In order to address the research questions, the Table 1 is referred.

From Table 1, MI showed weak correlations to gender ($P < .001$), ethnic ($P = .008$) and mother's education ($P = .001$). Females are more likely to score higher in MI than males. Malays are more likely to score higher in MI compared to other races maybe because of them being not willing to speak when they were younger, so they have to struggle more in the university level in order to be in par with the other races. The students whose mother's education was less than high school were more likely to score higher in MI. There are no significant factors observed for IO.

Table 1: Regression Results for the Relationships between Variables

Relatedness to:	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Mother's education	Father's education
Motivation					
MI	-.170	-.455***	-.340**	-.442***	-.121
IO	-.107	-.199	-.075	-.182	.072
Self-efficacy					
PCC	.374**	0.194	0.226	0.109	0.172
DLE	-.381**	-.249*	-.318*	-.199	-.366**
Mindset					
ALE	.208	.050	-.067	.081	.117
AAT	.137	.150	.152	.162	-.022
WTC	0.130	0.329**	0.249*	0.260*	-0.082
Academic performance					
SPM	.831***	.725***	.858***	.355**	-.045
MUET	.811***	.782***	.824***	.462***	.200
GPA	.004	-.090	-.050	.023	.036

Note. *n* = 50 students and Grade: Form 5.

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

As for PCC, only age was found to be a strong factor ($P = .004$). DLE was weaker correlated to all demographic variables, except mother's education. It was revealed that younger students were more likely to score higher in DLE ($P = .003$). This is maybe due to their braveness in trying out and not being shy when they are younger. The female students were more likely to score higher in DLE compared to male students ($P = .040$) because the females are usually more hardworking compared to the males in nature. Malays were more likely to have higher DLE scores compared to other races ($P = .012$). This is probably due to their unwillingness in speaking the language when they were in secondary schools and when situations are desperate for them to

learn, the desire of learning is higher to compare to Chinese or Indians or other races. DLE scores were also weak in the category of father's education, where those whose father had less than high school education were more likely to score higher in DLE.

Another weak strength is observed for mindset variables. However, student's SPM results showed high positive correlations to all demographic variables, except father's education ($P = .379$). Ethnicity seems to have the highest correlations to student's SPM results ($P < .001$), followed by age ($P < .001$), gender ($P < .001$) and mother's education ($P = .006$).

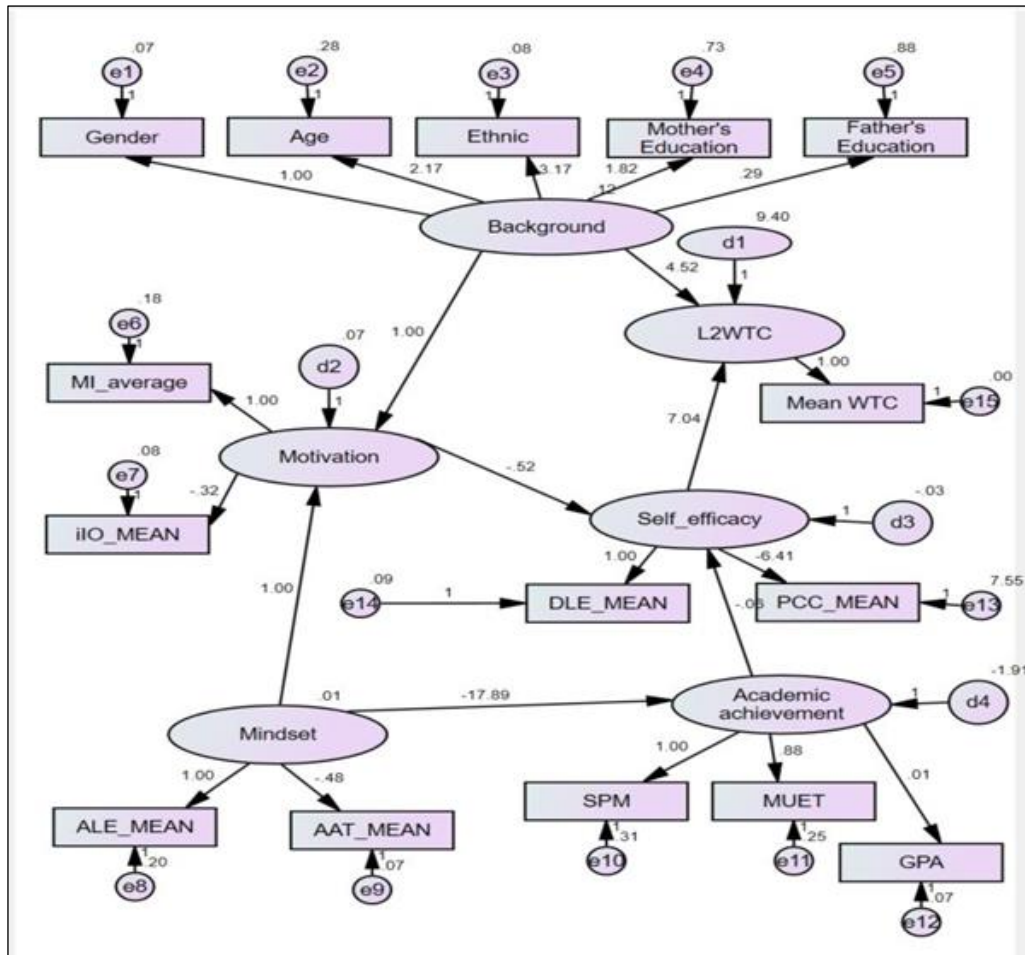


Figure 2: SEM results of the proposed WTC model

Similarly, MUET results showed high positive correlations to all demographic variables, except father's education ($P = .082$). It was found that there was no demographic variables were observed as significant factors affecting GPA results (refer to Figure 2 for the structural model).

CONCLUSION

As observed, the final model conformed well to the data. The findings showed that there was a strong relationship between academic achievement (L2 Proficiency) and

WTC but weak from the self-efficacy and background. When the learners are good in their proficiency, they are willing to communicate in English as compared to other factors, namely motivation, self-efficacy, background, and mindset. The reason for the weaker factors of background is that, the personality will not affect learners' willingness in speaking English. Self-efficacy also showed weak relation towards WTC, because the level of confidence or willingness in speaking the language is low if they realise they are not good in the examination. Learners believe that Examinations in Ma-

Malaysia determine everything, it is important and the grades are representing the competency of a learner. Motivation, self-efficacy, background, and mindset showed weaker in strength in the Malaysia context in the willingness of communication in English among the learners. The results have supported MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic WTC model in determining the factors influencing WTC in an L2 communication setting. However, the final model shows that academic achievement is an important variable in the current study, as no previous study has ever examined its relationship with learners' WTC in English by using SEM. Further research is recommended in order to determine the effect of other variables such as a learner's desire to communicate with certain person and WTC in English.

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