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## INVESTIGATING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the factors that affect the students' willingness to communicate in English in the classroom. This study employs a qualitative method, particularly the case study with the use of observation, questionnaire, and interview to collect the data. It can be concluded that there are mainly five factors that influence students' willingness to communicate namely teachers, topic discussions, classroom environment, peers, and types of activities.

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### INTRODUCTION

As English is used widely in diverse contexts nowadays, the needs for people to master this language increase. To be able to interact with other people of different language, communication is a prominent means. Language becomes the bridge that connect people from various background to understand each other's goal. This sheds light to the importance of English language mastery since English is considered as the international language, making the ability to communicate using English as the most demanding competence among people to achieve successful communication. People now then seek to master this language with various ways, one of which is by enrolling into a language program.

However, we as teachers often witness many students who are unwilling to use the language they are learning in the program, which is English in this context. This unwillingness to use English has somewhat become a problem for both teachers and

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students for the willingness to communicate (hence WTC) is very important for some reasons. During a language program, having the courage to communicate in the target language is considered as one of the means to develop the skills. Because learners who are less willing to communicate may hinder an effective interaction and language production (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006), practitioners must find a way to avoid that. One of which is by stressing that learning is best practiced by using the language. Menezes and Juan-garau (2015) emphasize this idea stating that to acquire the communicative ability, communication practice is the technique. Peng (2007) fosters this notion, too, saying that communication practice that is frequently done enhances the target language competence development. This is also in line with what Reinders and Wattana (2010) imply in their study that active learners are more likely to be successful in developing their language competences because they make use the available opportunities to communicate with others. Furthermore, students' willingness to communicate in the form of eliciting output is important because it helps them become successful learners by, among which, enhancing fluency and monitoring (Saville-Troike, 2006).

The concept of WTC dated back around 1980's. Initially, the study on students' willingness to communicate had been regarded as part of stable trait that embodied in individual's personality. However, some years later this notion slightly changed as MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels (1998) introduced the concept of WTC that is considered as dynamic factors. WTC is then defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a FL" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p.547). MacIntyre et al. (1998) categorised the factors influencing someone's WTC into six layers of a pyramid shape namely communication behaviour, behavioural intention, situated antecedents, motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context, and social and individual context.

Since then, the study of WTC has become emergent discussions. Various studies are currently studying the dynamic factors that affect the students' WTC, not merely focusing on the personality trait factors per se. A study done by Wen and Clément (2003) in Asian setting reveals that Chinese students' WTC is affected by the cultural aspect on interaction-Confucianism. Teachers are seen as the knowledge provider and the practice of student-centred classroom model is still widely emphasized. The reticence of the students to use foreign language is also caused by the fear of losing face if they fail to do it correctly. However, another study indicates most East Asian learners who seemed passive and silent in language classroom could not easily be regarded because of cultural factor per se, but there are other factors either from outside or inside each individual that might contribute to the students' WTC (Shao & Gao, 2016). Those factors could be identified into cultural, historical and social conditions and processes. In Indonesian context, Wijaya and Rizkina (2015) state in their study that the students indicating low WTC in English are caused by factors related to task type, interaction between different interlocutors, and class size in addition to language anxiety. Meanwhile, Ningsih, Narahara, and Mulyono's (2018) study adds that the students' unwillingness to communicate is due to their perception towards the value of the communication that they encounter.

Understanding that the study of this topic is still under researched particularly in Indonesia, this paper tries to bridge the gap by conducting this study. A thorough study must be done to find out the factors that make the students willing or unwilling to communicate in English in the classroom.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative case study is used as the method of this research. The use of qualitative method in this study also tries to fill in the gap of the previous research done in this field, which mostly employ quantitative studies. As stated by Cao and Philp (2006), investigating the factors of WTC by adding triangulation data collection and analysis may best help providing more data. Considering the ethical issue in doing research, a consent form was given to the participants in order to make sure that the study receives permission from the participants to be involved in the study. Before that, the researcher also asked for permission to the teacher and the institution for doing this study.

The participants of this study were learners studying English focusing on speaking course. There were two classes chosen, one taught by a novice teacher and the other taught by an experienced teacher. The selection of these two classes with different teachers was based on the effort to gain various data that might appear as taught by different teachers. The use of English in this context as their foreign language was necessary for narrowing the scope of the study and any student whose first language was English was excluded.

Six students from each class were asked to participate in this study based on their consent. The total of twelve students were observed within three meetings and were given questionnaire to find out their perception towards the factors that affect their WTC in the classroom. Observation was done to see the students' participation and their communication behaviour in the classroom. An observation sheet adapted from Cao and Philp (2006) and Cao (2013) was used as the guide to notice the aspects that are needed to observe. The observation sheet had been validated as well by two validators. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and to help record and recall the kinds of activity in the classroom, a video recorder and audio recorder were set during each observation. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was adapted from various sources (Gol, Zand-Moghadam, & Karrabi, 2014; Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2014; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Tavakoli & Davoudi, 2017) and employed to cater various aspects that may appear in the context of foreign language. To gain a thorough data, an in-depth interview was also done. The interview guide was adapted from Cao and Philp (2006), considering its relevance and rich data format that was likely helpful to elicit fully coverage aspects to analyse the factors that may contribute to the students' WTC. This interview protocol had been validated by two validators as well. The interview was on one-on-one basis and was recorded to be later transcribed and analysed. To conduct the interview, the researcher allocated approximately thirty minutes of interview for each participant. The interview was done once for each participant. To anticipate different language proficiency among interviewees and to avoid misunderstanding, the interview was done in Bahasa Indonesia. However, the transcription was then translated into English to fit the context used in this paper. These three data collecting techniques were used for triangulation since qualitative study needs multiple sources of data or data collection to enhance the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The following subsections present the results of the study which are written qualitatively based on the data that were gained through three techniques. It was then followed by the discussion of the findings by relating the results of the study with the available literature.

## Research Findings

Five aspects of factors existing in the classroom that the literature mentions as having big roles in influencing the students' WTC were further investigated by analysing the data gained from the observations, questionnaire, and interview. Those five aspects include teachers, peers, topic discussion, types of activity, and classroom environment.

The teacher aspect was believed to be very influential to the students' WTC as seen from the questionnaire results showing that the students were comfortable asking in English to their teacher to clarify the task that they were still confused with. As many as 79% of the participants extremely agreed to do this, implying that they were willing to communicate in English during the teaching and learning process. The students were also willing to answer the teachers' questions in English as what the researcher observed in the classroom, all of the students always responded to the teachers' questions or prompts directed to each student in English. This actual conduct that was observed was in line with the students' responses in the questionnaire in which 77% of the participants extremely agreed to answer the questions raised by the teacher.

Data from the interview session further clarified the reasons why the students identified the teacher influenced their WTC in English. It was found that the teachers were friendly, open minded, and had a good personality as well as proficient communicating skill that made the students enjoy talking to them. Student1 stated that "... the teacher in this institution never judges our statements. He is likely trying to understand us" and "... I am happy here. I am happy because the teacher brings good vibes, thus we enjoy the class, and he is not offhand." Similar comment comes from Student2 saying that "... she never blames me because I have tried to speak up to make her understand what I am talking about." Another student, Student3, added that the teacher's decision to avoid using Bahasa Indonesia during the program influenced her WTC in English, too. Conversely, Student4, a student from different class perceived different reality in relation to his teacher. He stated that the teacher in his class did not really give enough exposure in English, which resulted, as in my observation, the students in Student4's class had lower level of WTC.

"I truly enjoy communicating with teacher A because he tries his best to diminish the use of Bahasa Indonesia. It makes us accustom to speaking in English and the goal of this speaking program is clear. Since we are in speaking class, teacher A tries his best to expose us with speaking in English and we are enforced to speak. It both starts from the conversation activity and the teacher." (Student3)

"We the members are pushed to practice the English in English are and anywhere else, but the teacher does not do that. In my opinion, if we are required to do that, they (the teachers) must give an example, too. Even when we are in the classroom, we do not practice English fully." (Student4)

In addition to that, the students were very welcomed being corrected by the teacher if they made a mistake during speaking. Seventy-one percent of the participants disagreed that being corrected by the teacher made them afraid to communicate in English. The students claimed that they prefer being corrected because it helped them learn more, knowing what was wrong and what to improve so that they could avoid making the same mistakes in the future. This practice of correcting students' mistakes is done by the teacher in the end of each section. The teacher would list the phrases the students made mistakes of and then he would ask the students to repeat the correct

forms or pronunciation of those phrases. This teacher immediacy did not inhibit the students' WTC in English.

"I am glad the teacher does that. It helps us locate the mistakes we make, therefore we can do a self-reflection what needs to be improved."  
(Student5)

"... being corrected by the teacher indeed helps me to improve my skill."  
(Student4).

The next aspect that affected the students' WTC was their peers. The students agreed that they were willing to communicate in English if they had a chance to in the classroom. However, the researcher's classroom observation indicated that the students frequently conversed in Bahasa Indonesia with their friends. The results of the interview sessions with the students revealed the actual condition that happened in the classroom as well as their reasons in doing so.

"I came here to practice my English speaking skill but perhaps because many of my friends came here to learn English from the start that makes them still use Bahasa Indonesia. ... I think it is useless for me to speak in English because they do not really understand because they are still in the process of learning." (Student6)

"My friends here have the same difficulty to communicate in English. We actually want to learn with people who are more proficient than us but there is none. We are all still learning here so there is not a suitable partner to communicate in English. If I want to ask the English form of something my friends do not know it either. It is kind of hard." (Student5)

The excerpts implied that the students actually had high WTC in English yet their friends in the classroom were mostly still in quite low proficient level so that they thought that if they conversed in English that would be useless as their friends would likely not be able to comprehend or respond in English quite well. Although most of their friends were still considered as having low proficient level of English, there were few students who were seen as being more proficient. Those peers who were more proficient, interestingly, made some students more willing to communicate. Although at some time they felt anxious seeing friends whose English was better, that actually made them more motivated to learn English.

"I am glad that there are some friends whose English is better than mine. They can be a partner to practice communicating in English. I can ask them if I get problems." (Student5)

"If my speaking partner is willing to speak in English it makes me happy."  
(Student6)

Meanwhile, in relation to gender, the students did not really consider that different gender affected their WTC. The students stated that they were both willing to communicate in English either with the same gender or different sex.

The third aspect was the classroom environment. Some students were afraid of being laughed at when they made some mistakes. However, it turned out that this fear did not really affect their WTC as proven that the majority of the students disagreed this notion in the questionnaire. It was strengthened by the students' statements while being interviewed with.

"I am fine with that because being corrected helps me remember better. Either I am being laughed at or not I do not really care because I get some lessons because of my mistakes." (Student6)

In relation with the seating arrangement, the students did not really think that it affected their WTC in English. The seating arrangement in two classes was in U-shaped. The students believed that this kind of seating arrangement gave almost equal portion for the students. Meanwhile, different group size where the students got chance to communicate with their peers also indicated no influence towards students' WTC.

The fourth factor that affects students' WTC was the types of activity done in the classroom. Some students stated that they were more willing to communicate when they were in a pair activity while the others prefer doing individual presentation. These different preferences that affect their WTC were caused by various reasons. A student who chose pair activity said that this kind of activity enabled him to directly deliver his opinion, give feedback, and interrupt. In contrast, there was also one student who thought that the pair activity inhibited his WTC because if he got a partner whose language proficiency was the same with his, that would not help him to be more willing to communicate because they were in the same level of proficiency and lack of linguistic knowledge. Another student mentioned that sometimes she got a partner who dominated the conversation therefore she thought that doing an individual presentation made her willing to communicate more as she herself got the 'stage' to speak up. Some students also added that they needed more time to prepare, indicating that enough time preparation affected their WTC.

The last aspect that influenced the students' WTC was the topic of discussion. Some students agreed that controversial topic made them more willing to communicate the issue. Meanwhile, the majority of the students suggested that topic that they had experienced with increased their WTC because they knew better on what to say. Some students confirmed that a topic they were less competent with would decrease their WTC.

"I prefer a topic that is close to us. At least we know our daily activity and our hobby, such as travelling or our study habits. Meanwhile, if the topic is about culture, marriage, and so these kinds of topic are not familiar to me. That makes me unwilling to communicate." (Student5)

"If I do not know what the topic is about I had nothing to say then." (Student3)

One more aspect related to topic that influenced the students' WTC was related to their confidence with their answer. Sixty-nine percent of the participants chose to withdraw from the discussion because they were not sure with their answer.

## **Discussion**

The findings revealed that teachers partly contributed in influencing students' WTC in English. As the students agreed that teachers who were open-minded, friendly, and had good personality would make the students more willing to communicate in English. This kind of immediacy that the teachers showed during teaching and learning indeed was helpful in affecting students' WTC because teacher's affection and support were likely enhance students' WTC, which is line with the previous studies (Cao, 2013; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Pawlak, et al., 2016; Peng, 2007; Peng, 2012; Riasati, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014). It goes the same with the exposure and environment that the teachers create in the classroom. As stated before that the students' WTC is enhanced if the teachers minimize the use of Bahasa Indonesia during the teaching and learning program. In addition to various techniques used in the classroom, learners also have to be given enough exposure to learn the language, that is, providing them with ample frequency of input as it enables them to encounter the real process of learning to

communicate (Ellis & Collins, 2009; Harmer, 2007). Talking about the students' approval of teachers' error correction, teachers' decision to delay direct error correction is considered as a good strategy. The students did not feel intimidated as what Zarrinabadi (2014) mentions, too, in her study.

The observation result showed that the students still use Bahasa Indonesia while they were communicating with their friends in the classroom. Although the classroom surrounding was labelled as an English area, the students seemed to ignore that because there was no direct 'punishment' if they did not follow the rule, which was in contrast with what happened in the dormitory where they lived. This lenient control that the students received in the classroom and surroundings inhibited their WTC in English. Still in relation with the peers aspect, there was likely some problems when the students have low WTC when communicating with their friends. Different level of students who were placed in the same level of program in this institution made a problem because proficient learners did not get suitable partners to learn with although at some points they might be helpful for each other. It showed that the students' attention to their peers' language proficiency, participation, involvement, and cooperation should be taken into further notes as it confirmed the study done by Cao (2013), Kang (2005), Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2016), Pawlak et al. (2016), and Riasati (2012).

Moving to the next aspect of classroom environment, the students' response to ignore the embarrassment that they might receive because being laughed at their mistakes was a thing that should be emphasized. This finding was in contrast with Peng's (2012) study that reveals students' negative judgment decreases their WTC. The students' WTC in the class taught by teacher A indicated high level of WTC in average. This is partly because the students had known their friends in the classroom for some weeks and the students have good relationship with each other. This study confirms Khajavy's (2014) and Peng's (2007) study saying that cohesiveness affects students' WTC.

The students' responses towards the types of task and activity that influenced their WTC varied. This actually confirmed the study done by the scholars that different form of task type given either in the form of individual work, dyadic, in-group, or whole-class activity was perceived differently by the students and that it affected their level of WTC differently, too (Cao 2014, Cao & Philp, 2006; De Saint-leger & Storch, 2009; Lee, 2009; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Pawlak et al., 2016; Riasati, 2012). It also implied that the factors that affected students' WTC were different from one student to another. The different situation that each people faced resulted in different factors that contributed in their WTC.

Finally, the last finding indicated that the topic that was related to students' experience and that the students' were familiar with enhanced their WTC. It confirmed the study done by previous researchers that learners were more likely to be involved in the discussion if the topic was familiar, interesting, related to their personal experience, and that they had background knowledge with (Cao, 2011; Cao & Philp, 2006; Pawlak, 2015; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2016; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Pawlak et al., 2016; Riasati, 2012; Wolf, 2012). Cao (2011), however warns that the topic that is sensitive must be avoided since it may hinder students' WTC. Riasati (2012) also adds that the students are better given enough preparation time prior to discuss a topic so that they engage in the activity more actively. Following the result of this study, the students also suggested on this very similar idea. Additionally, Kang (2005) specifies that the topic that the students have background knowledge with influences their security. Meanwhile, topic that relates to

their personal experiences and background knowledge sparks excitement and topic that the students perceive as being useful and important, that they have background knowledge with, and that is sensitive influences their responsibility. Lastly, this should be noted carefully by the teachers to encourage the students communicate any kind of ideas they have, apart from the correctness of the answer because insecurity that the students' showed towards this aspect hindered their WTC in English as suggested in the findings.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study implied that there were various factors that influenced the students' WTC in English in the classroom context. These factors were the teachers, peers, classroom environment, topic of discussion, and types of task and activity. It should be noted, however, that these five factors did not always affect each student's WTC because each student had their own factors that influenced his or her WTC. Nevertheless, these five factors were found to be influential in affecting students' WTC in English in this particular study.

Some suggestions towards the teachers and institutions are made so that they could benefit this study. As teachers, we have to understand that there are various factors influencing students' WTC and should not merely focus that someone's WTC is affected only because of their personality trait. In the classroom, there might more than these five factors mentioned in this study that affect students' WTC. Teachers have to be sensitive and understanding so that students' WTC can be enhanced. For example, the teachers must emphasize that making mistakes is okay because they are in the process of learning so that embarrassment is not a big aspect that should not inhibit the students' WTC. The teachers also have to be able to manage the class in such a way and make a classroom pledge that supports any students' decision in learning as long as it does not violate the rules and enhance students' WTC. However, it still should be noted that teachers are the one who control the classroom so we cannot give the students any activity, task, or responses as what they want to but we ourselves have to be able to acknowledge what should and should not be done in the classroom. Meanwhile, for the institution, the chief and the teachers should administer strict rules not only in dormitory but also in the classroom and surroundings. They have to keep in mind that providing wide opportunities for the students to practice the target language is indeed very important to enhance the students' WTC in English.

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