

Willingness to Communicate Among Pre-University ESL Learners: Teachers' Perceptions and Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

In many regions of the world, the necessity to promote learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) has become a primary aspect of language instruction. Sensing the importance of WTC in ESL education, this study aims to explore Malaysian pre-university ESL teachers' perceptions towards learners' WTC and the teaching strategies employed to enhance it in ESL classrooms. The researcher employed qualitative means by employing semi-structured interview with 7 pre-university ESL teachers in providing extensive insights. The findings of this study depicts a concerning perceptions towards pre-university ESL learners' WTC, where five teaching strategies were discussed by the participants in promoting learners' WTC which comprises teacher immediacy, corrective feedback strategies, positive classroom climate, topic selection, and awareness raising strategies. This study implies that pre-university ESL teachers play a crucial role in reducing learners' apprehension to communicate using English language where a variety of teaching strategies should be integrated together in maximising their communicative potentials.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate, Teaching Strategies, Teachers' Perception, Pre-University ESL Classroom

Introduction

In many regions of the world, learning the English language for communicative reasons is a primary aspect of language instruction (Vongsila & Reinders, 2016). It plays a crucial role in mediating the link between people, society, and the environment in a community where global and cultural variety are on the rise (Chen et al., 2021). When it comes to facilitating interactions between individuals who are from different cultures and languages, the capacity to communicate in L2 is deemed as the key asset. This has given rise to the necessity to promote learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the second language (L2) which will facilitate the enhancement of the communication process with the global community (Saidi

2020; Sheybani, 2019). Lack of WTC in the English language among learners may impede them from achieving their language learning objectives, particularly their desired communication objectives (Yaqobi, 2022).

In supporting global communication, most nations, including Malaysia, have embraced several ways to foster communicative competence through English language education (Saidi, 2020). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education has introduced Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as the tertiary level admission requirement. Communication elements are embedded as an important component in this examination. According to Naaim and Hashim (2019), effective communication skills in the language will be an added value to receive higher grades, thus highlighting the need to polish learners' communicative competence. This highlights the crucial need to stress the importance of enhancing learners' WTC in the English language in an attempt to promote communicative competence.

The importance of WTC among ESL learners is a crucial value that should not be denied in assisting them to achieve their desired communicative objectives (Yaqobi, 2022). However, many ESL learners still possess a poor level of WTC although they have received more than 11 years of ESL instruction in school upon completing their secondary education (Ahmad et al., 2022; Bakar et al., 2020). This issue has become a major predicament among ESL education stakeholders, as the goal of learning a language should focus on productive communication rather than just being fluent in its structures (Pandapatan et al., 2022). Teachers play a crucial role in catering to this issue as they are the key player in maximising learners' communicative potentials. Therefore, this paper aims to explore Malaysian pre-university ESL teachers' perceptions and teaching strategies to enhance learners' WTC in the classroom by using qualitative means. There are 2 research questions addressed in this study:

1. What are the teacher's perceptions towards pre-university learners' willingness to communicate in ESL classrooms?
2. What are the teaching strategies enacted by the teacher to enhance pre-university learners' willingness to communicate in ESL classrooms?

Literature Review

English Language for Pre-University ESL Learner

At the pre-university level, the primary focus of English language lessons are geared towards teaching the English language for communication purposes as well as to prepare students for university entrance examinations (Othman & Nordin, 2013). According to Krishnan et al. (2019), internationally, there are several specified English tests that are used in approval of admission to higher institutions around the world such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as well as the English for Speakers of Other Languages examination (ESOL). These tests highlight the necessity to possess a good level of proficiency in English language among pre-university ESL learners as it serves a crucial role in preparing them for higher education prospects.

In Malaysia, the significant role of English language for the success in the tertiary education has led the Ministry of Higher Education to emphasise the aspect of English language proficiency as one of the requirements for admissions in public universities (Subramaniam et al., 2021). This has given rise to the establishment of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) that serves as a requirement for entrance into public universities in Malaysia (Baharum et al., 2021). This test was introduced to fill the gap between secondary and tertiary English

language requirements, as it aims to strengthen their proficiency to enable them to excel in their future academic courses. (Parnabas et al., 2022). This is vital as most of the public universities in Malaysia have set a certain standard of MUET band as a prerequisite in enrolling students for the course offered (Krishnan et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for pre-university students to be well equipped with good competency in English language in enabling them to perform well in the examination, thus preparing them for tertiary level education.

Willingness to Communicate in English Language

WTC has arisen as a research topic that has piqued the interest of many researchers in the ESL/EFL field, particularly in the last two decades (Ubaid et al., 2022). This notion emphasises that the ultimate goal of learning a second language should be to make learners more inclined to seek out communication situations and be willing to communicate in them (MacIntyre et al., 1998). For language learners, being willing to communicate could be beneficial since it enhances the opportunities for skills-building activities like speaking, producing work, and negotiating meaning (Shaffer, 2019). It has a significant impact on the learning of second languages since it may give learners the possibility to interact in real-world settings, giving them authentic practice in the language (Zarei et al., 2019).

In the classroom context, WTC occurs when learners engage in conversation with the instructor and peers in the ESL/EFL classroom with the intent of responding to each other's comments and communicating any pertinent information (Ahmad et al., 2022). It is imperative to note that ongoing effort to create a positive environment would help to raise the level of WTC (Kun et al., 2020). This will enhance overall language performance in the classroom as many researchers emphasised that if learners have a high degree of WTC, their level of competence will rise as a result of regular language use (Subramaniam et al., 2021). It is important for teachers to take into account students' WTC in the classroom to improve English language learning (Nilsson, 2021). Therefore, this highlights the importance in enhancing learners' WTC as it is positively correlated with successful language learning (Khalid, 2018).

According to Ducker (2021), WTC results from the dynamic interaction of trait-like and situational antecedents, including cognitive factors, affective factors, and teacher-driven factors. Learners' WTC can be influenced by several cognitive factors such as language proficiency (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021), vocabulary knowledge (Altiner, 2017), and topic selection (Jahedi & Ismail, 2020; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Nilson (2020) on the other hand asserts that affective factors can influence learners' WTC as it may vary according to their self-confidence, motivation, and apprehension. Teachers play a vital role in promoting successful communication, as students' learning is regarded to be highly dependent on teachers' teaching (Wen & Clément, 2003). Therefore, it is feasible to recognize that WTC can be affected by a multitude of factors which should be addressed by ESL teachers to maximise learners' communicative potentials.

Teaching Strategies in Enhancing Learners' Willingness to Communicate

Past scholars emphasised the necessity for ESL teachers to implement the right strategies that can encourage students to be more engaged in classroom activities that entail communication (Sheybani, 2019). It is crucial to note that any strategies aimed to improve WTC among L2 learners should examine how to assist learners in overcoming L2 communication challenges which emphasise the crucial role of teachers as the primary key player (Ayedoun et al., 2019). When learning a second/foreign language, speaking it can induce anxiety and apprehension,

which can possibly result in isolation or a refusal to communicate (Khalid, 2018). Hence, it is imperative to integrate the best strategies in enhancing learners' WTC to cater to these predicaments that may impede learners' communicative experience.

According to Zohrabi and Bimesl (2022), motivational strategy is one of the most contributing strategy in promoting learners' WTC. Motivational propensities is deemed as the strongest contributing factors influencing learners' WTC in English language (Basoz & Erten, 2019). Past scholars also put forth the importance of topic selection strategies in designing lesson that can maximise learners' motivation for communication (Zarrinabadi et al., 2014). The researchers discuss the crucial role of motivating the learners in enhancing their WTC with the emphasis on topic selection and error correction strategy. When a topic is well-compelling, students are more ready to take part in class activities, hence improving their WTC in the classroom.

According to Amini and Weisi (2019), teachers who are unaware of the importance of offering immediacy may cause a distance with their students which will eventually impede learners' WTC. This is aligned with Zarei et al. (2019), where the researcher highlighted that teacher immediacy behaviours, such as using eye contact, and sense of humour, enhance the relationship with students, which is essential to improve WTC. Adding onto that, another teacher-driven factor that can influence learners' WTC is the teachers' feedback. Previous studies hypothesised that students' reluctance to speak may be related to their fear of criticism and evaluations (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). It becomes imperative for teachers to be cautious in correcting mistakes and providing feedback to prevent students from becoming demotivated in using the language in their classroom interactions (Nilson, 2020).

Another study by Vongsila and Reinders (2016) emphasises that students will have a more positive environment for communicative practices when communicating in a small group as it is proven to reduce learners' anxiety. However, it is important to note that some learners might have excessive self-awareness and this can result in harsh self-criticism, which in turn lowers self-esteem and makes them reluctant to interact with others in social situations (Fallah, 2014). Hence, it is crucial for teachers to create a positive classroom environment that is free from ridicule, especially when assigning collaborative activities in order to reduce learners' apprehension to participate in communicative practices.

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research design to provide extensive insights in meeting the research objectives. In this study, seven pre-university ESL teachers were selected as the research participants through purposive sampling. The participants were selected due to the reason that they met the criteria set by the researcher namely: 1) Pre-university teacher; 2) teaching MUET syllabus; 3) obtained bachelor degree in TESL; 4) teaching in public institution. The instrument employed in this study was a semi structured interview conducted online via Zoom. There were 10 questions developed by the researcher in exploring the perceptions and teaching strategies employed by the research participants in promoting learners' WTC. A thematic analysis was employed in exploring the emerging themes and patterns related to the teachers' perceptions towards the pre-university ESL learners' WTC as well as the teaching strategies employed to improve their WTC. The themes that were outlined from the research instrument were used in presenting the findings in accordance with the research questions. Pseudonym was used in representing the research participants to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' identity.

Findings

ESL Teachers' Perceptions on Pre-University Learners' WTC in English Language

In answering the first research question, the perceptions on pre-university ESL learners' WTC in English language were analysed from the interview transcriptions. Despite the importance of WTC highlighted in this study, it was found that the participants express their concern towards their pre-university learners' WTC in English language classroom. As an English language teacher, the participants stresses that the students' unwillingness to communicate may impede their probability to engage in communicative practices especially in preparing them for their upcoming MUET examination. This issues were mentioned by several participants in the interview session:

"My students' willingness to communicate in the classroom using English is a bit worrying and this worries me as their MUET speaking test is just around the corner" (P3)

"Some of my students feel as if they do not need English to function on a day to day basis, thus they are unwilling to use it. This worries me as their MUET teacher". (P1)

"...the students I came across were mostly reserved and clearly hesitant to communicate with others using the language, which concerns me a lot because they have to practise for their upcoming MUET exam" (P5).

The above passage depicts the reality where a majority of the participants expressed their concern regarding their learners' reluctance in using English language for communicative purposes. Looking at the scenario where the WTC among pre-university learners are deemed critical, the participating teachers shared their concern as these students will be sitting for Malaysian University English Test (MUET). In addition, the low level of WTC among the pre-university students may also possess threat in preparing them for higher education, as mentioned by P7 and P2.

"My students' willingness to communicate using the English language is quite low although they are at the pre-university level. Honestly, this really concerns me because if they plan to pursue their study at a higher level, they have to possess good communication skills" (P7)

"This really worries me because when they enter university, they have to be able to communicate using English language to excel" (P2)

P7 and P2 highlighted that it is important to possess good communication skills in English language as their students pursue the higher education prospects. WTC is an important notion that should be instilled as it is integral in supporting learners' capacity for effective communication. Therefore, this highlights the importance for the pre-university learners to be well equipped with good communication skills in preparing them for tertiary education, thus justify the importance for the teachers to be concerned about the pre-university learners' WTC in English language.

Teaching Strategies in Promoting Learners' wtc in English Language

In answering the second research questions, the findings revealed five teaching strategies being highlighted by the research participants which comprises teacher immediacy, corrective feedback strategies, positive classroom climate strategies, topic selection strategies, and awareness raising strategies.

Teacher Immediacy

Based on the semi structured interview conducted, one of the most frequent strategies that has been employed by a majority of the participants is the teacher immediacy strategy. The participants highlighted the usage of verbal and non-verbal immediacy such as showing welcoming and friendly facial expression and intonation as a good way in making the students feel comfortable to communicate in English.

"I always make sure to show a welcoming and friendly facial expression and talk to them in a friendly intonation to reduce the gaps with the students" (P7)

"It is important to break the gap and let them come and talk to us, which would be the beginning to make them talk and use the language freely in our class" (P2)

The above transcriptions highlight the teachers' perceptions on bridging the teacher-student gaps by offering immediacy to enhance learners' WTC. As students become comfortable with the teacher, their WTC in English language may enhance significantly.

Adding on to that, the participants also highlighted that building a good rapport and positive relationship with the students in making them comfortable as a crucial aspect in offering immediacy. This notion was highlighted by several participants employed in this study.

"I always start with encouraging the students to see myself and their classmates as equal... breaking the 'they are better than me' barrier is important to allow students to feel that it is okay for them to converse in English full of 'errors' as they deemed themselves to be". (P5)

"one of the personal methods that I use is to be one of them. Treat them like friends. When you are willing to go on par with them, they will be more comfortable with you and learn better" (P4)

"I would build a good relationship with the students, because unlike AI, software or any learning tools, us humans have the ability to truly reach for their souls". (P1)

The above findings highlights the significance of creating and maintaining a close and positive relationship with the students which is beneficial in reducing their communication apprehension. By creating an environment that is less intimidating, learners will feel more at ease to participate in communicative activities, thus improving their WTC in ESL classrooms. The findings presented depict the expansiveness of teacher immediacy strategies employed by the pre-university ESL teachers in this study to promote WTC among their learners.

Corrective Feedback Strategies

The findings depicted that a majority of the participants mentioned the crucial notion of providing feedback that is positive and constructive which will not impede the learners' WTC. Mistakes are common among learners especially when engaging in communicative practices. If the teacher gives a negative or degrading feedback to the students, it may increase their reluctance to communicate using the language

"the best way to not impede their willingness to communicate in the language is not to blindly project their mistake in the classroom, and to put highlight on that one mistake, which will definitely give anxiety to our students to speak" (P2)

“never create a negative atmosphere in your class. I usually use different words to address errors such as ‘good try, but I want something more specific’ and ‘that’s not quite right, you might want to try again’ in correcting their mistakes” (P4)

“I usually correct my students starting with validation of their effort in trying to answer the question. Then I go with suggesting that it would be better if they could answer it in a certain way that fits the question better” (P6).

“I usually make corrections by making/showing similar examples to the class as a whole and discuss them. I often find calling the students in person to talk about the mistakes scare them a lot more, thus making them more distant” (P5)

The above findings emphasise that it is important for teachers to understand the right way of providing feedback and correcting the students’ mistakes. Despite the errors made by the students in their speech, the participants implemented some positive strategies by giving affirmation for the students’ effort. Teachers should recognise the students’ effort although they fail to give the correct answer as a way to encourage them to be active in the classroom. Therefore, the findings depict a crucial need to understand ‘when’ and ‘how’ teachers should provide corrective feedback, in a positive and non-threatening way.

Positive Classroom Climate

The findings obtained highlighted the teachers’ practices in providing a positive classroom climate as a strategy in enhancing their learners’ WTC. According to the participants, one of the ways in motivating students who are reluctant to participate in communicative practices is by creating a safe and welcoming environment.

“I would firstly create a safe classroom environment for my students whereby they are allowed to make mistakes. Despite all the grammatical errors, they should first be confident and use the language with less fear” (P1)

“Creating a welcoming classroom and making them feel important and safe is one of my strategies in promoting communicative practices in my class. It is important to appreciate their opinion and validate their effort.

The findings above highlighted that it is imperative for teachers to promote a positive classroom climate which will bring a remarkable influence on learners’ self-confidence and motivation. Teachers play an important role in monitoring the interaction processes that happen in the classroom to ensure the environment is safe and comfortable for the students to unleash their potential.

Besides that, in promoting a positive classroom climate, (P6) and (P7) also stressed upon the importance of maintaining a conducive environment for learning that is free from ridicule. This is crucial in preparing a conducive environment for the learners to practise the language at ease.

“I always stressed on the importance of having a positive classroom environment that is free from ridicule” (P6)

“I would prepare a conducive environment for them to use the language. This is because language shaming is very common in our classroom environment, so I have created rules that

the language is safe to use in the classroom and no shaming or any sort of teasing is allowed in my class” (P7)

These findings emphasise teachers’ important role in managing and reminding the students to be mindful during classroom interactions to ensure a positive and conducive classroom environment can be maintained. Teachers should put forth this strategy in their ESL classrooms due to the significance of classroom climate in enhancing learners’ communicative growth.

Topic Familiarity and Interest

The research participants also put forth the idea of choosing a suitable topic when designing lessons. Based on the interview conducted, it was found that the relevance of the topic is deemed important when selecting a topic. The necessity to integrate students’ background knowledge and interest when choosing a topic is crucial in promoting learners’ WTC in the target language.

“Topics should be relevant to the students. Instilling prior knowledge is essential if the topic chosen is almost foreign to them” (P1)

“Making sure the topic is relevant to the student life is very important so that it would be meaningful and can motivate them to use it” (P6)

“I will be critical when choosing the right topic for the students, because when they are interested and familiar with the topic, they will tend to be more active in expressing their thoughts, especially during classroom discussion” (P7)

“I would look into topics that could trigger their interests such as current trends, romance, AI, and so on” (P2)

The above transcriptions highlight that a majority of the participants agreed on the necessity to choose familiar and interesting topics as a strategy to enhance learners’ WTC in English language. Familiar and interesting topic allows learners to participate better in the classroom as they possess a background knowledge of the topic which allows them to make connections to their own experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds.

In addition, several participants also put forth the importance of choosing the topic that suits the learners’ proficiency level in English language. This strategy is crucial to avoid students from getting demotivated to discuss the topic, thus promoting them to speak using the target language. This strategy was mentioned by the following participants:

“I will choose something not too difficult for the class. Otherwise, students will not communicate if the topic is hard or boring” (P4)

“I will make sure that it is relevant and suits their level of proficiency” (P3)

“As per what topic/theme to choose, I started with something much closer and easier to them, such as people and values and moved on to complex issues like economy and environment” (P5)

The findings highlighted that communication difficulties may emerge from a lack of language skills and understanding of the topic. Therefore, in implementing this strategy, it is crucial to progress gradually from easier to more complex concepts in avoiding students from feeling too intimidated to participate in the communicative practices.

Awareness Raising Strategies

The findings obtained from the interview session with the pre-university ESL teachers also depicted the implementation of awareness raising strategies among the research participants. Since the primary focus is in preparing the students for their MUET examination, the awareness raising strategies focused on creating awareness on the importance of communication skills for the examination and the students' trajectory upon graduation. The participants' utilisation of awareness raising strategies were as followed:

"I often emphasise in class that mastering the skills is not only beneficial for their MUET exam, but is also helpful for them in the future whereby most of the students will pursue their tertiary level later" (P1)

"I always remind my students that English is important for further studies, the higher your grade, the more chances you have to apply to various courses" (P4)

"I remind them about the importance of scoring at least Band 3 in the exam in order to have a better chance to enrol in their preferred university. I also tell them about the importance of having good command in English since it will be used as the main language of instruction when they enter university" (P7)

The findings presented depict the important role of teachers in enacting the awareness raising strategy as a way to promote motivation for the learners to be more willing to communicate using English language. By creating the awareness among the pre-university students, this will hopefully enhance their motivation in reaching the goal as they completed their pre-university programme, thus enhancing their WTC in English language lessons.

Discussion

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in English language is a crucial quality that should be instilled among pre-university ESL learners in enhancing their communicative competence and preparing them for university entrance examinations (Othman & Nordin, 2013). However, based on the findings obtained from this study, it was found that the majority of the participants express their concern towards their pre-university learners' WTC as many of them are reluctant to use English language for communicative purposes. This shows that the issue with regards to learners' reluctance to communicate in English language still remains an obstacle in Malaysia, as depicted in several other studies in the previous years (Ahmad et al., 2022; Bakar et al., 2020; Saidi, 2020). Therefore, this highlights the needs for teachers to implement the right strategies in promoting learners' WTC in order to enhance their communicative competence.

The findings depict the expansiveness of teacher immediacy strategies employed by the participants in improving the teacher-learner relationship. In educational contexts, teachers who are unaware of the importance of offering immediacy may cause a distance with their students which will eventually impede their WTC in the target language (Amini & Weisi, 2021). The findings of this study highlighted that bridging the teacher-student gaps by offering immediacy is crucial to ensure learners are comfortable to communicate in the classroom.

Besides that, another teaching strategy highlighted in this study is the corrective feedback strategies. The key idea of giving feedback that is constructive and supportive without impeding the learners' WTC was noted by the majority of the participants. Previous studies emphasised that students' reluctance to speak may be related to their fear of criticism and evaluations which impede their opportunities to participate in social interactions (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). Therefore, it is important for teachers to be critical in

implementing the right corrective feedback strategies that will not hinder their learners to progress in their learning, particularly for communicative purposes.

The findings obtained from the interview also highlighted the teachers' practices in providing a positive classroom climate as a strategy in enhancing their learners' WTC. It is crucial to create a conducive environment that is free from ridicule as learners will inevitably become aware of how others perceive them when they try to express an opinion, and this concern may inhibit them from speaking up (Shamsudin et al., 2017). This factor can become a major impediment that can hinder ESL learners to progress in their learning, particularly for communicative purposes, which stresses upon the necessity for teachers to monitor the classroom interactions positively.

In addition, to enhance learners' WTC, the awareness on the importance of the English language communication skills should be addressed extensively. According to Othman and Nordin (2013), the primary focus of English language lessons at this level are geared towards teaching the English language for communication purposes as well as to prepare students for MUET. By creating the awareness among the pre-university students, this will hopefully enhance their motivation in reaching the goal as they completed their pre-university programme. This is highly important as most of the public tertiary institutions in Malaysia have set a certain standard of proficiency in English language as a prerequisite in enrolling students for the course offered (Krishnan et al., 2019).

Moreover, a majority of the participants agreed on the necessity to choose familiar and interesting topics as a strategy to enhance WTC in the ESL classroom. According to Jahedi and Ismail (2020), familiar and engaging topics enable learners to engage more effectively in the classroom. This is because they have prior knowledge of the subject, enabling them to relate it to their own experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds. It is also important to note that communication difficulties may emerge from a lack of language skills and understanding of the topic (Başöz & Erten, 2019), thus highlighting the necessity to choose topics that suit the learners' level. Therefore, given how challenging and stressful learning a second/foreign language can be, it is feasible to recognize the teaching strategies, which will assist learners to become more involved in classroom activities and, as a result, improve their language usage for effective communication.

Conclusion

This study explores the pre-university ESL teachers' perceptions towards learners' WTC in English language and the teaching strategies in enhancing their WTC in maximising their communicative potential. It was found that the majority of the participants express their concern towards their pre-university learners' WTC as many of the students are reluctant to use English language for communicative purposes. In catering to this predicament, the pre-university ESL teachers mentioned several teaching strategies in promoting learners' WTC which comprises teacher immediacy, corrective feedback strategies, positive classroom climate, topic selection, and awareness raising strategies. The findings of this study imply that pre-university ESL teachers play a crucial role in reducing learners' apprehension to communicate using English language where a variety of teaching strategies should be integrated together in maximising their communicative potentials. However, it is important to note that the findings obtained from this study was drawn from one single instrument which is the semi-structured interview. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to conduct a similar study by integrating other instruments such as observation and document analysis, to allow data triangulation to be made in rendering more reliable findings. .

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