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Indonesian ESP Students' Willingness to Communicate in English: Focusing on Situated Factors

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Introduction

Recently, students' willingness to communicate (WTC) has been of a great interest among language scholars (see Halupka-Rešetar et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The idea of investigating WTC is anchored by the fact that students have encountered complexities in terms of their linguistic knowledge and personality traits in L2 speaking. Many reports have indicated that linguistic knowledge is imperative for alignment with students' performance during their language learning trajectories (see Jiang, 2007). In addition, personality traits are also contributive in determining students' willingness to communicate in English (Pawlak, M., & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). However, the inclination of such a complex interplay between linguistic knowledge and personality attributes in L2 speaking has not been intensively investigated.

A recent investigation on students' performance within their English communication has looked at some factors influencing their willingness to communicate, ranging from English proficiency, teacher support, classroom activities, and psychological aspects (Maleki & Zangani, 2007). It is suggested that teacher education navigates approaches to teaching English communicatively, particularly for vocational settings and encourages students to speak English communicatively. However, it is unclear how to encourage students to express their ideas since studies investigating factors inhibiting students in L2 speaking at polytechnic levels are rarely conducted in EFL settings. Therefore, in-depth studies are worth investigating factors of unwillingness to speak English among EFL students in vocational higher education, which can later lead to pedagogical recommendations for language teachers.

Earlier in 1987, McCroskey and Richmond coined the term willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language learning (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Theoretically, WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 2007, p. 547). MacIntyre et al. further explain that WTC is influenced by linguistic, psychological, and social variables. These variables include personality, communicative competence, social situations, intergroup climate, attitudes, motivation, interpersonal motivation, self-confidence, and

desire to communicate with a specific person. These variables draw on the fact that WTC is jointly influenced by both internal and external aspects of a second language learner. However, in terms of vocational higher education, studies on WTC seem sparse.

The inconclusive studies of students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English in vocational higher education contexts have stemmed from a lack of research in this area. To the best of our understanding, scholars' attention is more directed to exploring how teaching materials are created for vocational school levels (Widodo, 2015), vocational education and training policy enactment (Brockmann, Clarke, Méhaut, & Winch, 2008), and vocational high school teacher identity development (Köpsén, 2014). This indicates that there is not much research on the vocational higher education context that focuses on the students and factors hampering them from speaking English communicatively.

Several personality traits have been predicted to complicate students' WTC in English as a foreign/second language context, such as self-confidence, self-belief, and self-motivation (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Later, anchored by an ecological perspective, Cao (2011) supported Peng and Woodrow's research that students' self-characteristics do influence their WTC. Cao even added that classroom discourse such as tasks, topics, and group discussions also contributed to students' WTC. In the contexts of Korean and Taiwanese students, institutional and instructional domains contribute to engaging students in WTC (Lee et al., 2019). Similarly, Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, and Bielak (2016) revealed that WTC is fluctuated by a number of contextual and individual aspects. These multilayered findings reveal that students' WTC is a fluid domain affected by a variety of individual differences and classroom activities.

Previous studies have also revealed the fact that internal and external domains were influential toward students' WTC. For instance, Cao and Philip (2006) found four factors hampering students to communicate in English, these are, (1) group size, namely the number of students involved in the classroom activities, (2) self-confidence, namely student self-confidence when communicating in English, (3) being familiar with interlocutors, or students' familiarity with their interlocutors, and (4) interlocutor participation, which is the involvement of interlocutors when communication is enacted.

In addition, Zeng (2010) added factors that can influence his Chinese students' courage to communicate in English. These are: (1) support from their lecturers (teacher support) which means that students will have enough courage to communicate in English if they get support from their lecturers; (2) fear of making mistakes when communicating in English which means that students find it difficult to convey their ideas in English because they are afraid of making mistakes due to their perceived weakness in knowledge of sentence structure or their limitations in English vocabulary; (3) fear of leaving a bad impression after communicating in English; and (4) losing face if they make mistakes in expressing their ideas in English.

Investigating Korean and Swedish students from different cultures and educational backgrounds, Lee et al. (2020) uncovered that Korean students tend to start communicating in English due to their high motivation in learning the language, while Swedish students are not likely to start a conversation during classes. Their research elaborated on the fact that context-specific pedagogy in a second language classroom is necessary. Teachers are then suggested to prepare such teaching enactments in order to increase students' willingness to communicate in English.

Although previous studies have explored different perspectives from students' WTC, there is still a paucity of research in the vocational higher education level, where students learn English for specific purposes. Scholars, in fact, have not focused their research in this area, whereas vocational higher education is a place for specialized college students to use English in the workplace. Given this knowledge gap, the present study was designed to investigate what factors hinder Indonesian students' WTC at the vocational higher education level.

Method

Using an interview study design, we recruited 28 sophomores consisting of 14 male and 14 female participants at a state polytechnic in Malang, Indonesia. At the time this study was carried out, they were attending a course on English for engineering. Prior to attending the course, these participants had very little experience in communicating in English. Thus, the course was designed to enable them to express thoughts and ideas through English as a medium of instruction as well as for a future career in the workplace. Informed consent and anonymity of the participants' identities were firstly given and explained prior to data collection. Then, we coded participants into S1, S2, S3 until S28, respectively.

Data collection was conducted using an unstructured interview conducted using participants' national language (Bahasa Indonesia). Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. This data elicitation method was employed to ensure that participants were involved in unrestrained responses with regard to their willingness to speak English. Consequently, follow-up questions were asked during the interview sessions. Participants' responses were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our interview questions started with a general inquiry related to what hampers the participants to communicate in English. Afterward, we inquired more about their complexities in willingness to communicate, including their reluctance to use the skill for communication. To analyze the interview transcript, the second author then translated the interviews into English.

In general, our data were analyzed using a thematic model as recommended by Creswell (2013). We read each transcript and did a careful examination of similar responses and included them in one emergent theme. Out of 28 interviews, we analyzed 21 responses from the participants. This analysis procedure is normally undertaken to figure out emerging themes from an interview study. To ascertain the data saturation, we did member-checking by inviting the participants to closely examine the transcripts and provide comments on the analyses.

Results

Our study attempts to reveal the situational factors hampering students to communicate in English. Findings of this study documented five mostly cited situated factors that lead to students' low willingness to communicate in English, these are 1) vocabulary attainment, 2) sentence arrangement, 3) self-confidence, 4) idea construction, and 5) motivation provision. They will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Vocabulary Attainment

Most of the participants in this study cited that vocabulary attainment affected their low willingness to communicate in English. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), L2 learners are not suggested to have the same vocabulary-size as L1 speakers. Nonetheless, they are encouraged to be familiar with the most frequently used vocabulary in language learning. Thus, vocabulary sizes determine learners' success in language learning, particularly when dealing with speaking activities. However, our findings suggested that the participants had a very limited vocabulary size, leading to a negative willingness to communicate. This concern is shared by S8 and S10.

S8:
I actually really want to be able to speak English, but unfortunately, my knowledge of English vocabulary is very limited. Worse, the lecturer is less helpful in teaching English vocabulary.

S10:
Actually, I really want to be able to speak English but because of my limitations in mastering vocabulary and the difficulty of composing sentences it makes me reluctant to speak English. Besides that, frankly I'm afraid to make mistakes.

Vocabulary may serve as the primary element that L2 learners need to cope with. It consequently relates to learners' ability to make effective sentences and their courage to make mistakes for communication. S26, and S30 shared their inability to arrange correct sentences and being afraid of making mistakes in speaking.

S26:
Actually, I really want to be able to speak in English. But I have a quite serious obstacle, which is the difficulty in arranging words in the correct sentences, for example when to use capital followed by be and when not.

S30:
I have difficulties when communicating in English because I don't understand English sentence structure, especially when I have to use the Question as words when, where, why, etc., because I don't have enough vocabulary and because I'm not able to pronounce words correctly , especially verbs that end in a hissing sound. Apart from that I am reluctant to speak in English because I lack confidence.

Sentence Arrangement

Another salient complexity encountered by the participants is arranging sentences. As a result, failure to do so tends to hinder second language learners from producing effective sentences in communication. This confusion is shared by S13, S14, and S15. Sentence construction for many EFL learners may not be very easy since it requires development in second language acquisition.

S13:
One of the issues that made me not dare to communicate in English verbally was because I did not understand very well about the sentence structure. One of them is the difference between Simple Past Tense and Present Perfect Tense which I consider to be two sentences that happened in the past.

S14
Initially I wanted to be brave enough to speak in English. But I am still traumatized because when I was in high school, I used to make sentences turned out to mean wrong, so my friends laughed at him.

S15:
I have difficulty in speaking because I do not have enough knowledge about the structure of English sentences, especially about arranging words in sentences and not being able to memorize many English words. In addition, what makes me reluctant to speak in English is that I am embarrassed if I make a mistake.

S13, for instance, experiences issues of first language transfer in differentiating simple past tense and present perfect tense, which explains accomplished activities in the past. Interestingly, S14 and S15 felt guilty when making mistakes in sentence construction. This concern leads them to an unwillingness to communicate verbally in English.

Idea Construction

Very often, ideas cannot be expressed effectively during communication. Our participants experienced such a feeling, hindering them from speaking. Lack of topical knowledge and familiarity with the topic discussed also tended to hamper effective communication. S23 and S31 narrated that:

S23:
Learning to speak English sometimes makes it difficult for me to communicate because my interlocutor doesn't respond. Maybe he did not understand what I was saying or maybe he was also having difficulty conveying his ideas.

S31:
I really want to be able to speak in English but I have difficulty in composing related sentences. Not sentences that stand alone. What's even more difficult is to arrange ideas in a logical order.

Self-confidence

Our study also reveals that personality traits such as self-confidence are contributive to the students' WTC level. These personality traits are associated with second language learners who attempt to engage in active communication in the class. Participants (S21 and S24) commented that:

S21:
I actually already somewhat understand the structure of English sentences and have started to memorize English vocabulary. But I am still doubtful about the pronunciation, especially words. What makes me even more reluctant in speaking English is if a friend laughs at me.

S24:
At first, I thought that speaking English was very simple, that is, I had enough courage to speak. It turns out I was once ashamed of not being able to utter a sentence. This is because I do not understand the structure of English sentences about Direct Sentences and Indirect Sentences, and do not have enough vocabulary. Also, I find it difficult to pronounce words that end in a hissing sound.

In line with this, Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, and Bielak (2016) contend that self-confidence is a significant factor for students' WTC in second language learning. This concern is supported by other previous findings (see Mulyono & Saskia, 2020; Peng, 2015; Shao & Gao, 2016). From the narratives of S21 and S24, it can be inferred that students are not willing to communicate in English since they are ashamed of incorrect pronunciation. It normally happens in the context where English is taught as a foreign language, leading to a decrease in students' self-confidence.

Motivation Provision

Many studies have argued for the importance of motivation in the second language classroom (see, for instance, King et al., 2019; Peng, 2015; Wen & Piao, 2020). In terms of WTC, motivation also serves as a significant predictor of students' active participants in a conversation (Syed & Kuzborska, 2020). However, this is not the case with many students in the present study. They encountered unmotivated conditions due to lecturers' ignorance and discouragement during communication. S19 and S25 illustrated that:

S19:
In my opinion, to speak in English it is not enough for the speaker to master his vocabulary and linguistic knowledge but more importantly is the motivation of the speaker to use English. This motivation can be formed by English lecturers who always encourage their students to always try to use their language knowledge.

S25:
I often have difficulty speaking in English not because I don't understand sentence structure and vocabulary mastery but because I really don't have the courage at all. But, my lecturer in speaking class does not encourage me and my friends to speak.

Together these narratives explain that teachers play a central role in shaping student motivation when communicating in English. Such encouragement appears to be strongly related to the way teachers engage students in the classroom. Understanding students as motivated individuals may serve this purpose, as noted by Hennebry-Leung and Xiao (2020, p. 1) who said that, "as the field of language learning motivation seeks to develop frameworks for motivational teaching practice, a richer understanding of learners' individuality is crucial in shaping practices that respond to learners' needs." In this study, regrettably, teacher motivational support is not well-practiced, leading to students' low willingness to communicate in English.

Discussion

This study has attempted to explore situated factors influencing students to communicate in English. Anchored by an interview approach, our findings suggest that the participants encountered five emerging complexities in WTC, ranging from vocabulary attainment, sentence arrangement, self-confidence, idea construction, and motivation provision. From the interview data, students seem to encounter a complex interface between linguistic knowledge (vocabulary attainment, sentence arrangement, idea construction) and personality traits (self-confidence, motivation provision). Many scholars (see Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2020; Peng, 2015) have noticed such a multilayered lens that hinders students from effective communication in a second language classroom. However, the results of this study differ from that of Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, and Bielak's (2016) investigation in which their participants elaborated more about the contributive variables affecting them to communicate such as English proficiency, learning preparation, and classroom dynamics.

Interestingly, most of the participants in this study argued that vocabulary has been 'a big' problem to communicate, which is often neglected by many previous studies on students' willingness to communicate (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; Grant, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). On the one hand, classroom discourse and teacher teaching styles were not dominant in the present study. This illustrates that our participants have likely been autonomous in learning. Although these aspects are not significantly voiced, their reluctance to communicate in English is possibly triggered by their linguistic and psychological influences. Another salient aspect unseen from our participants in this study is task planning in the classroom. This is contradictory with a previous study that explored students' willingness to communicate influenced by their rehearsal and strategic task planning (Jamalifar & Salehi, 2020).

In the present study, we also documented the interlink between vocabulary size and the ability to construct correct sentences in communication. Our participants were found unable to make sentences effectively due to their inadequate vocabulary knowledge. This condition does not allow for effective communication in language learning. Other research has looked at the central roles of unspecialized vocabulary in EFL contexts (such as Gámez et al., 2017; Kaplan-Rakowski & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019; White et al., 2017). However, this concern is not revealed in the previous research, given the fact that our participants were mostly college students studying English for engineering. Thus, this condition forces them to have specialized vocabulary knowledge and apply this knowledge into effective communication.

The most encouraging finding in the present study is that, albeit most of the participants are willing to communicate, they have not received enough teacher support during the class. This indicates that the teacher's role in engaging students' willingness to communicate in English is indispensable, particularly in the EFL context. Consequently, it is imperative for teachers to find ways of giving positive encouragement to students' so that their WTC will increase. Another salient factor contributing to the students' willingness to communicate in English is the attitudinal aspect of students' personality characteristics (Aubrey, 2010). However, this issue is not revealed in the present study. Thereby, this study calls for an in-depth exploration of how the teacher's role is better enacted to support students in using English communicatively and how the attitudinal aspect of students' personality assists them to speak English.

Conclusion

This study has reported situated factors influencing students' willingness to communicate in English. Two major problems were found; these are, students' linguistic (vocabulary attainment, sentence arrangement, idea construction) and aspects of their personality (self-confidence, motivation provision). The two can hinder students from making effective communication in the second language classroom if treated ineffectively. The findings of this study call for effective pedagogy in L2 speaking classes. In this case, teachers are invited to enact effective pedagogical tasks in order to alleviate students' psychological barriers and enhance their linguistic knowledge. In addition, since EFL students do not use English exclusively in the classroom, communicative language teaching with positive psychological approaches is encouraged, particularly dealing with students' willingness to communicate in specialized English conversations. In general, future research should complement this inconclusive study with classroom observation.

Acknowledgments

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