

Perceptions of EFL Iranian PhD Students on their Situational L2 WTC in Malaysia

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Abstract Study on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in second Language (L2) has become significant in modern language research and instruction. This study aims to explore the perceptions of a group of international EFL PhD students from Iran studying in a public university in Malaysia about the factors influencing their situational L2 WTC. To conduct this study, a qualitative case study method was applied to gain information from 8 participants by semi-structured interview as the main method, followed by focus group discussion and solicited journal diaries of the participants. The analyses of data derived from the research question showed two major themes: interactional and affective factors.

Keywords Situational L2 WTC, Willingness to Communicate, Second Language, EFL Learners, PhD International Students

1. Introduction

Nowadays in line with the globalization, there is an increasing need of learning English language for communicative purposes. Several researchers and English language learners around the world are looking for reliable ways for improving communication in English language. It has been said that looking for opportunities to communicate in a second language (L2) would extensively increase the opportunities of communication practices (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) as well as comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003). In fact, the final goal of L2 learning should generate willingness in L2 learners to look for opportunities to communicate and involve in communicative tasks in authentic settings (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to find elements that could increase or restrain language learners' willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) outside the classroom in authentic settings. In this vein, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a heuristic model of L2 WTC consisting of communicative, linguistic, psychological, and social variables that could influence on a learner's L2 WTC. Subsequently, MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined L2 WTC as a readiness to enter into a discourse at a specific time with a particular person or persons using L2.

In educational contexts, studying on L2 WTC is becoming of significant in decoding learners' communication

psychology and enhancing their communication engagement (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Although the construct of L2 WTC is a new concept to some degree; however, several studies have been implemented to scrutinize related variables influencing on it and its empirical results in L2 communication area. Different variables such as communication, personality, affective, and social psychology were explored in order to understand their relationship with WTC (e.g., Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre and Legatto, 2011; Yashima, 2002). However, still there is a need to unveil further factors which could constrain or enhance language learners' WTC.

2. Problem Statement

One of the targeted groups of L2 users who are in demand of improving their English oral communication skills are international PhD students. Qualified international PhD students who study in a country where the medium of instruction is English language must have the ability to clearly and forcefully articulate their opinions in person, using English language. When they make a discovery, they need to convince other experts that they have made a legitimate and meaningful contribution. They also require going to international conferences and participating in presentations to get people known about their research. They are obliged to manage how to balance their clarity and precision, so that their arguments come across without ambiguity.

However, it has been emphasised that barriers in spoken language are more common than problems in written language among international students (Alavi & Mansor, 2011). In other words, international students who undertake PhD studies lack the ability to justify and present their academic argument to the listeners efficiently. This problem could be similar for international PhD students from Iran who study in Malaysia where English is the medium of instruction in majority of universities in this country. According to Shahban (2010), even though international Iranian students have already acquired IELTS or TOEFL degree or passed compulsory English courses provided by their universities, but majority of these students still encounter problems in

communicating successfully and conveying their messages across to the listener.

Although L2 WTC was anticipated as one of the methods to improve L2 oral communication among international students by increasing their interactions in academic areas, but studies conducted on L2 WTC among international students are not enough, particularly in qualitative paradigm (e.g., Cao, 2011; Léger & Storch, 2009; MacIntyre, Burns & Jessome, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011). This is an essential issue, because implementing qualitative methodology could help in finding unknown factors contributing to L2 WTC and calls for innovative insights into the nature of WTC (Dörnyei, 2007). For instance, by adopting a qualitative approach and employing in-depth interview and observation, Kang (2005) proposed a multi-layered construct of situational L2 WTC that could change moment-to-moment in the conversational context. However, majority of L2 WTC studies primarily focus on its trait-like aspect and have not mentioned enough about its situational aspects. Situational aspects of WTC unlike its trait-like are not stable or constant across different situations and interlocutors.

Moreover, in spite of highlighting on the importance of WTC as a key concept in L2 pedagogy, related literature review reveals that L2 WTC has not been explored on English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners (like Iranians) sufficiently (Çetinkaya, 2009; Fallah, 2014; Nagy, 2007; Jung 2011; Yashima, 2002). Most of these studies are implemented in contexts where the target language was a second language (like Canada) (Xie, 2011; Yu, 2009). On top of that, L2 WTC has not explored among EFL Iranians adequately (Barjesteh et al., 2012; Ghonsooly, Khajavy & Asadpour, 2012; Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011). Majority of these studies are focused on EFL Iranians inside Iran and few of them have been implemented on EFL Iranian students studying overseas (e.g., Cameron, 2015). To the knowledge of the researchers, inadequate research conducted on EFL Iranian university students who live in a country where English is not the first language (like Malaysia).

Based on the knowledge of the researchers, no qualitative case study has been conducted on situational L2 WTC among EFL Iranian PhD students studying at a public university in Malaysia. Through investigating situational L2 WTC among these participants, the mentioned gaps in the existing literature can be addressed and contribute to the scholarship of research in L2 learning and teaching. Consequently, this study implemented a case study in qualitative paradigm using an in-depth interview as the main method in order to investigate and unveil new findings regarding situational L2 WTC among a group of international PhD students from Iran studying in Malaysia.

The current study attempts to answer following research question:

What were the EFL Iranian PhD students' perceptions about the factors influencing their situational WTC orally in English in Malaysian context?

3. Literature Review

WTC initially was conceptualized in L1 communication discipline by the work of McCroskey and Baer (1985) grounded by the studies on reticence (Phillips, 1965), communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970), unwillingness to communicate (Burgoon, 1976), a predisposition toward verbal behaviour (Mortensen, Arntson & Lustig, 1977), and shyness (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). McCroskey and Baer (1985) defined WTC as the probability that an individual will choose to communicate, specifically to talk, when free to do so. They conducted a study to positively depict the valid measure of personality-trait predisposition toward communication to prove that a trait-like tendency exists in individuals' communication which is stable across different contexts and types of interlocutors. Then, it was brought into second language by the work of MacIntyre and Charos (1996). MacIntyre and Charos (1996) adopted the Goldberg's Five Factor Model (1992) in order to investigate the role of personality traits in L2 WTC construct.

In order to explore L2 WTC extensively by a variety of cognitive, affective, and situational variables, a heuristic model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) to depict the conceptualization of WTC in L2. As mentioned before, the initial conceptualization of WTC in L1 (McCroskey & Baer, 1985), considered it as a personality-based predisposition, but in this model, WTC is treated with more situational variables. This model has both enduring and transitional influences on L2 WTC. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), enduring influences characterised as long-term and stable properties of a person or environment that could be utilised in any situation. Conversely, transitional influences considered as dependent on a specific setting where an individual communicate at a certain time. As presented in Figure 1, the heuristic model shows the range of possible influences on L2 WTC. The pyramid shape of this model stands for the distal and proximal factors, in other words, the broadest foundational to the most immediate factors respectively, which function as possible influences on establishing a communication in L2.

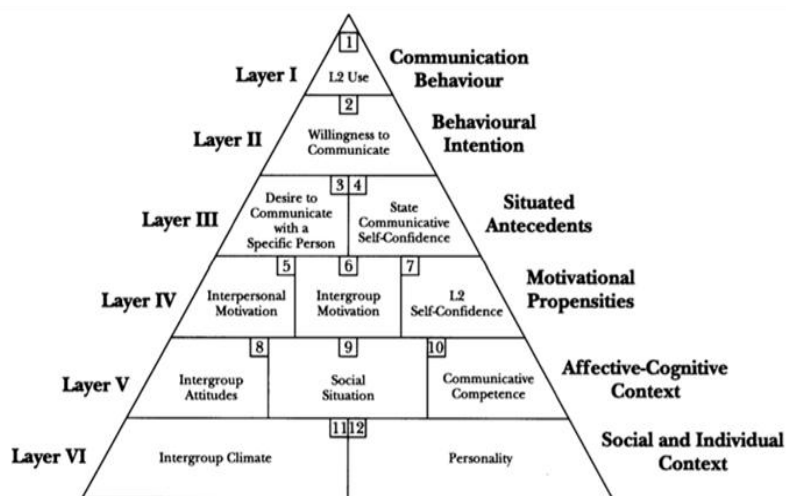


Figure 1. Heuristic Model of L2 WTC

In this model, six categories mentioned as “layers.” The first three proximal layers that are Communication Behaviour, Behavioural Intention, and Situated Antecedents referred to as situational factors influencing L2 communication within a specific time. The further three transit layers which are Motivational Propensities, Affective-Cognitive Context and Social and Individual Context denote enduring influences on communication in second language process. Thus, from bottom to top of this model (Figure 1), layers signify a move from the most stable, enduring influences to the most immediate, situation-based influences on L2 communication.

Research with the focus on variables relating to situational L2 WTC among EFL learners initiated around mid-2000s. Kang (2005) conducted an important qualitative

study in which he provided a new conceptualization of situational variables. Kang (2005) performed a qualitative study among EFL Korean learners studying in a university in the U.S, examining how situational L2 WTC can dynamically emerge and vary during a conversation situation. He found that situational WTC in L2 emerged from the joint effect of three interacting psychological conditions: excitement, responsibility, and security. Each of these variables interacted with situational variables such as topic, interlocutors, and conversational context. Based on these findings, Kang proposed a multi-layered construct of situational WTC (Figure 2) and a new definition of WTC in L2, in which WTC is defined as a dynamic situational concept that can change moment-to-moment, rather than a trait-like predisposition.

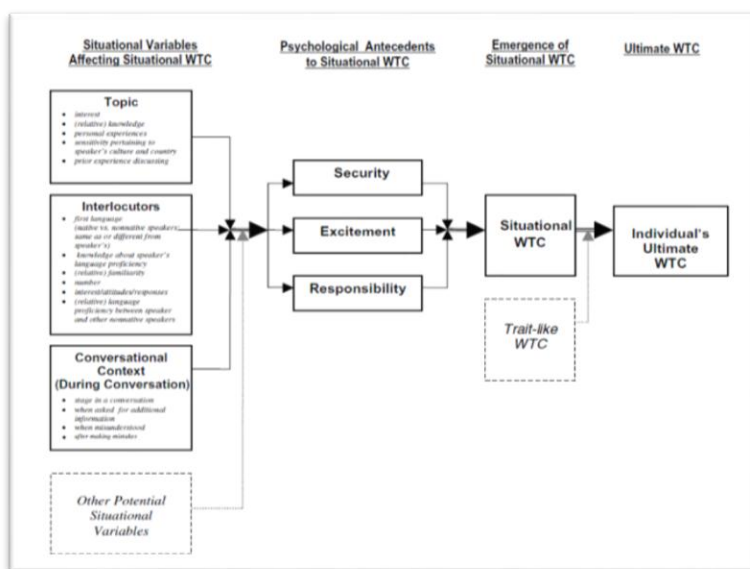


Figure 2. Situational L2 WTC

Following Kang's study, a number of important studies were conducted in various contexts through qualitative method to explore situational variables extensively. For instance, Cao (2009) investigated the dual characteristics of WTC in an L2: trait-like and situational WTC among international students in New Zealand. This study revealed a gap between trait and state WTC. While trait-like WTC, as measured by a self-report survey, could predict a tendency to communicate, classroom observation of situational WTC and interviews with individual learners highlighted the actual behaviour of students and the influence of contextual factors on the decision to engage in interaction with other students. The following factors were perceived by learners to influence WTC behaviour in class: group size, familiarity with interlocutor(s), interlocutor(s)' participation, familiarity with topics under discussion, self-confidence, the medium of communication and cultural background.

Compton (2007) qualitatively examined how content and context affects WTC of the international teaching assistants at U.S. University and their participation in the classroom. The study partially supported MacIntyre and associates' (1998) in their claim that perceived confidence increases WTC in an L2. However, in-depth exploration of the results discovered additional significant variables that were not covered under the pyramid model. Regarding the content, shared topical knowledge, while for context, international posture and cultural factors were identified as important variables influencing the participant's WTC, not included in the MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) concept.

Moreover, Aubrey (2010) investigated factors contributed to WTC as it manifested from moment-to-moment in a Japanese EFL classroom for three different sized class types: a one-on-one classroom, a small group classroom, and a large group classroom. A classroom observation scheme, participant interviews (including stimulated recall) and a questionnaire were adopted as methods. Inter-group analysis between class types revealed that class size was a very strong factor affecting WTC. A number of other factors were revealed in interviews: topic relevancy, group cohesiveness, anxiety, the perception of teacher participation, and level of activity difficulty. However, the influence of each factor was found to vary in significance depending on class size. These findings contributed to an understanding of WTC behaviour in different group sizes and point to future research that can be done in this field.

Cao (2014) revealed through observations, stimulated recall interviews and reflective journals that situational WTC in the classroom results from a combination of individual, contextual, and linguistic factors. Cao (2014) traced WTC among six EFL learners in English for academic purposes programme in New Zealand for 5 months. Analysis of the data suggests that WTC construct is best described as a dynamic situational variable rather than a trait disposition. This article argues that situational WTC in class results from the interdependence among individual characteristics, classroom environmental conditions, and linguistic factors.

These three strands of factors interdependently exert either facilitative or inhibitive effects on WTC in class at any point in time. The effect of the combinations of factors differs between individuals, and the interrelationship is too complex to be predicted.

Cao (2013) examines dynamism in students' situational WTC within an L2 classroom. This longitudinal study involved twelve EFL participants enrolled in English for Academic Purposes programme in New Zealand for five months. Based on the in-depth analysis of this case study that obtained from observations, stimulated-recalls and reflective journals reveal that learners' situational WTC in L2 classes could fluctuate and dynamically change over time. This involved a process where situational WTC was jointly affected by learners' cognitive condition and linguistic factors, together with classroom environmental factors. The in-depth qualitative analysis of a single case allowed the researchers to see the dynamic nature of WTC.

Taken as a whole, results from the described studies focused on situational variables have two common features. First, they approach the WTC concept from a situational point of view by using qualitative research method. Researchers have investigated how situational variables, such as social contextual variables, can influence WTC. Another similarity between these studies is that they support the pyramid model only partially while in qualitative studies on foreign students, other factors, such as emotional (excitement, responsibility, and security) (Kang, 2005), shared topical knowledge, and international posture (Compton, 2007) are important antecedents of the WTC that were not included in heuristic pyramid model. Besides, in response to MacIntyre's (2007) call for more qualitative studies on situated WTC, researchers have revealed a number of psychological and contextual influences on WTC emergent in classrooms and concluded that L2 WTC can be subject to change according to time and context (e.g., Cao, 2011, 2013, 2014; Peng 2012; Weaver, 2010; MacIntyre et al., 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Yashima, MacIntyre & Ikeda, 2016; Matsuoka, Matsumoto, Poole & Matsuoka, 2014; Zhong, 2013).

Therefore, this review suggests that the MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model is not comprehensive enough for L2 learners in the context of target language learning. However, although research has revealed the situated and dynamic nature of WTC, very few studies have combined both enduring and situated influences to describe why a person decides to initiate communication at a particular time and place (Yashima et al., 2016). Clearly, further research is required to describe the process whereby participants decide to initiate (or avoid) communication at a particular moment while taking into account the influence of more enduring learners' characteristics. Given the emphasis on communication in modern language pedagogy, it is important to know more about whether or not a person 'crosses the Rubicon', as represented by the line dividing L2 WTC and L2 use in the pyramid model. Moreover, based on Palwak's

(2015) recommendation, empirical investigations of fluctuations in WTC as learners' are engaged in various types of interactions and contexts are still rare and the knowledge concerning the factors shaping it is quite limited. In addition, most of these studies have been conducted within the classroom context, but other contexts in which learners could manifest other behaviours have been neglected.

4. Methods

The qualitative research methodology, case study approach was chosen because this study was related to a group of international PhD students from Iran studying in a public university in Malaysia. These students had gone through experiencing English oral communication in a new foreign context. According to the aim of this study which is exploratory in nature, a qualitative research methodology was the most suitable approach because it allowed the participants to openly explain their related perceptions and experiences that supported the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of their involvements (Creswell, 2013). 8 international PhD students from Iran who had learned English as a foreign language (EFL) were nominated by means of purposive snowball sampling from a public university in Malaysia.

The participants of the study were 8 international PhD students from Iran studying in different fields of study in this public university in Malaysia. For finding the most suitable participants, at first the researchers establish the criteria that direct the case selection, and choose a case which meets those criteria. Gender is a notable criterion which has been pointed out in Literature that female and male are not quite similar in terms of L2 communication, therefore the researchers made an attempt to employ the equal number of males and females from different disciplines. Secondly, participants from specific different disciplines (Engineering, Science, and Social Science,) were nominated as PhD students from these disciplines could have diverse thoughts, perceptions and behaviours relating willingness to communication in English language. Another criterion was that all the participants had to live in Malaysia at least for one year, and lastly they had to first learn English in Iran (as an EFL context) in which they had less exposure to English and their only English communication experiences were limited to English classrooms.

After forming these criteria, the researchers applied snowball sampling to recruit participants holding specific characteristics which are required in this study. The main criterion in selecting the number of sample size was the saturation or redundancy of the information received from the sample. As a result, 8 participants are saturated in this study when no new information emerged from the data collection. Figure 3 indicates the way of snowballing with anonymous names given to the participants.

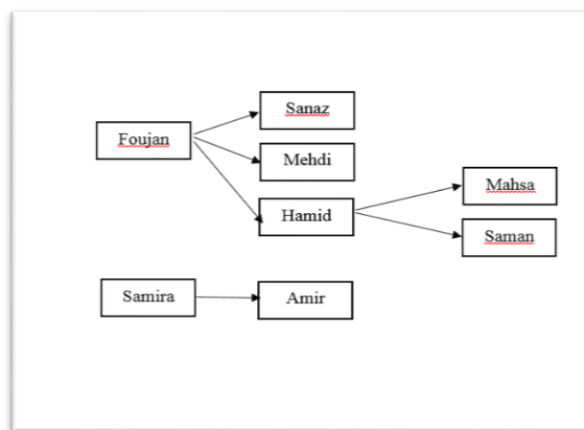


Figure 3. Snowball Sampling

In this study, different sources of information were utilised to answer the research question. The primary source of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussion and solicited diary of participants were the subsequent sources of data for this study. The rationale for using different sources of data was to triangulate the findings for finding a better perspective about the L2 WTC the participants. According to Silverman (2000), triangulation has an important role in qualitative research methodology since it enhances the validity and reliability of the results.

As mentioned before the main data collection method in the current study was individual interviewing, in particular, semi-structured interview guides. The concrete format of the interview guide consists of three sections, demographic, background questions, followed by open-ended questions. The open-ended questions are designed based on the research question of the study. Besides, the interview guide was reviewed by three experts to give stronger validity to the questions before conducting the actual interview. The interview lasted approximately for one hour for each participant and it was performed in English language.

The subordinate method in collecting data was the focus group interview. Focus group denotes to an interview on a topic with a group of participants who have the knowledge of that topic (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). According to the maximum variation sampling, participants were divided into two focus groups of 6 and 7 participants in order to manage each session efficiently. In these focus group events, overall, 13 individuals with quite similar criteria were included and participants were free to talk with other group members. As participants were actively encouraged to not only share their own opinions, but also replied to other members questions posed by the moderator, focus groups offered a nuance and variety to the discussion that would not be obtainable through individual interviews and solicited journal diaries. On the other hand, individual interviews and solicited journal diaries formed more in-depth data than focus groups, and brought more insight into a respondent's personal feelings, perceptions, and experiences.

Solicited diaries or keeping journals by the participants of the study considered as another supplementary method for data collection in order to triangulate from the primarily data of the interview. Solicited diaries have a different focus from that of unsolicited, personal diaries. They are created with the researcher in mind (Elliott, 1997). In this situation, the participant completes the diary reflecting on issues that are of interest to the researchers and with the knowledge that the diary will be read and interpreted by another person (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005).

The researchers provided notebooks and journal guidelines for the participants after all being interviewed and participated in the focus group discussions. The researchers collected the notebooks from the participants after 14 days. The average length of handwritten dairies was 18 pages. After examining the diaries, the researchers assigned a follow up session with each participant to clarify the information provided by them was accurate and they are based on their perceptions to avoid any confusion.

In current study, the researchers provided memos at different times during the research process. Writing memos was a way to show their thoughts and feelings in the process of implementing the study and supported them to be conscious about the emerging themes. Besides, the researchers wrote down their questions and interpretations that came up in their minds and the directions for the further data collection.

In this study, the data was analysed through manual analysis of qualitative data. After reading several times and getting familiar with the data, the researchers started processing the coding.

After finishing the coding process for the first transcript, the researcher built up themes by grouping of the produced codes which seem to match with each other. The researcher gave credit to the words that different participants often applied equally to state the same insights. These same repeating insights or ideas formed themes.

Moreover, particular theme labels were derived from the own words of the respondents and some others were derived from the relevant theories based on the researchers' interpretation which future was assessed and verified by supervisory committee as well as the panel of examiners. The creation of categories is increasingly inductive in nature at the beginning of Constant Comparative Method. While the researchers move through the analysis of data, they became more potent to "check out" these tentative themes with the following data sets. When the researchers reached to the saturation point, they were pondering in a more deductive way rather than inductive (Merriam, 2009). In the theoretical triangulation, the researchers have been referred to different theories and models to justify the data such as heuristic model of L2 WTC by (MacIntyre et al., 1998) and the model of situational L2 WTC by Kang (2005). Consequently, triangulation is utilised through this study to provide different sources of information to converge the interpretation of data.

Last but not least, the trustworthiness of this study was guaranteed by triangulation, peer examination member check, the documentation of audit trail and researcher's position or reflexivity. The researchers of this study used different methods for data collection, including individual interview, focus group discussion and solicited Journal diaries, so the collected data was cross-checked and compared from diverse angles.

5. Findings

This section presented the findings derived from the research question of this study revealing the perceived factors influence on the situational L2 WTC of the participants in the Malaysian context. Situational L2 WTC refers to a temporary willingness of the respondents to communicate orally in English at a particular place and with a particular receiver. Examination of the data identified two interrelated themes as the factors influencing situational L2 WTC as (1) interactional factors and (2) affective factors. The sub-themes of each theme have been stated as follows and the most repeated response from each sub-theme has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicates the main themes and sub-themes derived from the objective of the study

First Main Theme	Second Main Theme
Interactional Factors	Affective Factors
Sub-themes	Sub-themes
1.1. Topic of the discussion 1.1.1. Familiarity with topics 1.1.2. Important topics 1.1.3. Interesting/boring Topics 1.2. Type of Interlocutors 1.2.1. Prefer familiar interlocutors 1.2.2. Reluctant toward strangers 1.2.3. More knowledgeable 1.3. Size of the group discussion 1.3.1. Prefer duet/smaller 1.3.2. Reluctant to bigger size 1.4. Formality of the setting 1.4.1. Reluctant to formal setting 1.4.2. Reluctant to evaluative setting 1.4.3. Prefer friendly setting	1.1. State L2 Self-confidence 1.1.1. level of the knowledge of the interlocutors 1.1.2. Familiarity/unfamiliarity with topic 1.1.3. Formal/evaluative setting 1.1.4. Evaluative setting 1.1.5. Previous experiences on L2 OC 1.1.6. Group size 1.2. State L2 Anxiety 1.2.1. Unpleasant prior experience with the interlocutor(s) 1.2.2. Big group size of strangers 1.2.3. More knowledgeable in big group size 1.2.4. Unfamiliar with the topic 1.2.5. Not prepared enough for the discussion 1.2.6. Evaluate and formal setting 1.3. Mood 1.3.1. Tiredness 1.3.2. Irritation 1.3.3. Sadness

5.1 Interactional Factors

In this study, one of the major themes emerged from the interview, repeated in focus group discussion, and solicited diaries from the respondents were interactional factors influencing on respondents' situational L2 WTC. Interactional factors refer to the particular conditions that had perceived by the respondents that have the effect on the situational L2 WTC among the respondents. The interactional factors emerged from this study were (1) topic of the

discussion; (2) type of the interlocutors; (3) the size of the group discussion; and (4) formality of the setting.

5.1.1. Topic of the Discussion

The topic of the discussion is one of the categories that has emerged from all sources of findings. Most of the respondents mentioned that important, familiar, and interesting topics were the reasons why they prefer to engage in L2 oral communication.

All respondents asserted that the importance of the topic of discussion was quite important for them and they could have the highest L2 WTC when the topic is important. Mahsa who worked every day at Laboratory said:

“My experiment is on foods’ microbes which require very precise attention under the sanitized environment. Therefore, I must communicate with other lab mates every day certainly and let them know that they should not touch my samples or they have to keep the room sanitized. Besides that, I must learn how to work and do the experiments not only from my supervisor but also from other lab mates. This is necessary and I must communicate, otherwise, everything will go wrong.”

Amir was from the Economy field of study has recently become a part-time lecturer in a college, he said:

“My job mandates me to communicate with my colleagues to obtain more information from them as they are more knowledgeable than me and have more experience. I need to discuss with them how to lecture in an efficient way.”

Familiarity with the topic is important for the respondents. Participants from different disciplines and field of studies pointed out that they preferred to establish or engage in L2 oral communication about the topic that closes to their field of study. For example, Hamid and Saman who were from Science background in the field of Chemistry said that they could have higher L2 WTC when the topic of discussion was about Science. Amir mentioned: “When a discussion is about something unfamiliar to me, like Science or Politic, I stay silent because I have no knowledge about these areas.”

Those respondents from the discipline of Social Science, Samira and Amir, mentioned that they had more inclination into conversing in topics related to Humanities. The main reason that they mentioned in their interview, diaries, as well as focus group discussion was that they were more familiar with the topics about their field of study or their discipline, so that they had more confidence to get into communication and discuss the topic.

The interesting topics have also been mentioned by many participants as the reasons they get into a conversation. All male respondents mentioned that they had not liked to participate in conversations that the topic was not interesting for them because they easily got bored. However, females like Mahsa and Samira mentioned that they rarely might find a topic boring. Mahsa wrote: “It is fine for me. I continue if I

find the topic boring. Anyway, on a boring topic, I can also find something interesting or I learn something new.”

In focus group discussions also, males mentioned that they had very low patience on boring topics and they preferred to pay attention to something else. On the other hand, female respondents mentioned that they had not decreased their situational L2 WTC in boring topics.

In sum, all participants highlighted in all sources of data that the topic of discussion is important for their L2 oral communication production. Important, familiar and interesting topics were the most repeated reasons that they declared about engaging in an L2 conversation regardless of other influential aspects.

5.1.2. Type of Interlocutors

Another sub-theme that has the influence on the situational L2 WTC of the respondents is the type of interlocutors that they intended to communicate. Most of the responses obtained from the participants highlighted that they preferred familiar interlocutors, reluctant with strangers and people that are more knowledgeable.

Most of the participants mentioned that they had more L2 WTC with their friends than with acquaintances (e.g., lab-mates or supervisor) and the least situational L2 WTC with strangers. They mentioned that they had less security and did not know how the strangers might react/respond to them.

The findings also indicated that some of the participants were not willing to communicate with people that were more knowledgeable than them because they mentioned that they did not have enough confidence to discuss with them and most of the time they got anxiety. However, this reason is also in conjunction with other influences like the settings and the group size. The level of L2 WTC fluctuates according to these interactional patterns. On the other hand, some other participants like Amir or Foujan mentioned that they liked to communicate with more knowledgeable people because they could learn something from them and it gave them more sense of confidence.

Overall, same findings also repeated in diaries and focus group discussion that the participants of the study paid attention to the familiarity with the interlocutors and they preferred to communicate with familiar people like friends and avoid strangers due to uncertainty about their responses and reactions.

5.1.3. Size of the Group Discussion

Another factor that affected situational L2 WTC of the respondents based on their perception is the group size that they intended to communicate. All of the participants mentioned that they preferred to communicate in small or duet group size and they were not much ready to communicate in bigger group size.

Most of the participants declared their unwillingness toward bigger group size, due to having less opportunity to

express themselves or communicate, thus, they preferred small or duet group size. Through focus group discussion, some of the participants mentioned that as the group of interaction became bigger, their willingness to communicate in L2 decreased because they got less confidence to express and articulate their message with more interlocutors; therefore, they preferred to stay silent in bigger group size. However, some of the participants like Sanaz mentioned that:

“For me, it does not matter how big the group is. Because for many years, I was lecturing in a university and I have the experience to give lecture and speech for a long time in Persian, so I do not have that much anxiety.”

On the other hand, Samira who is from Social Science discipline, lived in Malaysia more than Sanaz, and participated in private English classes in Iran stated that she usually got panic when she wanted to give a presentation or speech in a big group size. She wrote: “My problem is not about the English language, but I have the same problem in the Persian language. And whenever I want to give a presentation, I will get nervous and I do not want to do that at all.”

As the researcher probed more about the reason, she mentioned that she had not known the reason and she had this problem since she was in elementary school and her mother had the same condition as hers. As her behavior had been observed during the interview and focus group sessions, she was more relaxed during the interview which was the duet group discussion. However, at the beginning of the focus group discussion although she was smiling, she was quiet and reluctant to talk, however after few minutes when the members of the group discussion knew each other and the environment became friendlier, she started to speak and felt more relaxed.

Overall, most of the participants preferred to communicate in duet group and as the group became bigger, their confidence and anxiety became higher and led to lower L2 WTC or less readiness to communicate orally in L2.

5.1.4. Formality of the Setting

From the findings of the data gathered from the perception of the participants, setting has the important role in conjunction with other mentioned factors in fluctuating the level of situational L2 WTC among the participants. In this study, formality, evaluative and friendly settings have been emerged from the data.

Respondents mentioned that the formality of the environment led them to have less confidence or higher anxiety to communicate orally in English. The formality of the setting, as well as other emerged interactional factors could effect in conjunction with each other to have an influence on the respondents L2 WTC. For instance, most of the respondents declared that in a formal setting where the interlocutors are strangers or more knowledgeable, their willingness to communicate decreased.

The evaluative setting has the same effect on the participants and they stated that this type of setting could make them less confident with higher anxiety since the participants were not sure about the evaluation or judgment of the interlocutors. Size of the group, and types of interlocutors as mentioned before influenced on their level of L2 WTC. At last, participants all preferred a friendly environment where they knew interlocutors or feel secure about the responses or reaction of the interlocutors. In this type of setting, they pointed out that they had higher willingness to communicate.

In sum, participants declared that they have a higher tendency toward the friendly environment where they could express themselves without the fear of being judged and had least willing to communicate in an evaluative setting where they were not sure about the interlocutors' responses and they felt less secure in losing their face. The formal setting also could have anxiety for the responses, as they were not able to show the best performance of their L2 oral communication and fear of losing face.

5.2. Affective Factors

Another major theme emerged from the data was the influence of the affective or emotional states on the situational L2 WTC of the respondents. The sub-themes gathered from the respondents' perceptions regarding their emotional or affection when they engaged in an L2 oral communication. According to their perceptions, the following sub-themes were the reasons which could change their situational L2 WTC in conjunction with other interactional factors. The description of each sub-themes mentioned as follows.

5.2.1 State L2 Self-Confidence

State self-confidence refers to the temporary level of the confidence of respondents regarding their L2 oral communication when they have situated in a particular situation for engaging in communication. Respondents mentioned that some issues changed their state L2 self-confidence. These reasons were level of the knowledge of the interlocutor's familiarity or unfamiliarity with the topic, formality or evaluative settings, evaluative setting, and group size.

Regarding the level of the knowledge of the interlocutors, most of the participants stated that they might feel less confident at the moment they intended to engage in a communication. For instance, Hamid who had lived in Malaysia for more than 8 years and had exposure to English due to working in the laboratory with his lab-mates remembered:

“I am a person with enough self-confidence to speak English, because I am in Malaysia for many years, attended different English classes and everyday tried my best to learn something new about English. All these things gave me

confidence more. Besides, I interact with my lab mates in the lab very much or every week we have a meeting with them and my supervisor and other professors in my field. I conduct my presentations or get into a discussion with them easily with no problem. However, one time, I participated in a conference which I knew there were many professors or doctors who were much knowledgeable than me. I lost my self-confidence and I was anxious during my presentation, thinking they might tell me that I was doing a wrong presentation and my work had no worth even I was sure what I was doing on my research.”

Familiarity with the topic of discussion was another reason that respondents mentioned that could fluctuate their state L2 confidence. Most of them stated that if the topic was strange and complex for them, they might not know its related vocabularies in English or they did not know how to express their meanings to them, so they might lose their self-confidence. Majority of the participants stated that they might feel less confident in formal and evaluative setting and big group size. These issues already mentioned in previous sections.

State self-confidence was among the sub-themes also emerged from the diaries, focus group discussions of the participants. According to the participants, formality or evaluative settings, knowledge of the interlocutors, group size, and familiarity with the topic of discussion were the reasons that could change their willingness to communicate orally in English.

5.2.2 State L2 Anxiety

State anxiety is another sub-theme regarding the affective factors emerged from the data. Most of the respondents emphasized that their anxiety about L2 speaking is not constant and fluctuate due to unpleasant prior experience with the interlocutor(s), the big group size of strangers, more knowledgeable people in big group size, unfamiliar with the topic, not prepared enough for the discussion, and evaluate or formal setting.

Most of the respondents declared that having an unpleasant experience with interlocutors such as being criticized, ridiculed, and discouraged could enhance their anxiety when they had to encounter again with those interlocutors. For instance, Samira stated that she became more stressful to communicate with those who made fun of her mistakes in English because she believed that they might ridicule her again. Other participants like Amir also mentioned that he did not like to be criticized sternly by others and if it happened, he would stop communicating with those people. He wrote in his diary, “these types of people make me nervous and I try to get away from them unless I had to communicate with them for a purpose. This is same as using my first language too.”

All participants agreed that they become stressful when they have to communicate in a big group size of strange people. Mostly they mentioned that more than 4 people made

them stressful and as the size of the group became bigger, their stress got higher. They mentioned that they would feel less secure among those who were not familiar with them, as they did not know their reactions, thinking or responses to them. They also had the same situation when they were in a big group of more knowledgeable people as they believed that among them, they had less confidence and they might be worried about their judgments.

5.2.3 Mood

Mood in this study refers to the temporary psychological state of mind that the respondents might feel due to pleasant or unpleasant, internal or external experiences they had before. Respondents highlighted that negative mood could decrease their situational willingness to communicate in English temporarily. They defined their negative moods, as being temporary tired, irritated, or sad due to any prior unpleasant experiences.

Most of the participants mentioned that if they wanted to have efficient oral communication in L2, they had to be in a good mood, meaning that if they felt tired, irritated, or sad due to any previous unpleasant experiences, their willingness to communicate orally got lower and they were not able to have a successful communication. Saman, Amir, and Hamid mentioned that they usually stayed silent or tried to stop the communication if they were not in a good mood. Amir defined his mood as being tired or had some tough or complex day which made him exhausted to have any willingness or readiness to make an oral communication in L2 if it was not obligatory. On the other hand, Hamid said:

“For me, not being in the mood is when I have many problems and I have to solve them or I cannot find any solutions for them, or when I had a quarrel with someone, or when I do not like the person I want to talk with.”

For others, bad mood defined as being sad that day due to having any prior unpleasant experiences. Mahsa said: “For me, it doesn’t matter if I want to communicate in Persian or English. When I am sad I prefer not to talk, but if I have to then I have no choice.” Besides, Samira stated: “Some days I prefer not to talk and stay silent. I don’t know why.”

In Sum, the findings gathered from the interview, repeated in focus group discussions and solicited diaries indicate that being in negative moods, which defined differently by the respondents could decrease their situational L2 WTC.

6. Discussion

Based on the data gathered from the research question of the study, it emerged that the L2 WTC of the EFL Iranian PhD students in Malaysia in this study fluctuates according to the interplay of particular interactional and affective factors. This type of L2 WTC which is not constant in different circumstances is called “situational L2 WTC” in literature.

Situational L2 WTC is a new concept in L2 WTC and has not extensively studied. Therefore, this study brings a new knowledge about the influential factors on situational L2 WTC of EFL Iranian PhD students in a Malaysian university.

This new perspective was also mentioned in MacIntyre et al. (1998) in which L2 WTC was defined as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (p. 547). According to their heuristic model, WTC is influenced by immediate situational antecedents—the desire to communicate with a specific person and the state of communicative self-confidence. Situational WTC, on the other hand, influences the decision to initiate a communication (Cao and Philp, 2006; MacIntyre et al., 1999).

From the first theme which is interactional factors, four sub-themes have emerged based on the data gathered for the research question as (1) topic of the discussion, (2) types of the interlocutors, (3) size of group discussion and (4) formality of the setting. For having the influence on state L2 WTC, these factors are interrelated with other theme found in this study as the affective factors. From the emotional factors, (1) state self-confidence, (2) state L2 anxiety and (3) mood has emerged as the sub-themes. These factors are all interrelated and work together to shape the level of state L2 WTC in the respondents. This is concurrent with the result of Cao (2011) which found that situational L2 WTC of the international students in the classroom from a University in New Zealand is the joint effects of individual characteristics including self-confidence, personality, emotion and perceived opportunity to communicate, classroom environmental conditions such as topic, task, interlocutor, teacher and group size, together with linguistic factors.

This finding is also concurrent with Kang (2005) study. Kang (2005) noted that an individual’s willingness to talk was affected by variables such as interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context. Kang (2005) proposed that knowledge of the topic under discussion can enormously contribute to situational WTC in the second language. Kang reported that students felt anxious when talking about a subject for which they had the least topical knowledge. In Kang’s (2005) study, students tended to be more anxious while speaking about an unfamiliar topic because of a lack of ideas, not being able to understand specialized vocabulary, and comprehension problems.

Past research also reports that the size of the group influences learners’ WTC (Kang 2005; Cao and Philip 2006). The results show that students tended to feel more competent speaking English in dyads than in larger groups of people and with friends than with acquaintances or strangers. Regarding communication apprehension, students tended to feel least apprehensive in dyadic communication, while most apprehensive in group discussions and public speaking. These communication tendencies were also found in previous studies (Cetinkaya, 2005; Brogan, Jowi, McCroskey & Wrench, 2008).

As shown in other studies (Cao and Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; Liu, 2005), the interlocutor was reported to be a major factor affecting students’ WTC. In this study, the respondents preferred to talk to interlocutors who were more talkative and outgoing than them. It was found less interesting to talk in English with interlocutors from the same country. Kang (2005) reported that the Korean participants regarded Koreans as the least preferable conversation partners, who would most decrease their interest and motivation to talk.

State L2 self-confidence as an important affective factor which emerged in the data had an essential effect on the situational L2 WTC of the respondents. This is concurrent with what MacIntyre et al. (1998) point out, self-confidence in a second language operates at dual levels, which is the overall belief in being able to communicate in an efficient manner, and state self-confidence, which fluctuates and tends to be reduced or enhanced at particular moments. The respondents situational L2 WTC in the present study appeared to be affected by their state self-confidence, which could be enhanced by increasing familiarity with interlocutors, topic, and small group size and also informal and friendly environment rather than formal and evaluative one. This also found in Cao’s (2011) study related to the influence of ecological factor in students’ state L2 self-confidence in the classroom.

Mood as state affective factor has been found to influence on the state L2 WTC of the respondents. The respondents mentioned that factors like tiredness, having a complicated day and previous emotional state could change their mood. Having a positive mood supported them to have more L2 WTC; on the other hand, being in bad mood reduces their state L2 WTC. Research on emotion like (Cao, 2011) suggests that learners’ emotions impact on the quality of student’s learning and student emotions have a substantial effect on the quality of classroom communication. Students experience a full range of diverse emotions in instructional settings.

Apart from negative emotions such as anxiety that has been widely reported, positive emotions are mentioned as frequently (Goetz, Pekrun, Hall & Haag, 2006; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). In the present study, a range of emotions was also noted by the students as factors influencing their WTC participation in class, including negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, frustration, embarrassment and anger, and positive emotions such as enjoyment and satisfaction.

In summary, different studies found that apart from trait-like L2 WTC, there is a state or situational L2 WTC which fluctuate according to the interplay of different temporary factors. In this study, it was found that interactional factors in conjunction with affective factors impacted the situational L2 WTC of the EFL Iranian PhD students in Malaysia. These findings have been mentioned and scrutinize already in the past literature. However, the notion of situation L2 WTC is new and requires more studies to find other influential factors.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the research question concluded that the respondents of the study had fluctuation in their situational willingness to communicate in English somehow like other researchers and studies have been demonstrated among other individuals. This fluctuation is caused by the two interrelated themes which have been found in this study as interactional and affective factors impacting on the amount of L2 WTC of the respondents.

It has been concluded that EFL Iranian PhD students could change their amount of willingness to communicate orally in English at a particular circumstance due to the topic of discussion, types of interlocutors, size of the group discussion and the formality of the setting. However, these factors are also interrelated to their temporary affective factors, as their state self-confidence in English, temporary anxiety in engaging or establishing an oral communication or their negative moods like tiredness or irritation.

However, the topic of the discussion and state L2 confidence have been found as the most important factors on EFL Iranian PhD students' situational L2 WTC. Familiarity with the topic brings more confidence for the respondents and lowered their anxiety; on the other hand, unfamiliarity with the topic could be combined with the low knowledge of vocabularies in English about the topic, lowering their L2 self-confidence. Besides, the purpose of the topic is essential for the respondents to establish or engage in a communication, resulting in higher situational L2 WTC due to the importance of the topic because respondents persuade themselves to engage in it.

From a theoretical viewpoint, this study has certainly provided evidence on the heuristic model of L2 WTC (McIntyre et al., 1998), and situational model of L2 WTC by Kang (2005). The main contribution of this study was providing knowledge on the MacIntyre's (2007) call for more studies on situational WTC. This study also demonstrated the influence of interactional and temporary affective factors on the fluctuation in L2 willingness to communicate which was not mentioned in the Literature adequately.

Regarding the practical implications, the result of this study can contribute to the L2 learners' situational WTC in English classes. To increase situational L2 WTC, topics in which L2 learners are interested, about which they have background knowledge, with which they have experience, and what can improve their personal or intergroup motivations are required to be provided in the class. L2

learners' enthusiasm can decrease if they talk about the same topic repeatedly, thus different topics should be discussed both within a lesson and across lessons to make L2 learners' situational WTC. Brainstorming, taking a survey, and letting L2 learners bring in topics are noble methods to identify both the most commonly occurring interests and shared background knowledge of the entire class, and those of individual L2 learners. At this point, arranging the discussion group according to their own chosen topics, supplying different topic preferences among L2 learners, is the best technique to create situational WTC.

Determinations to generate a safe environment, in which students will not feel anxious about making mistakes or making errors, should be made, by listening to them carefully, smiling and giving some active responses. These efforts should be made especially in the beginning, especially for those learners who have the fear of losing face. Besides, it is a good idea that teachers bring different nationalities together in order to make them more familiar with each other and reduce the in-group consistency among the students which can reduce their exposure and willingness to communicate in English. In addition, reducing the number of students in a group can contribute to generating situational WTC by increasing responsibility and security. Essentially, because when more facilitating factors are given, a greater degree of WTC can be made.

The findings of this study have contributed to the understanding and knowledge of situational willingness to communicate in L2 among EFL Iranian PhD students in a public university in Malaysia. There is still a need to conduct further research on this area to improve understanding and benefits of increasing situational L2 willingness to communicate among EFL international students who are in demands of knowing L2 oral communication skills. Further research could confirm further test for the heuristic model of L2 WTC and situational model of L2 WTC by Kang (2005) and provide modifications and refinements for diverse settings. For instance, it would be helpful to conduct similar studies on other EFL PhD students from other nationalities and compare their experience and their L2 WTC changes with this study. Moreover, it could be conducted in another universities, cities or countries and compared with this study. Besides, the future studies could collect data for investigating L2 WTC through applying different data collection methods, like observation, stimulated recalls and so on or attempts to apply other methods in qualitative paradigm to explore L2 WTC and compare their outcomes with this study.

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