

INVESTIGATING PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) CHILDREN'S UNWILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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The Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) to promote student communication in English during English lessons. However, implementing the programme is a challenge for teachers, particularly in rural primary schools in which English is a foreign language to the students, despite its status as a second language in Malaysia. Hence, this preliminary study aims to identify issues that hinder students from speaking in English, including those already competent in the language. A survey involving 30 students of different ethnic groups was conducted in a rural school in Sarawak. The findings show that anxiety and lack of confidence to use the language have made them unwilling to communicate in English in the classroom. This implies that teachers should find means or strategies to help students overcome anxiety and lack of confidence.

Keyword: Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Anxiety, Communication, English as A Second Language (ESL).

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) as an effort to promote students to communicate in English. This is because students have been found to be unwilling to communicate in English, even in the language classroom. Hence, this paper aims to present and discuss the findings of a study conducted to understand why primary school ESL children are unwilling to communicate in English language classrooms. The subsequent sections consist of the background of the study, a brief literature review, methodological concerns of the study, and a discussion of the findings.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The English language is a compulsory subject at all National or National-type Schools in Malaysia; both at primary and secondary school levels (Foo and Richards, 2004). It is also a compulsory subject assessed in national examinations, including the National Primary School Examination (*UPSR*), National Lower Secondary Examination (*PMR*), and the National Upper Secondary Examination (*SPM*). These examinations focus on written language, including reading skills, with grades given to indicate students' level of proficiency. Meanwhile, the listening and speaking skills are only tested at school level and given either a pass or fail status. This little

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attention implies the insignificant 'value' given to the listening and speaking skills. As a result, the importance of listening and speaking is not acknowledged and not given attention by the students.

Nevertheless, the current language policy that is the Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (*MBMMBI*) is promoting the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) to provide immersive English learning at school and encourage active participation in English learning among the students. Under this programme, English teachers are expected to create a fun and non-threatening environment to enable students to communicate in the language. In addition, HIP also aims to inculcate creative and critical learning environment (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Burgoon (1976, p.60) defined WTC as

“chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication and to view the communication situation as relatively unrewarding”.

He further elaborated the factors that may cause unwillingness to communicate. The first is caused by an individuals' anxiety and fears about interpersonal communication and participation; and the second is caused by his or her perception on their friends and family's appreciation of their conversation and opinions. Clement (1980, cited in MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998) reflected these as constructs of self-confidence that are students' awareness of their competence and students' lack of anxiety.

MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement and Noels (1998) further stated that WTC maybe demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal communicative events. Responding to questions is an example of verbal WTC, while hand-raising in order to answer questions is an example of non-verbal. Both examples show that students are willing to engage in a conversation using the targeted language. WTC in the students' first language is a fairly stable personality trait and maybe developed over the years. However, in second/foreign/another or other language (L2/FL/AL or OL) contexts, WTC is a problem, as it depends on students' language proficiency and communicative competence (Dornyei, 2003). Meanwhile, Hashimoto (2002) believed that the main cause of WTC is perceived competence which may lead to more L2 use or less use due to anxiety in using L2. In addition, Hue (2010) and Riasati and Noordin (2011) have argued that difficulty of the given tasks also hinders students from speaking in the L2. Similarly, Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) found in their study that anxiety forms when non-native speakers feel worried of making mistakes and being evaluated by peers and teachers in the classrooms. Nazari and Allahyar (2012) further added that teachers' behaviour also contributes to unwillingness to communicate, as teacher-centred behaviour limits the opportunity for students to interact in the targeted language.

Interestingly, these factors differ according to the context, which include the students' background, culture, religion, and surroundings. Teachers need to understand the factors that contribute to the problem in their own context. In order to increase WTC, MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) proposed the importance of opportunity, as the intention to speak must be in line with the opportunity in order to produce the behaviour. Harmer (2000) suggested reducing teachers' talk time and thus providing more time for students to talk. However, Nazari and Allahyar (2012) argued that even though there are opportunities for students to talk, only students who are more proficient will volunteer and dominate the classroom conversation. Hence, they further elaborated on the quantity and quality of the teacher's verbal behaviour. Perhaps MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Conrod's (2001) earlier suggestion that students might be more willing to speak in the targeted language in a more controlled environment, with a small and familiar audience, would increase WTC.

In terms of activities to increase WTC, Kagan (1995), Riasati and Noordin (2011) and Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) suggested teachers to use pair or group work activities in order to decrease students' anxiety. In small group, students will adjust themselves to the comprehensible level so that the group members could receive the input (Kagan 1995). This is because students who perceive social support from their close friends tend to show high significance of WTC (MacIntyre *et al.* 2001). Furthermore, students tend to pair up with partners of the same level of proficiency, so that they are not afraid or embarrassed of making mistakes (Riasati and Noordin 2011).

4. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Studies have shown that students may be competent in writing but unable to communicate in the target language (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998; Dornyei, 2003; Nawshin, 2009). In the Malaysian context, being unable to communicate in English has been identified as one of the reasons for unemployment among Malaysian graduates (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 2012). This implies that the HIP may face challenges in its implementation. It would therefore be helpful to explore and identify why students are unwilling to communicate in English to ensure that the HIP achieves its objectives.

5. THE STUDY

This preliminary study aimed to investigate the reasons of rural primary students' unwillingness to communicate in English. More specifically, it attempted to answer the research question—What are the reasons for rural primary students' unwillingness to communicate in English? Hence, a quantitative survey was employed in this study. A set of questionnaire was distributed to 30 students aged from ten to twelve years old from one primary school in Limbang, Sarawak. The students were from

the Bisaya, Iban, Murut, Lun Bawang and Penan ethnic groups. The students were purposively selected based on their performance of above 60% in the English mid-year examination. The 60% benchmark is an indicator that the students are average or above average proficiency level. The questionnaire items were adapted from Burgoon (1976) and Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) studies. Since this was only a preliminary study, a two-point scale (agree or disagree) was employed to measure the students' reasons for WTC. The questionnaire is divided into four categories in which were Anxiety to Speak Up (ATSU), Low Self-Confidence (LSC), Lack of Reliability on the Listeners (LRL), and Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated ($r = 0.70$) and showed that the questionnaire was reliable. The collected data was analysed by using descriptive statistics and calculated in term of percentages.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 1 to 4 show the factors that affect students' WTC by items. Table 1 represents ATSU during English lesson. 63.3% the participants indicated that they feel nervous during English lessons and that this affects their memory. Additionally, a majority of the participants (56.7%) agreed that they are afraid to speak in English, nervous to take part in conversation, and feel anxious even when well prepared for the lesson. However, most of the participants (66.7%) also disagree to the statement that they are afraid to express themselves in group and a high percentage of participants (70%) indicated that they do not avoid group discussion during English lesson.

The finding showed that majority of the students are afraid to communicate in English during English lesson. However, more than 60% of the students mentioned that they are more comfortable and willing to use English in a smaller group. This is consistent with suggestion by Kagan (1995), Riasati and Noordin (2011) and Yamat and Bidabadi (2012) that teachers may use pair and group work activities during the lesson to decrease students' level of anxiety.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCIES (%) ANXIETY TO SPEAK UP IN ENGLISH ITEMS

<i>No.</i>	<i>During English lesson,</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Disagree (%)</i>
1.	I'm afraid to speak up in conversations in English.	56.7	43.3
2.	I feel nervous when I have to speak to others in English.	56.7	43.3
3.	I am afraid to express myself in English in a group.	33.3	66.7
4.	I avoid group discussion.	30	70
5.	I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	63.3	36.7
6.	I feel anxious even if I am well prepared for the class.	56.7	43.3

Table 2 displays frequencies of low self-confidence. 73.3% of the participants agreed that they are not confident with their own proficiency in English. Also, a

majority of the participants (56.7%) indicated that they prefer to listen than talk and 46.7% of them agreed that they talk less because they are shy. In contrast, more than 60% of the participants stated that they do not feel awkward to speak in front of their friends and do feel comfortable to speak in English.

The participants in this study showed mixed responses on their level of self-confidence to communicate in English. This situation may occur due to contrasting factors between their desire to speak and their perceptions of their own language ability. This is consistent with a study by Clement (1980) which found that students' awareness of their language competency may affect their WTC during language lesson.

TABLE 2: FREQUENCIES (%) OF LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE

No.	<i>During English lesson,</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Disagree (%)</i>
1.	I talk less because I am shy.	46.7	53.3
2.	I prefer to listen rather than talk.	56.7	43.3
3.	I feel awkward speaking in English in front of my friends.	33.3	66.7
4.	I am not comfortable when I need to speak in English.	40	60
5.	I do not feel confident about my own proficiency.	73.3	26.7

A majority of the participants in this study indicated that they have lack of reliability on the listeners (refer Table 3). A high percentage (70%) of participants agreed that they think their friends will laugh at their speaking mistakes. Apart of that, 60% of the participants indicated that they never share their feelings with their friends and they think their friends do not listen to their ideas and suggestions. Besides that, 56.7% of the participants also think that their friends will make joke of them when they try to speak in English.

The scores in Table 3 shows that more than half of the students have lack of reliability on the listeners. This finding is consistent with Burgoon's (1976) statement regarding reward-factor dimension, in which students' perception on friends and family's appreciation regarding their conversation and opinions affect their WTC in the target language.

TABLE 3: FREQUENCIES (%) OF LACK OF RELIABILITY ON THE LISTENERS

No.	<i>During English lesson,</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Disagree (%)</i>
1.	I think my friends do not listen to my ideas and suggestions.	56.7	43.3
2.	I never share my feeling with my friends.	60	40
3.	I think my friends will make jokes about me when I try to speak in English.	56.7	43.3
4.	I think my friends will laugh at my mistakes.	70	30

Table 4 displays the frequencies of reasons for participants' fear of negative evaluation. Most participants in this study (80%) agreed that they believe that

other students are better in English and have better speaking skills. In addition, 53.3% agreed that they feel shy to voluntarily answer questions posted by their English teachers. However, only 43.3% of the participants agreed that they are afraid that the other students will laugh at them when they speak in English and that the teacher will correct their mistakes in front of their friends. The results from table 4 are correlated with Yamat and Bidabadi's (2012) findings, as they found that unwillingness to communicate happens when non-native speakers feel worried about making mistakes and being evaluated by peers and teachers in the classrooms.

TABLE 4: FREQUENCIES (%) OF FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION

<i>No.</i>	<i>During English lesson,</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Disagree (%)</i>
1.	I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am.	80	20
2.	I am shy to volunteer answers when my teacher ask questions.	53.3	46.7
3.	I feel that other students speak English better than I do.	80	20
4.	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak in English.	43.3	56.7
5.	I am afraid the teacher will correct my mistakes in front of my friends.	43.3	56.7
6.	I am worried my friends will spot my mistakes.	63.3	36.7

7. CONCLUSION

The findings show that a majority of students are not confident in their own ability to speak in English. They have limited opportunities to practise the language, as English is not widely used in their environment. In addition, they are often distracted by the fear of evaluation by both teachers and friends when encouraged to speak in English. These perspective and inner thoughts contribute to student unwillingness to communicate in the language. Thus, measures should be taken to overcome a lack of confidence or address factors that may contribute to anxiety in communicating in the target language. This implies that teachers play a vital role in promoting English communication in the classroom by increasing students' motivation and reducing their anxiety. This has further implications in terms of teacher training, curriculum content and assessment development. Teacher training should provide pedagogical creativity, while curriculum development should include a variety and flexibility of content. Additionally, assessment of communication skills should be given due attention.

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