

Exploring Students' Willingness to Communicate in English through Digital Platforms

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Abstract: The use of digital platforms in English language learning has transformed the way students communicate and participate in classroom discussions. This study explores students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English through digital platforms in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This study employs a qualitative approach, using narrative inquiry, to understand students' real-life experiences of communicating in English within a digital learning environment. The participants in this study were three graduate students from the Master's Program in English Language Education at an Islamic Higher Education institution in Banjarmasin who had used digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp for English-language learning activities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using narrative analysis. The findings of this study reveal five cross-cutting themes: (1) high competence but low willingness to communicate, (2) platform-specific variations in WTC, (3) perfectionism as an internal barrier, (4) camera anxiety as a digital contextual factor, and (5) small successes as turning points. This study offers pedagogical insights for English language instruction in digital contexts, emphasizing the role of a supportive classroom culture in fostering WTC.

Keywords: Willingness to Communicate; Digital Platforms; EFL; Narrative Inquiry; Postgraduate Students

INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of digital platforms into English-language education has fundamentally transformed how students communicate in the classroom. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp have become common tools for delivering learning materials, especially since the rise of blended and online learning in higher education (Ariani & Tawali, 2021). Although these platforms offer flexibility and ensure continuity of learning, they also introduce new dynamics that affect students' psychological readiness to speak, a concept widely known in second language acquisition as Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (McIntyre et al., 1998).

WTC refers to a learner's readiness to engage in conversation using the target language at a given time, with the freedom to choose whether to speak or remain silent (MacIntyre et al., 1998). MacIntyre (1998) proposed a situational model explaining that WTC in a second language is not a fixed trait; rather, it varies with situational variables, including the communicative context, the conversation partner, and perceived self-confidence. Digital learning environments introduce a range of distinct situational variables such as camera

angle, the absence of direct physical presence, and platform-specific features (e.g., mute mode, chat, breakout rooms) that can increase or decrease learners' anxiety and, consequently, their willingness to speak.

Empirical findings regarding the relationship between the digital environment and WTC remain mixed. Research has shown that digital communication activities positively impact the WTC of EFL learners, particularly in speaking and writing (Zhou, 2023). Similarly, the use of social media in the flipped classroom approach has been shown to increase students' motivation to communicate in a foreign language (Fan, 2022). Meanwhile, other research indicates that synchronous video conferencing can exacerbate feelings of shyness and communication anxiety, particularly when cameras are turned on (Ngien & Hogan, 2022). This tension between digital platforms as sources of comfort and increased anxiety has not yet been sufficiently explored, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning at the graduate level.

Most existing research on WTC to date has focused on undergraduate students or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in general, often assuming that higher language proficiency is associated with a greater willingness to communicate. However, this assumption does not always hold. Even advanced learners may hesitate or be reluctant to speak in digital learning contexts, raising questions about which factors beyond linguistic competence influence their communicative choices. WTC is situational (MacIntyre et al., 1998), meaning that even highly proficient speakers may choose to remain silent rather than speak, depending on psychological and contextual factors.

Although interest in willingness to communicate (WTC) is growing in the context of digital English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, narrative-based research exploring the lived experiences of graduate students in English language education programs remains scarce, particularly in Indonesian higher education. Graduate students enrolled in English language education programs are generally expected to demonstrate advanced English proficiency and academic communication skills as part of their postgraduate training. Nevertheless, communicative hesitation may still arise due to factors such as professional identity, perfectionism, and heightened academic expectations (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Horwitz et al., 1986). Furthermore, most previous studies have adopted quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to examine learners' willingness to communicate, foreign language anxiety, or the effectiveness of digital learning environments (Fan, 2022; Ngien & Hogan, 2022; Zhou, 2023). While these studies have generated valuable findings, they provide only limited insight into the personal stories and platform-specific experiences that shape learners' communicative choices.

This study aims to explore postgraduate students' willingness to communicate in English through their experiences in digital learning platforms. Specifically, it seeks to answer: (1) How do postgraduate English education students experience willingness or reluctance to communicate in English across different digital platforms? and (2) What factors, as narrated by the participants, support or hinder their willingness to communicate in these digital environments?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry research design. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it helps researchers understand human experiences

through the stories individuals tell about their lives, using narrative both as the phenomenon under study and as a method of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach is particularly well-suited for WTC research because it captures the situational, fluctuating, and highly personal nature of students' communicative choices dimensions that are difficult to access through quantitative instruments alone.

The participants in this study were three graduate students (hereafter referred to as Student 1 [S1], Student 2 [S2], and Student 3 [S3]) enrolled in the Master's Program in English Language Education at an Islamic Higher Education institution in Banjarmasin. They were selected using purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) sufficient experience using digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp for academic communication in English, and (2) reporting varying levels of uncertainty in speaking English in the context of digital learning. Although all participants possessed advanced English proficiency, as they were enrolled in a graduate-level English language education program, the hesitation they reported made their narratives theoretically and pedagogically significant. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms (S1–S3) were used throughout the study to protect participants' identities.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol developed from the situational WTC model (MacIntyre et al., 1998) and the narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This interview guide consisted of four thematic areas: (1) general experiences communicating in English on digital platforms, (2) confidence in communication, (3) factors that support or hinder WTC, and (4) experiences as graduate students in the English language education program. Each interview lasted approximately 40-60 minutes and was conducted individually. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' written consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participant checking was conducted to enhance data reliability by returning the transcripts to the participants for verification (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data were analyzed using narrative analysis following three stages: (1) familiarization, in which transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of each participant's narrative; (2) thematic coding, in which narrative segments were coded according to WTC dimensions outlined by (MacIntyre et al., 1998); and (3) re-storying, in which participants' individual narratives were reconstructed into coherent accounts. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to identify common and divergent patterns among the three participants' narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The narrative analysis of the interview data generated five cross-cutting themes that illuminate postgraduate students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English across digital learning platforms. To address the two research questions, the findings are organized into two sections. The first section presents participants' experiences of willingness and reluctance to communicate across different digital platforms. In contrast, the second section examines the factors that facilitate or hinder their willingness to communicate. Each theme is supported by narrative evidence and discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies.

RQ 1: How do postgraduate English education students experience willingness or reluctance to communicate in English across different digital learning platforms?

To answer the first research question, two themes emerged from the participants' narratives, illustrating their willingness and reluctance to communicate across digital learning platforms. The first theme highlights the paradox between participants' advanced English proficiency and their persistent reluctance to communicate.

Theme 1. High Competence, Low Communicative Willingness

The most striking pattern in the three participants' narratives is the paradox between advanced English proficiency and a persistent reluctance to speak. Although they were enrolled in graduate English language education programs, where advanced English proficiency is generally expected, all three participants stated that they often chose to remain silent, even when they had the necessary knowledge to contribute to discussions.

S1 described this experience clearly:

"Sometimes, I understand the material, but I still choose to stay silent because I'm afraid I'll say something wrong or not very well. A lot of thoughts immediately pop into my head, like 'What if my grammar is wrong?' or 'Does that sound weird?'"

S2 articulated a similar tension:

"All the time. And that's actually the most frustrating part, especially when I know the answer, I understand the material, but my hand won't go up, my mouth won't open. There's a kind of filter in my head that keeps asking, 'Is this sentence good enough?'"

S3 echoed this pattern:

"Sometimes I actually know the answer, but I overthink how to say it. I'm afraid of making a grammatical mistake or choosing the wrong words. So, I usually end up thinking about it for too long, and by the time I'm ready to speak, someone else has already answered."

These narratives align with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) conceptualization of WTC as something determined by the situation rather than a direct result of linguistic competence. The participants' experiences support MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) identification of the role of communicative self-confidence, which differs from actual ability in determining whether a speaker chooses to communicate. This finding is further reinforced by Friatin & Triastuti (2026), who found that Indonesian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) often experience high levels of anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and reluctance to speak in front of peers, regardless of their language proficiency level. Ironically, graduate students experience greater, rather than lesser, reluctance, suggesting a combined effect of high academic expectations on willingness to communicate.

Theme 2. Platform-Specific Variation in WTC

A significant finding of this study is that participants' WTC was not uniform across digital platforms. Rather, each platform created a distinct communicative context with different psychological implications, resulting in markedly different levels of willingness to speak.

All three participants reported considerably higher WTC in WhatsApp and in breakout

room sessions compared to whole-class Zoom sessions. S3 articulated this contrast explicitly:

"On Zoom, I get more nervous because I have to speak right away. There's no time to think too long. Especially when the camera is on, it feels like everyone's watching me. But on WhatsApp, I'm more relaxed. I can think things through first, type slowly, and sometimes even reread what I've written before sending it."

S2 described WhatsApp as a platform that offered a sense of communicative agency absent in synchronous video sessions:

"On WhatsApp, I feel more in control. I can write, reread, edit, and then send. If there's a grammar mistake, I can correct it before anyone else sees it. On Zoom, everything happens in real time. There's no undo button."

Regarding breakout rooms, S2 noted:

"Breakout rooms are a lifesaver. With only five or six people, they're more intimate, and I feel like the social pressure is lower. In a large class, there's an implicit pressure to perform perfectly. In a breakout room, I can make mistakes, and that feels more okay."

These findings are consistent with research indicating that platform features effectively shape the communicative behavior of EFL learners. (Zhou, 2023) states that digital communication activities with asynchronous components, such as text-based chats, positively support WTC by reducing time pressure. Similarly, a study by Yaniafari et al. (as cited in Yasinta & Hidayat, 2022) shows that computer-facilitated synchronous communication (SCMC) can reduce speaking anxiety compared to face-to-face situations because it eliminates direct eye contact and reduces the pressure of being physically observed. Participants' narratives in this study indicate that this anxiety-reducing effect depends on the platform: asynchronous contexts and small groups support WTC, whereas synchronous sessions in large groups continue to trigger barriers. This underscores the argument of MacIntyre et al. (1998) that situational context is a key determinant of WTC and extends this framework to digital environments.

Overall, the findings addressing the first research question demonstrate that willingness to communicate among postgraduate EFL students is dynamic rather than stable. Their willingness varied across digital platforms and interactional contexts, indicating that communicative behavior is shaped not only by language proficiency but also by situational characteristics of digital learning environments.

RQ 2: What factors facilitate or hinder postgraduate students' willingness to communicate in English across digital learning platforms?

To answer the second research question, the narrative analysis identified two major inhibiting factors and one facilitating factor that shaped participants' willingness to communicate. The findings indicate that participants' communicative choices were influenced not only by individual psychological factors but also by features of the digital learning environment. The themes presented below illustrate how these factors either constrained or enhanced participants' willingness to communicate in English.

Theme 3. Perfectionism as an Internal Barrier

Closely related to the first theme, the three participants identified perfectionism,

namely the urge to speak only when certain they could produce error-free and academically appropriate language, as the strongest internal barrier to their WTC. This internal barrier was described not as a result of the digital platform itself, but rather as a psychological filter shaped by the demands of graduate-level academic identity.

S2 offered the most explicit account:

"My inner filter is often what holds me back. Perfectionism, maybe. I don't want to speak up if I don't feel ready. And my definition of 'ready' is sometimes too high a standard for situations that should be more relaxed."

S1 similarly described an automatic self-evaluation process that occurred during and after speaking:

"When I was speaking, I felt a little stiff, and afterward I kept thinking about it like I was replaying what I'd just said."

S2 further elaborated how membership in an English education postgraduate program amplified the stakes of every utterance:

"In a master's program in English Language Education, we're all supposed' to be fluent. So, when a mistake suddenly slips out, it feels more noticeable. It's more embarrassing than it should be. But logically speaking, everyone is still learning, too."

These findings are consistent with foundational research on anxiety in foreign language learning. (Horwitz et al., 1986) identified the fear of negative evaluation as one of the three core components of anxiety in foreign language classrooms, along with concerns about communication and test anxiety. Participants' narratives indicate that this fear intensifies at the graduate level, where expectations of language proficiency create a higher psychological threshold for speaking. As reflected by S2, the irony is that the very enthusiasm that brought these students to the English language education program becomes a source of communicative barriers once expectations of professional and academic identity have been internalized. (Resnik et al., 2023) also found that anxiety in a foreign language does not always decrease among advanced-level learners and, in some cases, may even increase as learners become more aware of the gap between their ideal and actual communicative performance.

Theme 4. Camera Anxiety as a Digital-Context Specific Factor

A theme that emerged clearly in the digital context and would not have emerged in face-to-face research is the psychological impact of the camera's presence during synchronous sessions. All three participants identified turning on the camera as a factor that increased their feelings of embarrassment and, in some cases, reduced their willingness to focus and contribute to the discussion.

S2 described a heightened sensitivity to others' facial expressions when cameras were enabled:

"I've become too focused on other people's expressions. For example, if they furrow their brows even a little, I immediately think, 'Is my grammar wrong?' when maybe they're just squinting because of the glare."

S3 identified camera presence as a source of self-monitoring that competed with cognitive focus:

"If the camera has to stay on all the time, I end up being more self-aware rather than focusing on the material."

S1 also noted that camera activation during whole-class Zoom sessions intensified pre-speaking anxiety:

"On Zoom, especially when the camera's on, I get more nervous. It feels like everyone's zooming in on me."

These findings are consistent with the results of empirical research on camera-related anxiety in online learning environments. Research on "Zoom fatigue" has shown that turning on the camera is associated with increased self-focus and anxiety about one's appearance, especially when participants can see themselves on the screen (Ngien & Hogan, 2022). A study published in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* indicates that camera-related anxiety can reduce cognitive engagement and learning retention during online sessions (as cited in Resnik et al., 2023). For language learners, this self-monitoring effect appears to be even more complex: participants are not only anxious about their visual appearance. However, they are also acutely aware of their linguistic performance, which is being observed in real time. This dual layer of self-awareness, physical and linguistic, presents a unique challenge for the WTC model in digital learning environments that use cameras, a challenge not anticipated by previous WTC models, which were developed in face-to-face contexts.

Theme 5. Small Wins as Turning Points in WTC Development

Despite the barriers mentioned above, all three participants described at least one specific experience that transformed their relationship with risk-taking in communication, referred to in this study as a turning point. Importantly, none of these turning points involved a dramatic transformation; rather, each involved small, manageable communication successes that gradually recalibrated the participants' expectations of themselves.

S3 described a moment in which a lecturer's affirming response to an imperfect answer changed her communicative self-concept:

"After I finished answering, it turned out the professor responded positively. He focused more on the substance of my opinion than on the grammatical mistakes I made. From that point on, I began to realize that I did not actually have to wait until I was perfect before speaking."

S2 identified a moment of successful paraphrasing during a presentation as her turning point:

"I forgot the exact word in English. I paused, almost about to switch to Indonesian, but I decided to paraphrase to put it in other words that I knew. And it worked. The message got across. That's when I realized: what matters is that the meaning gets across, not the perfection of the form."

S1 recalled being called upon unexpectedly by a lecturer as a turning point, albeit an uncomfortable one:

"Even though I was nervous, that experience taught me to be better prepared. Maybe it was a turning point, too, even though I have not completely changed yet."

These narratives illustrate a key aspect of WTC development that the willingness to communicate is not static but can evolve through experience. This aligns with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative research framework, which emphasizes the role of narrated experiences in shaping identity and behavior over time. The participants' turning points align with the concept of positive communicative experiences documented in the WTC literature: various studies have shown that supportive feedback from instructors and communicative success in less high-pressure situations can significantly boost learners' self-confidence and their subsequent WTC (Fan, 2022; Lee, J. S., & Hsieh, 2029). These findings suggest that pedagogical design, specifically the creation of opportunities for small, reinforcing communicative experiences in digital environments, plays a critical role in the development of WTC among graduate-level EFL learners.

Furthermore, the findings addressing the second research question indicate that the interaction between psychological and contextual factors shapes postgraduate students' willingness to communicate. While perfectionism and camera anxiety emerged as significant barriers that constrained participants' willingness to communicate, supportive communicative experiences gradually strengthened their confidence and encouraged greater participation. These findings suggest that WTC is not a fixed characteristic but a dynamic process that can be fostered through supportive digital learning environments and positive communication experiences.

Overall, the findings and discussion reveal that postgraduate students' willingness to communicate in English is a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a stable individual characteristic. Across the five themes, participants' narratives demonstrate that the interaction between linguistic competence, psychological factors, and the affordances of digital learning platforms shapes their willingness to communicate. Although barriers such as perfectionism and camera anxiety often discouraged spontaneous communication, supportive communicative experiences gradually strengthened learners' confidence and encouraged greater participation. These findings reinforce the situational nature of WTC, as proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), while highlighting the unique influence of digital learning environments on postgraduate EFL students' communicative experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the willingness to communicate (WTC) in English among three graduate students in the Master's Program in English Language Education (MPBI) at an Islamic Higher Education institution in Banjarmasin using a narrative approach. Five themes emerged from the cross-case narrative analysis: (1) the paradox between high competence and low willingness to communicate, (2) platform-specific variations in WTC, (3) perfectionism as the primary internal barrier, (4) anxiety in front of the camera as a specific factor in the digital context, and (5) small successes as turning points in the development of WTC.

In response to the first research question, participants' narratives revealed that a constant tension between knowledge and communicative action characterizes WTC in the context of digital learning. Despite possessing high English proficiency, all three participants

reported often choosing to remain silent, driven by internalized academic expectations that set the threshold for "acceptable" speech too high for spontaneous communication. Regarding the second research question, the most consistent inhibiting factors were perfectionism, anxiety in front of the camera, and synchronous formats in large groups. In contrast, the most consistent facilitating factors were small-group settings or breakout rooms, asynchronous text-based communication (WhatsApp), and supportive instructor feedback.

These findings have several pedagogical implications for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in digital environments. First, teachers should consciously normalize communicative imperfection by explicitly indicating that meaning-focused communication is valued more highly than formal accuracy. Second, the strategic use of breakout rooms, chat features, and asynchronous communication channels can significantly lower the psychological barriers to speaking, especially for learners who experience camera anxiety. Third, small yet supportive communication experiences created through low-risk tasks and supportive feedback can serve as catalysts for long-term development in Target Language Communication Skills (WTC).

This study is limited by its small, purposive sample of three participants from a single institution, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. Future research should expand the participant pool to include various institutions and academic levels, and may consider a longitudinal design to track the development of WTC over time. Additionally, supplementary data sources such as classroom observations or digital communication logs could enrich the narrative and provide a more comprehensive picture of how WTC manifests in real-world digital interactions.

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