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Exploring Bangladeshi university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English classes through a qualitative study

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Abstract

English is regarded as a compulsory subject in Bangladesh, which learning starts at the very early stage of a learner. However, after spending almost 12 years in learning English, learners' oral skill is not seen up to the mark when they enter the university for tertiary education. Sometimes, they are noticed to have their unwillingness to communicate with others. Hence, the current study aims to explore the experiences of Bangladeshi university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) by employing a multiple case study method. 10 undergraduate students from a private university were interviewed. Apart from semi-structured interview, classroom observations were also carried out for data collection. The obtained data were analysed through the content analysis process. The findings show that students' earlier experiences of learning English have been positive; however, they think grammar-based English learning is an obstacle in the development of their oral communication. The study also reveals that learners' WTC is greatly influenced by classroom environment that enhances or declines their interest to communicate with others. Based on the findings, the study suggests that incorporating more drills in English classes by engaging learners with real-life based conversations, dialogues and so forth can enhance learners' WTC. Hence, learners' real voice would help the policymakers and language instructors to take the issue into consideration and way-out timely measures.

Keywords: EFL learning, Oral communication, Willingness to communicate (WTC), Grammar-based teaching, Classroom environment, Tertiary level, Bangladesh

Introduction

In the education policy of Bangladesh, learning English starts at the very beginning of a child's schooling and is considered as a compulsory subject like other core subjects (Obaidul Hamid, 2010; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). In every class, learners need to pass the English course to be promoted in the next class. Hence, they study English almost 12 years before taking admission into university. However, it is very worrying that after completing their university education in English-medium instruction, a good number of the graduating students are found weak in English while they are asked to speak before the audience (Fushino, 2011; Rahman et al., 2019).

Actually, the oral English proficiency of the Bangladeshi students is lower compared to the students of other Asian countries. But it is good news that the government of Bangladesh has taken some policies to develop the speaking and the listening ability of the students very aptly and minutely (Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018; Rahman et al., 2019). However, none of the policies will see the light of success until the learners have strong determination, motivation, and willingness to learn the language whose absence compels them to dropout from their academic arena (Cucco et al., 2021). Hence, willingness to learn the language or learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is believed to stimulate them to communicate in English. Realising its undeniable importance, studies on WTC have gained the attention from the scholars (Shirvan et al., 2019). However, studies are very rare to empirically explore learners' WTC in English classes in the context of Bangladesh. Thus, the current study aims to explore the experiences of Bangladeshi university students' WTC by employing a multiple case study method. Two research questions are taken into consideration to achieve this objective:

Question 1: What are the experiences of Bangladeshi university students in English communication classes?

Question 2: How do these previous experiences influence their willingness to communicate (WTC) in their university English classes?

The remainder of the study has been organised in the following chronological order. Literature review has been placed in "[Literature review](#)" section followed by a detailed description of the methodology in "[Methodology of the study](#)" section. "[Results and discussion](#)" section provides the findings and analysis of the study while "[Recommendations](#)" section elucidates the recommendation. Finally, conclusion has been provided in "[Conclusion](#)".

Literature review

Every learning depends on learners' determination and willingness. Without having a definite willingness to learn, no learner of second language (L2) can acquire language and hence can communicate properly. Therefore, learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is an important aspect to learn L2. Realising the importance of WTC, a good number of qualitative (e.g., Basöz & Erten, 2019; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Peng, 2012), quantitative (e.g., MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Yashima, 2002) and mixed-method studies (Léger & Storch, 2009) have been carried out. Based on the findings of the existing studies, L2 development is significantly influenced by learners' WTC.

L2 and WTC

Any learning outcome depends on the learners' positive attitude towards the thing they intend to learn. Such positive outlook or attitude is termed as willingness that refers to learners' desire or deliberate intention to learn. In L2 communication development, willingness plays an important role that is termed as WTC. It refers to the learners' deliberate intention to speak or remain silent when they are asked anything (MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 1998). In terms of acquiring L1 or L2, the importance of willingness is unquestionable (Shirvan et al., 2019). The concept of WTC was initially introduced by

McCroskey along with his collaborators in acquisition of L1 (McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). They accepted the term as a trait of personality (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Later, it draws the attention of the scholars researching on different notions and theoretical aspects of L2 acquisition (Asmali, 2016).

Studies on WTC have got a significant consideration from the scholars since it is generally believed that learners require more practice to gain communicative competence (MacIntyre et al., 2003), but they usually try to remain silent when they get any scope. Hence, how to accelerate L2 learners WTC is getting importance day by day and studies have been carried out in this regard too to come out strategies to promote L2 learners' WTC (Peng, 2019). Realizing the significance of WTC, Dörnyei (2014) says that WTC is the crucial objective of instruction in case of Foreign Language Learning (FLL). Scholars have been trying to find out various predictors that are crucially important in enhancing L2 learners' WTC. They find foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele, 2019), teachers' cordial behaviour (Peng, 2019), classroom environment (Khajavy et al., 2018; Lee & Hsieh, 2019), etc. are strongest predictors of WTC that positively enhance learners' language learning zeal and reduce anxiety. Since it is an important area of study on L2 development, studies are being carried out on this focusing its various aspects and new theories (MacIntyre, 2020).

Prevailing studies on WTC

A good number of studies by the scholars across the world have been carried out depicting the relationship between WTC and English language learning. Basöz and Erten (2019) have conducted a qualitative study where they interview 32 undergrad students in Turkey and find various factors like class size, vocabulary stock, teachers' behaviour, classroom environment, L2 anxiety, lack of actual pronunciation, shyness, peers' attitude, fear of making mistakes, etc. have a great influence on enhancing learners' WTC. Yashima (2002) has conducted a quantitative study on 297 Japanese university students' international attitude, where the researcher concentrated on WTC and other indicators having impacts on learners' oral English discourse. The study finds that students get motivated by international posture that eventually accelerates their WTC. Besides, taking a sample of 62 college-studying students, the quantitative study of Nakatani (2010) finds that two principal strategies such as maintaining discourse and negotiation of meaning help students develop their communication ability.

Another quantitative study conducted by Provenzano and Yue (2011) analysing a sample of 114 students reveals that assignments on speaking skill are helpful to bring an opportunity for the L2 learners to practice English. The participants believe that extra practice is helpful for improving their knowledge of discourse that augments the level of their confidence and English proficiency. The same result has been documented in a qualitative research conducted by Shower (2010), which demonstrates communicative approaches practiced by teachers are very effective in increasing learners' language skill. Besides, in a mixed method study by Al-Murtadha (2019) in the context of Yemen depicts that the use of visualization in the classroom by the L2 teachers improves learners' WTC in classes. The study suggests that teachers can implement various types of interesting activities to stimulate learners' WTC.

Moreover, Fushino's (2011) mixed method study in the context of Japanese university students reveals that learners' English practice has a great impact on communication. The study also finds that hands-on experience helps learners in developing their real English usage skill outside the classroom. However, negative result has been documented in case of high-school going students by the study of Watanabe (2013). The study shows that students' English language skill has not been improved after practising 3 years. Even though a native English speaker has been provided them with ample amenities, they, however, could not enhance their proficiency in spoken English. The learners only enjoy the lessons which actually do not indicate that they are learning. In fact, basic English teaching has different goals like meaning-focused in primary schools and more form-focused in junior high schools.

Factors associated with WTC

Researchers find varied factors that affect WTC. The principal indicators which influence WTC are classroom environment (Peng, 2019), learners' views (Trinder, 2013), learning motivation (Ma et al., 2019), metacognition of oral communication (Sato & Dussuel Lam, 2021), universal attitude (Yashima, 2002), teacher immediacy attributes (Sheybani, 2019), and communicative assurance (Fushino, 2010). Besides, a group of scholars like Zhou (2012), Carreira (2011), and Zhao (2012) consider inspiration as an important factor for L2 learning. Other scholars (Knell & Chi, 2012; Lockley & Farrell, 2011; Zhong, 2013) think the 'observed competency' as an important factor for target language learning that is associated with WTC. In fact, all the above researchers have focused on quantitative study where learners' real voices have not been taken into account. Moreover, another quantitative study conducted by Lee and Hsieh (2019) in the context of Taiwanese EFL undergraduate students shows that learners with perseverance and higher level of confidence have greater WTC. They also note that learners of the current and digital age always feel more comfortable with digitally equipped learning setting rather than traditional classroom settings.

However, they find that EFL learners' L2 anxiety has a negative impact on learners' WTC and this view is also supported by the study of Dewaele (2019) that has taken place in the context of EFL learners of Spain. On the other hand, foreign language enjoyment and use of English by the L2 instructors motivate students to enhance their WTC (Dewaele, 2019). Among many other factors, technology-based factors are seen to have positive impact on augmenting learners' WTC. In this regard, the study carried out by Tai and Chen (2020) in the context of eighth-grade Taiwanese students shows that EFL learners' WTC in English classes is very positively associated with the use of Google Assistant software. In addition to the above, boosting learners' WTC makes them self-regulated learners where teachers need to monitor them less. Making learners self-regulated, teachers' role by implementing various timely strategies plays a vivid role (Segaran & Hasim, 2021). It is noted that learners who are guided by strategic planning are seen more efficient in their oral production than those guided by no plan (Bakhtiary et al., 2021). Hence, teachers' positive and direct involvement is also a dominating factor to enhance learners' WTC. Synthesising all the findings of the past studies, a fruitful argument is required for the learners' real voices for learning English and the way of developing their English speaking.

Impact of early learning of English

It is generally believed that practice is essential to learn a language quickly. Learning L2 at the very early stage assists learners to be communicatively competent and learners' L2 competence is very positively associated with their WTC (Zhou et al., 2020). However, there is a debate about the exact time of starting language practice. Besides, the researchers are in a debate regarding the benefit on proficiency in early starting whether it would be in primary school or in junior high school. But early start is regarded as the most fruitful time for achieving the overall abilities in a language (Huang, 2011). On the contrary, early starting has a little impact on proficiency in a language (Larson-Hall, 2008). Actually, the young students who are provided more amenities for learning a target language, develop their oral skill very smoothly in communication with quality and quantity (Huang, 2011). The early start seems to be an easy issue, but there are two groups of researchers who have shown their arguments with empirical data in favour of their studies.

For instance, early start of learning English in the government primary schools is not without antagonism. Actually, the education system of any country should give more concentration on its own resources and context related contents that will help students improve their communication skills. It does not mean that English is ignored but it can be taught at next levels like junior high schools as well as colleges (Torikai, 2005). Besides, early start of learning a language helps learners only in phonemic ability not morphological ability (Larson-Hall, 2008). It means early start of learning English only develops the pronunciation of some words in English, not the formation of word to produce a language. Hence, the researchers are in confusions regarding the advantages of early starting age as the input is very little like a few hours, a week, a month, etc.

Methodology of the study

A qualitative case study was deployed in this current study. Through a qualitative case study, the experiences of Bangladeshi university students enrolled in intensive English classes and the effect of their past experiences on their WTC were examined and clarified. It took around 1 month to obtain the data for this study. In this multiple case study, each student was a participant. All students in the selected university were chosen from a single class.

Population

A private university located in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh with three basic thoughts was taken as the sample to get the fruitful result of the study. Firstly, the university has a lecturer to teach learners English who did his/her degrees from English speaking countries. Secondly, the university was very close to the researchers' house and it helped to conduct classroom observation as well as take interviews. Lastly, justifying a learner's WTC, low motivation and low English ability were expected on account of the nature of the research.

Participants

A non-random sampling method was used for this study to observe the speaking ability of the students in English and there were 10 classes in number of which one was chosen. For interviews, 10 students were taken out of total 41 in the classroom. At first, the selected learners were 15 in number and they were primarily chosen considering their obtained marks on WTC Questionnaire (WTCQ). But finally, 10 students were kept as they were found enthusiastic for completing the study and they also got better marks than the primary ones. Among 10 participants, 6 participants were boys and 4 girls.

Research instruments

This study mainly used WTCQ as research instruments to collect the data. The research instruments used at this single site were the initial WTCQ. Two sets of questions were formed. First set was mainly about learners' demographic information as well as known situations to describe so that their level of English could easily be understood. Second set was also about the topics that are somewhat unfamiliar with the students that they needed to think to answer. To have an in-depth understanding of the learners' WTC, six in-class observations of 1 hr each were conducted. During the observation session, the researchers used observation protocol and took notes on important issues and happenings that needed to analyse with more focus. Then, two semi-structured interviews were conducted in which the interview duration for each participant was 60 min. There were 10 students in the class who compromised 10 units analysed over a period of one month. There were also 1-hr follow-up interviews after the 1-hr direct classroom observations, where detailed questions regarding oral communication were asked in the classroom.

Handwritten notes were also available from both interviews and classroom remarks. Those notes were intended to capture the feelings and emotional mood of the classroom which were difficult to obtain only through audio recorders. However, students used and checked audio transcripts for precision after the interview. As a method of data collection, the emotional environment is important to keep open discussions between the researchers and the students. In order to ensure accuracy later on, all data were archived.

The initial WTCQ helped the researchers to understand the willingness of the university students to speak in English in their classes. This prior WTCQ was used only for better understanding of the level of the students. This questionnaire was not taken for analysis as the study did not aim to analyse quantitative data. This was critical to decide what Bangladeshi university students are thinking about their WTC and what they actually do in their real classes to enhance their speaking ability (Navarro & Thornton, 2011). The scale was 20 items on average, eight items being fillers and 12 items being marked in the scale. This helped the researchers to evaluate the WTC of current students in their English classes. The reliability of the WTC scale was measured at a modal estimate of 0.92 in the United States as well as in other cultures (McCroskey, 1992). Therefore, it was possible to depend on the scale in this case study to predict the students' WTC accurately. The scale was interpreted by a Bangladeshi university lecturer to truly comprehend what was being asked. Classroom observations were done for six classes to see the real scenario of the students whether they really interact with their classmates or not.

The way of entering the classroom was to take six lessons each for one-hour that focused on building oral communication ability.

Process of data collection and analysis

Prior to start the study, a primary survey was carried out to achieve a targeted sample. Two individual interviews were arranged with each participant after selecting the respondents and signing the consent forms. The first interview had been conducted in the first week before all the classroom observations were made. The second interview was completed after all the six observations in the classroom with the intention of providing more information about students' experiences. For both the interviews, a total of 30 questions were structured.

At first, no preconceived codes were available. Codes were produced and collected by transmitting data and by deductively dividing the qualitative data into less important sections. These sections were subdivided by reading and codifying the data over and over again. Data were coded manually. This rigorous job of coding the data was done carefully that took a vast amount of time by looking for similarities and allowing cross-references in the data. Keywords to assist in coding different knowledge segments were established.

Data were examined into an inductive process of reasoning. The WTC level was tested in English without any previous expectations. In a non-judgmental exploratory environment, the learners were given the opportunity to express their experiences in order to discuss about research questions in this study. Data were also analysed by clustering and grouping into several sections based on their meaning. Clusters and groups were then used to explore Bangladeshi university students' experiences with their WTC.

Data triangulation and trustworthiness

A single thing sometimes does not prove the validity of a study, as a result "multiple interpretations of reality" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22) are used to ensure the validity of a qualitative research. Hence, validity of a qualitative study is ensured through the triangulation process of collecting data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005) that allows to see the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2005) to obtain an in-depth knowledge of the subject to be studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, to ensure the validity of the current study, the researchers used interviews, classroom observations, peer debriefing, and member checking of the transcription of the interviews which are considered as triangulation in qualitative study. Immediately after the interview, the audio-recorded data were transcribed and checked by the student participants to ensure the reliability of the data. Moreover, one of the original authors in different age groups and communities tested the reliability of the initial WTCQ and proved its reliability (McCroskey, 1992). Besides, in a qualitative study, trustworthiness should be ensured in every stage of data collection (Mirhosseini, 2020). It can be ensured by following the strategies of validation, like, triangulation, member checking, maintenance of field notes, audio recording, and peer examination of the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The honesty of the researcher ensures the higher level of trustworthiness since in a qualitative study, the researcher seems to be the

main instrument. Therefore, in order to ensure trustworthiness, the current study followed all the defined procedures as mentioned by the scholars.

Results and discussion

According to the findings of the study, learners believe that the contemporary oral English courses of the university and grammar-intensive instruction are not appropriate for learning English, rather actual communication is necessary for them to develop their English proficiency skill. The study shows that students' earlier experiences of learning English have been positive although they see grammar-based English learning as an obstacle in their communication development. The findings also reveal that EFL learners' WTC is greatly influenced by classroom environment which has also impacts on their flow of interaction in English with their classmates. The similar outcome is found from the review of literature in which the researchers state that merely 6% of their respondents opine that previous grammar-based English language teaching is helpful for developing their oral proficiency (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). As this study has attempted to explore learners' real voices regarding their WTC in L2 classes, this section deals with an assessment of the research findings referring to two research questions of the study.

The findings show that Bangladeshi university students consider learning English as a positive issue. Though grammar-based teaching is not preferable to them, they acknowledge its importance for accurate learning. However, students believe that early start of language learning even it is grammar-based helps them developing their current English skill. The findings also show that Bangladeshi university students do not practice much with their classmates explaining that they feel uncomfortable to interact with their friends. Hence, their current proficiency level is not satisfactory. As a result, many of them think that their prior learning experiences do not help them develop their current language skill. Among the participating students, 69% do not have any faith on their previous English learning experience and consider it as meaningless which is also supported by the study of Mack (2012). Besides, they also feel embarrassed to communicate with other learners because of having less practice of speaking in English. To know the prior experiences of the students, semi structured interviews have also been deployed so that learners' real voices can be explored. Moreover, the respondents of the study think that only grammar-based pedagogy is not appropriate to develop their communication skill in future. During their oral conversation, when learners think of whether they are using grammatically correct sentences or not, this creates hindrances in their spontaneous conversation (Amini, 2018; Graham et al., 2021; Nguyen & Phu, 2020; Zeghdoud et al., 2019).

Besides, environment has a great effect on WTC and so, the learners cannot communicate with others in/outside the classroom effectively. According to Peng (2012, 2019), congenial classroom environment is required for successful teaching and learning. Various studies find various reasons regarding the importance of conducive classroom environment for learners' WTC. However, the findings of this research state a number of probable reasons to show the necessity of classroom environment for learners' WTC.

Firstly, most of the students feel shy to communicate because they do not know other students' names exactly and the way to start their dialogs even with their mother tongue than a target language. In this study, it was found that a few students knew each

other exactly and started practising with the help of their instructor. However, learners stopped practising once the instructor stopped monitoring them. Secondly, participating learners state that such kind of communication was not known to them before. Hence, lack of prior experience was also found in the classroom observations as an obstruction in their way of conversations. Studies find foreign language teachers believe that absence of prior experience is a foremost indicator for interaction in the classroom (Van Batenburg et al., 2019; Freiermuth and Ito, 2020). The respondents again state that they do not feel comfortable with communication tasks due to their poor English level.

Thirdly, majority of the respondents were found inattentive to their classroom activities that is responsible for their lower WTC which consequently affects classroom environment. Peng (2019) states that classroom environment has a great effect on students' participation in learning and their WTC as well. The participating students in this study show a very negative reply regarding classroom environment. They state whenever any conversation/interaction occurs, someone tries to sleep or does not pay any attention actively. Finally, the study shows that prior experience of the learners is very much important to develop learners' existing WTC. Participants state that they began practicing English at the very 1st class of primary school. Actually, merely 5 learners began to learn English properly before six-grade. While the participants were questioned regarding previous experiences of English learning, 68% students gave adverse reply like difficulties in English, not getting fun, or feeling uncomfortable in practicing English.

When the participants were asked in the second interview regarding the effect of early starting in speaking English on the development of current WTC, they replied that it would improve their pronunciation with making learning fun. In a word, it would develop their confidence for learning their second language though one learner replied negatively. In fact, early starting of L2 learning must develop the existing WTC. According to Goorhuis-Brouwer and De Bot (2010), early learning of English has a great advantage that enables learners to learn the target language properly. Moreover, according to Torikai (2005), early start of L2 learning has no negative effect on L1 proficiency although it is an argument in some cases for not recommending L2 learning in elementary schools. Lastly, the five themes extracted from this study have been described below using inductive codes that have a relation with the two questions of the study. Specially, the 1st study question deals with the learners' previous knowledge in learning English and the 2nd one is the role of preceding classes on the existing WTC.

Positive effect of previous experience

The first theme of the study is that students' prior experience is beneficial (Genc et al., 2016; Mack, 2012), but the teaching/learning approaches have to be developed. Specially, the participants inform that the grammar-based learning is a barrier in developing oral proficiency as well as the learners' WTC.

In the study, total 6 learners state that their previous experience of learning English is very much helpful for accelerating their current WTC though four students show their negative attitude towards practising English due to grammar-based learning style. Among the learners, only three learners provide moderately negative reply regarding the advantages of prior knowledge of English learning. They state like- "it was not good quality", "the mixture of good and bad". Another eight students (80%) reply positively

with the words like- “very good”, “it helped us a lot”, as well as “great motivation” that is aligned with the study of Goorhuis-Brouwer and De Bot (2010). Some of them reply like- “great experience so far, but waiting for the final outcome.” Another participant informs that he acquired an excellent and desired knowledge due to early start of practising English. A good number of respondents also state that speaking with natural English orators is “a decent thing”.

Moreover, when the students were questioned regarding their previous skills of learning, one learner (female) informs that her experience was “very good” as she began to learn English at the very outset of schooling. Another male student also replies the same answer by saying if he learned English at an early stage of education, his current level of learning would not be difficult. Lastly, participating students state that their previous knowledge of learning English would be developed if they could include more fun with their prior lessons that is similar to the findings of Osterman (2014) and Hartshorne et al. (2018). One of the respondents states that, the way of teaching in the previous classes was like a burden on him. The remaining respondents have informed about their eagerness to learn L2 with interesting learning style at the varsity level getting out from previous grammar-based teaching method. Yet, other learners state if they were taught English with interest at elementary level, they would be more curious to learn English now that would augment their current WTC. The longitudinal study of Jaekel et al. (2017) also shows the importance of the early start of language learning to gain better outcome.

Grammar-based learning has negative impacts on WTC

From the interviews and classroom observations, the second theme shows a large number of students think that grammar-based English teaching is one of the reasons that demotivates learners to learn English, which goes with the findings of Fujino (2021). The findings indicate that, apart from the perception that grammar is not beneficial to their general English knowledge, Bangladeshi university students also feel that grammar-based prior learning has stopped them from compensating for oral communication. Focusing more on grammar teaching is noticed as one of the demotivating factors of language learning that is also found by the study of Ali and Pathan (2017). Eight students, or 80%, indicate that they learned nothing after at least 12 years of English learning, and this has made them reluctant to learn and practice English in their current position. When the interview has specifically asked students what they can do to enhance their ability to speak English, no student has stated that it would help to study further grammar.

About 50% respondents denote that speaking English with the native English speakers would be a good way to develop their skills rather than learning grammar. Grammar-based learning makes them worried whether they are speaking grammatically correct English or not that hinders their spontaneous conversation. One of the students says, “As I am worried about using correct grammar, I stop speaking with others in English” that is also supported by the study of Graham et al. (2021) and Amini (2018). In his second interview, this same student says, “If I can’t speak English, it’s simple I can’t write English.” Hence, learning English in a natural setting is much better than learning through memorising grammatical rules or structures (Kung, 2017; Van De Guchte et al., 2015).

The study also shows that students do not like learning grammar too intensively and do not think they will study all of their English lessons. Instead, students have said that they would be more beneficial if they were given more tasks dealing with day-to-day conversation. The students have also stated that they should be taught those parts of English intensively that are very much useful in their daily communication. They should be taught considering events happening in their real life without focusing more on grammatical structures (Hasan et al., 2019). By this way, they can learn good English that will be stable in their memory for long time as said by one participant, “learning naturally would remain stable for long” (Hall, 2017).

Environment has a significantly positive impact on WTC

While analysing data, main focus has been given on prior experiences of learning L2 to evaluate whether those have any effect on learners' present WTC. It has been found that rote style learning as well as grammar-based teaching are not helpful for developing learners' current WTC, rather these create an adverse environment where learners hardly get any scope of doing oral practice. Each learner has reported that settings have a great effect on WTC (Al-Murtadha, 2019; Joe et al., 2017; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Peng (2019) finds that well-organised classroom creates a congenial environment to learn L2 that is considered as the 'strongest predictor' of WTC. For instance, one student has said, “I feel comfortable to talk with my friends not others.” Some participants have noted that while the classroom remains 'calm', they stop practicing. Interaction among the students makes a positive classroom environment that motivates learners to learn enthusiastically (Peng, 2012), fosters enjoyment, and 'reduces anxiety' of the learners (Khajavy et al., 2018). 90% of the participants have reported that the physical environment, teachers' behaviour, and other learners' outlook as well are important for enhancing the speaking ability of the students that are also supported by the study of Osterman (2014) and Peng (2019). Actually, it has been proved that the environment, learners' ability, and personality have a significantly positive influence on their WTC. A good number of students have reported they 'have poor ability in English'. Regard to personality, the students have replied that they are not comfortable to speak in English on account of their shyness, feeling of embarrassment, etc.

WTC is not higher with their classmates

The fourth theme of the study shows that students do not want to speak English with other students that denotes lower WTC with other students or their classmates. Many participants state that their WTC seems to be higher with their course instructor whereas they see their WTC is lower with their class friends. Several students have said that “talking with our friends in English is unnecessary.” It was found true during classroom observations that students were seen uncomfortable to speak in English with other students in classroom. They have proved this as they were found passing their times with their cell phones rather than communicating with other students. They were doing nothing with their assigned partners to accelerate their target language skill. In group activities, students were noticed many times when they just sat down in the group and apparently showed ignorance to others. Same thing was found in case of Japanese students' WTC by the study of Osterman (2014).

While they were asked to know the reason behind this, many of them replied, “everyone remains busy with their mobile phone, none starts speaking in English”. They have also stated that many of them think that they know better than others which makes them reluctant to speak in English (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Savaşçı, 2014). But this appears to be different while it is with their course instructor with whom they are compelled to speak. However, learners are independent in their way of learning (Lamb, 2004). In fact, they sometimes feel forced to do something that they do not want to do by attempting to talk to other students in English.

The interview results show that, although students have spent many years for studying English, they do not know how to speak if they are given the chance to prove their L2 efficiency. One male student has said that he was trying to use English, but he was not sure if other persons understood his English. He has also said that he will not try anymore with this feeling. Many participants have said that they give up trying to speak English due to the lack of actual pronunciation of English words. As their pronunciation is not up to the mark, they feel shy and embarrassed when they are in a situation to speak in English (Zhang, 2009). Native-like pronunciation skill helps learners comprehend the language of native speakers (Saito, 2021). 70% of the participants have noted that they speak in English in the classroom at the very beginning, but they stop practicing it while they see most of the students speak in their native tongue Bengali. This creates an awkward situation and compels them to leave talking in English.

Practicing at the early stage improves WTC in the current stage

The most noticeable thing is the final theme of this study. Every learner has reported if they had appropriate prior experience of learning English at an early age, they would never feel the lack of WTC in this current stage (Cameron, 2015; Osterman, 2014). These data have been used in answering the second research question regarding the role of prior experience on their current WTC. It has been found that all the participants except one have revealed if they got enough opportunity to practice English properly at the 1st grade of primary school, their present language acquisition would be developed. However, they all have mentioned if they got good atmosphere to practise English in their previous classes, their shyness would be blotted out and L2 learning would be more fun to them. Learning language at the early stage enhances learners’ language skill and they feel like learning in a natural setting (Gawi, 2012; Iriani et al., 2018).

Moreover, students’ remarks regarding early starting like “gateway to learn English easily” and then their “stickiness with them” are noted. One participant has posed a great comment about learning English early. He says that early learning of English would encourage further development of learning with fun. He believes if early interest was accomplished, learners would do well in university level. Special emphasis should be given on the remark of a participant in which he has rejected previous experiences as he believes, “you must practice English, otherwise you will forget it”. Another student has made a very nice comment by saying, “we dream to be a good speaker, but we are reluctant to practice it”. Without doing practice properly, learners will not gain perfection (Nickels, 2002).

Hence, based on the students’ remarks, if they got the proper environment of learning English at the very 1st grade of primary school, their present English knowledge as well

as WTC would be more developed (Al-Murtadha, 2019). For example, when the students were given compulsory grammar-based teaching at their primary school without teaching them with fun, they started neglecting English learning and also losing their eagerness to learn English in future. Hence, the findings of this study show the importance of learning English at the early stage. Learning English at the early stage would help learners enhance their confidence and motivation to learn English in their next classes that will make L2 classes more enjoyable to them (Sullivan et al., 2014), and thus accelerate their current WTC.

Recommendations

The first suggestion is to make sure that the potential researchers do not extend the findings of this study specifically to all Bangladeshi students. Instead, prospective researchers should take these findings as a guide to conduct more studies in this field in the form of either quantitative, qualitative or mixed method studies. This study has picked up the real voices of the L2 students by using interviews and classroom observations to determine whether existing policies are what students believe to be the best for them. In two interviews with the results of this research, students think that further communication would be more relevant to their needs. The results of the study therefore introduce to current WTC literature by exposing current pedagogical practices of Bangladeshi university students and how EFL learners see their verbal communication instruction.

Secondly, the findings of this study recommend using more drills in university English classes to enhance learners' communication skill. Hence, modified and time-tested teaching techniques should be implemented since a number of participants have claimed pedagogical issue as a key problem that reduces their current WTC. The key issue is that students must focus more on developing their oral communication skill instead of focusing on memorising grammatical rules. More studies would prove the validity and the reliability of the findings of this study. Therefore, more and more qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies should be carried out to have a fruitful understanding of Bangladeshi L2 learners' WTC in English classes that will widen the policy implications in this regard.

The final suggestion is that Bangladeshi students are required to be introduced to proper oral English interactions at their early stage since the participants of this study believe that learning L2 at their early stage motivates them to learn English in their next classes. This will enhance learners' desire to learn, and thus accelerates their current WTC. Learners' WTC gets affected due to the lack of their desire to learn (Rivers, 2012). Moreover, learning English properly at the early stage is very much helpful in their later academic life to learn the language enthusiastically which will enhance their WTC too.

Conclusion

Prevailing studies have found that EFL learners' WTC is highly influenced by their prior English learning experiences. Though many studies have been conducted in this regard, actual voices and perspectives of the learners were one of the key missing elements in the prior studies. Hence, this current study has filled this gap and contributed to the literature by providing real voices of Bangladeshi university students about their WTC in English classes. The five concepts described in this study only begin to understand how past

experiences influence learners' current WTC at universities. The students have said their overall previous experiences are positive but the English teaching/learning style should be changed. All the five themes of this study are connected to each other, and hence modification to one has impacts on others. In particular, focusing more on authentic learning instead of focusing on grammar-based teaching will build learners' confidence to learn English with joy that eventually augments learners current WTC.

The three suggestions based on the findings of this study have also been provided with a view to enhancing the learning experiences of prospective students that will help increase their WTC. Hence, policies are to be adopted to enhance Bangladeshi university students' WTC in English classes. Policymakers and curriculum setters should take long-term policies in this regard that will give more focus on communicative instructions rather than grammar-based teaching/learning style. Hence, more studies in this area should be carried out that will help the policymakers to implement timely policies. This current study has empirically explored L2 learners' WTC and found the impact of prior experiences on their current WTC. Similarly, future studies in this field are hoped to unveil more issues that would potentially help Bangladeshi students improve their oral communication skill.

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Authors' contributions

All the authors have equally made significant contributions in conceptualizing, drafting, interview questions preparing, editing, and proofreading of the manuscript. However, data collection have been solely carried out by MRA and MRKM. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

All the data used in this study belong to the corresponding author and will be shared upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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