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Willingness to Communicate and English Speaking Performance: A Phenomenological Study of Tadulako University EFL Students

*Mutia Reza[a]

[1]Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: mutiareza1712@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has emerged as a critical psychological construct mediating between linguistic competence and actual language use, yet its influence on speaking performance remains underexplored in Indonesian EFL contexts through learners' lived experiences. This qualitative study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate how English Education students at Universitas Tadulako experience and interpret the ways WTC shapes their English-speaking performance. Three undergraduate students (semesters 3-5) participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, with findings triangulated through a lecturer interview. Systematic IPA analysis revealed four superordinate themes: (1) WTC as Dynamic Social-Cognitive State, fluctuating with context rather than functioning as a stable trait; (2) The Fluency-Accuracy Paradox, whereby students universally prioritize comprehensibility over grammatical correctness as a strategic coping mechanism; (3) Fear as Cultural-Pedagogical Construct, wherein judgment anxiety rooted in Indonesian educational culture inhibits WTC despite supportive teaching; and (4) The Preparation Imperative, in which advance notice and cognitive readiness universally facilitate WTC while spontaneous demands trigger defensiveness. Findings demonstrate that WTC operates as a multi-dimensional construct shaped by individual motivation, social ecology, cultural context, and pedagogical environment. Practical implications include creating psychologically safe environments, validating fluency-first strategies, and scaffolding spontaneity through preparation.

Keywords: *Willingness to Communicate, Speaking Performance, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Indonesian EFL, English Education*

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INTRODUCTION

A persistent puzzle challenges English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy: students with comparable linguistic competence often demonstrate vastly different speaking performance in authentic communicative situations. This disconnect between what learners can do linguistically and what they will do communicatively has directed scholarly attention toward psychological constructs that mediate language use. Among these, willingness to communicate (WTC) has emerged as a particularly significant explanatory variable. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualized WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2," positioning it as the critical psychological bridge transforming potential competence into observable performance.

The theoretical significance of WTC lies in its recognition that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but a fundamentally social and psychological endeavor shaped by affective, motivational, and contextual factors (Brown, 2007). MacIntyre's (2007) pyramid model of L2 WTC illustrates this complexity, presenting six interconnected layers ranging from stable personality traits at the base to situational factors and immediate communication decisions at the apex. This framework has proven particularly valuable for understanding why learners with strong linguistic foundations actively seek speaking opportunities while others with comparable competence systematically avoid oral communication.

For English Education students in Indonesian universities, developing high WTC and strong speaking performance carries particular urgency. As future English teachers, these students must not only achieve advanced L2 proficiency themselves but also understand the psychological and pedagogical factors that facilitate or inhibit communicative willingness in others. Understanding how these students experience the influence of WTC on their speaking development can inform both their personal skill enhancement and their future professional practice.

Despite growing recognition of WTC's importance, several critical gaps persist. First, WTC research has been dominated by quantitative methodologies employing surveys and correlational designs (Fathi et al., 2024; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021). While such studies effectively demonstrate statistical relationships between WTC and speaking proficiency, they cannot illuminate the underlying processes or lived experiences through which willingness influences performance.

Second, the cultural and contextual specificity of WTC remains insufficiently theorized, particularly in Asian EFL settings where collectivistic values, hierarchical educational traditions, and culturally rooted communication norms may shape WTC in distinctive ways (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Wen & Clément, 2003). Indonesian contexts, characterized by refined speech norms, respect for authority, and emphasis on group harmony, may create unique patterns of communicative willingness (Zacharias, 2005). Third, research examining the WTC-speaking performance relationship among English Education students in Central Sulawesi remains absent from the literature.

This study addresses these gaps through two research questions: (1) How do English Education students at Universitas Tadulako experience and interpret the ways in which their WTC shapes their English-speaking performance in classroom contexts? (2) What internal and external factors do students perceive as influencing their WTC during speaking activities? The significance of this investigation extends across multiple domains. Theoretically, it contributes to WTC literature by expanding empirical evidence to include underrepresented Indonesian contexts and demonstrating how phenomenological approaches can complement quantitative findings. Practically, findings offer English language educators deeper insights into students' communicative experiences, enabling development of more responsive teaching strategies that foster WTC and enhance speaking performance.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of English Education students regarding how willingness to communicate (WTC) shapes their English-speaking performance. IPA was selected due to its capacity to capture participants' subjective experiences, reveal meaning-making processes, and honor idiographic particularity while identifying shared experiential patterns (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Participants were three undergraduate students (semesters 3-5) from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Tadulako, Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Purposive sampling employed specific criteria: (1) current enrollment in semesters 3-6; (2) completion of at

least one speaking course; (3) willingness to share communicative experiences openly; and (4) availability to participate in complete data collection. These criteria ensured participants possessed both experiential depth and reflective capacity to articulate their WTC experiences meaningfully.

The three participants, assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, represented diverse WTC profiles: P1 (male, semester 5, introvert) primarily experienced fear of judgment; P2 (male, semester 3, extrovert) demonstrated challenge-seeking despite severe anxiety; and P3 (female, semester 3, introvert) exhibited strong individual agency while navigating peer

expectations. Additionally, one English-speaking lecturer participated as an expert informant to provide contextual triangulation.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide grounded in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) pyramid model of WTC, comprising seven thematic sections with 23 main questions and multiple probing sub-questions. The seven sections progressed logically: (1) Warm-up and Background; (2) Self-Perception of Speaking Ability; (3) WTC-Speaking Performance Relationship (RQ1); (4) Factors Influencing WTC (RQ2); (5) Coping Strategies; (6) WTC Development Over Time; and (7) Reflection and Recommendations.

All questions were deliberately open-ended and non-directive to honor IPA's phenomenological commitment to capturing participants' own meanings. The interview guide was developed in both English and Indonesian to accommodate participants' linguistic preferences and support authentic communication. A separate interview guide was developed for the English- speaking lecturer, focusing on observable classroom dynamics rather than personal phenomenological experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2025. Each student participant engaged in one primary interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes in a private, comfortable setting. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and supplemented with field notes documenting non-verbal cues.

Recognizing participants' varying English proficiency, interviews were conducted in code- switching mode, allowing participants to respond in Indonesian, English, or fluidly switch between languages. The researcher maintained conversational naturalness while employing probing questions to elicit rich phenomenological detail. The lecturer interview, conducted separately, lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and provided environmental context for methodological triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Smith et al.'s (2009) systematic six-stage Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) procedure. The process began with familiarization, where each audio recording was transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly (minimum three times) to achieve immersive familiarity with participants' experiences. Initial noting then involved line-by-line analysis generating descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual exploratory notes that attended to both surface content and deeper psychological meanings. These notes were subsequently transformed into emergent themes, concise statements capturing essential experiential meanings while balancing phenomenological description with hermeneutic interpretation.

Within each transcript, the researcher searched for connections among emergent themes, examining patterns and relationships to construct structured thematic maps representing each participant's unique experiential landscape. Honoring IPA's idiographic commitment, each case was analyzed individually, with the researcher bracketing insights from previous transcripts to allow genuine emergence of each participant's voice. Finally, systematic cross-case analysis identified convergent and divergent patterns across all participants, resulting in four superordinate themes representing the collective phenomenological structure while preserving individual variation. Throughout analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting analytical decisions and interpretive reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was ensured through member checking (participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary interpretations), methodological triangulation (lecturer interview), and prolonged engagement. Transferability was supported through thick description of participants' backgrounds, institutional context, and interview excerpts.
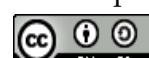
Dependability was maintained through audit trail documentation of raw data, coding stages, and analytical memos. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and grounding all thematic claims in direct participant quotations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, right to withdraw without consequences, and confidentiality protections. Pseudonyms replaced real names in all reports and publications. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team and will be destroyed after the mandated retention period.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings from systematic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of interview data. Analysis revealed four superordinate themes characterizing participants' lived experiences of how WTC shapes their English-speaking performance.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and WTC Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Semester	Self-Identified Personality	Primary WTC Pattern
P1	Male	5	Introvert	Fear of judgment/criticism
P2	Male	3	Extrovert	Challenge-seeking despite anxiety
P3	Female	3	Introvert	Strong agency; peer pressure navigation

Theme 1: WTC as Dynamic Social-Cognitive State

Participants consistently described WTC as highly fluctuating rather than stable, with dramatic variations across situations, emotional states, and developmental periods.

Emotional State Fluctuations

P1 described stark contrasts between high and low WTC moments: "Sangat beda. Kalau kita dalam kondisi semangat berarti disitu jiwa kita untuk meronta-ronta kayak ingin sekali sudah berbicara bahasa Inggris... bedanya dengan pada saat takut, semuanya hilang" [Very different. When we're in a motivated state, our soul struggles/fights wanting so much to speak English... the difference when afraid, everything disappears]. P2 elaborated on fear's cognitive impact: "Kacau. Jadi, kita gagal fokus... langsung lupa tadi mau bilang apa. Jadi, diam" [Chaotic. So we lose focus... immediately forget what we were going to say. So, silent].

Developmental Progression

P2 described systematic WTC evolution across semesters: "Di semester 1 yang masih takut-takut untuk berbicara, di semester 2 sudah mulai berani untuk berbicara, dan pada akhirnya di semester 3 mempunyai rasa percaya diri untuk berbicara" [In first semester still afraid to speak, in second semester starting to dare to speak, and finally in third semester having confidence to speak]. The expert informant independently confirmed this pattern: "Ada yang semester awal itu masih malu-malu... tapi di semester berikutnya... ada progress" [Some in early semesters are still shy... but in following semesters... there's progress].

WTC-Behavior Gap

P3 revealed a critical distinction between psychological willingness and behavioral manifestation: "Pernah mau sekali... pengen sekali bicara, tapi menahan diri... Ragu. Jadi tidak dijawab. Mau sekali tapi..." [Once I really wanted... really wanted to speak, but held myself back... Hesitant. So didn't answer. Really wanted but...]. Despite intense internal desire, self-regulation prevented actual speaking behavior.

Theme 2: The Fluency-Accuracy Paradox

All three participants independently articulated a strategic prioritization of comprehensibility over grammatical accuracy. This universal pattern represents a pragmatic adaptation enabling continued communication despite linguistic limitations.

Universal Fluency-First Philosophy

P1 explicitly stated: "Yang penting kita berbicara dan orang paham. Jadi kita lebih bisa percaya diri" [The important thing is we speak and people understand. So we can be more confident]. P2 articulated this with theoretical awareness: "Saya lebih ke fluensi sih kak karena menurutku dalam bahasa Inggris itu terkhusus speaking as long people understand about what we say it's ok... walaupun memang grammar itu penting tapi selama orang mengerti dengan apa yang kita katakan itu baik-baik saja" [I'm more toward fluency because I think in English, especially speaking, as long as people understand what we say it's ok... although grammar is indeed important, but as long as people understand what we say, it's fine]. P3 concisely summarized: "Lebih fokus ke yang penting orang paham dulu... nanti soal akurasinya... itu belakang" [More focus on the important thing: people understand first... then about accuracy... that's later].

Grammar as Universal Struggle

Paradoxically, all three participants identified grammar as their weakest area, making the fluency-first strategy not merely preference but necessity. P1: "Grammar. Number one." P2: "Grammar itu adalah salah satu hal yang mungkin beberapa orang merasa gagal di situ." [Grammar is something where perhaps some people feel they fail.] P3: "Grammar itu masih kurang sekali." [Grammar is still very lacking.]

Theme 3: Fear as Cultural-Pedagogical Construct

Fear of judgment emerged as the primary WTC inhibitor across all participants, but this fear was not innate, it was culturally and pedagogically constructed through Indonesian educational traditions, social hierarchies, and negative classroom experiences.

Fear of Teacher Judgment

P1 described how evaluative teaching destroyed WTC: "Kalau dapat dosen yang bisa terbilang killer, yang biasanya langsung kayak kita salah ini. Langsung dia bilang, 'kenapa kamu salah begitu? Kamu kan sudah semester begini. Kenapa masih salah begini?'" [If I get a so-called killer lecturer, who usually directly when we make a mistake. Directly they say, 'why are you wrong like that? You're already in this semester. Why are you still wrong like this?']. The consequence was complete motivational collapse: "Di situ kayak tidak ada termotivasi untuk speaking... jadi ya kembali lagi jadi blank" [There it's like there's no motivation for speaking... so yeah it returns to blank].

Teacher Efforts to Eliminate Fear Culture

The expert informant explicitly recognized this cultural pattern: "Budaya itu yang kita coba untuk hilangkan. Takut salah, kemudian malu, takut diketawakan... Ma'am berusaha untuk tidak membuat mahasiswa itu takut, jadi berusaha untuk membuat mereka nyaman" [That culture is what we try to eliminate. Afraid of being wrong, then ashamed, afraid of being laughed at... I try not to make students afraid, so trying to make them comfortable]. Despite these efforts, students still experienced pervasive anxiety. P3 described a peer's experience: "Pernah waktu dia... pas maju ke depan, dia menangis kak... Karena saking gugupnya" [Once when she... when coming to the front, she cried... Because of being so nervous].

Cultural Stigma Beyond Classroom

P1 uniquely described cultural stigma outside classroom contexts: "Ini kamu tuh apa ya orang Kaili jadi tidak usah sok sokan pakai bahasa Inggris." [You're a Kaili person so don't show off using English.] The term "sok sokan" (showing off) reveals that using English in ethnic contexts was perceived as cultural arrogance, illustrating how WTC is context-specific.

Theme 4: The Preparation Imperative

All participants universally identified advance notice and cognitive preparation as essential WTC facilitators, while spontaneous communication demands triggered anxiety and defensive responses. This creates a pedagogical paradox: authentic communication requires spontaneity, yet students need predictability to feel willing to communicate.

Preparation as Anxiety Reducer

P2 explicitly described how advance topic notification reduced anxiety: "Biasanya sebelum kita masuk kelas speaking, biasa dosennya sudah kasih tahu topik... Jadi ketika berbicara bisa mengurangi rasa nervous itu sendiri" [Usually before we enter speaking class, the lecturer already informs the topic... So when speaking it can reduce that nervous feeling
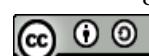
itself]. Conversely, unexpected demands felt threatening. P2 used a powerful metaphor: "Yang bikin nervous itu kalau misalnya kita langsung ditodong nih kak untuk berbicara tanpa adanya konsep" [What makes nervous is if suddenly we're ambushed to speak without any concept]. "Ditodong" literally means "held at gunpoint." P3 described cognitive disruption from spontaneity: "Kalau tiba-tiba disuruh kan belum siap ya, jadi kayak otak tiba-tiba lebih ini.." [If suddenly told to speak, we're not ready, so like the brain suddenly more this...].

Preparation Enabling High WTC

P1 described how preparation transformed presentations into high-WTC experiences: "Dengan presentasi saya belajar banyak dulu sebelum presentasi jadi semua sudah terkumpul di otak saya... yang penting materinya saya kuasai disitu dimana saya pokoknya di presentasi itu saya sudah merasa siap sekali jadi pada saat speaking jadi bisa fluensi" [With presentations I study a lot beforehand so everything is already gathered in my brain... the important thing is I master the material, where in that presentation I feel very ready so when speaking I can be fluent]. The expert informant validated preparation's importance: "Ma'am itu kasih instruksi sebelum melakukan aktivitas so they know what they're going to do... dan itu biasanya membantu mereka untuk memusatkan perhatiannya" [I give instructions before doing activities so they know what they're going to do... and that usually helps them focus their attention]. However, she acknowledged: "Kalau gak punya persiapan pasti dong akan gitu" [If they don't have preparation, of course it will be like that (anxious)].

Discussion

These findings offer important theoretical insights into WTC's contextual and developmental nature while providing practical guidance for creating pedagogical environments that foster communicative confidence in Indonesian EFL contexts.

WTC as Situated, Dynamic, and Developable

The finding that participants experienced dramatically different levels of WTC across situations, with the same individual moving from complete communicative shutdown to confident fluency depending on emotional state, contextual factors, and preparation, challenges conceptualizations of WTC as a stable personality trait. This supports MacIntyre's (2007) pyramid model's emphasis on situational layers at the apex of the WTC hierarchy, demonstrating that immediate contextual factors and transient affective states exert powerful influence on communicative readiness. While MacIntyre's model acknowledges both trait-like foundations (personality, motivational orientation) and state-like situational variables, participants' accounts suggest that in Indonesian EFL classroom contexts, situational factors may be particularly determinative, potentially overshadowing more stable individual differences.

Critically, the observed gap between psychological WTC and actual speaking behavior, exemplified by P3's experience of intense desire to speak yet self-imposed silence, extends existing WTC theory by revealing that readiness to communicate does not automatically translate into communicative action. This suggests WTC operates as a necessary but insufficient condition for oral participation. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) original conceptualization positioned WTC as the final psychological step before actual L2 use, yet our findings indicate additional mediating factors intervene between internal willingness and observable behavior. Students exercised active self- regulation, weighing their communicative desire against competing concerns such as face-saving, evaluation anxiety, and strategic timing. This behavioral WTC versus psychological WTC distinction has important measurement implications: researchers and educators must attend not only to students' internal readiness but also to the factors enabling or constraining behavioral manifestation of that readiness.

The developmental trajectory from fearful through daring to confident across semesters offers encouraging evidence that WTC can be systematically cultivated rather than remaining fixed, aligning with self-efficacy theory which emphasizes the malleability of confidence beliefs through mastery experiences and social modeling (Bandura, 1997). This developmental pattern also resonates with recent findings that self-efficacy and persistence significantly predict oral performance outcomes (Wu & Rose, 2025), and with Yashima's (2002) research on international posture development. Such findings suggest that sustained exposure

to supportive communicative environments, accumulated successful speaking experiences, and progressive skill development contribute to WTC growth over time. For English Education students specifically, this developmental perspective is pedagogically significant: their current WTC limitations need not define their future teaching effectiveness, as research demonstrates positive correlations between self-confidence and oral presentation performance (Al-Hebaish, 2012). Understanding WTC as developable also shifts responsibility from individual deficiency to institutional and pedagogical design.

The heightened context-sensitivity of WTC observed in this study suggests potential influences of collectivistic values commonly associated with Indonesian culture, particularly face- saving concerns. Students' behavior patterns such as fear of judgment reflecting on one's group and sensitivity to social evaluation align with characteristics of collectivistic cultural orientations. This cultural specificity suggests WTC theory, developed primarily in Western contexts, requires adaptation to account for how collectivism, hierarchical social structures, and culturally specific communication norms shape the psychological experience of communicative willingness.

Strategic Adaptation: The Fluency-First Philosophy

The consistent adoption of fluency-over-accuracy prioritization among all three participants suggests sophisticated strategic competence rather than linguistic deficiency (Canale & Swain, 1980). By redefining communicative success as mutual understanding rather than grammatical perfection, students created psychological conditions enabling continued participation despite acknowledged grammatical limitations. This strategic reframing served a vital WTC-maintenance function: if successful communication required flawless accuracy, students would face a binary choice between perfect silence and humiliating error. By validating comprehensibility as sufficient, students preserved their willingness to attempt communication.

This fluency-first orientation aligns with Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence, which encompasses not merely grammatical knowledge but sociopragmatic awareness of when, how, and why to communicate, and with contemporary understandings of strategic competence in language learning (Brown, 2007). Participants demonstrated understanding that achieving illocutionary goals, being understood, conveying meaning, participating in interaction, constitutes successful language use regardless of surface-level errors. This represents a sophisticated metalinguistic awareness: recognizing that communication is fundamentally about meaning transmission, not formal correctness.

The paradox that all three participants identified grammar as their primary weakness yet successfully communicated in English raises important questions about how grammatical accuracy should be weighted in speaking assessment and instruction. Indonesian EFL pedagogy has traditionally tended to emphasize grammatical correctness, often at the expense of fluency and communicative risk-taking (Lamb & Coleman, 2008), though pedagogical approaches may be evolving. Students' fluency-first philosophy may represent adaptive resistance to this accuracy- dominant culture, a pragmatic recognition that perfectionism inhibits rather than enables communication.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest a developmental approach: explicitly validating fluency-first strategies during early speaking development to maintain WTC, while gradually introducing accuracy refinement once students have established communicative confidence and fluency foundations. This aligns with task-based language teaching principles that prioritize meaning-focused communication before form-focused instruction (Ellis, 2009). Rather than treating the fluency-accuracy trade-off as a problem to eliminate, educators might productively embrace it as a developmentally appropriate stage, scaffolding students' progression from fluent- but-inaccurate toward increasingly accurate fluency.

Fear as Cultural-Pedagogical System

The pervasive fear of judgment that inhibited WTC across all participants appears to be less an individual psychological pathology than a culturally and pedagogically constructed phenomenon rooted in Indonesian educational traditions. Research has long established that foreign language anxiety significantly impairs oral performance (Horwitz et al., 1986;

Woodrow, 2006), particularly in contexts where errors carry high social stakes. The hierarchical nature of Indonesian education, combined with cultural values of refined speech and collectivistic face-saving concerns, may contribute to high-stakes communicative contexts where errors carry social as well as linguistic consequences. When mistakes are perceived not merely as learning opportunities but as face-threatening events reflecting poorly on oneself and one's social group, communicative caution becomes culturally intelligible (Wen & Clément, 2003).

The "killer teacher" phenomenon described by P1, evaluative teaching that immediately criticizes errors and leverages semester level as a shaming device, illustrates how pedagogical practices can institutionalize fear. Critically, this is not about individual "bad teachers" but reflects broader pedagogical cultures inherited from traditional Indonesian education systems that emphasized memorization, error avoidance, and hierarchical authority. Such practices reveal an underlying assumption of linear, uniform progress that pathologizes developmentally normal variation and struggle.

Most significantly, the teacher-student perception gap, wherein the lecturer actively worked to eliminate fear culture yet students continued experiencing pervasive anxiety, demonstrates that good pedagogical intentions do not automatically translate into perceived safety. Several factors may explain this gap. First, students' fear is deeply internalized from years of prior educational experiences; one supportive teacher cannot immediately undo systemic conditioning. Second, what teachers intend as supportive practices may be experienced differently by students: random calling, intended to ensure equitable participation, is experienced by students as being held at gunpoint, a communicative ambush. This reveals that creating psychological safety requires understanding student experiences, not merely implementing teacher-centered notions of support.

The stigma described by P1, whereby using English in ethnic Kaili community contexts was perceived as cultural arrogance, demonstrates that WTC is inhibited not only in classroom settings but in broader sociocultural contexts. This finding is particularly significant for multilingual regions like Central Sulawesi, where English use may be interpreted as rejecting local linguistic identity. WTC development thus cannot be addressed solely through classroom interventions but requires community-level attitude change regarding the legitimacy of English use in diverse contexts.

The incident of a student crying from speaking anxiety, described by P3, underscores the potential psychological harm of pedagogical practices that prioritize language development without adequate attention to affective wellbeing. When classroom speaking demands induce tears, we must question whether we are fostering language learning or inflicting trauma. This raises ethical obligations for English educators to prioritize psychological safety alongside linguistic development, recognizing that long-term communicative confidence depends on positive rather than traumatic speaking experiences.

Scaffolding Toward Spontaneity

The universal identification of preparation as enabling WTC while spontaneous demands triggered anxiety can be understood through cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988). Advance topic notification and preparation time allowed students to pre-process vocabulary, rehearse arguments, and reduce uncertainty, thereby freeing cognitive resources during actual speaking for language production and interaction management rather than panic suppression. When students know what they will discuss, working memory can focus on expression rather than simultaneously managing content generation, linguistic formulation, and anxiety regulation.

This creates a pedagogical paradox: authentic communication requires spontaneity and adaptability, yet students need predictability to feel willing to communicate. The solution is not choosing between preparation and spontaneity but rather implementing scaffolded spontaneity, progressively building students' tolerance for unprepared communication through carefully graduated challenges. Initial speaking activities might provide full preparation (advanced topics, rehearsal time), gradually transitioning to partial preparation (topic known, specific questions spontaneous), then structured spontaneity (framework

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provided, content spontaneous), and finally authentic spontaneous interaction. This developmental progression respects students' need for psychological readiness while systematically expanding their spontaneous communicative capacity.

The powerful metaphor reveals how deeply threatening sudden speaking demands feel to these students, suggesting broader patterns that warrant further investigation. What teachers may intend as ensuring equal participation, randomly calling on students, is experienced as communicative violence, an unexpected attack requiring immediate verbal defense without adequate psychological or linguistic preparation. This teacher-student perception gap must be bridged through transparent communication about participation expectations and gradual acclimatization to spontaneous speaking rather than sudden immersion.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how willingness to communicate (WTC) shapes the English-speaking performance of English Education students at Universitas Tadulako through their lived experiences. The findings reveal that WTC is a dynamic and context-dependent psychological state rather than a stable trait, strongly influenced by emotional conditions, cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and levels of preparation. Students' speaking performance was mediated by fluctuating WTC, explaining the gap between linguistic competence and actual oral participation. Participants strategically prioritized fluency over grammatical accuracy to sustain communication and maintain confidence, while fear of judgment—culturally and pedagogically constructed within hierarchical and face-sensitive educational contexts—emerged as the main inhibitor of WTC. Preparation was identified as a crucial facilitator that enhanced communicative readiness, whereas spontaneous speaking demands often triggered anxiety and withdrawal. Overall, the study highlights that fostering WTC requires psychologically safe learning environments, validation of fluency-first strategies, and scaffolded opportunities for spontaneous communication, emphasizing that WTC is developable and central to effective EFL speaking performance.

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