

# International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature

E-ISSN: 2200-3452 & P-ISSN: 2200-3592 www.ijalel.aiac.org.au



# The Relationship between Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English among Undergraduates in a Public University in Malaysia

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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: June 05, 2018 Accepted: August 20, 2018 Published: November 01, 2018

Volume: 7 Issue: 6

Advance access: September 2018

Conflicts of interest: None Funding: The research is financed by Universiti Putra Malaysia. GP-IPS/2018/9631200

## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to examine the relationship between ethnic group affiliation (EGA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English among the undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia. The three ethnic groups involved in the study were Malays, Chinese, and Indians. An EGA questionnaire was adapted from Phinney (1992), Magid (2004), and Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2008), while a WTC questionnaire was adapted from McCroskey (1992), Fishman (1972), and Granhemat (2015). The questionnaires were distributed to 39 participants representing the three major races. The analysis showed that the level of EGA for the Malays was the highest with 83% as compared to the Chinese with 73% and the Indians with 81%. Meanwhile, the level of WTC of the Chinese received the highest score of 75%, while the Malays and the Indians were at 63%. Results of the Pearson Correlation, r = -0.323, p = 0.045, indicated a significantly weak and negative association between EGA and WTC. This implicated that high levels of EGA would result in low levels of WTC. Hence, in addressing that, attention needs to be given to the aspect of EGA in language learning and teaching approaches in order to achieve better language proficiency among the English language learners in Malaysia.

**Key words:** Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA), Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country with the uniqueness of a complex multiracial population which is predominantly defined by three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian races. Thus, the country is blessed with a diversified culture of multi-ethnic groups that live together in harmony. This attribute plays a significant role in the social and cultural dimensions of English language learning in Malaysia. The researchers approached this unique attribute in this study by looking at the two main topics of interest in the study, which are: (1) Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) and (2) Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

A review of literature from previous studies, especially in the area of second language (L2) learning, adequately substantiates that a lot of attention has been given to the relationships between inter-ethnic and inter-culture influences on L2 language proficiency. However, limited studies have been conducted examining the angle of 'intra-ethnicity', which involves how people view their own ethnic group. Intimate feelings towards one's own ethnic culture and language is termed Ethnic Group Affiliation (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005; Hineoya & Gatbonton, 2000; Trofimovich and Gatbonton, 2008). Moreover, the concept of L2 WTC by MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels, (1998) has invited a lot of interest among research-

ers in conceptualizing and adapting the L2 WTC model to their local settings. Hence, WTC has become an important construct in second language acquisition (SLA). The theory of WTC postulates that the willingness to communicate in a L2 would enhance proficiency as more active participation in real communication would result. However, in an effort to localize the study in the current Malaysian setting, there are aspects of the research parameters that need to be considered. The first is the multi-ethnic population in Malaysia. Thus, the researcher specified that the study focus on Malaysia's three major ethnic groups. The second aspect was that English language is often used as the L2 in Malaysian education domains, but it might be the L3 or EFL in other domains of language use. These considerations lead to utilization of the domain-bounded instruments that will be explained further in Section 3 of this study.

# **Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA)**

Many studies related to ethnicity cover the aspects of different L2 language learners' attitudes toward the target language and how these attitudes affect the success of their language learning. However, the current study was intended to explore ethnic group affiliation (EGA), which is defined as how closely someone feels attached to their native culture and language. This is due to the fact that L2 learners

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may into contact with another group (target language group) that they could potentially identify with and show loyalty to, possibly at the expense of their loyalty to their home group (Frassure-Smith, Lambert, & Taylor, 1975; Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008; Taylor et al., 1977). Considering that language learning can affect one's group identity with the association between language on the one hand and group identity and loyalty on the other, implies that EGA could influence L2 learning (Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008). Many dimensions of EGA can be studied, such as the strength of group identification, perceived threats (Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008), group loyalty (Gatbonton, 1975), familiarity with the group's history, accomplishments, and pride (Magid, 2004), and group practices and knowledge (Coupland et al., 2005).

# Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

According to MacIntyre (2007), WTC in a L2 signifies the psychological preparedness to use the L2 once the opportunity arises. Studies on WTC among L2 speakers are very much related to the aspect of SLA as the willingness of a learner to speak in a L2 could represent the success of their language learning, especially when speaking skills are emphasized. Regarding this concept of L2 WTC, it is also postulated that WTC results in individual differences in communication behaviour, which consequently produce individual differences in the attainment of language proficiency. Generally, this theory postulates that language students who are more active with language use have a greater potential to develop language proficiency by having more opportunities to converse with others. Thus, the more willing to communicate language students are, the more likely they are to succeed in the achievement of language proficiency (Clark, 1989; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 2001; Yashima, 2002). A heuristic model of variables influencing WTC by McIntyre et al. (1998) was developed in order to explore the aspects of linguistic, communicative, and social or psychological factors in relation to WTC. This conceptual model identifies variables that would be useful in understanding L2 communications. Subsequently, research on the model has been conducted by researchers from different countries, with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in an effort to understand the communicative aspects of second and foreign language learning and teaching.

## Research Objective

This study specifically aimed to:

- Investigate the level of EGA among the undergraduates from the three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) in a public university in Malaysia.
- Identify the relationship between EGA and WTC in English among the undergraduates from the three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) in a public university in Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

## Previous Studies on EGA

Trofimovich and Turuševa, (2015) have extensively conducted studies related to ethnic identity and second language learning. Three elements in ethnic identity studies have been classified as (1) centrality of the group to one's self, which refers to perceived importance of the group membership; (2) positive effects associated with the group, which are feelings of joy and pride about being a group member; and (3) ingroup ties, which refer to perceived strength of affiliation to one's group. These three elements are seen in aspects of inter-group as well as in-group studies. Accommodating these three significant elements of ethnic identity studies, the current researchers brought forward the concept of EGA and contextualised it to the current Malaysian context. EGA can also be referred to as one's attitude towards their native culture and language. It is widely studied in various fields of knowledge such as Linguistics, Education, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Economics and Anthropology. However, in the discussion that follows, the researcher reviews previous studies on EGA in relation to L2 language learning that are regarded as very limited.

Gatbonton has been dominating studies related to EGA and L2 learning in recent years. In one of those studies, Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2008) examined the role of social factors related to ethnic group affiliation (EGA) in the development of L2 proficiency. The study was conducted with the assumption that an individual's level of L2 proficiency can be high or low depending on the degree of EGA shown and the amount of L2 use as the possible mediating factor. Data for the study was collected from 59 adult French-English bilinguals from Quebec, who read an English text and completed a questionnaire assessing their EGA, including pride, loyalty, and support for their ethnic group and its language. Results of the study showed that there was a significant, albeit complex, association between EGA and L2 proficiency. Feelings such as pride and loyalty towards the ethnic group were not found to have associations with L2 proficiency. However, strong support for the group's sociopolitical aspirations were found associated with low L2 proficiency. Therefore, strong ethnic group identification as well as positive orientation towards the L2 group were associated with high L2 proficiency, and these EGA effects were found to be mediated by the amount of L2 use. Hence, this revealed a plausible link sustaining the relationship between EGA and L2 learning success.

Gatbonton, Trofimovich, and Segalowitz (2011) conducted a study of to examine the association between a group of Quebec Francophones' EGA and their English pronunciation accuracy. The study was conducted based on the argument within Bourdieu's (1991) framework for the market economy concept of language in which being proficient in a language is taken as capital in accessing socioeconomic benefits such as jobs, promotions, and membership status not available to non-proficient speakers (Derwing, 2003; Derwing, Rossiter, Munro, & Thompson, 2004; Norton, 2000). Thus, L2 users who are aware of this beneficial scenario would strive to learn

the L2 and sound as nativelike as possible. However, those who have the thought that native-like L2 speech will make them appear less loyal to their own first-language (L1) group (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005) would modify or monitor their own L2 learning and use it to remain clearly distinguishable in speech from native speakers (NSs) of the L2 (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Segalowitz, 2011). Results of this study revealed that some component dimensions of EGA were negatively associated with participants' pronunciation accuracy of the English voiced interdental fricative (e.g.,/ð/in other), which functioned as an important marker of ethnolinguistic identity. Moreover, the hypothesis of "the stronger the EGA, the less native-like the L2 pronunciation accuracy" is found mediated by the amount of self-reported L2 use.

In both studies presented above, Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2008), Gatbonton, Trofimovich, and Segalowitz (2011), used questionnaires for data collection in order to identify the level of EGA among the participants of the studies. Both studies used the 21 nine-point EGA scales questionnaire, which requires the participants to indicate their ethnic or social group and to react to scales measuring their knowledge, pride, loyalty and support for a particular selected group. These scales were used in order to elicit participants' degree of preference for certain ethnic or social labels such as Quebecois, Canadian, French, Canadian, etc. and their beliefs in the importance of language in defining personal and group identity, such as "a person who does not speak French has no right to call himself/herself Quebecois". Scales were also used in order to elicit emotional reactions about the ethnic group, such as pride in its achievements, willingness to defend the group, etc. Some parts of the questionnaire also measured the participants' willingness to support the uni-lingualism of French in Quebec, French schooling for immigrants, etc. The scales used in the study were adapted from previous studies on language identity and attitudes (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Couplandetal, 2005; Lambert et al., 1960; Taylor et al., 1977). The political EGA scales, on the other hand, were based on those used by Gatbonton (1975), and most of the loyalty scales were adapted from Magid (2004).

## **Previous Studies on WTC**

Considerable attention has been given to the concept of WTC, especially in the context of L2 and foreign language learning. As stated in the previous section, WTC signifies the psychological preparedness to use a L2 once the opportunity arises. The research discussed below introduces views and approaches of other researchers especially for different demographic backgrounds in relation to WTC.

A study conducted by Mahmoodi and Moazam (2014) focused on the relationship between WTC and L2 achievement among 44 Iranian undergraduate Arabic students. In the study, L2 achievement was connected to being fluent in L2. As stated by MacIntyre and Doucette (2010), "Being willing to communicate is part of becoming fluent in a second language, which often is the ultimate goal of L2 learners". This correlational study indicated that students who are more willing to communicate are better in L2 achievement.

According to Mahmoodi and Moazam (2014), the findings of the study were in line with Baghaei (2012), who identified two out of the three subscales of WTC, willingness to communicate in the school context and willingness to communicate with native speakers of English, which were moderately correlated with success in learning English as a foreign language. Thus, these results indicated the influence of WTC towards successful L2 language learning, especially in relation to speaking skills.

Bergil (2016) conducted a study in relation to the influence of WTC and individual differences (IDs) on overall speaking skills. He cited Dörnyei (2005), who explains IDs as characteristics or traits that enable differentiation between individuals that leads to different ways of acquiring a target language. The study was conducted among 73 preparatory class students studying English. The instruments selected in the study were adapted from WTC scales by McCroskey (1992) and a 5 point Likert-type scale for eliciting instructors' points of view about the overall speaking skills of the participants. Results showed that participants had average WTC levels. However, their WTC levels had diverse effects on their overall speaking skills in terms of their context and receiver-type preferences, which implicated that activities conducted in foreign language classes should provide various opportunities for the learners to use their language learning skills in different situations, hence highlighting the role of contexts and situations as very crucial in WTC studies.

# WTC according to the Domains of Language Use

Marjohan (1988, as cited Fishman, 1972) found that domain is a sociocultural construct that addresses communication in relation to "who" speaks "what language" to "whom" and "when". In this context, "who" refers to the speaker, "what" refers to the language spoken by the speaker, "whom" refers to the interlocutor in the specific domain in time, and "when" is the context or domain of language use. Thus, these aspects will clarify language choice and use of the speakers in accordance with Fishman's (1972) statement that topic, role relation, and locale are the factors that will influence the concept of domains. Even though domain analysis frameworks are usually used by researchers in the area of language choice and use, contextualising the willingness to communicate using a second language also involves the factors of topic, role relation, and locality. By adapting Fishman's (1972) analytical framework, the researcher contextualised the events in which communication took place. Thus, the participants' willingness to communicate using English language would vary according to the language domains. The domains used by the researcher in the current study are education, family, friendship, religious, and transaction.

# MATERIALS AND METHODS

# Participants and Setting

The participants in the present study were 39 Malay, Chinese, and Indian undergraduates studying in various programs and faculties in a public university in Malaysia, such as agricul-

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ture, medicine, architecture, language, and engineering. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 25 years old. The number of female participants outnumbered the male participants.

## Instruments

Data for the study were collected using a survey questionnaire. There are three sections in the questionnaire: Sections 1, 2 and 3. The first section was developed to illicit demographic backgrounds of the participants such as field of study, faculty, age, gender, and ethnicity. The second section was designed to retrieve information regarding the participants' Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA), while the third section was designed to retrieve information on the participants' Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The two main constructs of the study that were meant to be determined by the indicator variables presented in Table 1 were tested for reliability, resulting Cronbach alpha values of more than 0.75 for every instrument.

#### **Procedure**

The researcher explained the purpose of the research as well as the aspects of confidentiality to the participants. Informed consent was obtained from them for volunteering to participate in the survey. The participants were encouraged to ask questions for further clarification regarding the questions or statements in the questionnaire. Time taken by the participants to complete the questionnaire was 10–15 minutes.

# **Null Hypothesis**

The study aimed to confirm the following hypothesis:

 $\rm H_0 ext{-}$  There is no significant correlation between Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

# Analysis

The data collected in the study were analysed by using SPSS version 18. Descriptive statistics were conducted for demographics data, level of EGA according to ethnicity, and level of WTC according to ethnicity. Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted in order to analyse the relations between the

level of EGA and WTC for overall participants as well as according to ethnicity.

## RESULTS

This section describes the demographic profiles, levels of EGA, and levels of WTC of the undergraduates from the three different ethnicities. It also provides information on the correlation analysis of the three ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). In addition, the analysis results of the relations between the levels of EGA and the WTC for the undergraduates in the overall analysis will also be presented.

# **Profile of the Participants**

The demographic information of the participants in the study is presented in Table 2, below.

## Level of EGA and WTC according to Ethnicity

Based on descriptive analysis of the data, the levels of EGA and WTC of the three ethnic groups are presented in Figure 1, below.

The level of EGA for the Malays is the highest with 83% as compared to the Chinese with 73% and the Indians with 81%. However, for the level of WTC, the Chinese have the highest score of 75%, while the Malays and Indians are at 63%.

# WTC according to Domain of Language Use

The levels of WTC according to domains can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Based on the results, the respondents were more willing to use English language in the domain of education. Each ethnicity achieved the highest mean in this domain (Malay, M=3.82, Chinese, M= 4.31, Indian, M= 4.36) with total accumulative M= 4.16. The domain that received second highest mean is transactional (Malay, M=3.20, Chinese, M= 4.27, Indian, M= 4.24) with total accumulative M= 3.91. The friendship domain had the third highest mean (Malay, M=3.30, Chinese, M= 3.77, Indian, M= 4.17) with total accumulative M= 3.75. The fourth highest domain is family domain (Malay, M=2.96, Chinese, M= 3.28, Indian, M= 3.73) with total accumulative M= 3.31. The domain that received the lowest score is religious with total accumula-

Table 1. The main constructs, their indicator variables, number of items, reliability measures and adaptation sources

| Variable | Indicator variables | Items No. | Cronbach's alpha | Sources   |
|----------|---------------------|-----------|------------------|---|
| EGA      | Loyalty             | 12        | 0.89             | Phinney, (1992)                                   |
|          | Pride               | 12        | 0.85             | Magid (2004)                                      |
|          |                     |           |                  | Elizabeth gatbonton and pavel trofimovich, (2008) |
| WTC      | Education           | 10        | 0.89             | McCroskey, (1992)                                 |
|          | Family              | 10        | 0.98             |   |
|          | Friendship          | 10        | 0.96             |   |
|          | Religious           | 3         | 0.93             | Fishman, J.A (1972)                               |
|          | Transaction         | 10        | 0.95             | Mehdi Granhemat, (2015)                           |

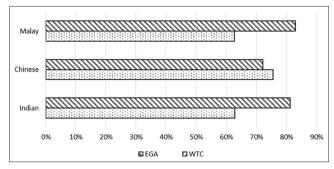
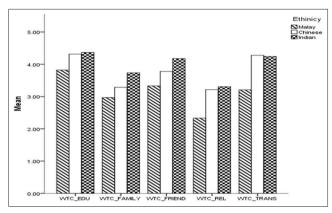


Figure 1. Scores of EGA and WTC



**Figure 2.** Levels of WTC according to domains of language use

tive M= 2.94 and the means for each ethnicity are Malay, M=2.33, Chinese, M= 3.21, and Indian, M= 3.30.

# Relationship between EGA and WTC

In order to identify the relationship between EGA and WTC, Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted according to ethnicity and on overall data.

## Overall correlational result of EGA and WTC

Table 3, below, shows the result of the Pearson Correlation between EGA and WTC on all the respondents.

Overall, results of the Pearson correlation indicated a significant weak negative association between Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC), r= -0.323, n= 39, p= 0.045.

# Correlation between EGA and WTC of the ethnic groups

Table 4, below, shows the result of the Pearson Correlation between EGA and WTC according to ethnicity.

As Table 4 indicates, there is a significant negative correlation between EGA and WTC among the Chinese undergraduates (r= -0.661, n= 14, p= 0.01). However, correlation between EGA and WTC for the Indian undergraduates is low, negative, and insignificant (r= -0.37, n= 12, p= 0.237). In the case of Malay undergraduates, the correlation coefficient is negligible and insignificant (r= 0.193, r= 13, r= 0.527).

**Table 2.** Ethnicity, gender, age, undergraduate year and MUET results

| Demographics        | Frequency | Percentage |  |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|--|
| Ethnicity           |           |            |  |
| Malay               | 13        | 33         |  |
| Chinese             | 14        | 35.8       |  |
| Indian              | 12        | 30.7       |  |
| Gender              |           |            |  |
| Male                | 9         | 23.07      |  |
| Female              | 30        | 76.92      |  |
| Age                 |           |            |  |
| 20-22               | 26        | 66.66      |  |
| 23-25               | 13        | 33.33      |  |
| Undergraduate year  |           |            |  |
| First year          | 14        | 35.9       |  |
| Second year         | 11        | 28.2       |  |
| Third year          | 11        | 28.2       |  |
| Fourth year         | 3         | 7.7        |  |
| MUET results (Band) |           |            |  |
| 3                   | 6         | 15.38      |  |
| 4                   | 29        | 74.35      |  |
| 5                   | 4         | 10.25      |  |

Table 3. Overall correlation

|                     | WTC    |
|---------------------|--------|
| EGA                 |        |
| Pearson correlation | -0.323 |
| Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.045  |
| N                   | 39     |

Table 4. Correlation according to ethnicity

| Malay               | WTC     |        |       |
|---------------------|---------|--------|-------|
|                     | Chinese | Indian |       |
| EGA                 |         |        |       |
| Pearson correlation | 0.193   | -0.661 | -0.37 |
| Sig. (2-tailed)     | 0.527   | 0.01   | 0.237 |
| N                   | 13      | 14     | 12    |

# DISCUSSION

The results of the current study indicate that high levels of ethnic group affiliation (EGA) resulted in low levels of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English language among the undergraduates from the three major ethnic groups in a public university in Malaysia. Another study related to EGA conducted by Hineoya and Gatbonton (2000) concluded by predicting that an increased affiliation with one's native culture can cause a lower level of proficiency in a second language. Gatbonton and Trofimovich also hypothesized that EGA might influence the level of L2 proficiency by refer-

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ring to the intimate relationship between language and group identity (Edwards, 1985 and Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982, as cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In line with these findings, the results of the current study also indicated that a high level of EGA can lead to a lower level of WTC in the English language. According to MacIntyre and Doucette (2010), WTC is part of becoming fluent in a L2, which is the premier goal of L2 learning. When language learners are willing to communicate in the second language, they will receive more exposure to real L2 communication, which, in turn, improves their L2 fluency.

EGA, on the other hand, is the intimate feeling that one has towards one's native culture and language. Sachdev and Bourhis (2005, as cited in Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008) stated that language is 'the pillar of ethnolinguistic identity', which means that language represents who its users are. Therefore, in order to protect their existence and identity, ethnic groups often pressure their members to behave in ways to ensure the maintenance and preservation of their language and consequently protect their existence. Due to the responsibility of protecting and maintaining the existence of their ethnic group, there will be to some degree, the tendency of the member to be 'un' willing to communicate in another language or otherwise limit their willingness to communicate in the second language. Thus, the results indicate the need to pay more attention to EGA in relation to English language teaching and learning as it can influence students' success in undertaking the learning process.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the relationship between Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) and willingness to communicate (WTC) among the undergraduates from the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Generally, the levels of Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) shown by each ethnicity were relatively high. This indicates that the participants had close attachments towards their own native cultures and languages. On the other hand, the levels of their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) were moderate. Significantly negative and weak correlations between these two variables were recorded, thus indicating a high level of Ethnic Group Affiliation (EGA) will result in a low level of Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Based on the results, EGA does play a major role in reflecting one's willingness to communicate.

The study also looked into willingness to communicate according to domains of language use, and the results varied according to language domains due to the preferences of individuals in using a specific language in specific domain. As Malaysia acknowledges the role of English language as the second language, the willingness to use English language in education and transactional settings is relatively higher than other domains. Based on these results, it is worth mentioning that the willingness to use English language among the undergraduates in the study was closely bound to the nature of the multilingual society of Malaysia. This is due to the varieties of language spoken by the society and which language they chose to speak in a particular situation.

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