

CHAPTER

11

‘TRAUMA’: LEARNERS WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

There are traumas we witness, ones we inherit, and others tied to illness or loss. But among them, complex trauma often runs the deepest. It is harder to name, and even harder to leave behind. For second language learners, this kind of trauma is not just a distant memory, it can shape the way they see themselves, the confidence they carry, and whether they feel safe enough to speak at all.

This form of trauma plays a central role in shaping learners’ language learning journey. Over the years, we have seen it time and again, bright, capable English as a second language (ESL) learners who fall silent the moment they are asked to speak in English. As teachers, we have come to recognise that this silence often goes far beyond vocabulary or grammar. It runs deeper, rooted in emotional and psychological experiences that many learners carry with them. For some, learning English has not been a journey of growth, but a series of painful encounters marked by embarrassment, discouragement, and in some cases, trauma.

These experiences, whether sharp and unforgettable or subtle and sustained, begin to shape how learners see the language, how they see themselves, and whether they feel safe enough to speak at all. This is where complex trauma enters the picture: not a single incident, but a pattern of emotionally harmful, often interpersonal moments over time that quietly erode confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC).

This chapter explores the complex and often painful connection between negative past learning experiences and students' WTC in English as a second language. In ESL classrooms, a lack of WTC does not just mean quiet students, it can mean stifled ideas, missed opportunities, and a deeply rooted fear of judgement. For many learners, especially at the tertiary level, being unwilling to speak up can have far-reaching consequences. It affects not just classroom participation, but also their confidence in job interviews, their ability to engage with others in professional settings, and ultimately, their access to global employment opportunities where English is the norm.

In Malaysia, where English is essential in both public and private sectors, employers value bilingualism and strong communication skills. Proficiency in English can create opportunities, while a lack of it can be limiting. Kang (2005) found that fostering WTC supports not only classroom engagement but also the development of independent learners who can use language effectively in real-life contexts. Learners who feel confident and supported are more likely to participate meaningfully in both academic and social settings (Hernández, 2020). However, early negative experiences such as ridicule or punishment can damage learners' relationship with English.

Harsh corrections, public embarrassment, and silencing can erode self-esteem and motivation of the learners to learn. Experiences of embarrassment in the language classroom are common and can have long-lasting negative effects on WTC and self-perceived proficiency (Khajavy et al., 2025). In fact, a learner's self-worth is closely tied to their WTC in the target language. If past language experiences were painful, fear may outweigh the desire to learn or speak (Pattapong, 2010).

While language instruction often focuses on skills and strategies, emotional factors are equally vital. Works of Gardner and Lambert (1972), followed by Gardner (1985), and later MacIntyre and Charos (1996), stressed that motivation, confidence, anxiety, and attitudes significantly affect communication. Yet, the impact of specific negative experiences, those lingering moments of emotional harm, remains underexplored.

Through this chapter, the researcher seeks to discover those overlooked experiences and show how unresolved emotional wounds can turn language classrooms into places of silence, rather than spaces of confident and meaningful expressions.

11.2 WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

Some people speak up with ease, while others hold back, often not because they lack ability, but because something deeper is at play. This brings us to the idea of WTC, a concept that helps explain why individuals choose to engage or remain silent in social interactions. The concept of WTC was first introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985), who described it as “the individual’s tendency to initiate communication when they are free to do so”, specifically among native speakers of English. In essence, WTC describes a psychological readiness, whether someone chooses to speak or remain silent in each interaction.

In the context of second language (L2) learning, WTC has taken on a more nuanced definition. MacIntyre et al. (1998) expanded the concept to refer to “the readiness to enter into a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using L2”. This definition is particularly relevant in language classrooms where opportunities to communicate often depend on both internal disposition and external environment.

Initially, WTC was viewed as a stable personality trait (McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). However, later research by MacIntyre et al. (1998) shifted this perspective, proposing that WTC in L2 should be seen as a situational and dynamic construct. This led to the development of the Heuristic Model of WTC (Figure 11.1) in a second language, which has