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**COMMUNICATING WHEN NECESSARY:
PERCEIVED FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND WILLINGNESS
TO COMMUNICATE AMONG MALAYSIAN EXCHANGE STUDENTS
ABROAD**

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ABSTRACT

Exchange programmes provide students with opportunities to use foreign languages in real-life settings. However, being abroad does not automatically mean that students will communicate confidently in the host-country language. Underpinned by MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) L2 Willingness to Communicate model, this qualitative study explores how Malaysian exchange students perceived the role of their foreign language proficiency in shaping their willingness to communicate with locals during exchange programmes in South Korea and Germany. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four Malaysian tertiary students who had participated in exchange programmes for at least three months. The findings suggest that students who perceived themselves as having stronger prior knowledge of the host-country language reported greater confidence in communicating with locals. However, willingness to communicate was not shaped by perceived proficiency alone. Participants' language use was also influenced by everyday necessity, fear of negative evaluation, perceived local response, religiously significant food-related needs, and the need to adapt to daily life abroad. The study contributes to willingness-to-communicate research by showing

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that exchange students' communication abroad may be voluntary, hesitant, or necessity-driven. The findings suggest that universities should provide pre-departure language preparation that includes basic host-language knowledge, scenario-based communication practice, intercultural awareness, and practical phrases for daily and religiously relevant situations.

Keywords: willingness to communicate; perceived proficiency; foreign language learning; exchange students; study abroad; Malaysian tertiary students

INTRODUCTION

Exchange programmes provide university students with opportunities to experience learning beyond the classroom. Apart from academic exposure, such programmes allow students to engage with new cultures, communicate with local communities, and use foreign languages in real-life settings. For students who travel to countries where English is not widely used in daily interaction, basic knowledge of the host-country language may become important for everyday communication. Students may need the local language to ask for directions, order food, read signs, use public transport, purchase items, solve payment problems, or seek help from local service workers. In this sense, exchange programmes can offer meaningful opportunities for students to practise the foreign language they have learned and to develop greater confidence in intercultural communication.

International student mobility has become an important feature of higher education worldwide. The OECD reported that international students enrolled in OECD countries increased from 3.0 million in 2014 to more than 4.6 million in 2022, showing the growing importance of cross-border education and student mobility. Although this statistic refers mainly to international tertiary enrolment, it reflects the wider global interest in mobility-based learning, including short-term study abroad and exchange programmes. For language learners, this mobility is often associated with exposure to authentic communication, opportunities to interact with local speakers, and the possibility of developing greater confidence in using the target language.

Previous studies have shown that study abroad may support language development, learner motivation, self-confidence, perceived communicative competence, and intercultural awareness. However, these studies differ in their research designs, contexts, samples, and findings. For example, Higuchi, Nakamuro, Roever, Sasaki, and Yashima (2023) used a fuzzy regression discontinuity design to examine the impact of studying abroad among Japanese university students. Their study found that

study abroad improved English proficiency and also increased international posture and perceived communicative competence. This study is important because it provides stronger causal evidence than many small-scale studies, as it used a quantitative design to examine measurable outcomes. However, its focus was on English proficiency among Japanese students, not on Malaysian students using Korean or German in everyday host-country settings.

McManus, Mitchell, and Tracy-Ventura (2021) also examined language development in study abroad, but through a longitudinal design. Their study involved 56 university learners majoring in French and Spanish who spent nine months abroad as part of a four-year degree programme. Their findings showed that learners' linguistic development changed before, during, and after study abroad, and that home and abroad contexts shaped language development differently. This study highlights that language development is not only a result of being abroad; it also depends on the learning context, language use, and learners' prior linguistic resources. However, the participants in their study were advanced learners of French and Spanish, while the present study involves Malaysian students with varying levels of Korean and German proficiency.

In addition, Kaya (2021) studied EFL learners participating in the Erasmus programme in contexts where English was not used as the first language. This study is especially relevant to the present article because it shows that study abroad may provide useful opportunities for language development, but students may also experience challenges when the host environment does not use the language they are most comfortable with. Kaya's study suggests that being abroad can be beneficial, but the benefit depends on the extent to which students are able to access meaningful language use. This point connects closely with the present study, where participants reported that they sometimes used Korean or German not because they were fully confident, but because the situation required them to do so.

The benefits and challenges of international student exchange programmes were investigated by Suryanto, Ayuza, and Othman (2022). Their findings among English Language Education students in an Islamic private university in Yogyakarta showed that exchange programmes helped students practise and improve their English, but students also faced challenges in how to communicate and adapt themselves. Unlike the present study, Suryanto et al. focused on English use during international exchange, while the present study focuses on Malaysian students' use of non-English host-country languages, namely Korean and German.

The studies suggest three important points. First, study abroad can support language development and communicative confidence. Second, language development depends on learners' active engagement with the host environment. Third, students may still face communication challenges even when they are physically immersed in another country. Therefore, exchange programmes should not be treated as automatically successful language-learning environments. The question is not only whether students go abroad, but whether they are willing and able to communicate in the host-country language.

This is where willingness to communicate (WTC) becomes important. WTC is a central concept in second and foreign language learning because it helps explain why some learners choose to speak while others remain silent even when they have some knowledge of the language. MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) define L2 WTC as a learner's readiness to enter into discourse with specific people at a particular time. Their L2 WTC model explains that communication behaviour is shaped by several layers, including perceived communicative competence, language anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, interpersonal relationships, intergroup climate, and the immediate social situation. The study shows that students' willingness to communicate is not determined by proficiency alone as a learner may know vocabulary and grammar but still avoid speaking if they feel anxious, shy, or unsure of how the other person will respond.

More recent WTC research continues to view willingness to communicate as dynamic, situated, and context-dependent. Peng (2024), in a review of 25 years of L2 WTC research, explains that WTC has been studied through several perspectives, including social psychological, cultural, dynamic, ecological, multimodal, and digital perspectives. This wider view is important because it moves WTC beyond the individual learner and considers the role of environment, culture, interlocutor, resources, and communication setting. This is highly pertinent to exchange students because their willingness to communicate may change from one situation to another. For example, a student may avoid casual conversation with locals but still speak when buying food, asking directions, or solving a problem at a cashier.

Perceived proficiency is one factor that may influence WTC. Perceived proficiency refers to how learners judge their own language ability. Learners' willingness to speak may depend not only on their actual language ability but also on how capable they believe themselves to be. Darasawang and Reinders (2021) examined the relationship between willingness to communicate and second language proficiency. Their study suggests that proficiency should not only be understood as the explanation for communication readiness, but learners' confidence and perception of their ability also matter. This

supports the present study's focus on self-perceived foreign language proficiency, since the participants' Korean or German proficiency was not measured through formal testing. Instead, the study examines how students themselves described their language ability and how this shaped their willingness or reluctance to communicate.

Yang and Lian (2023) offer another useful perspective in their quantitative study involving 427 undergraduate EFL learners in China. They examined the relationship between ideal L2 self, self-efficacy, WTC, and pragmatic production. Their findings showed that self-efficacy and WTC significantly predicted pragmatic production, while WTC mediated the relationship between learners' motivational self-system and communicative performance. This study shows the idea that learners who see themselves as capable language users may be more willing to communicate and more able to perform pragmatically in the target language. However, Yang and Lian's study was conducted in a Chinese EFL context and was not based on study abroad experience. Therefore, it supports the psychological and motivational aspects of WTC, but it does not fully explain the practical, intercultural, and religiously significant communication needs faced by Malaysian exchange students abroad.

In addition, language anxiety is another important factor. Manipuspika (2018) used a quantitative descriptive approach with 98 English Department students in Indonesia and examined the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and WTC using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and a WTC scale. The study found a significant relationship between anxiety and WTC, showing that anxiety can shape learners' readiness to communicate. Several participants described themselves as afraid, shy, or not confident when using the host-country language.

These studies show that WTC and study abroad have been examined from different perspectives. However, they do not fully address how Malaysian exchange students in non-English-dominant countries negotiate host-language use in everyday situations. They also do not focus on how religiously significant needs, such as asking about halal food, may shape willingness to communicate. This is the gap addressed by the present study. For Malaysian exchange students, this issue is particularly relevant when they participate in programmes in countries such as South Korea and Germany. Although Malaysian university students may be familiar with English in academic settings, English may not always be sufficient for everyday communication abroad. In such contexts, even basic knowledge of Korean, German, or another host-country language may help students manage daily life. At the same time, having basic knowledge does not necessarily mean that students will feel confident enough to communicate. Their willingness to use the language may also be shaped by fear of making mistakes,

perceived local response, practical needs, religious concerns, and the pressure to adapt to the host environment.

Despite the growing attention to study abroad and WTC, there is still a need for more qualitative studies that examine how Malaysian exchange students themselves explain their communication experiences in foreign-language settings. Existing research often focus on language development, motivation, or WTC in classroom contexts. Less attention has been given to how Malaysian students negotiate host-country language use during everyday encounters abroad, especially in countries where English may not be sufficient for daily interaction. It is also important to understand how students' willingness to communicate may be shaped not only by language learning motivation, but also by practical and culturally specific needs. For Muslim students, for example, communication may be necessary when asking about food ingredients, pork, gelatine, alcohol, or halal suitability.

Therefore, this study explores how Malaysian exchange students perceived the role of their foreign language proficiency in shaping their willingness to communicate with locals during exchange programmes in South Korea and Germany. The study is underpinned by MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) L2 WTC model, which explains that willingness to communicate is influenced by perceived competence, confidence, anxiety, interpersonal factors, and social situation. The study focuses on how students described their own language ability and how this shaped their confidence, hesitation, or need to communicate abroad. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Malaysian exchange students describe the role of their perceived foreign language proficiency in shaping their willingness to communicate with locals abroad?
2. What factors encourage or limit Malaysian exchange students' willingness to communicate in the host-country language during their exchange experience?
3. What are the participants' views on foreign language preparation and university support for future exchange programmes?

METHODOLOGY

Through a qualitative research design, the study explored Malaysian exchange students' perceived foreign language proficiency and their willingness to communicate in the host-country language while abroad. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication in real exchange-programme contexts rather than to measure the statistical relationship between proficiency and willingness to communicate. (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were collected through semi-structured

interviews as it allowed the researcher to use prepared guiding questions while still giving participants space to explain their experiences in their own words. In this study, the interview questions focused on participants' exchange-programme background, prior foreign language learning, self-perceived proficiency, willingness or unwillingness to communicate, examples of communication with locals, factors influencing language use, and views on language preparation before going abroad.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling as the study required participants who had direct experience of the phenomenon being investigated. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is commonly used to identify information-rich participants who can provide relevant and detailed insights into a specific issue (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants had to meet three criteria: they had to be Malaysian tertiary students, they had to have participated in an exchange programme abroad for at least three months, and they had to have experience learning or using the host-country language. These criteria ensured that the participants were able to reflect meaningfully on the link between foreign language knowledge and willingness to communicate abroad. Four Malaysian tertiary students participated in the study. Two participants were from the International Islamic University Malaysia and had joined exchange programmes in South Korea, where they used Korean. The other two participants were from Universiti Kuala Lumpur British Malaysian Institute and had joined exchange programmes in Germany, where they used German. The participants' exchange duration ranged from four to six months. All of them had a minimum of 1 semester of learning the foreign language at their respective universities.

The interviews were conducted online through Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 30 - 45 minutes. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent for the interviews to be recorded. They also gave consent for anonymised quotations to be used in the article. The interviews were conducted in English, Malay, or a mixture of both, depending on the participants' preference. Allowing participants to use their preferred language helped them express their experiences more comfortably and clearly. The interview questions were shared with participants through WhatsApp platform before the interview so that they could reflect on their exchange experiences and provide fuller responses during the interview. The interview recordings were manually transcribed by repeatedly listening to the audio files. Responses given in Malay were translated verbatim into English. The transcribed interview scripts were then returned to the participants for confirmation of accuracy before analysis. This step helped to ensure that the participants' intended meanings were accurately represented. All participants were anonymised as P1, P2, P3, and P4 to protect their identity.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data as the study aimed to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts of language proficiency, willingness to communicate, fear, necessity, adaptation, and other factors influencing communication abroad. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis in this study followed several stages: familiarisation with the transcripts, initial coding of relevant statements, grouping related codes into broader categories, identifying possible themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and selecting representative quotations to support the findings. This process was guided by established thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

Several steps were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. First, the interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully. Then, the transcripts were returned to participants for confirmation. Malay responses found were translated verbatim to preserve the meaning of participants' responses. Next, the codification process was checked by an applied linguistics ESL lecturer with more than 30 years of experience. Finally, the findings were supported with direct participant quotations. These steps provided a clear record of how the data were handled, coded and interpreted. Such transparency is important in qualitative research because it allows readers to understand how findings were developed from participants' accounts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Flick, 2023; Miles et al., 2020).

FINDINGS

The first research question examined how Malaysian exchange students described the role of their perceived foreign language proficiency in shaping their willingness to communicate with locals abroad. The findings show that perceived proficiency influenced students' confidence, but did not automatically produce willingness to communicate. Students with stronger perceived proficiency appeared more open to using the host-country language, while students with basic perceived proficiency reported hesitation, fear, or selective use of the language.

P1, who had learned Korean for six years before going to South Korea, described the exchange experience positively because it allowed him to use Korean in real-life situations:

“Yes, I like the experience because as I said before, I got to fully immerse in their culture and since their country is not an English-speaking country and many of the natives and locals do not use English on a daily basis, so we can fully utilise our knowledge in the Korean language.”
(P1)

P1's response suggests that stronger prior language learning gave him confidence to use Korean with locals. He viewed the exchange programme as an opportunity to practise and apply what he had learned. For him, the host-country language was not mainly a barrier. It was a communicative resource that helped him take part in the local environment. By contrast, P2, P3 and P4 described their language proficiency as basic. For example,

"I would give a rating of 4, because I know how to read and write. Listening can be quite tough sometimes because people don't really use the standard language that we learned in class in UIA."
(P2)

These responses show that students distinguished between knowing some language and being able to communicate confidently. The finding is therefore not simply that "higher proficiency increases WTC", but that perceived proficiency supported confidence, while limited perceived proficiency made students more cautious and situation-dependent.

The findings also show that students' willingness to communicate was not stable across all situations. P2, for example, said she was willing to use Korean, but her willingness depended on the type of interaction and the expected response from locals:

"Actually, I am willing to use the language, but sometimes I am afraid the Koreans do not want to talk with foreigners. I think if it's with the seller, I would definitely talk with them a lot using Korean, especially when they love to give discounts if we can speak well in Korean."
(P2)

This response shows that willingness was selective and P2 was more willing to use Korean in service encounters, such as speaking with sellers, because the situation was practical and possibly rewarding. However, she was more hesitant when she was unsure whether locals would respond positively to foreigners. This suggests that perceived proficiency influenced WTC, but the actual decision to communicate depended on the situation. Students did not simply become willing or unwilling speakers. Their willingness shifted depending on confidence, expected local response, and practical purpose. Although some participants reported fear or hesitation, the findings also show moments of genuine keenness to use the host-country language. P1 valued the opportunity to use Korean because the exchange experience placed him in a setting where the language was naturally needed. P2 also described the Korean environment as useful for language practice:

"I do like it. The language that we learned over there, we learned it intensively and went to class everyday. We also have to communicate with those people who use Korean as their main language. So, it keeps us improving our skills in talking, and reading. Most of the signs and menu were

written in Korean, especially in the Sun Moon university area, which is not considered an urban area. I like it more there, because we have more chances to use it. In Malaysia, even after classes, we don't really know when to use it." (P2)

This shows that the exchange environment gave students opportunities for real language use that were not easily available in Malaysia. P2 connected her willingness to communicate with the availability of authentic input and real communicative situations, such as reading signs and menus and interacting with Korean speakers. Therefore, perceived proficiency became more meaningful when the host environment provided opportunities to use the language.

The second research question examined the factors that encouraged or limited students' willingness to communicate in the host-country language. The findings show that WTC abroad was influenced by four main factors: fear and low confidence, necessity-driven communication, adaptation to host-country life, and religiously significant communicative needs. Fear and low confidence were the clearest limiting factors. P3 described being afraid to communicate during the early part of her exchange:

"For the first three months, I was afraid to communicate using the language. The community in my city were mostly the elderly and I feel scared to try and engage with them." (P3)

P4 expressed even stronger avoidance:

"Not really, if possible, I would like to avoid communicating with the locals as much as I can. It is because I was quite shy to use the language and I am not confident to use them." (P4)

These responses show that limited WTC was not only linked to language ability. It was also linked to emotional readiness. P3's fear lasted for the first three months, suggesting that the early adjustment period was especially difficult. P4's response shows that basic language knowledge did not necessarily lead to actual communication when confidence was low. Some participants also felt discouraged by how locals responded to them. P2 described a situation where she tried to ask for directions:

"We wanted to ask the people around on how to get back, because they would know better. However, some of them don't want to talk at all. It's either that, or literally run away. Sometimes we even asked the questions in Korean, questions whether they could speak English, but then they just ran away." (P2)

P3 also described difficulty asking locals about public transport:

“When I first arrived, it was very hard for me to ask the locals how to ride the train because they don’t use English. They would most likely ignore you if you did not know how to speak their language.” (P3)

Although these are participants’ perceptions of the interactions, the study cannot confirm the locals’ actual intentions. However, the perceptions are important because they shaped participants’ future willingness to communicate. When students felt ignored, avoided, or not understood, they became more hesitant to initiate communication.

The findings also show that communication often occurred because students needed to solve immediate problems. This is one of the strongest findings of the study. Participants did not always communicate because they were fully willing or confident. They communicated because daily life required it. P2 explained:

“I’m not sure about ‘willing’ to communicate, because most of the time it was like we ‘had to’ communicate. Even in the store that has a self-service machine, they don’t offer English and it was so hard. Sometimes when the card does not work during the payment, we would need to go to the cashier, so I would say it was not ‘willingly’ but more to ‘naturally’ doing it. Locals there are all Koreans, they don’t have diverse cultures like us so naturally we would need to talk to them and use the Korean language that we learned because they don’t know English, most of the time.” (P2)

This response shows that communication was sometimes activated by necessity rather than confidence. P2 had to use Korean when the self-service machine did not work and English was not available. Therefore, the host-country language became necessary for completing daily tasks. P3 made a similar point:

“People in rural areas especially would most likely use their own language, hence we had no choice but to use them. At first, I thought having the basic knowledge like basic greetings would be sufficient, but it is not.” (P3)

P3’s response shows that simple greetings were not enough for real-life communication. Students needed more practical language for actual situations. This theme shows that necessity can encourage communication even when students are not fully confident.

Adaptation to daily life was another factor that encouraged language use. Participants needed the host-country language for ordinary routines such as buying food, asking for directions, using transport, finding items in shops, and communicating with service workers. P1 explained:

“Examples are everyday situations like when you want to order a taxi or when you want to pay at the cashier, want to order food or ask questions by the street. So that is like an important factor for you to learn the language before coming to the country.” (P1)

P4 also explained the need to use German during grocery shopping:

“Also, when going to the grocery store at our place, we need to use their language or else they would not entertain us. Basically, I would just use the language for when I needed to use it. I suppose if were to make conversations or just communicate to them as normal people would, I’d get more benefit from there too.” (P4)

These responses show that students used the host-country language to function in daily life. The language was not only for academic or social purposes. It was needed for practical adaptation. However, adaptation did not always mean students became fully confident. In P4’s case, she used the language only when she needed to but was also aware of the benefits of simply making conversations and practice the language more.

Religiously significant food-related communication also encouraged students to use the host-country language. For Muslim participants, the host-country language was important when asking about ingredients, pork, gelatine, and halal suitability. P2 explained:

“It’s important because if it’s for us Muslims, we need to know the ingredients of the food. So, that’s one of the reasons why we need to know how to read or have the basic knowledge on it. Sometimes, we do have apps like Papago or Google Translate to scan the ingredients, but sometimes it doesn’t come up accurately.” (P2)

P4 described preparing a question in German before buying pastries:

“There was a time when we went to a cafe and as Muslims, there are not many pastries that we could eat there because they contain pork gelatine. So, when we wanted to buy some, we would just use the questions we prepared in advance and ask important questions of what we wanted to know like ‘is there any gelatine in this pastry?’ in German and most of the time we will use body language and gestures as in pointing to another item that had gelatine in it.” (P4)

These responses show that religiously significant needs created practical reasons to communicate. Participants needed to ask direct questions and understand ingredient information before deciding what

they could eat. Translation applications helped, but participants did not fully trust them in all situations. P4's response also shows that students used strategies such as preparing questions in advance and using body language.

The third research question examined participants' views on foreign language preparation and university support for future exchange programmes. The findings show that participants generally believed students should acquire at least basic knowledge of the host-country language before departure. However, they also suggested that universities should provide better language support rather than leaving students to prepare on their own.

Participants viewed basic language knowledge as important because it helped students manage daily life abroad. Their examples included asking for directions, ordering food, buying groceries, reading signs, speaking to shop workers, using public transport, and asking about food ingredients. P1's earlier response about ordering taxis, paying at the cashier, ordering food and asking questions on the street shows that students saw language preparation as directly linked to everyday survival. P4's response about food ingredients also show that basic language knowledge could help students manage religiously significant situations. The participants' experiences suggest that basic host-language knowledge should not be viewed as an optional advantage only. For students going to non-English-dominant countries, it may be necessary for daily functions.

The findings also show that students may not receive equal quality of language preparation before exchange. P4's case is important because she described her proficiency as very basic and explained that she learned mainly through YouTube because her university did not provide additional classes before the programme:

“Very basic, around 4 out of 10 as I only learned the language through YouTube, and also our university did not provide any additional classes to learn the language.”
(P4)

This response suggests that some students may need more structured pre-departure support. Self-learning can help, but it may not be enough for real-life communication abroad. Students need practical language that prepares them for likely situations in the host country. Based on participants' accounts, useful pre-departure preparation would include simple self-preparation like host-language phrases, listening practice, role-play, public transport communication, food ordering, grocery shopping,

payment problems, asking for directions, asking for help, and halal-related questions. These areas reflect the actual situations participants faced during their exchange.

Data also suggest that exchange programmes may support language improvement when students have opportunities to use the language regularly. P2 felt that being in Korea gave her more chances to use Korean than in Malaysia:

“Most of the signs and menu were written in Korean, especially in the Sun Moon university area, which is not considered an urban area. I like it more there, because we have more chances to use it. In Malaysia, even after classes, we don’t really know when to use it.” (P2)

This response suggests that language use was supported by the environment. Students had more opportunities to practise when the host-country language appeared in signs, menus, classes and daily interactions. However, the findings also suggest that post-return language practice is important. If students do not continue using the language after returning home, the improvement may not be sustained.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings show that Malaysian exchange students’ willingness to communicate abroad was shaped by perceived proficiency, confidence, fear, necessity, adaptation, religiously significant needs and institutional preparation. The findings show that perceived proficiency supported confidence. P1, who had learned Korean for six years, appeared more confident in using Korean. P2, P3 and P4, who rated their proficiency as basic, reported more hesitation and difficulty. This finding supports MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) L2 WTC model, which explains that willingness to communicate is influenced by perceived communicative competence and self-confidence. It also aligns with Darasawang and Reinders (2021), who argue that WTC should not be explained by proficiency alone because confidence and learner perception also play important roles. Yang and Lian (2023) are also relevant here because their study found that self-efficacy and WTC were linked to communicative performance. However, the present study adds that perceived proficiency becomes meaningful only when students face real communicative demands. P2 could read and write some Korean but struggled with listening because locals did not always speak in the standard form learned in class. This shows that classroom knowledge may not fully prepare students for spontaneous communication abroad. Therefore, WTC should be understood not only as a matter of language knowledge, but also as confidence to use that knowledge in unpredictable situations.

The findings also show that students' willingness was not constant. P2 was willing to speak with sellers but hesitant when she feared that locals might not want to talk to foreigners. P3 was afraid to communicate during the first three months. P4 wanted to avoid communication as much as possible because she lacked confidence. This supports MacIntyre's (2007) view that the decision to speak in a second language is a volitional process. Learners decide whether to speak based on perceived risk, confidence and emotional readiness. Manipuspika's (2018) study on anxiety and WTC is also relevant because it shows that anxiety can reduce willingness to communicate. The present study extends these findings into a study-abroad context. The participants' anxiety was not limited to classroom speaking. It appeared in real-life settings such as streets, shops, train stations and cafés. This makes the emotional dimension of WTC more practical and immediate because communication affects students' ability to complete everyday tasks. The findings also show that perceived local response shaped WTC. Although the study cannot verify locals' actual intentions, participants' perceptions of being ignored or avoided influenced their willingness to initiate communication. This supports Peng's (2024) ecological view of WTC, where communication readiness is shaped by the learner, interlocutor, environment and available resources.

The second research question asked what factors encouraged or limited WTC abroad. The most important finding is necessity-driven communication. Participants often used the host-country language because they had to, not because they were fully willing. P2's reflection that communication was "not willingly" but something she "had to" do captures this clearly. This finding sharpens this research's contribution. In many WTC studies, willingness is discussed through motivation, confidence, anxiety and perceived competence (Peng, 2024). The present study shows that in exchange contexts, communication may happen because the situation requires it. This extends MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model by showing how immediate situational need can push communication even when confidence is limited. It also supports Peng's (2024) view that WTC is dynamic and ecological. In the present study, willingness was not simply a personal trait. It changed according to urgency, task, setting and available language resources.

Adaptation to daily life was another factor that encouraged WTC. Participants needed Korean or German for ordinary routines such as taxis, shops, restaurants, grocery stores, directions and public transport. This finding is consistent with study abroad research showing that language development depends on meaningful engagement with the host environment. The findings support studies by McManus et al. (2021), Suryanto et al. (2022) and Higuchi et al. (2023) but reveal that engagement is uneven. Students may communicate actively in some situations but avoid communication in others.

Therefore, universities should not assume that students will automatically communicate because they are abroad. Students need preparation that helps them manage everyday situations confidently and strategically.

The halal-related findings are an important contextual contribution. For Muslim participants, asking about food ingredients was connected to religious observance and daily decision-making. They needed to ask about pork, gelatine and halal suitability. They also could not always rely fully on translation applications. This finding expands WTC research by showing that willingness to communicate may be shaped by religiously significant needs. This point is important for Malaysian exchange students because many may travel to non-Muslim-majority countries where halal information is not always available in English or Malay. Therefore, pre-departure language preparation should include halal-related phrases and strategies. This is not an extra issue outside the scope of language learning but presents a part of students' real communicative needs abroad.

Finally, findings showed that participants viewed basic host-country language knowledge as important. However, they also indicated that universities should provide structured support rather than expecting students to prepare alone. This implication follows directly from the findings. Students did not need language only for general conversation. They needed it for purposeful and specific scenarios: asking directions, ordering food, buying groceries, reading signs, solving payment problems, asking for help, using transport and checking ingredients. Therefore, pre-departure language preparation should be scenario-based. This recommendation is consistent with study abroad literature showing that students benefit more when they are able to engage meaningfully with the host environment (Kaya, 2021; McManus et al., 2021; Suryanto et al., 2022). It also responds to the participants' experiences of limited preparation, especially P4's reliance on YouTube learning. The findings also suggest the value of post-return support. Students may gain language confidence abroad, but if they have few chances to use the language after returning to home country in which their development may not continue. Universities could support this through language clubs, peer practice, exchange sharing sessions, international student mentoring or language-based volunteering.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how four Malaysian exchange students perceived the role of foreign language proficiency in shaping their willingness to communicate during exchange programmes in South Korea and Germany. The findings suggest that perceived proficiency supported students' communicative confidence, but did not determine their willingness to communicate on its own. Students' language

use was also shaped by fear, perceived local responses, practical needs, religiously significant food-related concerns, and the need to adapt to daily life abroad. The study contributes to WTC and study abroad research in three ways. First, it shows that perceived foreign language proficiency supports WTC mainly through confidence, but does not independently determine communication behaviour. Second, it identifies necessity-driven communication as an important feature of exchange students' language use abroad, where students communicate not because they are fully confident or willing, but because the situation requires it. Third, it adds a Malaysian Muslim perspective by showing how halal-related communication can shape students' use of the host-country language in non-English-dominant settings.

The findings suggest that universities should prepare exchange students not only through general pre-departure briefings, but also through basic host-language training, practical communication scenarios, intercultural preparation, and confidence-building activities. For Muslim students, halal-related communication should also be included because it is directly connected to their daily experience abroad. This study is limited by its small sample size and qualitative design; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all Malaysian exchange students. It also relied on participants' self-reported experiences and self-perceived proficiency rather than objective language testing. Future studies may involve larger samples, compare different host countries, examine students' WTC before, during and after exchange programmes, or use mixed methods to investigate the relationship between proficiency, confidence, anxiety and WTC more comprehensively.

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