



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***MEDIATING ROLES OF WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE AND
MOTIVATION IN L2 LEARNERS' SECOND LANGUAGE
COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE CONTEXTS***

SHIMA BALOUCHI

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MOTIVATION IN L2 LEARNERS' SECOND LANGUAGE
COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE CONTEXTS**

By

SHIMA BALOUCHI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

April 2022

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chair : Professor Arshad Abdul Samad, PhD
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The ideas of second language acquisition (SLA) and language communication have become so inextricably intertwined that previous language education research revealed that the path to second language (L2) learning passes via L2 speech. To date, a significant number of studies have highlighted the importance of affective variables in predicting students' L2 communication in different contexts and with different participants; however, the relationship between learners' affective variables and their L2 frequency of communication (L2 FOC) in fully online contexts has not been adequately investigated. Therefore, the main objective of the present study was to investigate the relationships between the L2 learners' affective factors and their L2 frequency of communication in online contexts. This study also examined the mediating roles of learners' L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and L2 motivation on the relationship between L2 Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), L2 anxiety, international posture, and the L2 frequency of communication. This study's variables are derived from Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of L2 learning, MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model, and the concept of international posture (Yashima, 2000; 2004) in the field of social psychology and communication. This study employed an online questionnaire to collect data from L2 undergraduates, and graduate students enrolled in four top research universities in Malaysia. The partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach was used to analyse the final data, which were 564 questionnaires. The findings of this study provide strong support for the proposed model and the hypothesised relationships. Furthermore, all of the direct established path's hypotheses were supported, with the exception of the path from anxiety to L2 communication frequency. Further investigation into the mediating effects of L2 motivation and L2 WTC revealed that all but one of the mediation effects among the constructs were significant. The indirect effect of international posture on L2 communication frequency via L2 WTC was not supported. Therefore, 15 out of 17 established paths hypotheses were supported. As a result, the proposed structural model of this study had a strong statistical ability in describing, explaining, and predicting L2

frequency of communication in online contexts among tertiary students in Malaysia. These findings hold important implications for both theory and practice. It extends the application of Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model beyond the classroom setting to online contexts. Given the importance of L2 SPCC, lack of L2 anxiety, international posture, motivation, and L2 WTC in students' L2 frequency of communication, those involved should consider developing and implementing activities that promote L2 SPCC, international posture, motivation, and L2 WTC while reducing L2 anxiety.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PERANAN PENGANTARA KESEDIAAN UNTUK BERKOMUNIKASI DAN
MOTIVASI DALAM KOMUNIKASI BAHASA KEDUA PELAJAR L2 DALAM
KONTEKS ATAS TALIAN**

Oleh

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Idea pemerolehan bahasa kedua (SLA) dan komunikasi bahasa telah menjadi sangat berkait rapat sehingga penyelidikan pendidikan bahasa terdahulu mendedahkan bahawa laluan kepada pembelajaran bahasa kedua (L2) melalui pertuturan L2. Sehingga kini, sejumlah besar kajian telah menekankan kepentingan pembolehubah afektif dalam meramalkan komunikasi L2 pelajar dalam konteks yang berbeza dan dengan peserta yang berbeza; walau bagaimanapun, hubungan antara pembolehubah afektif pelajar dan kekerapan komunikasi L2 mereka (L2 FOC) dalam konteks dalam talian sepenuhnya belum disiasat dengan secukupnya. Oleh itu, objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat hubungan antara faktor yang mempengaruhi pelajar L2 dan kekerapan komunikasi L2 mereka dalam konteks atas talian. Kajian ini juga mengkaji peranan pengantara Kesiediaan Pelajar L2 untuk Berkomunikasi (WTC) dan motivasi L2 mengenai hubungan antara Kecekapan Komunikasi L2 Yang Dinilai Diri Sendiri (SPCC), kebimbangan L2, postur antarabangsa, dan kekerapan komunikasi L2. Pembolehubah kajian ini diperolehi daripada model sosio-pendidikan Gardner (1985) bagi pembelajaran L2, MacIntyre dan Charos' (1996) Model WTC, dan konsep postur antarabangsa (Yashima, 2000; 2004) dalam bidang psikologi sosial dan komunikasi. Kajian ini menggunakan borang soal selidik atas talian untuk mengumpul data daripada mahasiswa L2, dan pelajar siswazah yang mendaftar di empat universiti penyelidikan terkemuka di Malaysia. Pendekatan Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) secara separa digunakan untuk menganalisis data akhir, iaitu berjumlah 564 soal selidik. Penemuan kajian ini memberikan sokongan yang kuat terhadap model yang dicadangkan dan hubungan yang dihipotesiskan. Selain itu, semua hubungan laluan hipotesis yang ditubuhkan secara langsung disokong, kecuali laluan dari kebimbangan kepada kekerapan komunikasi L2. Siasatan lanjut terhadap kesan pengantara motivasi L2 dan L2 WTC mendedahkan bahawa semuanya diterima dan salah satu kesan antarabangsa pada frekuensi komunikasi L2 melalui L2 WTC tidak disokong. Oleh itu, 15 daripada 17 laluan hubungan hipotesis yang ditubuhkan adalah disokong. Hasilnya, model struktur yang dicadangkan dalam kajian ini mempunyai keupayaan statistik yang

kuat dalam menghuraikan, menerangkan, dan meramalkan kekerapan komunikasi L2 pelajar pengajian tinggi Malaysia dalam konteks atas talian. Penemuan ini mempunyai implikasi penting untuk kedua-dua teori dan amalan. Ia memperluaskan penggunaan model sosio-pendidikan Gardner (1985) dan model MacIntyre dan Charos' (1996) WTC di luar persekitaran bilik darjah kepada dalam konteks atas talian. Mengambil kira kepentingan L2 SPCC, kekurangan kebimbangan L2, postur antarabangsa, motivasi, dan L2 WTC dalam kekerapan komunikasi L2 pelajar, mereka yang terlibat harus mempertimbangkan untuk membangun dan melaksanakan aktiviti yang mempromosikan L2 SPCC, postur antarabangsa, motivasi, dan L2 WTC sambil mengurangkan kebimbangan L2.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CALL	Computer-assisted Language Learning
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
L2 WTC	Willingness to Communicate in the Second, Foreign, or Target Language
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squared Structural Equation Modeling
CR	Composite Reliability
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
L2	Second Language/ Foreign Language
L1	First Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
SPCC	Self-Perceived Communication Competence
WTC	Willingness to Communicate
FOC	Frequency of Communication

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this thesis, which is divided into ten sections, provides an outline of the entire research. Section 1.2 discusses the research background of L2 communication and online learning, followed by Sections 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6, which address the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study. In Sections 1.7, 1.8, and 1.9, the scope of the study, definitions of key terms, and the structure of the thesis are further discussed before concluding the chapter in Section 1.10.

1.2 Background of the Study

The ideas of second language acquisition (SLA) and language communication have become so inextricably intertwined that previous language education research revealed that the path to the second language (L2) learning passes via L2 speech. In other words, according to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), in order to achieve L2 proficiency, one must use L2. They considered L2 communication to be the main goal of L2 learning. Therefore, the emphasis of L2 education has changed throughout time to L2 communication, which is the aim of L2 learning as well as the means of accomplishing it. Modern language pedagogy has also placed a strong emphasis on L2 communication in recent years, allowing L2 learners to learn and practice their oral L2 skills more frequently than before. However, Munoz (2014) claimed that the amount of L2 speech input and output inside the language classroom is still limited. Flege (2016) argues that the L2 classroom often involves limited exposure to oral L2 input in terms of both quality (lack of authentic L2 speech resources) and quantity (few hours of L2 communication). According to Larson-Hall (2008), compared to naturalistic L2 learning environments in which most L2 learners can make rapid and consistent progress by having regular daily opportunities to practise L2, classroom language instruction is frequently subjected to criticism for having less interaction and engagement with authentic L2 resources. While language learning and particularly L2 communication in classroom settings may not appear to be as efficient as learning a target language in a realistic L2 setting, for most L2 learners who do not live in the target language context, practising L2 in online environments is likely the only option. Therefore, learners who may not have the opportunity to be exposed to an actual language learning environment for real-world L2 communication can benefit greatly from online settings. As a result, for L2 students seeking more opportunities to practise and enhance their L2 communication frequency, which is typically neglected in a traditional English classroom, the online environment provides a large range of options at no or very low cost.

With the advancement of technology in the education sector, the importance of L2 communication has become more apparent. Online environments connect individuals all

over the world and allow them to communicate with one another with a few clicks. Studies show that integrating language learning technology has a long history of promoting linguistic knowledge acquisition, enhancing L2 learning effectiveness, and strengthening language skills. According to Healey (2016), technological innovation has revolutionised people's communication and L2 acquisition.

The use of technology in L2 learning has evolved over time from being a primary source of content in the curriculum to a means of communicating real-world language learning experiences (Otto, 2017). The development of the Internet and web 2.0 brought numerous opportunities for learners to have better access to learning resources on the one side and other language learners or native speakers on the other. Online tools and applications allow L2 learners to interact in the target language, enhance their digital skills, work collaboratively, and enhance their linguistic and pragmatic proficiency (Kızıl, 2019; Lomicka & Lord, 2016; Parmaxi & Zaphiris, 2017). Digital English learning enhances learners' engagement with the L2, motivates them, and allows them to communicate with other language learners in social and collaborative settings (Peeters, 2018), which is the goal of L2 learning.

There has recently been a global trend of increased investment in digital education. Digital education, in particular, has the potential to benefit L2 students by providing more opportunities for them to interact with other L2 learners, as previously indicated. It is difficult to find a valid justification to oppose the use of digital technology for language acquisition these days. In fact, most L2 students, particularly in Asian countries, require the use of digital technology in order to gain access to a true L2 community (Yashima, 2002). Thus, there is no longer a discussion over whether or not to utilise digital technology for L2 learning and communication. In reality, the discussion has shifted to how digital technology will be integrated into the curriculum to improve students' learning experiences. This issue is more relevant in second language acquisition, which will be discussed in the next section. The challenge now is how we can maximise online interaction among L2 students?

The impact of technology applications on L2 teaching and learning is so pervasive that it is nearly impossible to ignore. There is a need for academics to provide compelling empirical evidence of the influence of individual characteristics on learners' L2 communication behaviour in online environments while utilising technology for L2 communication. Initially, individuals' SL/FL cognitive factors (such as intellect and language aptitude) were thought to be the key determinants of their L2 acquisition. Scholarly research has later proven that the process of L2 acquisition entails more than just learning language skills and structures. Many non-linguistic variables influence this process, including L2 anxiety, Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), motivation, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), and attitude (Gardner et al., 1997). Gardner and his colleagues first tackled this issue by researching individual variables from different domains, such as psychology and communication studies, with the belief that they correlate to L2 learning (Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al., 1992; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Gardner (1985) presents a conceptual model of how diverse individual traits influence L2 learning (see more in Chapter Two). Their findings revealed that, unlike cognitive variables, affective variables take into account individuals' emotional and emotionally relevant characteristics, which do influence their L2 learning. As a result

of these findings, educators' attention has been directed toward the major role of affective variables in L2 learning. Among the many distinct affective variables that drive L2 communication, many language researchers believe that motivation and WTC are the most important variables that influence L2 communication.

Many studies in L2 education have been done throughout the years on the variable of motivation (Dörnyei, 2019, 2020; Gardner, 1985; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Gardner and Lambert's (1972) and Gardner's (1985) socio-educational theory had a significant impact on motivational research in L2 learning. Gardner (1985) distinguishes three primary components of motivation. First, Individuals' desire to attain a certain goal, followed by the work they put in to accomplish the objective and finally, the satisfaction they had after reaching the goal. Thus, for an individual to be motivated, all three components must be present (MacIntyre et al., 2019). Gardner's theory suggests that motivation has a significant effect on people's behaviour to engage in a task or activity, mainly in voluntary situations, which is the subject of the current research. According to Dörnyei (2019; 2020), motivation is the most important individual characteristic that can dramatically influence the overall language acquisition process, when compared to other individual factors.

In L2 research, the WTC construct has garnered a lot of interest as it has been established as the most important predictor of L2 communication behaviour (Hashimoto, 2002; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lin, 2019; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Shimizu, 2017). MacIntyre and Charos (1996) introduced and described the L2 WTC notion as the desire to begin a conversation while having the option of doing or not doing so. Numerous studies have revealed that self-esteem, anxiety, and attitude can all have an impact on WTC (Cha & Kim, 2013; Lee, 2018; Lee, 2019; Lin, 2019; Munezane, 2016; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Theoretical models proposed that L2 SPCC and anxiety are two major factors impacting L2 WTC in L2 contexts (Hashimoto, 2002; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), meaning that individuals who are more confident in L2 usage and less concerned to use L2 have a higher probability to start L2 discussion. It is worth noting that McCroskey and his colleagues initially developed the WTC variable in L1 communication (McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), and it was subsequently extended to L2 communication. In the study of L2 communication, by combining the communication studies in L1 WTC and L2 motivation studies, MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a conceptual model that examined students' reported L2 frequency of communication (L2 FOC).

Furthermore, Yashima (2002) introduced the international posture variable as an attitudinal variable in the Japanese context as a replacement for Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model's integrativeness factor. In contexts when L2 learners have no frequent interaction with native speakers, the international posture was proposed to study L2 learners' views toward the global community. Studies reveal that international posture has been related to a variety of different affective factors including motivation, L2 WTC, and the ideal L2 self (Botes et al., 2020; Peng, 2014; Tabira & Goto, 2017; Yashima et al., 2004). Individual characteristics in L2 communication have been studied in L2 education research, and it has been discovered that the affective variables including L2 SPCC, L2 communication anxiety, L2 WTC, motivation, and international posture play essential roles in influencing individuals' L2 communication in the classroom or out of

classroom contexts (Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Yashima et al., 2018). However, because digital contexts have the potential to increase cross-cultural communication opportunities (Chen, 2012), Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) scholars argue that the digital environment may have some benefits for students' L2 communication behaviour (Lee & Lee, 2019; Richards, 2015) as online contexts can extend access to the L2 community outside the classroom, providing more and different alternatives for L2 communication.

The primary goal of L2 learning, as previously stated, is the capability to converse in the L2. Although some scholars have investigated these two topics- L2 learning and communication - there have been few studies that investigate them in online contexts. Thus, understanding how affective variables influence learners' L2 communication behaviour in the ever-changing online world is critical. This thesis draws upon models developed within these two fields of study (L2 learning and communication) to predict the learners' L2 FOC in online settings. This study's variables are derived from Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of L2 learning and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model in the field of social psychology and communication and were adapted to pertain to L2 use in online environments. In accordance with prior research, the current study suggests that L2 learners' perceptions of their competence and willingness to interact in L2 communication, their L2 learning motivation, and their perspective toward the L2 community are all linked to L2 communication. However, the relationships among these variables and their influence on L2 FOC for online contexts are still unknown. As a result, the primary goal of this research is to look at the correlation between learners' affective factors and L2 FOC to address the ability of the present study's conceptual model to describe, explain, and predict learners' L2 FOC for tertiary students in Malaysia. As noted earlier, the relationships between these factors and the L2 FOC in the Asian contexts are not adequately discussed. The second objective of the present study is to examine the role of learners' motivation and L2 WTC in mediating the relation between international posture, L2 anxiety, L2 SPCC, and L2 FOC in online settings.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Interaction in the L2 has been suggested to have a significant role in providing learning opportunities and enhancing the L2 acquisition process (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985). In reality, most language learners rarely have enough opportunity to practise and interact in their second language both within and outside of the language classroom. This clearly has an impact on the language development and communication skills of learners. According to Reinders & Min (2012), one of the most difficult challenges for those involved in L2 education is finding out how to encourage and enhance learners' L2 interaction both within and outside of the L2 classroom. Many Asian countries, provide opportunities for L2 students to learn and use L2 in the classroom, with little or no L2 use in everyday life because the main portion of interactions with the native population is conducted in their native language. While the classroom context is likely to be the only place for most Asian L2 learners to be exposed to and use L2, actual communication in the target language is difficult, if not impossible.

Owing to the changing ecological environment of L2 learning and teaching, and also its enormous potential for out-of-class L2 learning, a growing number of TESL and CALL researchers and practitioners have been interested in informal online English learning in various L2 learning contexts (Lee, 2018). To date, however, it is still inconclusive what individual factors can contribute to L2 learning outcomes in online contexts. To put it another way, empirical research with L2 learners in online contexts is still yet to thoroughly clarify the factors that influence learners' L2 FOC when engaging in informal online L2 activities.

The rise of digital technology in L2 education creates possibilities as well as problems for L2 communication. Then, it seems critical to emphasise that traditional forms of L2 teaching and learning cannot meet all students' expectations and needs, and also research has demonstrated that using digital technology enhances student engagement, provides more diversity in learning, and is more accessible. As a result, schools and institutions all across the world have changed the way they offer learning, exams, and credentials. Although the internet has provided new opportunities for educational institutions, online teaching and learning pose unique challenges for instructors, students, and institutions. One of the major issues in online learning is a lack of interaction, which plays a key role in online learning failure and student retention (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2016). At the same time, students can engage with others who speak different languages and have diverse cultural backgrounds in an online setting.

As previously stated, the main purpose of L2 education is to improve L2 communication; therefore, it is critical to understand why L2 learners are willing or unwilling to communicate with other L2 speakers, as well as what variables increase their likelihood of participating in a conversation. The reluctance of L2 learners to utilise the target language causes them to lose interest in L2 learning since they realise, they are not making any progress in their L2 learning, which drives them to abandon their L2 learning (Kim & Kim, 2021; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2016). Past research has investigated language learners' communication behaviour from different perspectives in an attempt to obtain a better understanding of why L2 learners avoid communicating in an L2 despite possessing a generally high level of proficiency in the L2 (Yashima et al., 2016). Many studies in L2 communication have found that a variety of enduring (individual characteristics) and situated (contextual characteristics) variables influence learners' communication behaviour in the L2 (Lee & Hsieh, 2019). Notably, because psychological factors play a significant role in L2 learning, several empirical studies in the field of L2 acquisition have examined and proven that affective variables including L2 self-confidence, motivation, L2 WTC, anxiety, and attitudes influence individuals' L2 communication behaviour in and out of the classroom contexts (de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Eddy-U, 2015; Lin, 2019; Munezane, 2016; Peng, 2014).

Furthermore, the rapid growth of technology in recent years has compelled L2 educators to conduct similar studies on L2 learners' communication behaviour in online contexts (Reinders & Wattana, 2014). Online contexts offer L2 learners plenty of opportunities to communicate with L2 native speakers, L2 teachers, and the other L2 students across geographical barriers, at any time and from anywhere. Nonetheless, the focus of the above-mentioned research has been on formal classrooms, blended learning, or

extracurricular online learning environments wherein learners' L2 communication activities are mostly regulated and supervised by instructors (Lee, 2019; Lee & Dressman, 2018; Rogers, 2009). However, the relationship between learner's affective variables and L2 communication behaviour in totally online contexts in informal English learning has not been adequately investigated thus far. More specifically, five research gaps in the existing literature concerning L2 communication behaviour in online contexts stand out:

First, there have been few studies on L2 communication behaviour among L2 learners in fully online contexts. However, they have been overshadowed by those of face-to-face communication. As stated by Lee and Hsieh (2019), the way L2 students communicate in L2 in online contexts differs from face-to-face situations. The correlation between online L2 learning and L2 communication behaviour in online settings is being a phenomenon that is under investigation. L2 communication inside the classroom context usually happens in a relatively predictable L2 scenario involving an individual teacher or peers. Yet, digital communication situations in which an individual communicates in the L2 with familiar or unfamiliar individuals, in written form, verbally, or both, using online resources (Lee & Hsieh, 2019) remain an understudied area in L2 literature. As a result, researchers have emphasised the significance of undertaking further research on students' L2 communication behaviour in online contexts (Gutiérrez-Colón et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019; Reinders & Wattana, 2014).

The second issue concerns the use of Gardner's (1985) socio-educational theory and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model in L2 communication research. Although these models have been reported to consistently explain L2 learners' behaviours in both in-class and out-of-class contexts (Lee & Hsieh, 2019), these models have not been used holistically in investigating the students' L2 communication behaviour in online contexts. In past years, Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model and WTC model (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) were integrated to explain L2 learner behaviour (Gregersen et al., 2019; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Yashima et al., 2004). Although prior research has maintained the significance of psychological factors in L2 learners' communication and demonstrated that affective factors like motivation, L2 self-confidence, L2 WTC, anxiety, and attitudes influence individuals' L2 communication behaviour in and out of the classroom (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Lee, 2018; Peng, 2014; Yashima et al., 2018), the role of these factors on L2 learners' online L2 FOC has yet to be determined. The current study has thus sought to employ the integration of both models to determine the correlation between L2 student affective factors and L2 FOC in online settings.

The third point to consider is the influence of the affective variables on learners' L2 FOC in online contexts. According to Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model, the key determinants of L2 learners' communication behaviour are their willingness to communicate and motivation to perform that behaviour. Although L2 WTC has been widely reported as the most prevalent factor in predicting the L2 FOC (Joe et al., 2017; Munezane, 2013, 2016; Shimizu, 2017; Yashima et al., 2004), there have been very few studies on the impact of L2 WTC on L2 FOC in online settings. As a result, fills a void by determining the impact of these influential factors in explaining L2 use among L2 learners in online settings.

Furthermore, the antecedents that influence L2 WTC and L2 motivation are also discussed, with one example being students' SPCC as an immediate predictor of the L2 WTC in relation to learners' L2 FOC. Although several studies have examined the impact of SPCC on the L2 WTC, nearly all of these studies have focused on face-to-face communication either inside or outside of the classroom settings (Gutiérrez-Colón et al., 2020; Hashimoto, 2002; Marton & MacIntyre, 2020; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Shimizu, 2017) and have overlooked this relationship in online contexts. As a result, it is essential to examine whether or not language education results in traditional settings also transfer to online settings. Therefore, the present study focused on the L2 SPCC as an antecedent affecting the L2 WTC in online settings.

Similarly, previous research on students' L2 communication behaviour was also found to have overlooked the impact of students' anxiety on the L2 WTC toward L2 use in online contexts (de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Tsao et al., 2017). Although some researchers have found that communication anxiety has a negative effect on the L2 WTC, the findings may not be applicable to online environments. As previously stated, most of the studies on the influence of affective factors on L2 use, such as those on L2 anxiety, were conducted in classroom contexts. In online contexts, there has been little study on the detrimental influence of L2 anxiety on L2 WTC and found that the negative impact of L2 anxiety on L2 WTC in online settings is less acute than in face-to-face classroom settings (Côté & Gaffney, 2021). To investigate this dilemma, this study looked at the impact of L2 anxiety on L2 WTC in fully online contexts.

Individual attitudes toward learning in Gardner's (1985) socio-education paradigm, notably integrativeness, are remarkably consistent with the international posture variable (Botes et al., 2020; Ghasemi et al., 2020). It is proposed that international posture reflects individuals' positive attitudes toward the members of the L2 community, where resource restrictions are regarded as impediments to direct communication with the L2 community (Yashima, 2002). The influence of international posture on L2 WTC and motivation has been investigated in several studies. However, nearly all of these studies have focused on face-to-face communication (Munezane, 2013, 2016; Yashima et al., 2004) and have overlooked the influence of this variable on L2 WTC and motivation in online contexts, so their findings may not be applicable in online contexts. Hence, the current study focused on the international posture as an antecedent that influences students' L2 WTC and motivation in online environments, which has not been studied previously.

The fourth issue is that very few studies have addressed the roles of mediators in students' L2 FOC. Mediation analysis is an effective statistical technique for determining the relationship between variables. As previously stated, motivational and communication theorists contend that the primary goal of L2 acquisition is to interact in the target language. There is also evidence suggesting that affective variables can improve students' L2 FOC. Further evidence also shows that L2 motivation and L2 WTC have been related to L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture (attitude towards L2 community) and L2 FOC. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has been conducted in the SLA literature on the effect of SPCC, anxiety and international posture on L2 use through the potential mediation of L2 WTC and motivation. This situation prompted further calls for future research to address this

research gap by considering mediating effect of motivation and L2 WTC between L2 SPCC, international posture, anxiety, and L2 FOC among tertiary students in online settings.

Nonetheless, the subject of online L2 FOC has not been addressed in the Malaysian context, to the best of the researcher's knowledge. As a result, the goal of this research is to address a gap in the literature on the relationship between affective factors and L2 use in online environments among tertiary students in Malaysia.

1.4 Research Objectives

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships between learners' affective factors and their L2 FOC in online contexts among tertiary students in Malaysia. This research also investigates the mediating effect of learners' L2 WTC and L2 motivation on the relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety, L2 international posture, and the frequency of L2 communication. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. To examine the direct relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety, international posture with L2 FOC in online contexts.
2. To examine the direct relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety, and international posture with L2 WTC and L2 motivation in online contexts.
3. To examine the direct relationship between L2 WTC and L2 motivation with L2 FOC in online contexts.
4. To investigate the mediating role of L2 WTC in the relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture and L2 FOC in online contexts.
5. To investigate the mediating role of L2 motivation in the relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture and L2 FOC in online contexts.

1.5 Research Questions

The study posed the following research questions in order to attain the aforementioned objectives:

1. Is there a direct relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture with L2 FOC in online contexts?
2. Is there a direct relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture with L2 WTC and L2 motivation in online contexts?
3. Is there a direct relationship between L2 WTC and L2 motivation with L2 FOC in online contexts?
4. Does L2 WTC mediate the relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture with L2 FOC in online contexts?

5. Does motivation mediate the relationship between L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety and international posture with L2 FOC in online contexts?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The present study is expected to highlight some significant theoretical and practical perspectives.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

The purpose of this study is to address a knowledge gap about the factors that impact L2 learners' communication behaviour in online settings. The communication behaviour of L2 learners in online contexts is an understudied field in the teaching and learning literature; specifically, the relationship between affective variables and L2 use in online settings is unknown. As such, the focus of this study is on the relationship between L2 affective variables and L2 FOC in online environments. As a result, a substantial contribution of the current research is the potential to better comprehend how the affective factors (L2 anxiety, L2 SPCC, and international posture, L2 WTC, L2 motivation) are related to the outcome variable (i.e., L2 FOC) among tertiary student in a specific domain of L2 learning in the online context. As previously stated, the communication behaviour of L2 learners in online situations can vary based on the learner's individual variables. These studies' findings increase our awareness of the relationships between learners' individual variables and the L2 FOC in the Asian context. Furthermore, the role of international posture (L2 learners' attitude toward the L2 community) in relation to L2 WTC and L2 use has received little attention in the literature. Particularly with the advance in technologies and the easy access to the L2 community through different online channels, the international posture variable gains more importance. Therefore, by revealing the relationship of international posture with L2 WTC, motivation and L2 use in online contexts, the present study adds to the existing literature on the communication behaviour of L2 learners.

In addition, the current study attempts to examine the theoretical validity and empirical capability of this study's initial framework - Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC model - to predict students' L2 FOC in online contexts. This will enrich theories in the field of L2 education by identifying and evaluating the impact of various factors influencing L2 learners' communication behaviour in online contexts, which is currently understudied. Moreover, the current study contributes to theory by developing and validating a research instrument for data collection that examines the communication behaviour of L2 learners in online settings. In situations where theory has advanced, it is important and necessary to validate new measures or instruments. This study seeks to confirm the validity of adapted scales from existing literature for the contexts of this study.

From the contextual perspective, the current research can deepen our understanding by filling the gap of insufficient research concerning individuals' affective variables and L2

FOC in online settings in Malaysia and other similar EFL settings. Previous research focused mostly on the influence of affective variables on L2 WTC as the outcome variable. This study, on the other hand, takes it one step further and investigates L2 FOC as a dependent variable. Moreover, empirical research on L2 communication behaviour in online contexts in Malaysia, especially for tertiary level students in Malaysia, is still limited in comparison to other Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Korea. The replication of L2 communication behaviour studies in Malaysia is especially important for determining the generalizability of existing L2 communication theories.

Finally, it is hypothesised that L2 SPCC, L2 communication anxiety, and L2 international posture all have direct and indirect effects on L2 FOC. The purpose of this study is to examine the mediation role of L2 WTC and motivation in the relationship between anxiety, L2 SPCC, international posture, and the L2 FOC. There has been no research into these relationships in online contexts so far.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

This study benefits L2 researchers, curriculum designers and policymakers, teachers, and L2 learners. The primary target audience for this study is L2 researchers. This study is beneficial for L2 scholars, particularly those working in the field of online L2 teaching and learning. Learning about the structural relationships among individual difference variables that impact L2 FOC in online contexts can add to the body of research on L2 learners' communication behaviour in online settings, which is especially important in a globalising world where the nature of language teaching and learning is evolving. Previous research has proved that individual differences have an influence on L2 FOC both inside and outside of the classroom. This study can help researchers in determining whether these findings apply to online contexts.

Curriculum designers and policymakers are the second groups to benefit from the findings of this study. Understanding students' L2 communication behaviour in online contexts can help answer questions about how to design curriculums that enhance and promote L2 communication. Curriculum development should be founded on a knowledge of the students' needs and responses to the curriculum. Curriculum designers need to find out how new technologies can help L2 learners make better use of their L2 knowledge for communication, which is the primary goal of L2 learning, as technology advances and its integration into the educational system grows. This research could help curriculum designers determine how L2 SPCC, L2 communication anxiety, international posture, L2 WTC, L2 motivation, and L2 FOC are related in online contexts.

The results of this study would be of interest to the policymakers, who are striving to reform the current educational framework and present new ways to enhance L2 students' learning and particularly their abilities for communication in L2 so that they can meet the challenges in this globalized world. The study's findings may be of interest to policymakers who are attempting to reform the current educational framework and present new strategies to enhance L2 students' learning, particularly their ability to

communicate in L2 so that they can interact with a true L2 community or other L2 learners in a real-world setting. For example, people involved in the Malaysian education system may be interested in whether students' L2 communication behaviour will change in online contexts and what factors affect students' L2 FOC in online environments. By recognising the relationships between these individuals' variables and L2 use in the online context, L2 educators can design specific technology-supported curriculums to promote L2 teaching and learning for L2 tertiary level students in Malaysia.

L2 teachers are the third group who could benefit from this research. The findings of the current study may shed light on students' perception of L2 communication in online contexts. As previously stated, technology advancements hasten transformations in the educational paradigm in L2 teaching and learning. If L2 teachers use new technologies and various online sources without deliberate consideration of factors influencing L2 learner behaviour, they may feel overwhelmed and lost. The better teachers understand what motivates students to use L2, the better they can provide appropriate educational practices.

Finally, this study has the potential to help L2 learners. Students learning L2 often lack authentic L2 communication opportunities with other L2 learners or native speakers; however, online contexts provide plenty of opportunities for L2 communication. Using online contexts for L2 communication facilitates learners' engagement, motivates them, and enables them to interact and communicate with L2 learners or native speakers. The findings of this study will enable online L2 learners to become more successful in their L2 achievement by understanding what factors impact their communication behaviour and how to increase their L2 FOC. Knowing these factors will help them to enhance their L2 learning achievement.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

The definitions for key terms used in this thesis are provided in this section.

L2 Self-Perceived Communication Competence (L2 SPCC): This term is initially defined as “adequate ability to pass along or give information; the ability to make known by talking or writing” (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988, p. 109). In this study, it reflects the degree to which an L2 student believes he or she can communicate effectively in the target language, which is based on learners' self-awareness rather than their actual communication abilities (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990).

L2 Anxiety: L2 anxiety, also known as communication apprehension, is described as “an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1997, p. 192). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined L2 anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284). In this study, L2 communication anxiety is operationalized as anxiety related to engaging in activities using L2 in online contexts.

International Posture: L2 learners' attitudes toward English as an international language are referred to as international posture. International posture aims "to capture a tendency to relate oneself to the international community rather than any specific L2 group, as a construct more pertinent to EFL contexts" (Yashima, 2009, p. 145). The concept of international posture is made of "three sub-components: "intergroup approach/avoid tendency (tendency to approach or avoid speakers from different cultural backgrounds)" (Lee, 2018, p. 3), "having things to communicate to the world, and interest in foreign affairs" (Yashima, 2009, p.145).

L2 Motivation: According to Ellis (1994, p. 509) L2 motivation refers to "the effort that learners put into learning the L2 as a result of their need or desire to learn it." Gardner (1985) defines motivation as "the interplay among desire to achieve a goal, effort expended and the pleasure associated with a task, and all three components must be present for an individual to be motivated" (MacIntyre et al., 2019, p. 59). In general, motivation is defined as "the driving force in any situation" (Gardner, 2001, p. 9) and the determination that L2 learners put forth in order to acquire a target language.

L2 Willingness to Communicate (L2 WTC): According to MacIntyre (2007) and MacIntyre et al. (1998), L2 WTC refers to "a conscious intention to seek out opportunities for talking with a particular person in a specific situation in the L2" (Wang et al., 2021, p. 2). In other words, L2 WTC determines whether or not someone will engage in communication when given the opportunity.

L2 Frequency of Communication: It refers to "how frequently learners voluntarily communicate" (Munezane, 2016, p. 92) in different speaking and writing tasks in L2 (MacIntyre et al., 2003). L2 frequency of communication was operationalized in MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC study using self-report data on the average percentage of time spent communicating by respondents in each situation. Furthermore, Yashima et al. (2004) operationalized communication frequency by determining how frequently respondents volunteered to talk both within and outside the classroom. The current study operationalized the L2 FOC as the Frequency with which an L2 learner communicates voluntarily with others in online contexts using an L2.

Online Contexts: In the current study, the terms "online contexts" and "online environments" are used interchangeably to refer to the content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by digital technology, either synchronous or/and asynchronous using the Internet (Rogers, 2009).

L2 Communication Behaviour: According to MacIntyre et al. (1998) L2 communication behaviour consists of "such activities as speaking up in class, reading L2 newspapers, watching L2 television, or utilizing a L2 on the job" (p.547).

L2 Online Communication Behaviour: According to Tanribilir (2021, p.5), "online communication behaviour refers to an individual's cumulative communication frequency with online applications via smart devices". In the context of this study, it refers to the behaviour of L2 learners of English in online situations where English is used for communication.

Tertiary Education: According to Kritz (2015, p. 44), tertiary education refers to "all forms of post-secondary education, including that provided by universities, technical

institutes, teaching colleges and other programmes that lead to the award of academic diplomas, degrees or certificates”.

Online Learning: online learning refers to education in which the delivery of instruction and content are mainly over the Internet (Watson & Kalmon, 2005). It is worth noting that eLearning refers to any digitally enhanced learning. Online learning, on the other hand, is commonly used to describe any type of education that is supported using the Internet.

1.8 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter of this study introduced the background and the study's problems; it also outlined the research questions and objectives, the significance and the scope of the present study, the definition of the key terms, and the organisation of the thesis. The second chapter summarises and discusses previous studies that were relevant to this study and investigated the same factors that were chosen for this research. Chapter two also discusses the importance of L2 learners' individual differences in L2 communication, the influence of technology on students' L2 communication behaviours, and the study's gaps. Following that, it provides a theoretical justification for the constructs used to examine L2 learners' FOC in L2 contexts, introducing and explaining Gardner's (1985) social educational and MacIntyre and Charos' (1996) WTC models, as well as the study's variables, which include L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety, international posture, L2 motivation, and L2 WTC. The development of hypotheses is also discussed in this chapter. The conceptual framework and the development of hypotheses are also covered in this chapter. The research methodology is examined in Chapter Three, which includes the research paradigm, research design, population, sampling, data collection procedure, instrumentation, measurement items, validity and reliability, the pilot study, and data analysis. The fourth chapter discusses data analysis, which includes data screening, respondent profile, assessment of measurement, structural model assessment, assessment of mediator, and overall hypotheses results. Chapter Five discusses and concludes the study by providing an overview of outcomes and findings, as well as implications and recommendations for further studies.

1.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research by introducing the research background, problem statement, research objective, research questions, the significance of the study and the scope of the study. It also included variable definitions to help comprehension of terms such as L2 SPCC, L2 anxiety, international posture, L2 motivation, L2 WTC, and L2 FOC. Finally, it demonstrated the structure of the thesis.

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