Saudi Undergraduate Students' Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate in English in Online Classes

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Abstract : This study examined Saudi undergraduate students' anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) in online English classes. The research involved 227 Saudi EFL students (male, n = 78; female, n = 149) enrolled in the English language and literature program at Northern Border University. A 31-item survey with two open-ended questions was used to collect the data. Results indicated that students had average levels of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and WTC. There was a non-significant positive relationship between FLA and WTC among participants of the study. In addition, male and female students experienced similar levels of FLA and WTC in online English classes. Qualitative analysis showed the participants' views on positive and negative factors that influence their WTC in online English classes. The study discusses pedagogical implications based on these findings.

Keywords: Anxiety, online English classes, Saudi undergraduate students, willingness to communicate.

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القلق اللغوي لدى الطلاب الجامعيين السعوديين واستعدادهم للتواصل باللغة الإنجليزية في الفصول الدراسية عبر الإنترنت
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المستخلص: تناولت هذه الدراسة القلق اللغوي (FLA) والاستعداد للتواصل باللغة الانجليزية (WTC) في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت لدى الطلاب السعوديين في المرحلة الجامعية. وقد شارك في البحث 227 طالبًا وطالبةً سعوديًا من طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (149 أنثى و78 ذكرًا) مسجلين في برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها بجامعة الحدود الشمالية في المملكة العربية السعودية. وقد استخدمت الاستبانة كـأداةٍ رئيسةٍ لجمع البيانات، وكانت مُكوَّنةً من (31) عنصرًا بالإضافة إلى سؤالين مفتوحين. وأشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلاب لديهم مستويات متوسطة من القلق اللغوي (FLA) والاستعداد للتواصل باللغة الإنجليزية (WTC). كما أظهرت النتائج أن هناك علاقة إيجابية بين القلق (FLA) ، والاستعداد للتواصل باللغة الإنجليزية (WTC) وذلك بين المشاركين في الدراسة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، شهد الطلاب والطالبات مستوياتٍ مماثلةً من القلق اللغوي (FLA) ، والاستعداد للتواصل (WTC) في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت. وقد أظهرت نتائج التحليل النوعي آراء المشاركين حول العوامل الإيجابية والسلبية التي تؤثر على استعدادهم للتواصل باللغة الانجليزية في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت. وقد ناقشت الدراسة الآثار التربوية بناء على هذه النتائج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق، دروس اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت، طلاب المرحلة الجامعية السعودية، الاستعداد للتواصل باللغة الإنجليزية.

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1. Introduction

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is regarded as an essential factor in learning a foreign language (Yildiz & Piniel, 2020). According to Dörnyei et al. (2006), WTC is a fundamental and indispensable element of second language acquisition (SLA). Researchers, such as Elahi Shirvan et al. (2019), have reported that emotions, namely anxiety, boredom, and enjoyment, play the mediating effects on WTC in foreign languages. Most scholarly research on L2 WTC has concentrated on conventional, face-to-face mode of instruction (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yildiz & Piniel, 2020). However, little is known about students' WTC in online classes and the factors that may influence students' levels of WTC, such as anxiety and perceived proficiency in a foreign language (Altunel, 2021; Ardiansyah et al., 2020; Said et al., 2021; Shirvan et al., 2019).

The sudden and quick shift from face-to-face to online instruction placed students "into an emotional terra incognita" (Resnik et al., 2021, p. 99) and caused students to experience different levels of stress and anxiety (Moawad, 2020). However, research regarding the roles of anxiety on WTC in an online context remains scant. In addition, there is a need to undertake additional investigation to explore the effects of emotions on WTC in a variety of learning contexts (Wang et al., 2021).

Despite the prevalence of online learning nature in the Saudi Arabian context, there is a lack of study investigating Saudi EFL learners' WTC and other affecting factors such as anxiety in online learning settings. The aim of the current study is to fill this gap in research by investigating Saudi undergraduate students' anxiety and willingness to communicate in online English classes.

1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The current research aims to:
1. examine the levels of anxiety and willingness to communicate among Saudi undergraduate students enrolled in online English classes.
2. Examine the relationship between the levels of foreign language anxiety and reported willingness to communicate in online learning English classes among Saudi undergraduate students.
3. Compare the levels of foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate in English among male and female Saudi EFL undergraduate students enrolled in online English classes.
4. Explore positive and negative factors that influence Saudi EFL students' WTC in online English classes.

The Present study is guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the Saudi EFL undergraduate students' FLA and WTC levels in the online courses?
2. To what extent does FLA correlate with Saudi EFL students' reported WTC in online classes?
3. Are there any significant differences between male and female Saudi EFL students' levels of FLA and WTC in online classes?
4. What are the positive and negative factors that influence Saudi EFL students' WTC in online English classes?

2. **Literature Review**

This section reviews previous research on the two concepts of willingness to communicate (WTC) and foreign language anxiety (FLA).

2.1 Willingness to Communicate in a Foreign Language

The term 'willingness to communicate' (WTC) is credited to Burgoon's (1976, p. 60) research within a first language (L1) paradigm. It is initially known as 'unwillingness to communicate', which refers to individual learners' tendency to engage or avoid oral communication, particularly in unfavorable or unwelcome circumstances (Burgoon, 1976, p. 60). Later, researchers in the field of first language (L1) willingness to communicate (WTC), such as McCroskey and Baer (1985) and McCroskey and Richmond (1987), expanded on Burgoon's initial work by examining WTC from a personality trait perspective.

The integration of the concept of 'willingness to communicate' into the second language and foreign language contexts was inspired by the recognition of its significance of "talking in order to learn" (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011, p. 152). Therefore, in the present study, the communication is limited to speaking. MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547) defined L2 WTC as the learners' deliberate intent or 'readiness' to engage in conversation with specific individuals at a given moment in time. Later, the L2 WTC gained prominence within the field of second language (L2) acquisition following MacIntyre et al.'s (1998, p. 559) development of the L2 WTC model, which they viewed as a 'situation-based' factor denoting the intention of an individual to communicate with a designated person at a specific moment in time.

Previous research attempted to identify variables that are associated with WTC in a foreign language in the Saudi context. Bensalem (2022) investigated the impact of enjoyment and anxiety on willingness to communicate among 349 (female = 226, male = 123) undergraduate students of English in Saudi Arabia. The result showed no significant correlation between FLA and students' WTC.

In another study, Alqurashi and Althubaiti (2021) examined the role of language proficiency in the willingness to communicate among Saudi learners of English. The participants comprised 30 third-year EFL students and three EFL instructors. The results indicates that students displayed reluctance to communicate in English as a foreign language (EFL) environment because they believe their language skills are inadequate, had a restricted vocabulary, and worried about making mistakes when speaking the language, which could have led to more miscommunication.

Finally, Alenezi (2020a) explored the factors affecting Saudi undergraduate students' WTC. The participants comprised 30 students, enrolled in Preparatory Year Studies. The data were collected though semi-structured interviews. The results revealed three major themes were identified: learner-related elements (e.g., self-perceived communication competence), affective elements (e.g., anxiety, motivation), and context elements (e.g., classroom size, topic interest).

2.2 Foreign Language Willingness to Communicate in Online Setting

Although many studies that examined WTC in English in a range of online environments, most of these studies dealt with learning English in informal digital settings (e.g., Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Drajati, 2020). There is little research conducted about WTC in formal online class settings (e.g., Altunel, 2021; Said et al., 2021). Altunel (2021) examined the core factors

influencing Turkish EFL learners' WTC in English in virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher interviewed twelve university students taking a required one-year English course. The results revealed that three essential factors affected the participants' WTC, which included personality attributes, the features of online learning, and a lack of confidence in one's ability to speak.

In another study that was conducted in different educational setting, Said et al. (2021) explored Indonesian EFL undergraduate students' WTC in remote learning classes at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the quantitative data revealed that the students were less anxious about speaking English in online classes, and they had a high preference for online learning as the best way to be active in practicing speaking English.

2.3 Foreign Language Anxiety, WTC, and Roles of Gender

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is defined by Horwitz (2017) as the learners' discomfort arising from their limited proficiency in the new language, which hinders them from expressing themselves clearly and establishing authentic connections with others. For the past four decades, FLA has been the most commonly researched emotion in second language acquisition (MacIntyre, 2017), particularly in the traditional in-person classroom (Dewaele et al., 2019). Few studies were carried out in remote teaching classes (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2022; Resnik et al., 2022; Sun & Zheang, 2021). In a longitudinal study that examined the emotional experiences of Chinese College EFL students enrolled in online classes, Sun and Zhang (2021) reported that students' levels of anxiety fluctuated from high at the beginning, stable in the middle, and high at the end of courses. The authors reported that students were not

collaborating with their peers when assigned tasks by the instructor. Resnik et al. (2022) found that EFL learners had low levels of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). The participants experienced less anxiety about being inferior to their peers and less fear of making errors during online learning. However, they disliked volunteering to answer some questions in the class. The most anxiety-provoking experiences lamented by the participants were related to internet connection issues.

Dewaele et al. (2022) reported that EFL learners had low levels of FLCA and FLE in emergency online and traditional in-person classes. Results of the qualitative analysis indicated that what the participants disliked about the emergency remote teaching was the feeling of isolation and lack of social interactions. In terms of sources of anxiety, it was the issue of internet access was more pressing than the fear of making errors in the presence of their peers.

Some previous empirical studies have shown that FLA could be a predictor of WTC (MacIntyre, 2020; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2021). In addition, FLA is typically reported to have negative effects on learners' WTC in a second/foreign language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Khudobina et al., 2019; Yildiz & Piniel, 2020). For example, in an English language classroom, Khudobina et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between willingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety among university students. According to their research, WTC and FLA can predict L2 acquisition. However, in the Saudi context, a study by Bensalem (2022) found that FLA was not a predictor of willingness to communicate among Saudi students.

Another line of research in the current study is to examine the gender differences in regards to levels of FLA and WTC. From a sociocultural

perspective, gender differences were claimed to play significant roles in FL learning (Dewaele et al., 2019; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). There have been mixed results from previous studies examining the roles of gender in learners' experiences of FLA and WTC. Within the Turkish context, Oz's (2015) and Oz et al.'s (2015) found no statistically significant difference in gender differences among EFL students' level of WTC. In addition, studies by Lee and Drajati (2019) and Lee and Lee (2021) showed that there is no relationship between gender and WTC among university EFL students from Korea, Iran, and Indonesia. In the Saudi context, Bensalem (2021) found that male and female students had similar levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). In a study involving 592 Turkish language learners in Kazakhstan, Dewaele et al. (2019) found that male participants had higher levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) than female participants. The inconsistent findings suggest that more research is required for a better understanding of the role of gender in WTC. In contrast, Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2019) study which involved 750 foreign language learners from all across the world, discovered that female students tended to experience a higher level of FLA compared to their male counterparts. Meanwhile, Lee and Hsieh (2019) reported that male EFL learners in Taiwan had higher WTC in English language classes.

So far, only a limited number of studies focus on WTC in an online setting. Previous research mainly concerned with factors affecting WTC in traditional face-to-face learning. Therefore, the current research involves an investigation of the influence of gender in Saudi students' FLA and WTC in online classes. None of the reviewed studies examined the potential effect of the FLA on WTC among EFL students enrolled in online courses in the Saudi context. To gain a better understanding of the potential impact of FLA on students' WTC.

3. ethodology

3.1 Participants

A total of 227 Saudi English major undergraduate students (male, n = 78, 34%; female, n = 149, 65.66%) participated in the study. All students were enrolled in the English language and literature program at Northern Border University, which is a public university in Saudi Arabia. They were distributed across the academic year as follows: 63 seniors (27.8%), 29 sophomores (12.8%), 38 juniors (16.7%), and 97 freshmen (42.7%). They were also assured that their participation was voluntary and that the information they provided would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the study.

3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire used to collect data in the current study was divided into three sections (A, B, and C). Section A was used to obtain the participants' demographic information, such as gender, age, and academic year. Section B consisted of 18 items that were adopted and modified from the foreign language anxiety scale (FLAS) (Horwtiz et al., 1986; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The items are based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to measure the students' levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Section C includes 13 items adopted and adapted from Lee and Drajati's (2020) survey, which was designed to measure WTC 'in online classes. The participants were given the choice between responding to the questionnaire in Arabic or English to accommodate students' desire to answer in Arabic, which is their native language. The adapted questionnaire was sent to two experts in the field of EFL learning for content and construct validity. The questionnaire was

pilot tested with a small group of students from the same program prior to its administration. Both scales (FLAS and WTC) had good internal reliability (FLA, α =.91; and WTC, α =.93).

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were employed to show the participants' levels of FLA and WTC in online classes. The relationship between FLA and WTC was then examined using a Pearson correlation analysis. In addition, an independent-samples t-test was employed to determine whether gender differences played a significant role in the students' reported levels of FLA and WTC in online English classes. Quantitative data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. Then the data extracts, selected from the open-ended question, were analyzed using content analysis. All the participants' responses were coded in order to generate main themes.

4. Findings and discussions

This section presents the results and discusses the findings of the present study obtained from the analyses of data based on research questions.

4.1 Students' Levels of FLA and WTC in Online English Classes

Descriptive statistics are used to present the findings of the first research question, which examines the students' FLA and WTC in online English Classes. The results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. **Students' Levels of FLA and WTC in Online English Classes**

Constructs	No.	Items	M	SD
FLA	3	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on to speak in online English classes.	3.31	1.23
	1	I feel anxious to speak in English in online classes, even if I am well prepared for it.	3.19	1.19
	15	I worry about the consequences of failing an oral presentation.	3.16	1.26
	4	I don't speak in online classes, because I am worried about making mistakes in English.	3.12	1.19
	9	I feel more nervous and tense when I am speaking in an online English language class than when I am communicating via text.	3.11	1.32

	13	I feel more tense and nervous when I am speaking with open-camera in an online class.	3.07	1.34
	11	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English	3.02	1.25
	2	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do	3.00	1.23
	16	I am afraid that I can easily forget things I know, during synchronous online oral presentations.	2.97	1.26
	6	I get nervo1us and confused when I am speaking in my foreign language in online classes	2.93	1.27
	8	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in the online English language class.	2.56	1.29
	14	I am usually scared during synchronous online oral examination presentation	2.88	1.23
	7	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in an online class	2.87	1.32
	17	I do not feel pressure to prepare very well for speaking in the online English language class. (Reverse worded)	2.84	1.21
	18	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.68	1.30
	5	I never feel confident when I am speaking English in online language classes.	2.54	1.27

	10	I feel tense and nervous in courses that require oral presentations in English.	2.45	1.25
	12	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English in online classes.	2.41	1.35
WTC	25	Speak in English with the camera off	3.99	0.81
	22	Ask for instructions/clarification when you are confused about a task you must complete	3.81	0.88
	20	Speak to your teacher about your homework assignment during a synchronous online class session.	3.71	0.91
	27	Participate in online debate in English.	3.66	1.06
	19	Speak English in a breakup group about your studies during the online class session	3.37	1.046
	31	Speak to your classmate in English after the class.	3.32	1.04
	29	Video-record a presentation in English and send it to the teacher	3.28	1.05
	30	Talk to a classmate in English while waiting for the teacher to enter the class	3.21	1.10
	26	Answer the questions in a synchronous online class session.	2.85	0.87
	28	Speak aloud in the English language during a synchronous class	2.71	0.91

	24	Speak to present your opinions in in online class.	2.55	1.03
	23	Send an English voice message to ask for the teacher's explanation.	2.50	0.97
	21	Speak when a teacher asks for volunteers in an online class	2.39	0.92

Table 1, shows the perceived levels of foreign language anxiety and foreign language willingness to communicate among Saudi EFL students in online classes. After calculating the mean scores on the 5-point scale, the result reveals that the participants showed a moderate level of FLA in online classes with an overall mean score of 2.89 (SD = 1.26). In addition, the participants had an average of WTC with an overall mean score of 2.89 (SD = 0.97).

In general, the participants experienced moderate levels of FLA, which were below the values reported in previous research on Saudi EFL students' anxiety in face-to-face classes, with a range between 3.48 (Bensalem, 2021) and 3.70 (Bensalem, 2022). This result is not aligned with the findings of Alrabai (2015), which suggest that Saudi EFL students generally exhibit higher levels of anxiety than other students in various educational settings. However, the levels of FLA reported in the current study were similar to those reported by Said et al. (2021) who examined FLA in an online environment, such as in the case of Indonesian students (M = 3.01).

On the other hand, observing the patterns of preparedness of students' WTC in online classes, the participants showed interest in speaking with their peers and instructors in online classes. However, they preferred not to show their faces while speaking in an online class. One possible explanation for that is that students tend to feel more secure when they are behind the computer and physically away from the instructor and peers. It is a situation that does not require students to maintain eye contact or worry about their body language when they communicate with the instructors or their peers. However, the moderate level of WTC found in the current study is below the level of WTC reported in face-to-face classes in the Saudi context by Bensalem (2022). This result echoes the findings of Dewaele et al. (2022), who reported that participants experienced reduced levels of anxiety in remote teaching classes. However, this outcome does not corroborate Punyaporn and Soontornwipast's (2022) findings, which show that students tend to have high levels of WTC (M =3.69) in an online environment. The present study provides further evidence for the fact that Saudi students tend to avoid being engaged in oral conversations due to a lack of confidence and linguistic skills (Turjoman, 2016). One possible explanation for the participants' low WTC could be the instructors' inability to create a learning environment that promotes English communication and improves learners' speaking abilities (Bensalem, 2021).

4.2 Relationship between FLA and WTC Among EFL Learners

This section addresses the second research question, which examines the extent to which FLA correlates with WTC in online classes among Saudi EFL students. First, the data normality of WTC and FLA was assessed using

Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. The results of the tests show that the data are normally distributed with WTC, D (227) = 1.14, p < .05 and FLA, D (227) = 1.19, p < .05). Subsequently, the Pearson correlation coefficient test was employed to examine the relationship between FLA and WTC as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Online Classes (FLSAIOC) and **Willingness to Speak English in Online Class (WTSEIOC)**

	FLSAIOC	WTSEIOC
FLSAIOC	1	.071**
		.288
WTSEIOC		1

**p < .01

Table 2 shows that participants' level of WTC is not significantly correlated with their level of FLA, rs(227) = .071, p = ns. In other words, the results indicate that the participants who reported higher levels of WTC did not experience higher levels of FLA. The insignificant correlation between FLA and WTC in this study confirms the findings reported by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2021), which indicated that the relationship between FLA and WTC is dynamic and highly variable as the correlation between them fluctuates from negative to slightly positive effects. In addition, this result supports Bensalem's (2022) claim that FLA was not a predictor of WTC in the Saudi setting. The finding of the present study is not surprising since research has shown conflicting results about the relationship between FLA and WTC. Other studies reported a negative correlation between FLA and WTC in traditional in-person classes (e.g., Kalsoom et al., 2020; MacIntyre, 2020). Other studies in an in-person traditional classroom context reported a positive relationship (Alenezi, 2020a; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2020; Zabihi et al., 2021).

4.3 Differences between male and female participants in terms of FLA and WTC

This section addresses research question 3, which examines differences between male and female Saudi EFL students' levels of FLA and WTC in online classes. To measure the difference based on gender, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender Difference in Terms of Participants' Levels of FLA and WTC (T-Test)

Variable	Males (n= 78)		Female (n =149)					
	M	SD	M	SD	T	df	P	Cohen's d
WTC	3.2249	.55660	3.1595	.42152	0.990	225	.232	0.132469
FLA	2.8647	.93900	2.9105	.94311	0.348	225	.728	0.04869

*P<0.01

Table 3, displays the gender differences in terms of participants' levels of FLA and WTC. First, the result shows that there was no significant difference between levels of FLA among male and female students while learning English in online classes (t [0.348] = df =225, p <.728, Cohen's d = 0.048, indicating a small effect size. Thus, the result reveals that male

students (M = 2.86) had experienced almost similar FLA to their female counterparts (M = 2.91). Similarly, the result of the 2-tailed t-test reveals no significant difference between male and female learners' levels of WTC (t [0.990], df =225, p <.23; Cohen's d = 0.138, indicating a medium effect size). This result showed that male students (M = 3.22) had more WTC in online English classes than their female counterparts (M = 3.15). Overall, the results indicate that the female students experienced more FLA and less WTC in online English classes, in contrast to the male students, who experienced more WTC and less FLA.

Although the difference between male and female students' levels of WTC was not statistically significant, it's worth noting that female students exhibited a higher overall mean score. This finding is consistent with prior studies, which found no significant differences between males and females regarding FLA and WTC (e.g., Bensalem, 2021; Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2021). However, the findings of the present study contradicted prior studies

that reported the affective roles played by gender in influencing learners' FLA and WTC in various contexts, such as Turkey (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Oz, 2015; Oz et al., 2015). The lack of gender effect in both participants' FLA and WTC in online English classes can be attributed to participants' demographic variables and levels of competency, as argued by previous researchers (Bensalem, 2021). It seems that the students who participated in this study are typically good learners, as Dewaele (2018) argued.

4.4 Qualitative Analysis

This section addresses research question 4, which reports participants' views on the positive and negative factors that influence their WTC in online English classes. All responses to the two open-ended question were subjected to thematic analysis. The participants' views were divided into two categories: positive and negative, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Positive and Negative Views of Online English Classes

Themes of positive views:	Frequency	Themes of negative views:	Frequency
Flexibility	78	Lack of social interaction	62
Comfort and reduced anxiety	47	Unpleasant learning environment	63
Increased confidence	31	Technical issues	42
New experience	14	Home distractions	31
TOTAL	170		178

4.3.1 Students' positive views about online English classes

Based on the themes that emerged, it was found that there were several positive views on learning English in online classes.

Flexibility

First, participants appreciated the flexibility of online learning mode in terms of their ability to attend the course from a distance location.

Participant 4 commented on his positive experience in the online learning class: "I enjoy the freedom of logging in from anywhere. I don't have to make a trip to campus in order to attend my classes. This saves me time and transportation costs.".

One possible explanation for students' appreciation of the flexibility of online courses is that most students in Saudi Arabia commute from their hometowns to the university. They prefer to live with their families rather than live on campus, even if their hometowns are far away from campus (Al-Nofaie, 2020).

Comfort and reduced anxiety

A number of participants cited feeling comfortable as one of the advantages of online learning. Students were happy with the fact of being able to communicate without maintaining eye contact with the instructor or peers as mentioned by Participant 100 who wrote:

I appreciate the fact that I don't have to worry about how my teacher is checking my body language or my facial expressions when I talk in class. I'm a shy person, though. I feel uncomfortable speaking English in class when others are staring at me.

Some participants believed that online class reduced their anxiety about learning English as illustrated by Participant 199:

I'm someone who worries about not being able to respond to the instructor's questions, and I'm afraid of being laughed at because I may say something stupid. However, logging in from home makes me less anxious and I can use my notes to answer questions without anybody seeing me.

Students' feeling of comfort seems to have helped them gain confidence in their abilities to communicate in English. Participant 201 reported growing confidence as his comfort level increased: "I feel more confident participating in the class discussions. I don't worry about making mistakes, as nobody can see my face."

Increased confidence

The platform used for instruction (Blackboard) offers students the ability to ask the instructor questions privately without worrying about the reactions of their peers as illustrated by the following excerpt:

I do not hesitate to ask questions even though I am aware that my English is not good. I chat with my instructor without any fear and ask him for clarifications. Consequently, I feel that my English is improving each week (Participant 65).

New experience

Other students enjoyed the experience of learning through a new mode of instruction. They thought that online courses allowed them to learn differently and enhance their computer skills, as stated by Participant 144:

I have to admit that I was first scared of the whole experience. I thought I might fail my courses because I had never used Blackboard before. However, the fear of failure turned into enjoyment. I like speaking using my microphone. I like the fact that the instructor can share his screen and start explaining. I feel that I can focus more that way. Random group discussions are fun. You never know who is going to be in your group discussion. Interacting with my peers from my computer is fun.

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Another student reported the same sentiment:

> Using a computer to work on assignments and uploading them is an interesting experience. Getting electronic feedback from the instructor is a plus for me. Even taking exams online is a great experience. After graduation, I will have to take IELTS online. Therefore, this is a psychological preparation for such an important test (Participant 139).

4.3.2 Students' negative views about online classes

Despite the positive views shared by students in online English classes, other participants reported negative experiences as shown in Table 4.

Lack of social interaction

The participants cited a lack of social interaction as the main negative aspect of their experience of taking classes online. Students felt isolated and missed the in-person interaction with the instructor and their peers:

> I dislike staying alone during my online classes. I feel lonely, and that is a bad feeling. I really miss joking and mingling with my friends. We used to have fun when we had in-person classes (Participant 33).

Unpleasant learning environment

Many students complained about the learning environment of virtual classes, which they qualified as unpleasant and boring. Especially, students did not think such an environment motivated them to be actively involved in the learning process. Participant 19 observed that:

> staying behind a computer for hours is so boring! I have problems staying focused. I tend to daydream and lose interest as the instructor keeps talking for a long time.

Other students blamed the instructor for his/her failure to engage students:

> Sometimes the teacher forgets that students have been sitting for almost an hour without being active. I feel that the teacher does not know how to make the class fun and get our attention back (Participant 95).

Another participant added:

> I like my physical classroom much more than online classes because I can't pay continuous attention to it. Sometimes, I start playing games on my computer until the end of class (Participant 44).

Another negative view was reported by the participants:

> Online courses seem to give students the opportunity to remain passive and get lazy. One participant observed: "Sometimes only a few students participate, and the rest choose to remain silent or inactive, blaming the bad internet connection" (Participant 56).

Home distractions

Another source of dissatisfaction with online courses is home distractions. Some participants complained about not having an adequate space at home where they could log in to their classes without any distractions coming from their family members.

> I live in an apartment without an office space where I can take my courses without any distractions. I

cannot control the noise caused by my young siblings who keep running in the apartment and playing, causing me to lose focus. (Participant 110).

Technical issues

Participants complained about the role of technical issues in spoiling their learning experience. Technical problems included mainly poor internet connection as Participant 20 stated:

I live in a neighbourhood where the internet connection is unstable. Losing an internet connection during the lectures made me lose precious learning moments. This has been a nightmare for me. Missing instruction made it difficult for me to understand some of the materials covered by the instructor.

Based on the results presented above, reported Saudi EFL students' views on the positive and negative factors that influence their WTC in online English classes. The themes that evolved from the students' answers aligned with earlier studies conducted on this subject (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2022; Dewaele, 2019). These included the things the students liked (positive views), such as flexibility, comfort, reduced anxiety, increased confidence, and new experiences, and the things they disliked (negative views), such as a lack of social interaction, an unpleasant learning environment, technical issues, and home distractions. Other contextual factors, such as attitudes toward the teacher and the target language, could play a role in reducing the effect of FLA on the WTC (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2018). According to Yashima (2002), environmental factors such as a lack of opportunities for oral skill practice have an effect on students' WTC (D'Orazzi, 2020). Participants in the present study live in a predominantly monolingual society where English is not widely spoken by most people. Another plausible explanation is provided by several researchers (e.g., Dewaele, 2019; Li et al., 2022), who state that WTC is closely linked to a variety of complex emotions that interact with other learning factors such as learner-internal and learner-external variables. These variables affect learners' levels of WTC (Boudreau et al., 2018).

5. Pedagogical Implications

Given the importance of WTC in enhancing learners' communicative competence, the outcomes of the current study have several implications for language practitioners. First, the moderate levels of both FLA and WTC observed in the current study, suggested that despite the students' feelings of anxiety, they had a good willingness to speak in online English classes. Nevertheless, instructors need to address the anxiety-evoking factors mentioned in the interviews, such as the lack of social interaction in online classes, which makes students feel isolated. Hence, the students described the online learning environment as unpleasant and boring. Facing technical issues is another anxiety-provoking factor identified in this study. Based on the findings, teachers should try to establish a supportive and friendly classroom. Encouraging student participation is a very important factor that influences their WTC (Dewaele et al., 2022; Said et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the instructors need to pay more attention to the nature of the online class context. Boosting students' WTC starts by setting up a classroom environment that makes learners ready to speak. Teachers play a central role, as they are the ones who should strive to provide students with constant encouragement and support (Li et al., 2022), especially during moments of learning difficulties. In addition, diversifying lesson activities to meet students'

different learning styles is crucial. Teachers should remember that individualized instruction could make learning more relevant to students. This increases their motivation and readiness to speak a foreign language. Teaching online does not allow instructors to check students' level of attention. Therefore, keeping students busy with interesting and challenging activities is key to providing learning opportunities. Students tend to participate when involved in fun activities that make learning enjoyable and worth their attention. It is suggested that instructors promote an emotionally positive classroom to maintain the students' emotional well-being and form a rapport in communication (Lee & Drajati, 2020). Li et al. (2022) argue that students' levels of WTC will increase if they experience language-learning enjoyment. Enjoyable activities encourage students to play a part in the interactions.

The present study is one of the first efforts to provide insights into the relationship between foreign language anxiety and WTC in English in the context of online classes within the Saudi context. This is an attempt to contribute to this emerging field of research, as research investigating WTC in online classes is scarce (Lee & Lee, 2019). Previous studies on WTC and anxiety placed a lot of emphasis on face-to-face settings, where students communicate with interlocutors in much more predictable situations in real-world settings.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the FLA and WTC and their relationship in online classes beyond the traditional in-person classroom. Results showed that even though EFL Saudi students had a lower level of FLA compared to their counterparts in traditional face-to-face instructions, the participants did not report high levels of WTC. The absence of correlation

between WTC and FLA corroborates the findings of previous research, which suggests that lower levels do not necessarily result in higher levels of WTC. The findings of the present study also suggest that gender did not play a significant role in FLA and WTC in Saudi students' online English classes. The researcher argues that a deeper understanding of WTC requires exploring the mediating roles of learner variables such as self-perceived proficiency and attitudes towards English, combined with other constructs such as enjoyment and boredom. Future research explores the roles of different emotions as possible predictors of WTC in online English classes among Saudi EFL learners.

One of the limitations of the present study is that the participants were exclusively drawn from a single university. Therefore, the findings are not representative of the country. It is suggested that future research could involve several universities, enabling more extensive generalization of the findings to encompass all Saudi EFL students at the tertiary level. Second, because students' levels of FLA and WTC were self-reported; therefore, the results of the present study may include a certain degree of generalizability (Dewaele, 2018). A future study should include in-depth interviews to get a deeper understanding of the relationship between FLA and WTC. Finally, WTC is influenced by more than just one construct.

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