

Keeping the Conversation Flowing: Students' Insights Into Sustaining Willingness to Communicate in Online English Classes

Eman Matar M. Alshammari

English Department, University of Hail, Hail, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—While numerous studies in the literature have examined the factors that influence the willingness to communicate (WTC) among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, limited research has been conducted on EFL learners' recommendations for sustaining their desire to interact in online English language classes (Dariyemez & Yastibas, 2023). The current study, conducted through an online questionnaire, is a novel exploration that investigates University of Hail (UOH) undergraduates' perceptions of English virtual classes in different faculties and their specific suggestions for maintaining their WTC via online English classes. The data collected revealed that students considered the methods and the online activities to be only average, and they had not effectively acquired the expected English language skills. It was concluded that students' needs must be addressed to prepare them effectively for online EFL courses. The outcomes were meticulously reviewed, and pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research were provided, based on the current study data.

Index Terms—EFL learners' suggestions for maintaining WTC, willingness to communicate, traditional face-to-face setting, online English setting

I. INTRODUCTION

WTC is crucial in EFL education (Yildiz & Piniel, 2020). Dörnyei et al. (2006) highlighted that WTC is a key component of second language acquisition (SLA). Many studies about WTC have been conducted in traditional face-to-face settings, such as Zarrinabadi (2013), whose research investigated how teachers' interactions and support within face-to-face environments can foster WTC among learners. Some studies have investigated WTC in both traditional and online settings, such as Alshahrani and Preece (2020), Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2024), and Gopalakrishnan et al. (2022). Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2024) compared the role of self-esteem and motivation in shaping students' WTC in both face-to-face and virtual classes. Gopalakrishnan et al. (2022) found that in-person classrooms often encourage more spontaneous communication due to teachers' and peers' immediate interaction and social presence.

In contrast, while online settings offer flexibility and reduce anxiety for some students (see Zhao & Li, 2020), they may also lead to reduced real-time interaction and cause students to feel isolated or less motivated to speak up without the direct presence of others (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2022). However, Alenezi's (2024) study showed that reducing anxiety does not always lead to increased WTC. In contrast, other recent research on web-based or hybrid learning has suggested that learners tend to feel less anxious and display higher WTC in these settings compared to face-to-face classes (Kruk, 2021; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). This could be because web-based environments, including features such as avatars, can create an anxiety-free space that encourages introverted learners to engage more readily in speaking (Kruk, 2021). Punyaporn and Soontornwipast (2022) also argued that shy learners may feel more comfortable in web-based classes where they are not expected to turn on their cameras during oral skills activities. Recent studies by Abulhaija et al. (2024) have shown that students enjoy online English classes. However, Gopalakrishnan et al. (2022) suggested combining face-to-face and web-based learning would be the most effective way to boost WTC. Integrating the benefits of direct interaction and the flexibility offered by digital platforms would enable students to experience more opportunities for interaction in diverse settings.

Research into online language learning has become a prominent field of study (White, 2014), driven by the increasing need for this type of instruction. It has become valued for its various advantages, particularly since COVID-19. Furthermore, universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia have limited capacity, in contrast to the rapid growth in students applying for college education (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2012). To tackle this issue, the Ministry of Higher Education has integrated web-based instruction with traditional forms of instruction at universities. The UOH, for instance, has adapted to these changes by allowing a more substantial number of students to attend online classes, which has helped to attract and accommodate additional students. Although online learning is widespread in Saudi Arabia, there are limited studies on EFL learners' WTC in online contexts (e.g. Alenezi, 2024; Altunel, 2021; Ardiansyah et al., 2020; Said et al., 2021; Shirvan et al., 2019) and, in particular, a lack of studies about how to sustain EFL learners' WTC in virtual classes (Dariyemez & Yastibas, 2023). While some studies touched on the role played by technology, the impact of online-based learning environments, social media interactions, and digital communication tools on students' WTC in English

communication has not been studied in depth (Kruk, 2024). This study addresses this gap by examining Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions of their WTC and identifying ways to sustain their WTC in online English classes. More research is needed in this area to fully understand the dynamics of online language learning and its impact on students' WTC. This research could significantly impact the work of educators, researchers, and policymakers in English language teaching. Additionally, the current study explores undergraduate students' perceptions of UOH and their suggestions for maintaining their WTC in English virtual lessons. It is hoped that it will help improve online English classes and enable them to meet EFL students' needs more effectively. The current study aims to address the following research question:

According to students' perceptions, what can help Saudi EFL students maintain their WTC in English online classes?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of WTC was introduced into the literature by McCroskey and Baer in 1985, building on Burgoon's (1976) research, which examined reluctance to communicate in the first language (L1) and primarily referred to the willingness to start and engage in a conversation in L1 (as cited in MacIntyre et al., 1998). In the 1990s, the concept of WTC expanded to include the second language (L2). WTC in L2 was defined by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2" (p. 547). It was further explained by Kang (2005) as "an individual's volitional inclination toward actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables" (p. 291).

WTC is crucial for developing English language abilities in EFL learners, as it involves using English to express thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. WTC is also a key component of learner participation and is essential for language learning (Cao, 2011). WTC is vital for commencing a conversation in L2 (Kang, 2005). Additionally, L2 learners with high levels of WTC are more likely to engage in frequent English-speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom (Kang, 2005). Therefore, WTC exerts a crucial influence on the improvement of L2 proficiency. Consequently, it is essential to understand WTC and the factors influencing it in traditional and virtual English classes. Several studies have examined these factors, focusing on face-to-face L2 lessons and, more recently, web-based learning settings. Past research has identified several important factors that help to promote WTC, for instance, involving students in choosing topics and allowing them to discuss subjects that interest them (Cao, 2011; Kang, 2005; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Furthermore, online-based environments, particularly asynchronous ones, encourage students to engage in interactions more freely, as the likelihood of losing face is reduced (Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006).

Some recent studies have provided insights into the factors, such as motivation, anxiety, social influences, teacher support, and self-efficacy, that shape students' WTC in traditional language learning classroom settings. Barrios-Espinosa and Acosta-Manzano (2025) examined factors impacting students' WTC in English and French foreign language classes in Spain. They identified several key predictors: more excellent proficiency in the foreign language correlated with increased WTC; positive emotions towards the language learning process were linked to higher WTC; instructors' usage of the targeted language in the classroom positively impacted learners' WTC; and higher levels of anxiety were associated with decreased WTC. The researchers emphasised the importance of creating supportive and engaging classrooms to improve learners' WTC in foreign language contexts. Zhu and Liu (2020) explored how various aspects of the classroom environment and learners' motivation impact their communication in face-to-face language classes. The study highlighted the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation and supportive classroom settings to enhance learners' WTC in second language (L2) classes. Baker (2021) investigated how anxiety and motivation influence learners' WTC in traditional EFL classes. It was revealed that increased anxiety negatively impacted learners' WTC, while higher levels of motivation corresponded with a greater WTC. These results underscore the importance of addressing both affective factors to enhance EFL learners' communicative participation.

Zarrinabadi and Khatib (2021) highlighted the impact of teacher support and learners' self-efficacy on their WTC in traditional language classes. They found that increased teacher support positively influenced learners' self-efficacy, which enhanced their WTC. This suggests that fostering a supportive classroom environment can boost learners' confidence in their language skills, improving their desire to communicate. Liu and Yang (2022) focused on the social and psychological factors that affected Chinese university learners' WTC in face-to-face English classes. The study identified positive instructor-learner relationships, supportive peer communications, and a cooperative classroom atmosphere as key social factors that improve WTC. Furthermore, higher levels of self-confidence and lower levels of anxiety were associated with increased WTC. Alam et al. (2022) found that learners' prior experiences with grammar-focused English instruction hindered their interaction abilities. Additionally, the supportive classroom atmosphere significantly enhanced their WTC. The research highlighted the importance of incorporating real-life conversations into English classes to improve learners' WTC. Nakamura and Tanaka's (2024) research focused on how cultural factors affect Japanese learners' WTC in traditional English language classrooms. It was identified that learners' WTC in English is significantly shaped by cultural factors such as the importance of group harmony and the avoidance of making errors in front of classmates, leading to a preference for listening over speaking and a reluctance to participate in classroom interaction.

Other recent studies offered precious insights into various factors that impacted learners' WTC in English, including classroom practices, individual traits, and cultural perspectives. For instance, a systematic review by Gao et al. (2024)

explored various classroom-based instructional practices that influenced learners' WTC in English. The review concluded that teaching practices focusing on active engagement and learner interaction are most beneficial in improving WTC. Riasati (2018) examined the factors influencing learners' WTC in English. It was found that higher motivation and lower anxiety levels are crucial for increasing students' WTC. The study also suggested strategies for teachers to create a more supportive learning environment, encouraging oral interaction. Another research study by Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2023a) investigated the role of the social climate in the classroom, emotional factors, and language mindset in shaping learners' willingness to engage in English. The researchers found that a positive classroom atmosphere, where learners feel safe and supported, significantly boosts their WTC. In addition, the study suggested that learners with a growth mindset about language learning are more likely to participate in English interaction, even when faced with challenges.

Chojimah and Widodo (2023) explored the WTC of domestic learners in international university classrooms, focusing on the impact of multicultural contexts. The researchers highlighted that domestic learners' WTC was affected by both their perceived language proficiency and the multicultural nature of their peers. They suggested that exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds enhanced domestic students' confidence and willingness to speak English. Zhang and Zhang (2023) investigated the connection between learners' global perspective and their WTC in English in an English Medium Instruction. The researchers found that learners with a broader global perspective, including openness to different cultures and a strong international outlook, tend to have higher WTC in English (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). The research suggested cultivating a global mindset can improve WTC and enhance interaction abilities. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2023b) examined the WTC of Chinese international learners, comparing their experiences in EFL and English in an L2 context. They found that learners' WTC is significantly higher in L2 contexts where English is used for daily interaction. The study emphasised the importance of immersion in English-speaking communities for boosting WTC.

Additionally, when students develop a greater interest in learning a second language for its value, essentially by boosting their intrinsic motivation, their WTC also rises. Therefore, instructors should enhance students' intrinsic motivation to foster greater WTC (Azmand, 2014; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2014). In addition, the self-esteem of L2 students is another factor that influences their WTC (Azmand, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Therefore, strategies that enhance learners' self-esteem, such as encouraging them to take the initiative (Canfield, 1990), can help to improve their WTC in the long run. It is suggested that the instructor should offer students assistance in the linguistic, emotional, and discursive areas to help alleviate their anxiety and boost their confidence (Zarrinabadi, 2014) and assist students in becoming more independent by allowing them to choose the skills and techniques that they want to apply when completing an activity. In this regard, the instructor's role is to offer strategy-focused courses that equip students for a lifelong learning journey (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2014). In addition, cooperative tasks can help to alleviate anxiety and enhance the situational self-efficacy of L2 students. Instructors can leverage these activities to create an environment that fosters greater WTC (Razmjoo & Hoomanfar, 2012).

Tan and Phairot (2018) suggested a correlation between learners' English proficiency and their WTC, with proficient learners exhibiting higher WTC levels and performing better in examinations (Zhang et al., 2022). Achieving success in language learning boosts learners' L2 confidence, thereby increasing their WTC (Cao, 2011; Kruk, 2021; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021). Confidence is a key factor influencing WTC in the classroom (Şener, 2014). However, proficiency and confidence alone may not guarantee a high WTC (e.g., Alenezi, 2024) without a positive learning environment. This could explain why research has shown that students are often more willing to practise speaking English beyond the classroom than within it (Başöz & Erten, 2018; Isma & Baharuddin, 2022). Therefore, it is clear that a positive classroom environment plays a crucial role in enhancing L2 WTC (Aomr et al., 2020; Cao, 2011; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). According to Dewaele (2019), a pleasant classroom environment where mistakes are tolerated helps create a non-threatening space for language use. Some studies have indicated that anxiety in foreign language classrooms can adversely affect WTC (Dewaele, 2019).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Context

Previous research by Alshammari (2019) indicated that English teaching in Saudi Arabia was largely traditional, focusing mainly on grammar and translation methods, with little emphasis on oral interaction. As a result, students typically only spoke to the instructor when responding to questions, often with short answers, such as giving the past tense of "go". Direct communication between students was rare; the teacher was the source of information and did most of the talking, while learners were mainly passive listeners (Alharbi, 2015; Harmer, 2007; Harmer, 2003).

B. Participants

As mentioned earlier in this paper, UOH students from various faculties were invited to complete the questionnaire. The 194 students who did so, 67.2% female and 32.8% male (see Figure 1 below), played a crucial role in this research. This questionnaire, administered using Google Forms, focused on students' perceptions of online English classes and their suggestions for sustaining their WTC, making their participation integral to the research process. The potential impact of these findings on language education in Saudi Arabia is significant, highlighting the importance of this research.

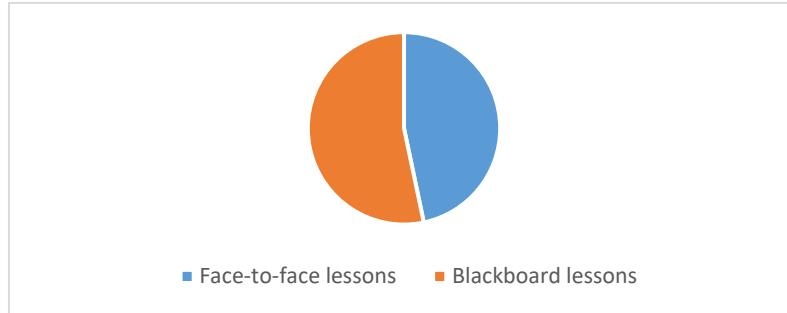


Figure 1. Gender of the Participants

The participants provided valuable views and suggestions; therefore, the findings can significantly improve online course content and teaching methods. Encouraging students to offer suggestions for programme improvement, rather than simply asking for their opinions, generated more constructive feedback. This input type is considered more valuable than the standard students' perspectives typically gathered through questionnaires. Therefore, students' perceptions and suggestions concerning their online English classes were sought in this study.

C. Data Analysis

To analyse the data, we used the descriptive statistics features in SPSS to calculate the frequency of the various answers. SPSS was utilised to analyse the quantitative data and generate graphs and charts, while thematic analysis was applied to examine the qualitative data. The data gathered from the open-ended answers to the last question asking about EFL students' suggestions for maintaining their WTC in virtual English classes were reviewed via thematic analysis, a method used for identifying, analysing, and presenting patterns within the data. Examples of themes were modified from previous studies, such as those by Dariyemez and Yastibaş (2023). These sub-themes were categorised under broader themes based on their similarities. The results were then interpreted in line with the data analysis. This technique is valued for its flexibility and ease of use, making it particularly suitable for the qualitative nature of this study, as it focuses on the content of participants' responses (Willig & Rogers, 2017). As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, "Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (p. 5). This approach is beneficial as it helps structure the collected data's content and aids in synthesising key information from the narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Additionally, thematic analysis is highly adaptable, allowing the researcher to identify themes from various perspectives (Riessman, 2008).

IV. RESULTS

The following charts illustrate students' perceptions of online English lessons and their suggestions for maintaining their WTC in online classes.

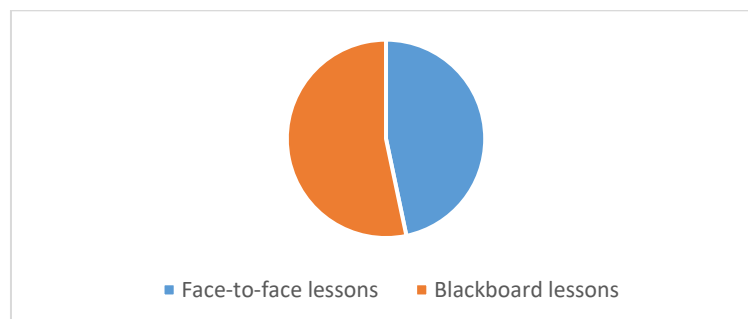


Figure 2. How do You Prefer to Study in Your English Language Classrooms?

Figure 2 shows that 53.3% of the students preferred to study the English language in Blackboard (online-based) classes, while 46.7% preferred face-to-face courses to online classes.

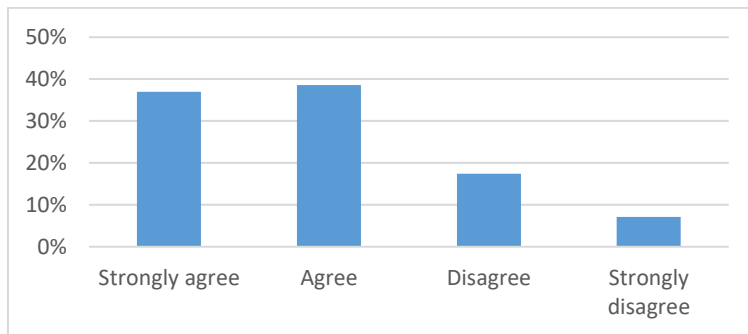


Figure 3. Online English Lessons (Blackboard) Effectively Improve My English Communication Skills.

76% of the participants agreed that virtual English lessons effectively improve their English communicative skills, while 24% disagreed (see Figure 3).

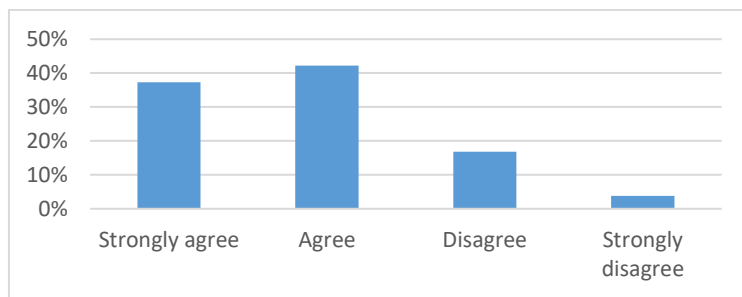


Figure 4. Online English Lessons (Blackboard) Are Taught Using Various Methods.

The above Figure 4 illustrates that 79% of the participants agreed that online English lessons are taught using various methods, while 21% did not agree.

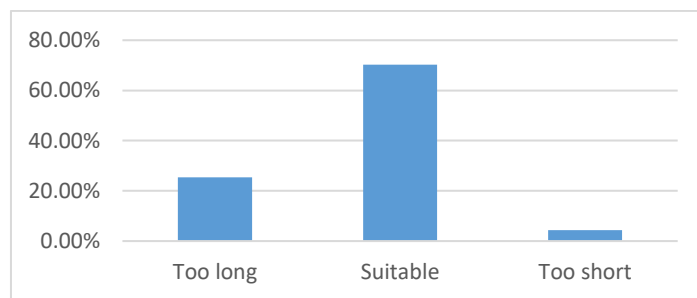


Figure 5. The Duration of the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

70.3% of the participants considered the duration of the Blackboard English lessons suitable, 25.4% thought it too long, and 4.3% considered online English classes to be too short (see Figure 5).

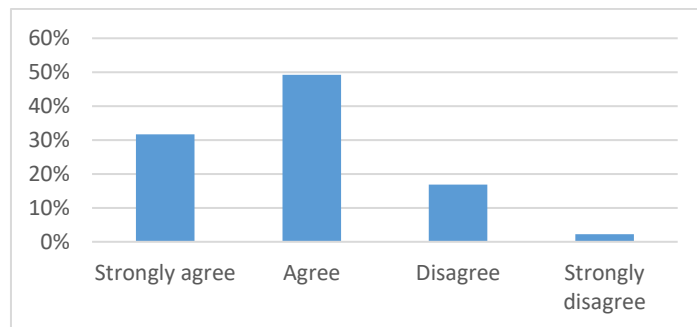


Figure 6. Accelerating the Pace of Online English Lessons (Blackboard) Would Be Preferable.

Most students agreed that accelerating the pace of virtual English lessons would be preferable, while a minority did not agree (see Figure 6).

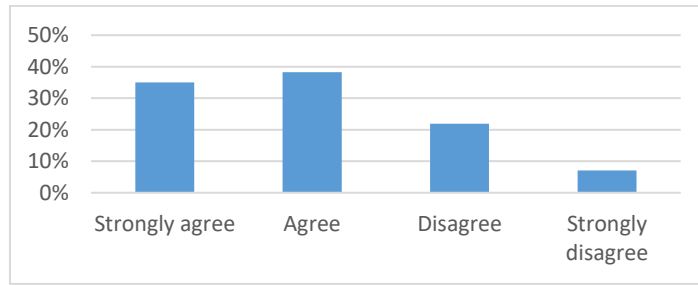


Figure 7. Online English Lessons (Blackboard) Activities Are Enjoyable.

Figure 7 demonstrates that 73% of the participants agreed that they enjoyed the activities in the online English classes, while 45% considered them boring (see Figure 7).

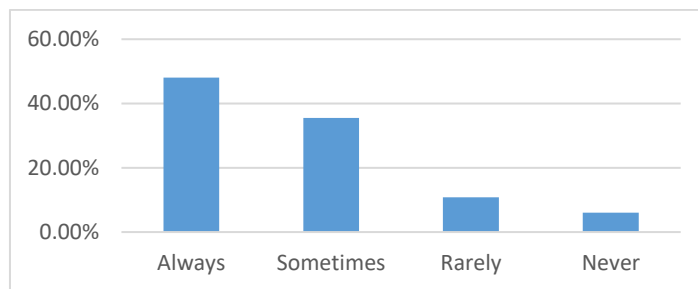


Figure 8. My Teacher Encourages Me to Participate in Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

Figure 8 shows that 48.1% of the students confirmed that their teacher always encouraged them to participate during virtual English lessons, 35.1% expressed the view that they were sometimes encouraged, 10.8% reported that their teacher rarely encouraged them, and 6% reported that they had never been encouraged by their teacher during online English classes.

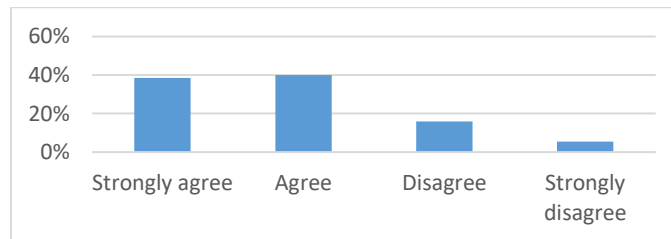


Figure 9. I get Enough Opportunities to Communicate During the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

79% of the students agreed they get enough opportunities to communicate during online English lessons, while 21% disagreed (see Figure 9).

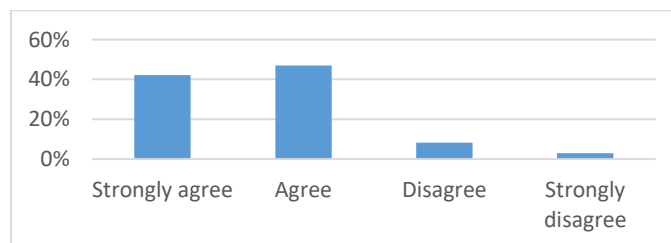


Figure 10. My Teacher is Positive During the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

Most participants agreed that their teacher showed a positive attitude during the online English classes, while only 11% disagreed (see Figure 10).

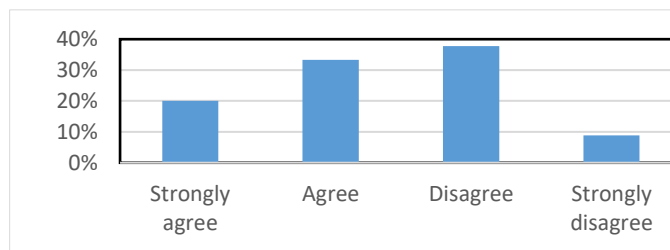


Figure 11. I Hope My Teacher Will Change the Nature of the Assignments in the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

The students' opinions varied when asked about changing the nature of the online assignments (see Figure 11). 53% of them hoped that their teacher would change the format of the assignments in the online English lessons, while 47% of the learners disagreed.

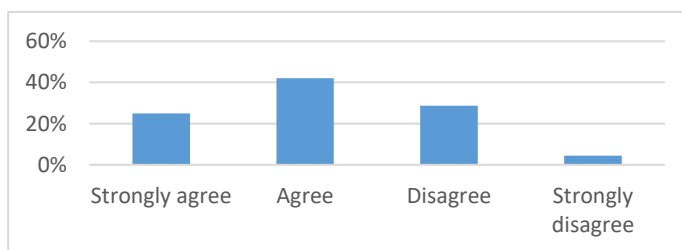


Figure 12. I Hope My Teacher Will Reduce the Number of Assignments in the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

Figure 12 above shows that 67% of the participants hoped their teacher would reduce the number of assignments in the online English lessons, while 33% did not.

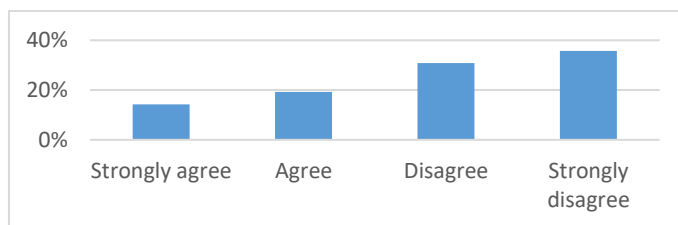


Figure 13. I Prefer Speaking in English With the Camera on During the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

According to Figure 13, 67% of the participating learners preferred speaking in English with the camera off during the Blackboard English lessons. In comparison, 33% preferred the camera to be on when communicating in English during the virtual English classes.

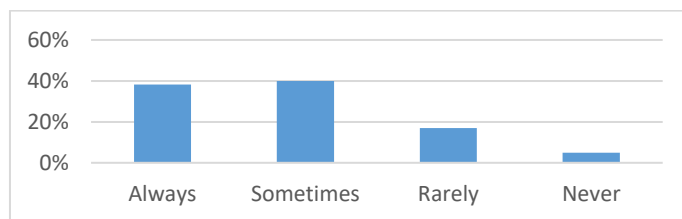


Figure 14. I Ask for Clarification When I Am Confused About a Task That Needs to Be completed During the Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

As shown above, 38% of the students claimed that they *always* ask for clarification when they are confused about a task that needs to be completed during the Blackboard English lessons, and 17% reported that they rarely ask for clarification when they need it during online English classes (see Figure 14).

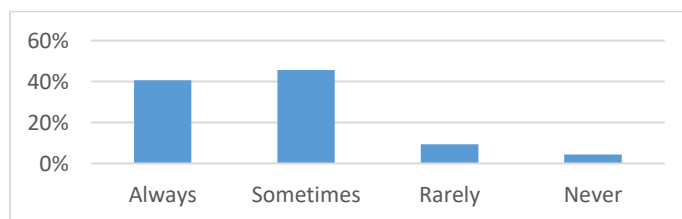


Figure 15. I Answer the Questions During the Online English lessons (Blackboard).

As illustrated in Figure 15, 46% of the participants stated that they sometimes answered the questions during the online

English sessions, while 4% never did so.

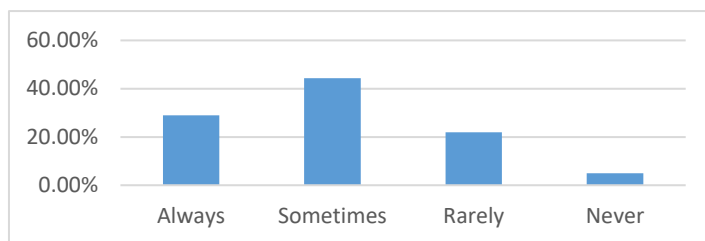


Figure 16. I Speak to Express My Opinions in English During Online English Lessons (Blackboard).

The above Figure 16 shows that 29% of the students who participated claimed always to speak to express their opinions in English during online English lessons. In comparison, 22% admitted that they rarely do.

Furthermore, in their answers to the open-ended question about the factors that help to sustain their WTC in online English classes, participants suggested several factors that can influence students' WTC. These suggestions were divided into four broad themes, as follows:

1- Lesson-related suggestions

The first theme focuses on suggestions related to lessons, as the participants' responses indicated that online English lessons impact maintaining their WTC. Factors, including how lessons are taught and the overall nature of the lessons, influence students' WTC. Based on these insights, the sub-themes for lesson-related suggestions were classified as: (a) varying the teaching methods used in online lessons; and (b) making virtual classes more engaging to motivate students.

A. Sub-theme 1: Varying the teaching methods

Monotonous online English lessons adversely affect some participants' willingness to engage. Therefore, to sustain their WTC, it was recommended that the teaching methods be diversified. The following quotes from several of the participants highlight this suggestion:

P 1: "Varying teaching methods is important."

P8: "Focusing on improving the delivery methods to prevent the recipient from getting bored with the information."

B. Sub-theme 2: Making virtual classes engaging and motivating

If online English lessons are perceived as boring, unengaging, or make students feel uncomfortable, their WTC may decline. Therefore, the overall nature of these lessons can hurt the maintenance of WTC. To keep students motivated, it was suggested that online lessons should be made more enjoyable, engaging, and comfortable. The following quote highlights this recommendation:

P3: "Adding motivational elements for students during online classes to capture our attention."

2- Teacher-related suggestions

It has been found that English language teachers who deliver online classes directly influence the maintenance of participants' willingness to communicate (WTC) through their attitudes and behaviours. As participants' responses emphasised teachers' behaviours and attitudes, this theme is divided into two sub-themes: (a) encouraging student participation; and (b) maintaining a positive attitude.

A. Sub-theme 1: Encouraging student participation

Some participants believed that English teachers encouraging participation by allowing students to speak in virtual lessons helps to maintain their WTC. The following quotes illustrate this view:

P19: "Encouraging students' participation one by one."

P20: "Teachers should increase communication with students."

B. Sub-theme 2: Maintaining a positive attitude

The attitudes of English language teachers in online lessons seem to affect the maintenance of students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Some students suggested that teachers adopting positive attitudes help to maintain their WTC in these classes. The following quotes demonstrate this point:

P14: "Teachers' positivity during online lessons is important..."

P27: "Increasing effective methods to encourage students to speak English confidently without the fear of making mistakes."

3- Classroom-related suggestions

The findings indicate that online English classrooms influence participants' willingness to communicate (WTC) through factors such as the classroom environment and the duration of lessons. Participants' responses focused on these aspects. Therefore, the sub-themes identified are: (a) fostering intimacy in online lessons, (b) adjusting class hours, and (c) students turning on their cameras to enhance communication.

A. Sub-theme 1: Fostering intimacy in online lessons

Two participants noted that if an online English lesson lacks an intimate atmosphere, they may struggle to maintain their WTC. It appears that a more intimate environment helps to trigger WTC. As a result, some participants suggested that a sense of intimacy should be created in online lessons, as the following quotes illustrate:

P18: "Fostering an intimate environment like traditional class settings would be better."

P16: "Face-to-face classes are better than online classes because of the intimacy in a face-to-face environment."

B. Sub-theme 2: Adjusting class hours

There were some differences of opinion regarding class times, as three students suggested increasing the duration of online classes to improve their learning and, therefore, their WTC. In contrast, another participant suggested that reducing the amount of class time would help to maintain their WTC, as shown below:

P17: "Allowing more time during online lessons."

P21: "Intensifying the lectures and increasing the number of hours."

C. Sub-theme 3: Students turning on their cameras to enhance communication

Two students recommended that turning on their cameras would facilitate communication and maintain their WTC. The following quotes highlight this view:

P18: "Turning on the camera facilitates communication between the teacher and students."

P7: "The study should involve sound and images to enhance the effectiveness of the lesson."

4- Programme-related suggestions

The choice of English language programme used in online lessons appears to influence the participants' WTC. As a result, the sub-themes identified are: (a) tailoring the English language programme to match students' proficiency levels; and (b) enhancing the online English content.

A. Sub-theme 1: Tailoring the English language programme to match students' proficiency levels

If the English language programme in a virtual class does not match students' proficiency levels, it can negatively impact their WTC. Therefore, it was suggested that the programme should be tailored to students' English proficiency levels to help maintain their WTC in virtual lessons. The following quotes emphasise this point:

P10: "The level of the curriculum being taught does not match my language proficiency; the curriculum is simpler than my level."

P11: "I hope the curriculum will be improved, as it is too basic and has not enhanced my skills."

B. Sub-theme 2: enhancing the online English content

The topic-related suggestions indicate that the subjects covered in online English lessons can negatively affect participants' WTC if they fail to capture students' attention. Participants' responses focused on the nature and content of these topics, for example:

P4: "Increasing activities that require speaking in English to help improve speaking skills."

P13: "Giving useful examples from real-life situations rather than the usual examples."

V. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the data from the current study in light of previous literature. According to the current study, there are variations in the students' opinions, as 53.3% of students preferred online English classes to traditional face-to-face classes, and 46.7% preferred traditional settings. This variation is expected as previous studies have shown the advantages of learning in virtual and in-person classes. For instance, Gopalakrishnan et al. (2022) observed that face-to-face classrooms typically foster more spontaneous communication because of teachers' and peers' immediate interactions and social presence. Conversely, recent studies on web-based and hybrid learning environments have indicated that students generally experience less anxiety and exhibit higher WTC in these settings compared to traditional classrooms (Kruk, 2021; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). Therefore, the best approach for enhancing WTC would be to blend face-to-face and online learning (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2022). This combination allows students to benefit from in-person interaction and the flexibility of digital platforms, thus providing more opportunities for communication in varied environments.

Furthermore, it was found that most participants believed that virtual English classes are practical for learning, taught in various ways, enjoyable, last for a suitable length of time, and the teachers have positive attitudes. They also believed that the teachers always or sometimes encourage students to participate, giving them enough opportunities to communicate using English. Furthermore, it was found that many students would always or sometimes ask for clarification when confused and would answer questions during virtual English lessons, which aligned with previous studies on web-based or hybrid learning environments indicating that students generally experience lower levels of anxiety and exhibit higher WTC in web-based environments compared to traditional face-to-face classrooms (Kruk, 2021; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). Other studies, such as Abulhajja et al. (2024), have also suggested that online classes were interesting.

However, the number of students who chose "always" dropped when asked if they express their opinions using English during online English classes, possibly because students tend to be passive learners in the context in which the study was conducted and only speak when they are asked to by the teacher (see, e.g., Alshammari, 2019; Alharbi, 2015; Harmer, 2007). It is also possible that learners in EFL contexts have a lower level of WTC than students in L2 contexts because they use English for daily communication (Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2023b). Therefore, exposing learners to environments where English is spoken is crucial for enhancing their WTC. According to the results, students appeared to be confident in communicating by asking questions when they required clarification and answering questions; for instance, during virtual English lessons, students seemed less willing to express their opinions using English. Some variables, such as proficiency and confidence alone, may not ensure a high WTC, as a positive learning setting is also essential (e.g.,

Alenezi, 2024; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2023a). This helps to explain why studies have found that students are generally more eager to practise speaking English outside of the classroom than in the classroom (Başöz & Erten, 2018; Isma & Baharuddin, 2022).

Moreover, according to students' perceptions, the current study generated some suggestions for reducing learners' WTC. For example, most participants hoped that their teacher would reduce the number of online English class assignments. Additionally, it was revealed that most of the participants preferred to have their cameras switched off during online English classes, possibly because shy students feel more comfortable communicating when their cameras are off, as the chances of losing face were minimised (Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). Nevertheless, the qualitative data gathered from the open-ended question proved to be quite comprehensive, with participants suggesting several factors that they thought should be taken into consideration to improve their WTC, such as using various teaching techniques, ensuring that activities are enjoyable, teachers adopting a positively encouraging attitude, fostering a sense of intimacy in classes, increasing the duration of class time, students turning on their cameras to interact effectively, tailoring the chosen English language programme to match students' proficiency levels, and enhancing the online English content. These were crucial to sustaining students' WTC in the current research. Therefore, it was suggested that teachers should involve students in selecting topics and allow them to discuss subjects that interest them, thus boosting their WTC (Cao, 2011; Kang, 2005; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Furthermore, fostering intrinsic motivation by helping students appreciate the value of learning a second language has also been found to enhance their WTC (Azmand, 2014; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2014). In addition, strategies that support self-esteem, such as encouraging initiative-taking, can lead to long-term improvements in WTC (Azmand, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Canfield, 1990). It has also been shown that a positive classroom environment fosters a higher WTC, encouraging risk-taking and reducing anxiety (Aomr et al., 2020; Cao, 2011; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022; Barrios-Espinosa & Acosta-Manzano, 2025). According to Dewaele (2019), a supportive environment where errors are accepted helps create a non-threatening space for students to engage in language use.

VI. CONCLUSION

Research into online language learning has gained increasing importance, especially since COVID-19, due to the growing demand for online language learning and its benefits (White, 2014). However, few studies have focused on EFL learners' recommendations for maintaining engagement in online English classes (Dariyemez & Yastibaş, 2023). The current study investigated students' suggestions for maintaining their WTC during online English classes at Hail University in Saudi Arabia. However, some of the students who participated in the current study found the virtual English classes effective, enjoyable, and conducive to participation, which is consistent with studies showing increased WTC in web-based or hybrid environments (Kruk, 2021; Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Mulyono & Saskia, 2021; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022). On the other hand, other students provided suggestions for improving their WTC, including reducing the number of assignments, allowing them to keep their cameras switched off during classes, using varied teaching methods, fostering their motivation, and creating a supportive environment. These suggestions align with those of past research, emphasising the importance of a positive classroom atmosphere and teacher support in enhancing WTC (Barrios-Espinosa & Acosta-Manzano, 2025; Aomr et al., 2020; Cao, 2011; Punyaporn & Soontornwipast, 2022).

This study suggested that educators should create environments that support learners' WTC in face-to-face and online classrooms. Teachers should be mindful of the advantages and drawbacks of both learning formats and adapt their teaching methods accordingly to maximise learners' willingness to engage. In conclusion, the study emphasises that while every setting has unique benefits and challenges, the future of language learning lies in creating balanced and adaptable learning environments that support effective communication in diverse contexts (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2022).

However, despite the significance of the results of the present study, there were some limitations, such as the participants being drawn exclusively from a single university and the fact that the study only studied students' WTC in an online context. Therefore, the findings cannot fully represent the country as a whole. Future research could involve several universities and various contexts, enabling more extensive generalisation of the findings to encompass all Saudi EFL students at the tertiary level. Further studies in various contexts and considering different variables such as students' English proficiency and personality traits are needed to better understand students' requirements in English online lessons and determine how best to meet their needs in order to maintain their WTC.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abulhaija, L., Migdadi, H., Bashir, I., Yunus, K., & Taany, B. (2024). Undergraduate students' willingness to communicate in English during remote learning classes. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 51(3), 290–302. <https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v51i3.4181>
- [2] Alebaikan, R., & Troudi, S. (2012). Blended learning in Saudi universities: Challenges and perspectives. *ALT-J*, 18(1), 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687761003657614>
- [3] Alenezi, A. (2024). Saudi undergraduate students' anxiety and willingness to communicate in English in online classes. *Journal of the North for Humanities, Northern Border University*, 9(2), 202–220. <https://doi.org/10.12816/0061801>
- [4] Alharbi, H. (2015). Improving students' English speaking proficiency in Saudi public schools. *International Journal of Instruction*, 8(1), 105–116.
- [5] Alshahrani, H., & Preece, S. (2020). Willingness to communicate in face-to-face and online settings: The role of motivation and

- anxiety. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 39(1), 58–78.
- [6] Aomr, J. A. W., Seng, G. H., & Kapol, N. (2020). Relationship between willingness to communicate in English and classroom environment among Libyan EFL learners. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(2), 605–610.
- [7] Azmand, M. (2014). The relationship between Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and self-esteem. *Journal of Studies in Learning and Teaching English*, 2(6), 1–23.
- [8] Baker, C. (2021). Anxiety, motivation, and willingness to communicate: A study of Chinese EFL learners in traditional settings. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 12(5), 783–790.
- [9] Barrios, E., & Acosta-Manzano, I. (2025). Factors predicting classroom WTC in English and French as foreign languages among adult learners in Spain. *Language Teaching Research*, 29(1), 88–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211054046>
- [10] Basöz, T., & Erten, I. H. (2018). Investigating tertiary level EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English. *English Language Teaching*, 11(3), 78–87.
- [11] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- [12] Canfield, J. (1990). Improving students' self-esteem. *Educational Leadership*, 48, 48–50.
- [13] Cao, Y. (2011). Investigating situational willingness to communicate within second language classrooms from an ecological perspective. *System*, 39, 468–479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.10.016>
- [14] Dariyemez, T., & Yastibas, A. (2023). EFL students' suggestions to maintain their willingness to communicate in online English language lessons. *GiST Education and Learning Research Journal*, 26, Article 1615. <https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.1615>
- [15] Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th Ed.). SAGE Publishing.
- [16] Dewaele, J. M. (2019). The effect of classroom emotions, attitudes toward English, and teacher behavior on willingness to communicate among English foreign language learners. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38(4), 523–535.
- [17] Dörnyei, Z., Csizér, K., & Németh, N. (2006). Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation. *Multilingual matters: A Hungarian perspective*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [18] Freiermuth, M., & Jarrell, D. (2006). Willingness to communicate: Can online chat help? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16, 189–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2006.00113.x>
- [19] Gao, Y., Kew, S. N., Feng, H., Zhang, T., & Ren, Z. (2024). Facilitating second language willingness to communicate in English: A systematic review on types of classroom-based instructional practices and their effects. *Arab World English Journal*, 15(4), 328–351. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from <https://awej.org/facilitating-second-language-willingness-to-communicate-in-english-a-systematic-review-on-types-of-classroom-based-instructional-practices-and-their-effects/>
- [20] Ghanizadeh, A., & Moafian, F. (2024). The impact of self-esteem and motivation on willingness to communicate in face-to-face and virtual classrooms: A comparative study. *Journal of Language and Communication*, 46(2), 98–110.
- [21] Gopalakrishnan, B., Borah, R., & Hussain, M. (2022). Willingness to communicate in face-to-face and online language classrooms and the future of learning. In S. M. Y. Lee & M. J. Arnett (Eds.), *The future of learning: Learning in the digital age* (pp. 183-199). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93921-2_14
- [22] Harmer, J. (2003). Popular culture, methods, and context. *ELT*, 57(3), 288–294.
- [23] Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching* (4th Ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- [24] Isma, A., & Baharuddin, A. F. (2022). Exploring students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in Indonesian EFL classrooms. *Proceedings of English Linguistics and Literature*, 3, 78–85.
- [25] Kang, S.J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *System*, 33, 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.10.004>
- [26] Kruk, M. (2021). Changes in self-perceived willingness to communicate during visits to Second Life: A case study. *The Language Learning Journal*, 49(2), 240–250.
- [27] Kruk, M. (2024). A scoping review of willingness to communicate in language learning. *Language Testing in Asia*, 14(1), 1–19. <https://languageestingasia.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40468-024-00284-2>
- [28] Lee, J. S., & Hsieh, J. C. (2019). Affective variables and willingness to communicate of EFL learners in in-class, out-of-class, and digital contexts. *System*, 82, 63–73.
- [29] Lee, J. S., & Liu, L. (2022). Dynamicity of EFL learners' willingness to communicate in an online class. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(6), 2078–2096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2039677>
- [30] Liu, F., & Yang, J. (2022). Social and psychological factors influencing willingness to communicate in traditional language classrooms: A study of Chinese university students. *Modern Language Journal*, 106(1), 134–151.
- [31] Ma, X., Wannaruk, A., & Lei, Z. (2019). Exploring the relationship between learning motivation and L2 WTC in an EFL classroom among Thai EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 12(7), 33–45.
- [32] Macintyre, P., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in an L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, 545–562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>
- [33] Mulyono, H., & Saskia, R. (2021). Affective variables contributing to Indonesian EFL students' willingness to communicate within face-to-face and digital environments. *Cogent Education*, 8(1), 1–15.
- [34] Nakamura, R., & Tanaka, A. (2024). Cultural factors affecting willingness to communicate in traditional face-to-face language classes in Japan. *Language Education in Asia*, 15(1), 67–81.
- [35] Piechurska-Kuciel, E. (2014). Willingness to communicate in a foreign language: Evidence from those who approach and avoid L2 communication. *Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 27, 145–159. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08353-7_10
- [36] Punyaporn, P., & Soontornwipast, K. (2022). An exploration of students' willingness to communicate in Thai EFL online classrooms. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Call on CALL*, 8, 70–87.
- [37] Razmjoo, S. A., & Hoomanfar, M. (2012). On the effect of cooperative writing on students' writing ability, WTC, self-efficacy, and apprehension. *World Journal of English Language*, 2, 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v2n2p19>
- [38] Riasati, M. J. (2018). Willingness to speak English among foreign language learners: A causal model. *Cogent Education*, 5(1), 1455332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1455332>
- [39] Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications, Inc.

- [40] Şener, S. (2014). Turkish ELT students' willingness to communicate in English. *ELT Research Journal*, 3(2), 91–109.
- [41] Tan, K. E., & Phairot, E. (2018). Willingness to communicate among Thai EFL students: Does English proficiency matter? *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15(3), 590–602.
- [42] White, C. (2014). The distance learning of foreign languages: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 47(4), 538–553. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444814000196>
- [43] Willig, C., & Rogers, W. S. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. SAGE Publications.
- [44] Yashima, T., & Zenuk-Nishide, L. (2023a). Classroom social climate, emotions, and language mindset: Their impact on willingness to communicate in English. *Language Teaching Research*, 27(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241237214>
- [45] Yashima, T., & Zenuk-Nishide, L. (2023b). From EFL to ESL: Unveiling willingness to communicate in English among Chinese international students in Malaysia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 44(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2024.2425980>
- [46] Yildiz, R., & Piniel, K. (2020). Turkish students' willingness to communicate in English as a second language in a third language environment. *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Technology*, 5(1), 156–185.
- [47] Zarrinabadi, N., & Khatib, M. (2021). Teacher support, learners' self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate in face-to-face language learning contexts. *Language Teaching Research*, 25(2), 213–231.
- [48] Zarrinabadi, N. (2014). Communicating in a second language: Investigating the effect of the teacher on learners' willingness to communicate. *System*, 42, 288–295. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.12.014>
- [49] Zhang, J., Beckmann, N., & Beckmann, J. F. (2022). One situation does not fit all: Variability and stability of state willingness to communicate in a Chinese college English classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(3), 504–529.
- [50] Chojimah, N., & Widodo, E. (2023). The willingness to communicate in English among domestic students in an international online class. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1301.07>
- [51] Zhang, Y., & Zhang, L. (2023). A study of the relationship between students' global perspective and willingness to communicate in English at an EMI university in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 873766. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.873766>
- [52] Zhao, Y., & Li, S. (2020). Teacher-student interaction and the effectiveness of corrective feedback in online language education. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(3), 59–79.
- [53] Zhu, W., & Liu, M. (2020). Exploring the relationship between motivation, classroom environment, and willingness to communicate in the L2. *Journal of Second Language Teaching and Research*, 16(3), 234–249.

Eman Matar M. Alshammari is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at the UOH in Hail, Saudi Arabia, Faculty of Arts and Literature. Her research interests include learning and teaching evaluation, language testing, second language acquisition, and oral corrective feedback.