Perceptions of Saudi EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate in the Extramural Digital Context

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Abstract—**This study aimed to investigate the factors that may impact Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in an extramural digital (ED) environment. To do this, 50 Saudi EFL learners from different Saudi secondary schools were interviewed. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study showed that there are three variables affecting the second language (L2) WTC of Saudi learners in the ED context: educational variables (including teacher-centred English pedagogy and use of L1 in the English classroom), contextual variables (including both familiarity with communication partners and familiarity with online communities) and Individual variables (including both L2 self-confidence and L2 anxiety). The findings of this research study contribute to achieving a better understanding of the L2 WTC of Saudi EFL learners in the ED context. Furthermore, the factors illustrated by the study findings can provide insight for teachers and policymakers in Saudi Arabia to promote the L2 WTC of Saudi EFL learners in classroom environments.**

Index Terms—**Saudi EFL learners, second language (L2), willingness to communicate (WTC), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), extramural digital (ED) context**

I. INTRODUCTION

Willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language (L2), defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), has become a significant part of language learning and plays an important role in the development of language learners' communicative competence. In the past two decades, the role of WTC has been given great importance in research related to L2 teaching and learning (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Öz et al., 2015). Studies conducted on WTC to examine why some students are more willing or less willing to communicate in an L2 have been based on different aspects. The first group of WTC studies was conducted to examine why L2 learners are willing or unwilling to communicate based on trait-like aspects. This group of studies examined the effects of individual factors on L2 learners' WTC (e.g. EFL learners' L2 anxiety, Dewaele, 2019, self-confidence, acculturation and motivational types, Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020). The second group of WCT studies was conducted to examine the impacts of situated-specific factors (e.g. contextual factors) on L2 learners' WTC. For example, these studies included examinations of the classroom environment (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Peng, 2019), interlocutor identity (Cao, 2013) and task difficulty (Eddy-U, 2015). The third group of WTC studies was carried out to investigate why some L2 learners are more willing or less willing to communicate from dynamic and situated perspectives through a combination of both individual and contextual factors (e.g. the interrelationships between different constructs, such as cognitive processes, and anxiety, MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011).

With the increased importance of digital technologies in recent years, a growing number of studies have been conducted on WTC in online environments. These studies can be divided into two categories. The first category examined L2 learners' WTC in online environments in classrooms or in extracurricular contexts (e.g. Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Rahimi & Soleymani, 2015; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Xiangming et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). In other words, these studies examined the interaction of L2 learners in online settings that are connected to formal educational settings and regulated by instructors or in extracurricular online settings in which students can engage in online activities offered outside of school hours and school curriculum but within the school or through an affiliation with the school (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2017). The second category examined L2 learners' WTC in extramural digital (ED) contexts, in which L2 learners are engaged in self-instruction and self-regulation for learning English beyond formal classroom contexts and without association with a school through various online games and streaming media (Sundqvist, 2009). These studies are too limited compared with other WTC studies that were conducted to examine why some L2 learners are more willing or less willing to communicate based on trait-like aspects, situated-specific factors and dynamic and situated perspectives in classrooms or extracurricular digital contexts.

The research in the literature revealed that only three studies examined L2 learners' WTC in ED contexts: Lee and Dressman (2018) and Lee (2019a) in the South Korean context and Soyoof (2022) in the Iranian context. Thus, there is a strong need for conducting more studies in ED contexts to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between L2

learning and L2 learners' WTC in different ED contexts. Furthermore, there is a need to better understand the factors that impact L2 learners' WTC in ED contexts. By adopting a qualitative research method, this study aims to fill this literature gap and answer the following research question:

(1) What factors might impact Saudi EFL learners' WTC in the ED environment?

The findings of this study are of great importance because they will contribute to providing EFL teachers and EFL programme administrators in Saudi Arabia with pedagogical insights and improved knowledge regarding Saudi EFL learners' WTC in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. L2 Learning in the ED Context

Due to its increasing importance and widespread use, digital technology has become an effective means of L2 learning. In recent years, many learners have depended on a range of digital technology devices (e.g. computers, tablets and smartphones) and various digital resources (e.g. social media, digital games and mobile applications) for their English learning beyond formal classrooms. As a result, several studies have been conducted to examine the experiences of L2 learners in the informal digital learning of English (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Lai, 2017; Lee, 2019a; Lee, 2019b; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Richards, 2015; Sun et al., 2017; Toffoli & Sockett, 2015). The CALL studies used different titles to refer to the process of L2 learning in the ED context. These titles included *English beyond the language classroom* (Lehtonen, 2017), *out-of-school digital English* (Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015), *informal learning of English* (Al-Kadi, 2020; Hezam, 2020), *out-of-school exposure to English* (Peters, 2018), *out-of-class English learning* (Lai et al., 2015) and *extramural English* (Sundqvist, 2009; Sundqvist & Sylven, 2016).

As the concept of L2 learning in an ED context is adopted in this study, it is important to achieve clear comprehension regarding the difference between this concept and L2 learning in an extracurricular digital context. This difference can be identified based on the four elements shown in Benson's (2011) framework, which are 'formality, location, pedagogy, and locus of control' (p. 9). In an ED context, learners use different technology devices and sources to learn English independently and without an association with the school or interference from language teachers. Thus, their English learning is autonomous and naturalistic. However, in an extracurricular digital context, learners can use technology devices and English sources to perform tasks and activities outside of school hours and school curriculum but within the school or through an association with the school.

The research in the literature shows that several studies have been conducted to examine the role of an ED context in the development of L2 learning in different aspects, including studies on digital games (Bin-Hady, 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2020; Qasim, 2021; Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015), online communities (Putrawan & Riadi, 2020; Vazquez-Calvo, 2021; Vazquez-Calvo et al., 2019), social media (Al-Kadi, 2020; Sockett & Toffoli, 2012) and WhatsApp (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016). Although these studies have examined different aspects related to the role of the ED context in the development of L2 learning, they are still primitive. The process of L2 learning in the ED context is an important issue in SLA and CALL research that is in continuous and rapid growth (Reinders & White, 2016). Furthermore, the research shows that L2 learning in the ED context has positively affected L2 learners' affective characteristics (e.g. self-confidence, motivation and reduced stress; Rahmawati et al., 2019; Sylven & Sundqvist, 2012; Temban et al., 2021). The process of L2 learning in the ED context has been shown to promote L2 learners' affective characteristics and is likely to have a deep effect on L2 learners' WTC (Lee & Drajati, 2020).

B. L2 Learning and WTC

WTC is defined as the intention to initiate communication with others or to stay quiet, given free will (MacIntyre, 2007). McCroskey and Baer (1985) first introduced this concept to distinguish the trait-like variables detected by individuals though their communication in their first language (L1). Considering that there may be variables other than language competence that would illustrate WTC in an L2, MacIntyre et al. (1998) applied WTC to the L2 context to investigate the psychological factors affecting L2 learners' willingness to commence communication. MacIntyre et al. (1998) designed a heuristic model in the shape of a pyramid to illustrate the variables impacting L2 WTC (see Figure 1). According to the MacIntyre et al. (1998) heuristic model, the upper three layers (i.e., real L2 use, behavioural aim for L2 communication and preference to speak with a particular person) are seen as situation-specific impacts on WTC in L2. They are also seen as more dynamic, which means that they change over time according to specified situations of communication. In contrast, the lower three layers (i.e., motivational tendencies to communicate and interact in L2, cognitive and influential contexts and individual and social contexts) are considered trait-like variables that influence WTC in L2, and they are seen as more consistent and stable in their effect on communication situations over time and contexts.
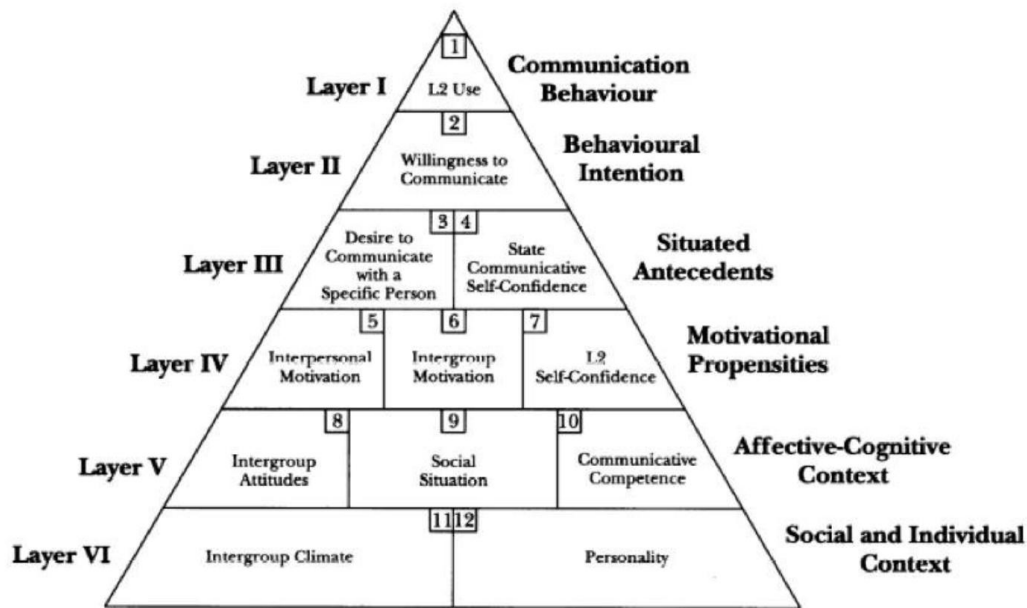
Figure 1. The Macintyre et al. (1998) Heuristic Pyramid Model for Illustrating the Variables Impacting L2 WTC.

Many studies have been conducted in support of the MacIntyre et al. (1998) WTC heuristic model in terms of trait-like aspects, situation-specific aspects and dynamic and situated aspects. Studies conducted on L2 WTC from trait-like aspects have emphasised learners' characteristics, such as anxiety (Dewaele, 2019), self-confidence, acculturation and motivational types (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020) and motivation (Lee & Drajati, 2020). In contrast, studies conducted on L2 WTC regarding trait-like aspects have emphasised contextual factors, such as classroom environment (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Peng, 2019), interlocutor identity (Cao, 2013), task difficulty (Eddy-U, 2015) and task form (Syed & Kuzborska, 2020). Other studies have dealt with L2 WTC from dynamic and situated aspects through the interplay between individual characteristics (trait-like aspects) and contextual factors (situation-specific aspects; Khajavy et al., 2016; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011).

With the increased importance of digital technologies in recent years, changes in the ecological conditions of the L2 teaching and learning process have been observed (Lee, 2019a). As a result, several studies have investigated L2 learners' WTC to engage in different types of digital technologies, such as digital gaming (Reinders & Wattana, 2015), social networks (Gallagher, 2018; Nukatta & Hayo, 2016) and digital wilds (Soyoof et al., 2021). The results of these studies illustrate that digital technologies have a positive effect on the L2 learning process by improving L2 learners' motivation to communicate and reducing their levels of stress and anxiety.

The research in the literature shows that three studies have examined L2 learners' WTC in the ED environment by adopting the MacIntyre et al. (1998) WTC heuristic model. Lee and Dressman (2018) conducted the first such study on the South Korean context and found that striking a balance between the form of L2 activities (e.g. examining grammatical differences online and the spellings of words) and the meaning of L2 activities (e.g. listening to recordings in English and reading English websites) is necessary for improving L2 learners' WTC. Lee (2019a) investigated the factors that impact South Korean EFL learners' L2 WTC in the ED context. The findings of the study showed that L2 anxiety and self-confidence, familiarity with communities and speakers and K-12 instruction in Korean contexts were the most prominent factors affecting South Korean EFL learners' L2 WTC. Finally, Soyoof (2022) conducted a similar study in the Iranian ED context and found that the factors that affect EFL learners' L2 WTC were educational practices, L2 anxiety and self-confidence and familiarity with communities and speakers. Thus, there is a significant need to conduct more studies in the ED context to gain a better understanding of the relationship between L2 learning and L2 learners' WTC in the ED environment in different contexts. Furthermore, there is a need to understand the factors that impact L2 learners' WTC in the ED context. By adopting a qualitative research method, this study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the factors that may impact Saudi EFL learners' WTC in ED environments.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

A total of 50 EFL secondary students participated in this study. The participants were studying in five public secondary schools in the city of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia. All participants were females and native speakers of Arabic. The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 18 years old. All the Saudi female students had been studying English for more than six years. Based on the information provided by the participants, none of the participants had lived longer

than one month in English-speaking countries or in any other country. According to a Quick Placement Test for Offshore Testing (UCLES, 2001), the language proficiency of the participants was at the elementary level.

B. Data Collection

This study was qualitative in nature and featured semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method was used because it yielded more and richer information and allowed for a deeper description and interpretation of the data. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the University of Hail. Also, the researcher obtained approval from parents and school principals. The participants were invited to participate in this study during the period from June to October 2022. All the participants were interviewed after they received explanatory statements about the study and its purposes and granted consent to participate in the study by submitting consent forms. The interview questions were adopted from semi-structured interview questions on the L2 WTC used in the Lee (2019a) study. The interview questions used in this study are as the following:

1. "What types of L2 activities in the ED context do you engage in? Can you describe how you engage in those?"
2. "Tell me how you feel about communicating in English online? Do you feel nervous, comfortable, and/or confident?"
3. "Do you believe you are more willing to communicate in English when engaging in ED activities? Why or why not?" (Lee, 2019a, p. 7).

The aim of the interview was to examine the factors that may affect Saudi EFL learners' L2 WTC negatively or positively in the ED context. Therefore, the interview questions emphasised the kinds of L2 activities in the ED environment that Saudi EFL students engage in, as well as descriptions of how students participate in those activities, their perceptions and feelings when communicating in virtual environments, whether speaking or writing, and their perceptions regarding the positive or negative impacts that make them more willing or unwilling to communicate in the ED environment.

Since the participants were native Arabic speakers, the interviews with them were conducted in this language, and the interview questions were translated into Arabic and double-checked by two proficient translators to ensure clarity. The purpose of using the Arabic language was to enable the participants to interact with the interview questions and express their ideas and experiences freely without any barriers that could affect the results of this study.

The participants were provided with detailed information about the study before they started conducting the interviews with the researcher. The researcher explained to the students that the data will be reported anonymously, the names given for participants in the study will be pseudonyms and not the actual names used by the students. Furthermore, the researcher explained to the students that the term 'digital' included digital devices (e.g., smartphones, laptops and tablets) and digital resources (e.g., mobile apps, social media and computer software). Each participant was interviewed for about 20 minutes. Some of the participants were interviewed face-to-face, while other participants were interviewed through phone calls and WhatsApp voice calls. The choice of conducting the interview face-to-face or through phone calls and WhatsApp voice calls was based on the participant's preference. During the interviews, the researcher gave participants the freedom to express their experiences, hopes, fears and opinions without limiting their answers to the study questions. Allowing the participants more freedom during the interviews was useful, as it helped the participants feel more relaxed and comfortable. To ensure accuracy in gathering the answers to the research questions from the participants and to concentrate on the interview, the researcher recorded all the interview sessions with the participants instead of taking notes, which may have caused distractions for both the researcher and the participants.

C. Data Analysis

This study derived the data required to obtain answers to the research question from semi-structured interviews. The data were transcribed in Arabic and then translated into English. To ensure the validity of the data obtained from the participants, back- translation technique is adopted to check the accuracy of the translation (Douglas & Craig, 2007). Besides, member checking is also used (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). After the data was transcribed, the participants were provided with their own transcriptions, and they were asked to judge validity of the information provided by them before inserting them in the study.

In the subsequent phase, the content was organised. Data analyses in qualitative research require data reduction and the organisation of information because the data obtained from participants are fragmented and disordered (Cohen et al., 2011). For this study, thematic data analysis was utilised to organise the data. Using thematic analysis is useful because it helps organise the content of the obtained data and facilitates combining important information from narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Furthermore, thematic data analysis is extremely flexible, enabling the researcher to identify themes from different angles (Riessman, 2008).

The data analysis process in this study involved several steps. First, the transcribed data was read repeatedly to identify important points. Second, similarities and differences in the viewpoints that the participants expressed were identified, and codes were generated in the margins of the transcriptions. Finally, recurrent themes were identified and revised. Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted that researchers can approach coding either from a data-driven perspective or a theory-driven perspective. In this study, the data were coded according to data-driven analysis that followed an inductive analytical approach, beginning with the research question and then collecting data, identifying codes and

finally generating themes. For example, the codes identified from the data including 'teacher-centered English pedagogy' and 'use of L1 in English classroom' were grouped into one theme, titled 'Educational variables. In Table 1, there is detailed representation of the themes and the coding structure.

TABLE 1
REPRESENTATION OF THE FINAL CODING STRUCTURE

Themes	Codes
Educational variables (n= 46; 92%)	Teacher-centered English pedagogy (n= 22; 44 %)
	Use of L1 in the English classroom (n= 24; 48 %)
Contextual variables (n= 42; 84 %)	Familiarity with communication partners (n= 25; 50 %)
	Familiarity with online communities (n= 17; 34 %)
Individual variables (n= 43; 86 %)	L2 self confidence (n= 18; 36 %)
	L2 anxiety (n= 25; 50 %)

Besides, the table includes illustration of the number of point of views provided by the participants for each one of the themes as well as for the codes. Detailed information about study findings will be presented in the following section.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Educational Variables

(a). Teacher-Centred English Pedagogy

A teacher-centred approach to EFL teaching is commonly used in Saudi EFL classrooms, as most of the interviewed students stated. Using such a method is illustrated to be one of the teaching methods that has negatively impacted Saudi EFL learners' WTC in the ED environment. Hussah, for example explained that depending on a traditional teacher-centric approach in teaching EFL is one of the reasons that she is a passive user of English in digital settings. Hussah said, 'I have never initiated an L2 online conversation with other users because I used to be passive in the classroom. During all the years of my learning English in schools, our teacher always talks, and we just listen to her and receive information and knowledge'. Similarly, Aminah said, 'I'm a passive user of English in the digital environment because during the previous years of my English learning, I have been encouraged to be quiet and listen carefully to teachers talk rather than to speak and share conversation until the teacher permits me to talk'.

Sara explained how the teaching-centric method used by EFL teachers in classrooms frustrated her L2 WTC in the ED environment and limited her competence in communicating in English:

> We are encouraged to listen to teachers to memorise what we are taught rather than to think or to communicate in English in the classroom. In short, the aim of teachers is to just spoon-feed us information to be ready to answer English tests in the classroom, not to prepare us for effective communication with foreigners outside the walls of the classroom. The lack of practice in oral communication in the classroom negatively impacts my willingness to communicate with foreigners online, as I feel afraid to provide the wrong pronunciation to vocabulary while speaking, and I have to spend time preparing my ideas in English.

Similar to Hussah, Sara and Aminah, many interviewed students emphasised that adopting a teacher-centred English pedagogy in Saudi EFL classrooms that treats the teacher as the classroom authority and ignores the role of the learner hindered their ability to communicate effectively in an ED environment. Teachers using this method are careful to pass information to learners and cover only what is needed for evaluation purposes and formal tasks, with no attention to helping learners collaborate as peers and develop the communication skills that prepare them to be effective English speakers and communicators outside the classroom.

(b). Use of L1 in the English Classroom

The use of the L1 (Arabic) by teachers in English classrooms hinders EFL learning and, consequently, the abilities of Saudi EFL learners to communicate in the ED environment. For instance, Alaa depicted how EFL teachers maximally using Arabic in class harm her WTC in digital settings by saying, 'I rarely initiate communication in English online. I do not have enough confidence in my pronunciation of English vocabulary. This is due to teachers' overuse of Arabic in the classroom, which deprives me from the adequate exposure to English that is necessary to develop my linguistics proficiency, including pronunciation'. Reem echoed this sentiment:

> I am a passive L2 user in digital settings. My use of English online is too limited. The reason is due to a lack of confidence in my pronunciation and ability to communicate well with other interlocutors, which resulted from the lack of enough teaching for oral communication in the classroom and the lack of using English as the language of instruction in the classroom.

Hind portrayed that using Arabic when teaching English in the classroom resulted in her low proficiency level, which hinders her WTC with others in online settings, saying, 'The lack of my exposure to English in the classroom makes me prefer to remain silent with other users online because I always fail to form a correct sentence that makes people understand what I am talking about'.

Noura illustrated that becoming an inactive L2 user in the ED environment was due to most EFL teachers and students using their native language (Arabic) over the target language (English) in the classroom and to EFL instructors' ignorance of teaching communication skills:

> I rarely communicate in English online. The focus of EFL teachers on teaching us grammar and vocabulary in Arabic, as well as their focus on teaching us the skills of reading and writing while ignoring the emphasis on teaching speaking, listening and pronunciation – the skills that are necessary for developing communicative competence – impact negatively on my L2 communication in digital environments, as I sometimes fail to recognise what others are talking about and sometimes fail to share and convey my ideas effectively.

Many other subjects reinforced that the prominent factors that affect the L2 WTC of Saudi EFL learners in the ED environment are EFL teachers' optimal use of L1 in the classroom, focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary with immediate translation in students' native language and neglect of teaching oral communication and communicative competence skills.

B. Contextual Variables

(a). Familiarity With Communication Partners

The participants in this study illustrated that creating friendships with people from different countries via social media who share the same activities, goals and interests plays an important role in improving their WTC to communicate in English. For example, Ahlam mentioned the following:

> My communication in English in online digital settings improved after I met my friend Leena. I met Leena for the first time while playing the digital game Roblox, a popular game throughout the world. Leena was helping me win by fighting the enemies in the game. I first contacted her via Roblox chat, but then I asked her to join me on Snapchat using the chat or video calls. I am communicating with her on Snapchat or Roblox almost daily, which has helped me improve my WTC in English.

Hind stated the following:

> I'm interested in photography, so I created an account on Instagram to share different photos that I took of food, nature and people. I got many followers from different countries who expressed their admiration for my photos in the comments, and two of the followers who always expressed their admiration for my photos were native speakers of English. After a while, they became close friends for me. I shared with them my phone number and joined them on Snapchat and made Snapchat chat calls, which helped me to improve my pronunciation of many words, as well as my writing skills.

Like Ahlam and Sara, many interviewees assured that familiarity with their communication partners and close interactions with them assisted their WTC to communicate in an L2 in ED settings. According to them, this method of communication helps in supporting their motivation to communicate in an L2 and reduces their L2 stress and anxiety.

(b). Familiarity With Online Communities

Apart from familiarity with communication partners, familiarity with communities via the internet impacts positively on L2 learners' WTC to communicate in ED settings. Renad commented, 'I played my favourite online game, and I often communicated with other players in English in the chat while playing'. Similarly, Areej mentioned, 'I used to play PUBG for three years, and I often talked with the members of the team in English, which helped me to improve my tendency to communicate in L2'. Asma, who was quite familiar with Twitter, reported, 'I use Twitter a lot. I am following 7NEWS Sydney, BBC News and CNN...I am interested in seeing topics provided by these Twitter accounts, and I often post comments in English'. Leen said, 'I have joined a group of photographers using Telegram Messenger, and I often comment on topics provided by the group members in English, and I often share my experiences with them. I find this group a supportive community, so I can introduce my inquiries without language concerns'. In addition to these comments, many other interviewees stated that engaging in a supportive community can assist the WTC of L2 learners.

C. Individual Variables

(a). L2 Self-Confidence

Individuals in this study revealed that the self-confidence to start communicating in English with others in ED settings is based on greater exposure to English. Mariam, for example stated the following:

> It was difficult for me to start talking with my friends when I first joined them in the online game, but by spending more time learning from their conversations in English in the game chat box, I started to feel confident sharing in their English conversation.

Similarly, Hana mentioned the following:

> When I first joined the online game Roblox, I avoided initiating conversations in English with my peers because I did not feel confident enough to speak in English. However, after spending three weeks in the game and learning how my peers were communicating in English by posting texts in the chat box, I became more willing to communicate in English.

Deena described how self-perceived English competence affects her ability to communicate confidently with people in digital games:

> Many users of digital games speak English fluently and confidently. They have a high level of linguistics proficiency that I do not have. I think this is because they have overseas experience or because they study English in international schools. My negative self-perception of my competence to speak English like them makes it difficult to share those conversations. This is the reason behind my preference to stay silent most of the time.

Thus, the perceptions of participants regarding their ability to speak English well support their willingness to share online conversations. However, their self-perceived low English competence leads to a lack of self-confidence and, correspondingly, restricts subjects' WTC in digital contexts.

(b). L2 Anxiety

L2 anxiety is one of the factors that hinder WTC in digital environments. Communicative anxiety is found to result from personal features regarding fears of making mistakes. For instance, Asma stated that she experiences L2 anxiety due to the fear of making mistakes that may lead to losing face. She said, 'I feel anxious when speaking English on social media because of my fear that I may make linguistic mistakes that may make me mocked by peers'. Eman echoed this sentiment, noting, 'I feel nervous when I post messages on Facebook and no one interacts with my messages, especially because my language proficiency is not good enough, so I always prefer to see how others write in English and communicate before sharing my messages'.

Lama remarked that she felt anxious when speaking English because she feared being laughed at:

> Because I do not have enough confidence in my pronunciation, I prefer to be silent when others speak English. I feel anxious when I speak English due to my fears of being laughed at when I provide the wrong pronunciation of English words.

Similarly, a great many Saudi students emphasised that they are unwilling to use English for communication in ED environments because they experience high levels of L2 anxiety that result from fears of making mistakes and, thus, feelings that they will not be understood.

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explain those factors that might have affected Saudi EFL learners' WTC in ED environments. In conducting interviews with 50 Saudi EFL students from secondary schools, this qualitative study revealed that three variables impacted Saudi EFL learners' WTC in the ED context: educational variables, contextual variables and individual variables.

Regarding educational variables, the participants argued that the teaching methods used in schools negatively impacted their L2 WTC. According to the findings, teachers follow traditional language teaching methods, emphasising teaching students' vocabulary and grammar with immediate translations into their native language. Students are also encouraged to memorise what they learn in preparation for language exams. Thus, English is taught only for the purpose of performing well on evaluations, rather than teaching students how to understand and think in the target language, as well as how to communicate in the target language. The findings illustrated that EFL teachers follow the traditional method—the grammar translation method, which is criticised for preparing students to memorise rather than to think in the target language—and mostly use the students' native language as the language of instruction for grammar and vocabulary, with no attention given to teaching students how to communicate in the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). An English teaching method that pays attention to teaching vocabulary and grammar is considered a form-focused method, meaning that it focuses on form rather than meaning and communication (Lee, 2019a). EFL teachers adopting this form-focused method in Saudi secondary schools encourage students to pass language tests to obtain future merits, such as university admission or employment, by considering language a linguistic capital (Seth, 2002). Making EFL learners follow this view of language leads to 'harmful backwash', a process that negatively affects L2 learning by leading students to consider English an academic subject that must be passed and not a communication tool (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016; Thompson & McKinley, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, educational variables seem to negatively impact Saudi EFL students' WTC in L2.

The findings showed that the contextual variables included familiarity with communication partners and familiarity with online communities. Concerning familiarity with communication partners, the participants showed that creating friendships with partners in ED settings motivated them to communicate and to develop their skills to communicate in L2. As for familiarity with online communities, the participants illustrated that engaging in different online communities, including games or social media, also increased their willingness to use English to communicate and had a positive effect on their communication skills. This is in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Cao & Philp, 2006; Gee, 2004; Reinders & Wattana, 2014, 2015; Yashima, 2002) that found familiarity with communication partners in online communities in different contexts raised learners' WTC in an L2, while unfamiliarity promoted the negative effects on their L2 WTC. The findings agree with the findings of those studies that particularly focused on examining factors affecting learners' L2 WTC in ED contexts, including Lee's (2019a) study on Korean students and Soyoof's

(2022) study on Iranian students, both of which found that familiarity with interlocutors plays an important role in promoting learners' WTC in an L2.

Regarding individual variables, the findings showed that increasing L2 confidence and minimising levels of anxiety and stress in ED settings have a positive effect on Saudi EFL learners' L2 WTC. This finding is consistent with other studies (e.g. Lee, 2019a; Soyoof, 2022; Yashima, 2002) that found that the lack of L2 confidence and the presence of L2 anxiety are negative factors influencing learners' WTC in an L2. The study's findings supported previous studies (e.g. Rahman & Deviyanti, 2018; Rahmawati et al., 2019; Sylven & Sundqvist, 2012; Temban et al., 2021) that found that offering non-anxious contexts for learners can increase their motivation to communicate in an L2. Online games were the most prominent activities used by participants to increase their self-confidence when communicating in English in the ED context, and this is in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020; Dewaele, 2019; Reinders & Wattana, 2015; Soyoof & McLay, 2019). Similar to EFL learners in other contexts, including Korean learners (Lee, 2019a) and Iranian learners (Soyoof, 2022), Saudi EFL students see ED settings as a chance to improve their WTC in an L2 by making friendships with foreign English speakers through enjoying online games or through using different types of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, in which they make friendships with English speakers who share the same interests or hobbies. Thus, Saudi EFL learners attempt to find what Gee (2004) referred to as 'affinity spaces' (p. 79) to meet foreign friends who use English as their language of communication and to communicate orally or through posting written texts.

In general, the findings of this study are similar to the findings of Lee's (2019a) study on Korean learners and Soyoof's (2022) study on Iranian learners. Furthermore, the findings of this study confirm the theoretical perspectives of the MacIntyre et al. (1998) model, as the five sub-variables, including trait-like aspects and situated-specific factors, shown in this study appear to have a concurrent interplay with the L2 WTC of learners when communicating in ED environments. For example, Layer 4 in the MacIntyre et al. (1998) heuristic model refers to motivation tendency (e.g. personal motivation, intergroup motivation and self-confidence) and represents Saudi EFL learners' WTC in an L2. Similarly, Layer 5 represents cognitive and influential contexts (i.e. intergroup attitudes, communicative competence and social situation) and also influences Saudi learners' L2 WTC. The findings of this study illustrated that the reason that Saudi EFL students do not have adequate motivation or are less confident (Layer 3) when communicating in ED settings is their lack of exposure to the L2 and interactions with the intergroup (Layer 5).

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, there are five recommendations. First, the findings showed that EFL teachers in Saudi schools focus their English teaching on teaching grammar and vocabulary with direct translation into the Arabic language. The findings also showed that EFL teachers encourage learners to memorise what they have learned instead of teaching them how to understand and think in the target language. Following such a teaching method has a negative impact on the process of English learning, as learners are not taught how to achieve communicative competence in the L2. Thus, EFL teachers in Saudi secondary schools must change their teaching methods and use alternative EFL techniques and methods that prepare learners to achieve high competence when communicating in an L2.

Second, EFL teachers may guide learners to online communities and give them instructions on how to communicate with these communities, as supportive communities were found to be important for improving L2 communication skills, as well as for reducing L2 anxiety and reinforcing learners' self-confidence and L2 WTC (Lee, 2019a; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Syoof, 2022).

Third, administrators of EFL curricula and programmes and in the Saudi Ministry of Education should pay closer attention to the significance of providing EFL textbooks that include rich conversations and topics about real situations with native English speakers that will help provide Saudi EFL learners with insight into how to communicate effectively in an L2 and improve their communication skills instead of merely focusing on the language form (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015).

Four, administrators of EFL curricula and programmes and in the Saudi Ministry of Education should urge Saudi EFL teachers and learners to use different types of digital technologies for the EFL teaching and learning process, including extracurricular and extramural digital activities, as using these digital activities is necessary to improve communication skills in an L2.

Five, students themselves can improve their own WTC in L2 outside the context of classroom and teacher-led activities through making close friendship with foreign interlocutors to reduce L2 stress before interacting with those interlocutors via social media. Such way is useful as it improves students' WTC in L2 as well as it promotes their English competence.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate those factors that might affect Saudi EFL learners' WTC in the ED environment by adopting a qualitative research method. The findings of this study illustrated that three different variables impact Saudi students' WTC in an L2: educational variables, including teacher-centred English pedagogy and use of L1 in the

English classroom; contextual variables, including familiarity with communication partners and familiarity with online communities; and individual variables including both L2 self-confidence and L2 anxiety. Although these findings seem to be similar to the findings obtained by Lee (2019a) in the Korean context and Soyoof (2022) in the Iranian context in terms of contextual variables and individual variables, the findings of this study contribute to reinforcing knowledge about L2 WTC in general and knowledge and understanding about L2 WTC in CALL environments in particular. Furthermore, this research study provides insight into the Saudi context regarding L2 WTC in ED environments, particularly since no study has been found in the literature that examines the factors that affect Saudi EFL learners' WTC in ED settings.

Although this research study made valuable contributions to the literature in terms of L2 WTC and CALL research, it is not free from limitations. The findings of this study are related to the Saudi context and cannot be generalised to other contexts. Furthermore, this study adopted a qualitative research method by using semi-structured interviews for data collection, which is considered inadequate for generalising data. Thus, further research may combine quantitative and qualitative methods to examine whether there are other variables that may affect the L2 WTC of Saudi EFL learners. In addition, the findings of this study were obtained from Saudi EFL learners studying only at secondary schools. It is important for further research studies to examine the perceptions of Saudi students at other stages, such as intermediate or university levels, to gain an understanding of other factors that may affect the L2 WTC of Saudi learners in the ED context. Examining the perceptions of EFL teachers to understand the factors affecting the L2 WTC of Saudi learners or learners in other contexts also seems critical.

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