

# Speaking in EFL classrooms – A qualitative analysis of students' unwillingness to communicate

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**Abstract.** In any foreign language learning, speaking is an essential productive skill. Despite this, many foreign language learners demonstrate hesitancy to participate in classroom settings. This study explores the reasons behind this phenomenon in the English classroom. Using semi-structured interviews with two teachers and 20 Saudi tenth-grade learners of English, the study identified various barriers that shape students' willingness to communicate (WTC), including psychological, linguistic, classroom, cultural, and pedagogical issues. The findings showed that fear of the consequences of making mistakes, anxiety, shyness, uneven classroom participation, and cultural beliefs inhibit students' attempts to speak in the English classroom. On the other hand, teachers' strategies, such as tolerating errors and implementing peer and small-group activities, promote students' willingness to participate. The study highlights the necessity of providing low-anxiety, interactive, and culturally sensitive learning atmospheres to enhance learners' communicative abilities, translating reluctant learners into active speakers. Theoretically, the study contributes to bridging the gap in the existing literature about the Saudi EFL learners' WTC.

**Keywords:** willingness to communicate, Saudi EFL learners, speaking skills, anxiety, classroom interaction.

**Алматкурі Джалал. Говоріння на заняттях з англійської мови як іноземної: якісний аналіз небажання студентів до комунікації.**

**Анотація.** Під час вивчення будь-якої іноземної мови говоріння є важливою продуктивною навичкою. Незважаючи на це, багато учнів, які вивчають іноземну мову, виявляють небажання брати участь у класних заняттях. Це дослідження вивчає причини цього явища на прикладі занять з англійської мови. За допомогою напівструктурованих інтерв'ю з двома вчителями та 20 саудівськими учнями десятого класу, які вивчають англійську мову, дослідження виявило різні бар'єри, що впливають на бажання учнів спілкуватися, включаючи психологічні, лінгвістичні, класні, культурні та педагогічні проблеми. Результати засвідчили, що страх перед наслідками помилок, тривожність, сором'язливість, непостійна активність та культурні переконання стримують спроби учнів говорити на уроках англійської мови. З іншого боку, стратегії вчителів,

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такі як поблажливе ставлення до помилок та впровадження групових і командних завдань, сприяють бажанню учнів брати участь у занятті. Дослідження підкреслює потребу у створенні навчального середовища, вільного від тривожності, інтерактивного та чутливого до культурних особливостей, щоб покращити комунікативні здібності учнів, перетворюючи пасивних учнів на активних учасників. У теоретичному плані це дослідження допомагає заповнити прогалину в сучасній літературі щодо готовності до спілкування саудівських учнів, які вивчають англійську як іноземну мову.

**Ключові слова:** бажання спілкуватися, саудівські учні, які вивчають англійську як іноземну мову, навички говоріння, тривожність, взаємодія в класі.

## Introduction

Speaking plays a vital role in communication between people as it is an instrument used by interlocutors to render their feelings, thoughts, ideas and intentions. Rahman (2010) states that communication implies transferring ideas, thoughts, values, feelings, and facts; it is essential in developing information and understanding among people. Moreover, Hughes (2006) states, "Speaking is the first mode in which children acquire language, it constitutes the bulk of most people's daily engagement with linguistic activity, and it is the prime motor of language change. It also provides our main data for understanding bilingualism and language contact" (p. 144). In the first language (L1) context, it is obtained through the natural process of L1 acquisition, whereas learners of a second language frequently encounter diverse difficulties such as insufficient exposure to the language, few practice opportunities, low linguistic level, anxiety, and L1 interference (Al-Saidat et al., 2024), among other factors.

As is commonly known, the amount of time spent on learning and using innovative approaches to master communication in the target language plays an important role in L2 gains. Despite this, literature indicates that some L2 learners avoid communication although they have spent sufficient time learning English and have high levels of linguistic competence and language proficiency (MacIntyre, 2007). This implies that learners' high level of language proficiency and length of exposure do not ensure natural and constant use of L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Dörnyei (2005) states that there must be an unclear factor responsible for putting communicative competence into practice and making learners more reactive, leading to the actual initialisation of L2 communication and then minimising learners' aversion to communication. This factor can hinder or construct the ability to use language; that is, psychological preparation to communicate at a particular moment (MacIntyre, 2007). This variable is commonly known as Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

## Willingness to Communicate

WTC was defined by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as the learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with specific person or persons using L2" (p. 547). According to McCroskey and Richmond (1990), WTC is a cognitive process that involves the learner's decision whether to talk, and this decision is influenced by his or her personality. WTC played a pivotal role in modern language learning. Learners with a high level of WTC demonstrate higher abilities to use the language in authentic communication contexts than those with a low level of WTC. They also have more opportunities to employ L2 inside and outside the classroom. They become autonomous learners as they rely on their own efforts to increase their gains in L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1998). However, this "readiness to enter into discourse" differs from one learner to another, as it is impacted by some factors. The previous studies indicate that learners' WTC is open to influence from certain internal and external factors (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2003; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Cao, 2011). For example, Cao's (2011) study showed that the most factors that impact learners' WTC in the classroom are the task type, topic, interlocutor, and teachers.

In his *Effective Filter Hypothesis*, Krashen (1982) provided another key perspective. It is suggested that emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence have a role in L2 acquisition; they either facilitate or block acquisition. For example, being afraid of making mistakes or having a high level of anxiety raises the learners' affective filter, resulting in decreasing their abilities to process input and produce output. Krashen's (1982) framework helps explain why some students, although competent in language, are unwilling to communicate in classroom settings. Moreover, from a sociocultural viewpoint, interaction is considered vital to language development. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), researchers stress the significance of collaborative tasks, negotiation of meaning, and opportunities for output in developing communicative competence (e.g., Swain, 1985, 2000; Long, 1996). Studies, such as Cao and Philp (2006) and Peng (2012), revealed that employing peer interaction and small-group tasks contributes to increasing students' participation and reducing their anxiety when compared to whole-class discussions.

The social and cultural dimensions of language learning have also been emphasized in recent research. Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) contends that effective communication in a second language is shaped not only by linguistic ability but also by cultural

awareness, social norms, and learners' identities. Similarly, Norton (2000) introduced the concept of investment, proposing that learners' participation in communication is influenced by how they perceive the social value of language use and the potential risks to their identities. In contexts where speaking English may lead to embarrassment, loss of face, or social discomfort, learners may consciously choose silence over participation. These studies and models offer a strong theoretical basis for investigating EFL learners' willingness to participate in classrooms. They emphasise that learners' WTC is influenced by some affective, cultural, and contextual factors besides their linguistic abilities.

Speaking is the real application of all language aspects, whether inside or outside the classroom. Alonso (2018) indicated that, in a second language context, speaking is inherently challenging and is the most difficult skill to teach, to assess and to investigate. This study aims to explore the factors that may impact Saudi EFL learners' willingness to engage in speaking activities and events in the classroom.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Saudi Arabia, despite the governmental support for teaching and English, students' level of English proficiency is still beyond expectations (Akhter, 2020; Alrasheedi, 2020). The international tests of English as a foreign language (EFL), such as TOEFL and IELTS, provide evidence of the Saudi EFL learners' poor performance in the four language skills (Alsiyat, 2021; Alshammari, 2020). Moreover, in most Saudi EFL classrooms, it is commonly observed that students avoid oral communication. Based on these, it is essential to understand why most of the students prefer to remain silent while a few do not. Therefore, it is important to shed light on the factors that may increase their WTC inside the EFL classrooms. To do so, the study attempts to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What are the main factors that influence Saudi EFL tenth-grade students' willingness to speak in the classroom?

RQ2: What strategies or solutions can help address the difficulties that hinder Saudi tenth-grade students' willingness to speak in the classroom?

### **Literature Review**

Being an important productive language skill, speaking is a crucial element in learning any foreign language. Research indicates that most learners of English as a foreign language encounter difficulties in speaking, decreasing their willingness to participate in the classroom. These difficulties and their sources

have been discussed in many of the previous studies (e.g., Başöz & Erten, 2019; Al-Saidat et al., 2023; Abed & Alishah, 2022).

Başöz and Erten (2019) examined the factors influencing EFL learners’ willingness to communicate inside the classroom. Thirty-two undergraduate EFL learners at a university in Turkey participated in the study. For data collection, the authors used semi-structured interviews. The results showed that students’ willingness to communicate inside the classroom is affected by various factors, including classmates, teachers, teaching methods, class size, fear of being ridiculed, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, vocabulary knowledge, and past communication experience.

Al-Saidat et al. (2023) investigated the effect of anxiety on the willingness to communicate of 20 Jordanian EFL learners at a private school in Amman. Data were collected through observation and semi-structured interviews. The results of the study revealed that students’ levels of anxiety are affected by factors such as fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism by other people inside the classroom, fear of negative evaluation, and some cultural beliefs concerning being active participants or speaking in front of other people. Similarly, Abed and Alishah (2022) explored the factors responsible for the low-level speaking skills of Jordanian EFL learners. Using a questionnaire, the authors collected data from 20 male and female students from the English department at a Jordanian university. The results of the study showed that the students encountered several challenges in mastering English speaking skills, including shyness, lack of vocabulary, teaching methods and ineffective group work.

In the Saudi context, EFL learners’ WTC has attracted the attention of researchers. Even though an insufficient amount of attention is paid to the impact of psychological factors on learners’ WTC, a number of studies have investigated the reasons behind this phenomenon in an attempt to determine and find solutions to overcome such obstacles (e.g., Alnaeem & Alwasidi, 2023; Alenezi, 2020; Alshammri, 2023; Alsiyat, 2021; Al-Qahtani, 2024; Alqurashi & Althubaiti, 2021; Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Mahdi, 2024; Elbashir, 2023, among others).

For example, the impact of anxiety on the achievement of Saudi EFL learners was investigated by Al-Khotaba et al. (2020). The study reported that students who had a higher level of anxiety had limited achievements and vice versa. Shyness, being a potential factor for WTC, was investigated in a study conducted by Alnaeem and Alwasidi (2023). They studied the impact of shyness on Saudi university EFL learners’ willingness to communicate inside the class. The authors used the shyness and willingness to communicate scales and interviews to collect data from 360 Saudi EFL learners. The study results

showed a negative correlation between the students' shyness and their willingness to communicate, especially when communicating with strangers, in meetings or speaking in public.

Alenezi (2020) investigated the factors that impact the in-class willingness to communicate of Saudi EFL learners. The author interviewed 30 Saudi university students to collect data. The study showed that participants' willingness to communicate is affected by 19 factors, including fear of making mistakes, fear of being ridiculed, shyness, L2 communicative anxiety, evaluation apprehension and previous communication experience. Similarly, Alshammri (2023) interviewed 50 Saudi EFL learners from different Saudi secondary schools to explore the factors that affect their willingness to communicate in the extramural digital context. According to the results, the participants' willingness to communicate is affected by factors like the use of L1 in the English classroom, the teaching method, familiarity with the interlocutor, self-confidence and L2 communicative anxiety.

Al-Qahtani (2024) examined how the global perspective (GP) impacts the willingness to communicate of Saudi EFL learners. The author used two data collection tools; he distributed a questionnaire among 150 undergraduates and interviewed eight students. The results of the study showed that there is a moderate positive correlation between WTC and certain GP domains, such as cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Moreover, learners whose GP was high showed greater WTC influenced by factors including intercultural awareness and openness to multiculturalism.

Alqurashi and Althubaiti (2021) explored the relationship between language proficiency and willingness to communicate among Saudi EFL learners inside the classroom. The authors collected data through focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews. The results of the study revealed that students' desire to communicate is mostly hindered by factors such as their low language proficiency level, limited vocabulary and fear of making pronunciation mistakes.

Al-Hassaani and Al-Saalmi (2022) conducted a study to find out the challenges that Saudi EFL learners face in speaking skills. Using a questionnaire, the authors collected data from female students at Bisha University. One of the major difficulties they encountered was that they were exposed to English at a late stage. The findings of the study included that students' language background is limited, teachers employ a teacher-centred approach, speaking class time is not enough, limited chances are available for practice, and teaching materials do not meet the students' needs of their daily lives and the labour market. Furthermore, teachers' impatience and absence of encouragement resulted in students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes.

Alsiyat (2021) explored the reasons behind the low speaking level of Saudi EFL learners. To collect data, the author used semi-structured interviews with three learners and one university professor. They attributed the students' low speaking levels to a number of factors, including the teacher-centred teaching method, motivation and unauthentic English materials. Similarly, Mahdi (2024) studied the linguistic and non-linguistic factors that hinder Saudi EFL learners' speaking skills. The results showed that the non-linguistic factors that impact students' speaking abilities include fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, confidence and lack of interest. In contrast, the linguistic factors include pronunciation, limited vocabulary and poor grammar knowledge. Focusing also on speaking challenges, Elbashir (2023) explored Saudi EFL learners' challenges in spoken English. He used a questionnaire and interviews to collect information about the reasons behind students' low level of fluency in spoken English in Saudi universities. The results of the study revealed that fluency in spoken English is negatively affected by the qualifications of the teachers, teaching materials, teaching methods and lack of motivation.

As seen in the findings of previous studies above, learners' willingness to communicate is affected negatively by psychological, linguistic and sociocultural factors. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, shyness, cultural norms, and low proficiency interact to determine students' desire to engage in speaking activities in English classrooms. These findings justify the need for research that investigates the perspectives of both students and teachers in an attempt to develop strategies that improve WTC in English classrooms.

## Method

The present study was conducted at a public school in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Although a few studies investigated students' unwillingness to communicate at the school level (e.g., Al-Saidat et al., 2023; Alshammri, 2023), the majority of the previous studies focused on university students' willingness to communicate (e.g., Başöz & Erten, 2019; Abed & Alishah, 2022; Alnaeem & Alwasidi, 2023; Alenezi, 2020; Al-Qahtani, 2024; Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Alsiyat, 2021; Elbashir, 2023). To bridge this gap, this qualitative study considers EFL learners at schools that have not been given enough attention by researchers.

### Setting and Participants

The participants of this study were 20 EFL learners and two English language teachers at a public school in Taif, Saudi Arabia. The students were in tenth

grade during the academic year 2024-2025. They were native speakers of Arabic and had been studying English as an obligatory subject for about ten years. All participants are males due to the gender segregation policy followed in the Saudi educational system. In addition, this study does not focus on gender distinction. Required permission was obtained from the principal of the school before data were collected. The participants were briefly introduced to the study and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. They signed the consent form and assured that the confidentiality of their information was protected by their anonymity. The study mainly adopted MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC as a theoretical framework.

## **Instrument**

Individual interviews provide a systematic way of speaking and listening to people for certain purposes, where the researcher examines the views and experiences of the participants related to the study's topic. According to Maxwell (2005, p. 94), interviews generally offer "a valuable way of gaining a description of actions and events – often the only way, for events that took place in the past or ones to which you cannot gain observational access".

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 school students and two teachers. Each interview lasted for 20 to 30 minutes. The semi-structured interview type was employed because it gives the researcher a space to probe deeply into the topic, adding more questions with the possibility to rephrase and explain certain questions to the participants. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow participants to reflect on their responses to give more details about the topic of the interview.

Face-to-face interviews with all participants were conducted over two weeks. As for the teacher-participants, the interviews were conducted in English, whereas the students' interviews were conducted in Arabic to avoid foreign language barriers and then translated into English. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. NVivo software was used to code and classify the data, facilitating the identification of themes, codes, and illustrative quotations, which were later summarised in the Results section (see Table 1). The factors identified in the present study were categorised into fear of consequences of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, cultural beliefs, and other factors.

The interview questions were developed by the researcher, drawing on his experience as an English instructor at a Saudi university and informed by the literature on WTC in English. The questions were subsequently reviewed by

two experts in the field and revised based on their feedback. The students’ interview questions included: What factors affect your participation in English classes? How do you usually feel when the teacher asks you to speak in English during class? Do you prefer speaking in English or staying silent in class? Why? How do your classmates’ reactions affect your willingness to participate in English discussions? The teachers’ interview questions included: How would you describe your students’ participation in English classes? In your opinion, how much do anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or lack of confidence influence students’ willingness to communicate? Do you believe cultural beliefs (e.g., avoiding mistakes publicly or respecting silence) contribute to students’ unwillingness to communicate? Which classroom activities do you think encourage students to speak more freely?

## **Results**

As shown in the literature, the desire to communicate among learners of a foreign language is highly influenced by various factors, including anxiety, a state of being connected to people’s experience in dealing with tension, trepidation, uneasiness and worry (Spielberger, 1983). Therefore, it is necessary to uncover the reasons behind this negative feeling in an attempt to get rid of, or at least minimise, this feeling. In this section, data were analysed in order to investigate the factors that are responsible for the students’ unwillingness to communicate in English classrooms and to suggest some solutions to reduce the effect of these factors on students’ WTC by relying on the interviews conducted with both students and teachers. Analysis of the individual interviews with teachers and students revealed three interrelated themes that shape students’ unwillingness to communicate: fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence and cultural beliefs.

### **Fear of Consequences of Making Mistakes**

The analysis revealed that fear of making mistakes was a key factor contributing to students’ unwillingness to communicate. Several students attributed their unwillingness to communicate to the fear of making mistakes. For example, S2 stated,

“Fear of making mistakes makes my desire to communicate low. I don’t even like to ask the teacher any questions” (S2).

More precisely, they were worried about the consequences of making mistakes caused by the reaction of both the teacher and the other peers in the

classroom. Therefore, two sub-themes emerged in the analysis: fear of negative evaluation and fear of being ridiculed by other students.

### **Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Several student-participants expressed their annoyance with the teacher's reaction when they made an error while speaking. Some participants emphasised this fact and its impact on their desire to participate. For instance, S7 said,

“The teacher does not give chances when I make mistakes. This increases my anxiety, so my participation becomes less”.

Similarly, S20 stated,

“For me, I usually hesitate and feel worried to engage in discussion, ask questions or speak with the teacher because his response will not be good if I make errors”.

The students associated their fear of negative evaluation with anxiety. It seems that it is one of the causes of being anxious. However, S1 was worried about the expected reaction of the teacher as well as that of the other participants; he believed that it would hinder him from engaging in classroom discussions. He said,

“In the discussion classes, I prefer not to participate; in fact, I feel anxious and ashamed because of the consequences of making errors. It is the teacher's negative evaluation in front of students; they usually laugh” (S1).

According to these excerpts, the teacher's role in reducing the students' fear and anxiety seems to be significant and more interestingly, the teachers themselves seem to be aware of the students' feelings about their own and other students' reactions. One of the teachers stated,

I believe that it is essential to encourage students to speak and participate without any fear of committing mistakes. There is no learning without mistakes; this is the process. Students fear the teacher's reaction and negative evaluation when their performance is not good. In my opinion, this reduces their willingness to communicate and, as a result, impacts their learning process of English. Teachers should be urged to understand the students' proficiency levels and other difficulties. Students have diverse difficulties, academic, psychological or whatever. Teachers should consider this (T1).

Similarly, T2 supports T1 in terms of the teacher's role in considering the individual differences in students' levels and encourages teachers to tolerate students' errors, suggesting a gradual error correction strategy. He stated,

One major reason for students' unwillingness to participate, in my experience, is the relationship between the teacher and the students; it is an obstacle for the students as they fear making mistakes while speaking with him. This feeling exists in most of the subjects, not only in English classes. This fear prevents them from being involved in any discussion or answering teachers' questions. Many teachers do not tolerate students' errors. This is not always good. Teachers sometimes should accept students' errors and gradually correct them (T2).

### **Fear of Being Ridiculed**

In the context of this study, fear of being ridiculed refers to students' negative feelings when they are criticised or scorned by other students in the classroom for either their grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. The analysis showed that fear of being ridiculed negatively impacted students' willingness to speak English. Participants implied this in the interviews as a reason for their unwillingness to speak in the English classes. For instance, S18 said,

“The way other students in the class look at me when I speak makes me feel anxious. It causes my reluctance to participate. I prefer not to speak in English classes” (S18).

One of the major situations described by the participants is that when a student commits an error, other students laugh at him. Some student participants indicated this situation (e.g., S12, S19, S3). One student stated,

“English pronunciation is my difficulty because when I make mistakes in pronouncing English words, students will laugh” (S12).

Similarly, S19 described the effect of such a situation on his willingness to speak; he said,

The problem is that some of the students start laughing when I make a mistake, which annoys me and impedes my desire to participate. I think this is not good” (S19).

It seems to be a frequent behaviour among the students in English classes to laugh or comment on those who participate, especially when the latter commit errors, as implied in the following excerpt taken from the interview with S3 who stated,

“My problem is apprehension. I prefer to remain silent instead of making mistakes. Students laugh at me. Most students feel like me” (S3).

On the part of teachers, they seem to be aware of this behaviour and its impact on the active student. One of the teachers mentioned:

*“Fear of making mistakes is the main problem; they don’t want their peers to laugh or correct them” (T1).*

Other students, such as S<sub>4</sub> and S<sub>11</sub>, explained their fear of being ridiculed in terms of the way other students think of them when they participate. S<sub>4</sub> noted,

I think that some students like to make sarcastic comments on other students’ mistakes. This is not good and makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t volunteer to speak unless the teacher forces me” (S<sub>4</sub>).

In the same line, S<sub>11</sub> stated,

“When I try to participate and make a mistake, other students have negative views. For this reason, I don’t like to participate” (S<sub>11</sub>).

For a summary of these and other findings, see Table 1 below.

### **Lack of Self-Confidence**

Student participants associated their unwillingness to speak in the English classroom with a lack of self-confidence. They believed that the lack of or low self-confidence was one of the reasons that hindered their attempts to participate in English classes. They attributed their lack of confidence to their fear of making mistakes. In other words, fear of making mistakes reduced their confidence, which resulted in avoiding oral communication. For example, one student explained,

“I think self-confidence is the reason for a lot of students. It impedes us from engaging in interactions inside the classroom. We fear making errors” (S<sub>8</sub>).

Similarly, another said,

“I know many English words and can form sentences, but when my turn to speak approaches, I feel worried, and everything goes away. This feeling hinders me from participating” (S<sub>14</sub>).

A different student added,

“In my opinion, many students do not have enough courage to use English in the classroom. Even when it is compulsory to speak, they hesitate and wish that the teacher would not ask them any questions. No self-confidence” (S<sub>16</sub>).

The above students’ views on the role of confidence in willingness to speak were confirmed by one of the teachers, who noted,

“Anxiety is a big problem. Even when a student knows the answer, he hesitates because he needs confidence” (T1).

Moreover, the students blamed the teacher for not encouraging them to speak. One of the students explained,

“There is no motivation from the teacher’s side. We fear committing mistakes in front of him. This reduces our confidence and participation” (S7).

Another student stated,

“Even if a student has high self-confidence and has no fear of making mistakes, other students and the teacher will not help” (S5).

Instead of identifying errors as part of the learning process, these students experienced them as threats to their self-image, which intensifies anxiety and silences interaction. This emphasises how situational anxiety and the absence of courage weaken the ability of even students with knowledge or initial confidence, showing that self-confidence is fragile and heavily shaped by the classroom atmosphere.

The teachers’ viewpoint strengthens these student experiences. As one teacher explained,

Some students are good, but they do not participate. They speak English in my chamber, but in the classroom, they prefer to be silent. I feel that they lack confidence. I usually encourage them, but they rarely volunteer. In my opinion, teachers should motivate such students to participate and tolerate their errors to increase their speaking confidence (T2).

T2’s opinion confirms that students often perform better in low-pressure, private contexts but prefer to be silent in public classroom settings.

This proves that low confidence acts as a psychological barrier that hampers even motivated students from engaging in any speaking activities. Confidence appears to be an essential requirement, at least for some students, for communication in the classroom settings. However, this is not always the case. Confidence alone does not always guarantee successful oral communication; the classroom environment, including the teacher’s role, should be taken into consideration. For a summary of these and other findings, see Table 1 below.

## **Cultural Beliefs**

Cultural norms constrained communication. These play a substantial role in shaping students’ willingness to communicate, often standing as invisible

barriers to students' desire to participate in the classroom. Participants reflected on these obstacles. For example, S6 said,

*"Some students are good at English speaking and other skills, but they avoid participation. The problem is that they don't like to be mocked by other students in the classroom" (S6).*

Fear of ridicule reflects cultural sensitivities about face-saving and other students' views, where committing errors in public is perceived as embarrassing rather than a normal learning process. Another student added,

*"In our class, when someone mispronounces a word, others laugh, so many of us choose silence instead of speaking" (S10).*

These excerpts indicate the role of cultural beliefs in shaping the students' willingness to interact even when they are competent in English. It is observed that preserving dignity and avoiding shame led students to withdraw from interaction.

The impact of cultural beliefs and values has also been acknowledged by teachers. One of the teachers explained,

*"In my opinion, culture has an important role in learning; it does not mean only politeness; it has other facets. Some students, although they know the answer, do not like to appear distinguished in front of others. This is true" (T1).*

As evident in T1's excerpt, modesty and humility, being important cultural values, prevent students from demonstrating their knowledge publicly. A student confirmed this observation:

*"If I answer too much, others may think I am showing off, so I keep quiet" (S5).*

Such cultural viewpoints exemplify how cultural beliefs of modesty, group conformity, and social harmony can overwhelm students' natural willingness to engage in speaking, as their participation might be interpreted as arrogance or as disrupting classroom balance.

Data indicated that students' willingness to communicate is also affected by their respect for authority figures. As one learner described,

*"As you know, in our culture, we respect the elders and sometimes avoid talking in front of them. This also affected our communication with the teacher; we minimise speaking with him in the school" (S15).*

This kind of respect, while positive in many ways, led students to prefer being quiet in the classroom when the teacher is perceived as an authority figure. This perspective was supported by another student who stated,

“When the teacher is strict or older, we feel it is not polite to interrupt him or talk too much” (S20).

S15 and S20’s perspectives confirm that cultural norms of deference and politeness may unintentionally constrain opportunities for practice and interaction in classroom settings, underlining students’ reluctance to participate. See Table 1 for a summary of these and other findings.

### **Other Factors**

Level of proficiency is a common factor that hinders communication among most learners of a foreign language. Some student participants confirmed this idea, attributing their hesitancy in speaking to their linguistic level. For example, S9 stated,

“I feel anxious and fear of making mistakes because of my level of English speaking. It is difficult for me. This is my feeling” (S9).

Another student, besides attributing his reluctance to participate to his low English level, believes that if most of the students were at the same level, he would be encouraged to speak:

“When many students make mistakes, this encourages me to speak because I am just like them; it is not only my problem, but if they speak fluently, my courage decreases. The reason is my level is not good, especially in speaking” (S2).

Some student participants emphasised the impact of shyness and anxiety on their desire to be engaged in any type of speaking, regardless of the linguistic level (e.g., S3, S10, S17). For example, S3 stated,

“I think my level is not good. Other students whose level is better than mine also hesitate to participate because of their shyness and fear of making mistakes in speaking” (S3).

Similarly, S10 noted,

“Anxiety and fear of committing mistakes are common reasons behind our unwillingness to speak in the classroom for most of the students, even for those with average academic level” (S10).

The number of students in each class played a significant role in the participants' willingness to speak in English classes. S<sub>13</sub> explains,

“In classes with a small number of students, it is easier for me to participate; I feel comfortable, but the huge number of students makes me anxious and unwilling to speak” (S<sub>13</sub>),

whereas S<sub>1</sub> attributed his reluctance to the huge number of students and his linguistic level:

“Some students always speak. I feel they are better than me, so I stay silent. In fact, talking to the whole class is scary” (S<sub>1</sub>).

The opinions of S<sub>13</sub> and S<sub>1</sub> were further supported by teacher participants' observations, as one of the teachers noted,

“The majority of the students do not participate; they stay quiet. Only a handful of them speak regularly. When I put them in pairs or small groups, suddenly they speak more” (T<sub>2</sub>).

The analysis of the interview data using NVivo produced four principal themes: fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, cultural beliefs, and other factors. Each theme was signified by specific codes that captured the students' and teachers' experiences, with representative quotations emphasising the participants' opinions. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers shaping students' willingness to communicate. Table 1 presents a thematic matrix that summarises the themes, codes, descriptions, and illustrative quotations.

Table 1  
*The Results of Thematic Analysis of Factors Impacting Saudi EFL Learners' WTC*

Theme	Codes	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Fear of consequences of making mistakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fear of negative evaluation</li> <li>▪ Fear of being ridiculed</li> </ul>	Anxiety about being corrected or mocked by the teacher/peers decreases WTC.	<p>“Fear of making mistakes makes my desire to communicate low” (S<sub>2</sub>).</p> <p>“The teacher does not give chances when I</p>

			make mistakes” (S7).
			“When I make mistakes ... students will laugh” (S12).
Lack of self-confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Hesitation</li> <li>▪ Low courage</li> </ul>	Students lack the confidence to speak even when they know the answer, often hesitating due to fear of errors.	“When my turn to speak approaches, I feel worried, and everything goes away” (S14). “Many students do not have enough courage to use English” (S16). “Even when a student knows the answer, he hesitates because he needs confidence” (T1).
Cultural beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Modesty/humility</li> <li>▪ Fear of showing off</li> <li>▪ Respect for authority</li> </ul>	Cultural values of humility, politeness, and deference to authority discourage active participation.	“If I answer too much, others may think I am showing off” (S5). “We respect the elders and sometimes avoid talking in front of them” (S15). “Some students... do not like to appear distinguished in front of others” (T1).
Other factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low proficiency</li> <li>▪ Shyness</li> <li>▪ Large class size</li> </ul>	Linguistic limitations, shyness, and	“I feel anxious... because of my level of

<p>crowded classrooms raise anxiety and lower participation.</p>	<p>English speaking” (S9).          “In classes with a small number of students, it is easier for me to participate” (S13).          “When I put them in pairs or small groups, suddenly they speak more” (T2).</p>
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## Discussion

The present study investigated the factors that affect Saudi EFL learners’ willingness to communicate in classroom settings from the perspectives of both teachers and students. The thematic analysis showed that a complex interplay of psychological, cultural, and situational factors shapes Saudi EFL learners’ WTC. The four key themes (fear of mistakes, lack of self-confidence, cultural beliefs, and other factors) underline the interaction between both internal affective barriers and external classroom dynamics to lower learners’ WTC in EFL classrooms. In addition to extending existing theoretical and empirical research, the findings of this study offer context-specific insights into the Saudi school setting, as shown in Table 1 above.

For example, fear of the consequences of mistakes, anxiety and lack of confidence emerged as strong obstacles to students’ attempts to speak in English classes. This is consistent with MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) WTC model, suggesting that affective variables and situational factors have a strong impact on learners’ WTC. Furthermore, this study revealed that students avoid speaking, even those with a high linguistic level. This finding supports Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasises the role of high anxiety in limiting language production. It is also in line with the findings of Al-Khotaba et al. (2020), Başöz and Erten (2019), Al-Saidat et al. (2023), Alnaeem and Alwasidi (2023) and Mahdi (2024) who found that fear of negative evaluation and shyness considerably decrease students’ willingness to speak. The results of the study revealed that cultural beliefs and social expectations negatively impacted the students’ willingness to participate; they were hesitant to perform in front of teachers and other students. This confirms

Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence model and Norton's (2000) investment theory, which highlight the impact of learners' identity and perceived social risks on speakers' WTC. It also agrees with the findings of some studies conducted in the Saudi context, such as those of Alsiyat (2021) and Al-Qahtani (2024), which indicated that cultural and social factors are significant in understanding students' avoidance of communication in the English classrooms.

Moreover, the findings support sociocultural perspectives of Vygotsky (1978) and Swain (1985, 2000) in terms of employing pair work and small group activities to reduce students' anxiety and avoid unequal participation dominated by confident students. Teachers' understanding of these strategies can help create a more interactive, relaxing atmosphere in the classroom. This also confirms the findings of the studies conducted by Abed and Alishah (2022), Alshammri (2023), and Elbashir (2023), which showed that teaching methods, lack of motivation, and ineffective group work had a negative impact on students' WTC.

## Conclusion

This study explored the factors that influenced tenth-grade EFL learners at a public school in Taif, Saudi Arabia. It establishes that WTC in English classrooms is a complex phenomenon. It is predisposed to be influenced by psychological, linguistic, cultural, and instructional issues. In response to the first research question regarding the factors that hinder students from participation, the findings showed that the psychological barriers: anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and shyness were the most noticeable factors, while the classroom environment and the teacher's role additionally inhibited participation. Moreover, students' WTC was shaped by their cultural beliefs and social expectations about speaking in the classroom. As for the second research question regarding strategies to overcome the factors that reduce students' unwillingness to communicate, the findings revealed that teachers' strategies – such as tolerating errors, employing pair and group activities, and using interactive tasks were effective in lessening these barriers.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that reducing students' unwillingness to communicate is a holistic approach, incorporating emotional support, learner-centred teaching methods, and culturally responsive practices. The study recommends that educators and curriculum developers generate low-anxiety, interactive, and authentic speaking opportunities that motivate all learners to participate. It also encourages further research that investigates

longitudinal changes in WTC, cross-cultural comparisons, and the impact of targeted pedagogical interventions on learners' communicative confidence and competence.

## Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflicts of interest.

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