

Causes of Saudi Students' Unwillingness to Communicate in the EFL Classrooms

Rasha Fawzi Kadi

English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia

Abeer Ahmed Madini

English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

It can be argued that the ultimate goal of ESL\EFL pedagogy is to enable students to have communicative competence. To achieve this, EFL teachers implement various techniques and strategies that aim to produce communicatively competent students. Nevertheless, one of the major challenges teachers encounter is that students are often passive, unresponsive and unwilling to speak in the classroom. Accordingly, the current study seeks to investigate the causes of Saudi students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom. A total of 136 Saudi female preparatory year students at the English Language Institute (ELI) in King Abdulaziz University (KAU) participated in this study. To gain a deeper understanding of the causes of this phenomenon, a mixed methods approach was adopted. Two data collection instruments were utilized in this study: an online questionnaire with 126 participants and semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire, and the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed thematically using NVivo. The findings of the study revealed that the unwillingness to communicate is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can stem from multiple causes. The main causes reported by the participants were fear of making mistakes, low language proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, shyness, lack of self-confidence, inefficient school education, and teacher\classmates related factors. The study concluded by briefly stating some of the limitations, offering recommendations for future research, and providing valuable suggestions for English language practitioners and policymakers to enhance this communication obstacle.

Keywords: Unwillingness to communicate, Saudi students, causes, perceptions, ELI, EFL classroom

1. Introduction

The ultimate goal for teaching a foreign language is to enable learners to use the language for communicative purposes. In the communicative approach, communication in the target language constitutes a pivotal part of the classroom practices (Littlewood, 1981). To achieve communicative competence, learners need to initially have the intention or desire to communicate in the target language. The desire to initiate communication in the second/foreign language is called willingness to communicate. Recently, the construct of willingness to communicate has come into focus and appears to be a powerful predictor of success. In fact, in communicative language classes, students' success can be dependent on their eagerness to participate in L2 communication (Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak, 2017). Additional importance is lent to the concept because it can be seen as the ultimate goal of L2 instruction (Dörnyei, 2008).

Despite all the advantages that engaging in communication may yield, it may seem surprising that some learners lack the will to communicate and interact with others either inside the classroom or outside (Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak, 2017). Actually, it is rather common to find people who avoid entering L2 communication situations even if they are communicatively competent (Dörnyei, 2010). Such reticence or unwillingness to communicate, therefore is a huge obstacle for many foreign language learners. Baran-Łucarz (2014) stated that "speech is a vital part of [language learning] that is not only considered as a product of acquisition but also a precondition for it; therefore, it is crucial to discover and understand the reasons for some students' unwillingness to speak." (p.446). On a similar note, Hamouda (2012) stated that most second and foreign language learners specifically in Asia are often described as passive and reticent in the English language classroom, and students do not respond to nor volunteer answers or initiate questions. This issue is also confirmed by Rabab'h (2005) who claimed that communication in the target language is one of the major difficulties' Arab learners face. In the Saudi context, Saudi learners are often described as unwilling to participate because they rarely volunteer answers or ask questions, are unresponsive to the teacher's questions, and prefer to remain silent most of the time in the EFL classroom (Aljumah, 2011; Hamouda, 2012; Alhmadi, 2014 Reza, 2015; Al-wossabi, 2016). Such unwillingness to communicate is a huge hinderance to learners' development in learning the foreign language. Accordingly, the current paper aims to investigate the causes of EFL students' unwillingness to communicate in English in the Saudi context. In doing so, some useful suggestions and recommendations are made for teachers and policymakers to enhance this communication problem. This paper therefore aims to answer the following research question: What are the students' perceptions regarding the causes of unwillingness to communicate in EFL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *What is unwillingness to communicate?*

In the literature, there are three commonly used terms associated with communication in the second/foreign language. Namely, willingness to communicate, unwillingness to communicate, and reticence. MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) defined willingness to communicate in English as a second language as the “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2” (p. 547). In contrast, unwillingness to communicate refers to a “chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication” (Burgoon, 1979, p.60). As for reticence, Phillips (1968) described a reticent person as “a person for whom anxiety about participation in oral communication overweighs his projection of gain from the situation.” (p.40).

McCroskey (1977) made a distinction between reticence, unwillingness to communicate, and willingness to communicate. Reticence and unwillingness to communicate were used interchangeably in the literature; however, there were few differences between them. Reticence is the most global of the constructs in that it refers to a trait of an individual characteristically remaining silent rather than participating in the communication. On the other hand, unwillingness to communicate is the same as the most recent formulations of the reticence. However, it focuses on global predisposition to avoid communication which could stem from multiple potential causative elements. On the same note, the terms willingness to communicate and unwillingness to communicate are essentially the same except for the fact that the former is worded positively while the latter is worded negatively (McCroskey, 1992). In brief, the aforementioned terms belong to the same category which focuses primarily on preference to approach or avoid communication. (McCroskey, 1992). In the current paper, the researchers use the term unwillingness to communicate to refer to EFL learner’s tendency to avoid communication using English.

2.2 *Causes of unwillingness to communicate*

A plethora of research in the field of linguistics indicates that unwillingness to communicate is a cryptic and multifaceted phenomenon that could stem from a multitude of factors. Some of these factors are related to the language teacher and classroom environment while others are of a linguistic, affective, cultural nature and/or factors associated with learners’ personality traits.

2.2.1 The role of the teacher

In the EFL classroom, the language teacher can be the cause of students’ unwillingness to communicate. In fact, Macintyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011) stated that teachers “have the potential at any moment to increase or decrease WTC among the students.”(p.88). Tsui (1996) noted that teachers could contribute to learners’ fear of making mistakes and fear of being negatively evaluated. He also stated that teachers’ intolerance of students’ silence in the

classroom and the uneven allocations of roles caused students to be unwilling participants. Likewise, Littlewood (2004) found that the insufficient time given to students to formulate ideas also plays a role in this behavior (As cited in Savaşçı, 2013). In terms of teaching methods, some methods adopted by language teachers such as the grammar-translation method contributed to students' reticence (Reza, 2015). Similarly, Cheng (2000) stated that reticence could be caused by teacher-centered learning environments where students were likely to develop passive and reticent behavior.

Additionally, methods of error correction adopted by the language teachers play a crucial role in students' unwillingness to speak in the classroom as well. Zadkhast and Farahian (2017) investigated the impact of immediate and delayed corrective feedback on EFL students' willingness to communicate and found that students who received delayed feedback were less willing to communicate than those who received immediate feedback. Likewise, Zarrinabadi (2014) found that the teacher's lack of support, immediate correction of students' errors, the short time given to students for receiving responses and students' unfamiliarity with discussion topics were causing them to be unwilling to communicate.

2.2.2 The classroom environment

Sometimes, the classroom is a context that induces anxiety for learners (Carter and Henrichsen, 2015). Many adult learners are fearful of others' evaluation of their abilities and view the classroom as a platform where they are constantly being evaluated (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). On a different note, Reza (2015) found that the classroom environment and seating arrangement contributed to students' unwillingness to communicate. In his study, although students had a positive attitude towards the English language, they had a negative one towards the classroom environment. Another causative factor he reported was the equipment malfunction. For instance, malfunctions in laptops, projectors, speakers, smartboards and even the air conditioner contributed to student unwillingness. On the other hand, Khazaei, Zadeh, and Ketabi (2012) investigated the effect of class size on EFL learners' willingness to communicate and found it to have a considerable role. In their study, students were less willing to communicate in large classes as they had fewer opportunities to express themselves and practice their oral skills.

2.2.3 The role of school

The quality and type of school education EFL students received before enrolling in the university can have a substantial impact. Nagar and Littlewood (1997) found that school has indirectly caused students unwillingness to communicate due to lack of English language practice which led to students' inexperience in speaking. Consequently, they were reluctant to speak in class. Similar claims were made by Reza (2015). In his study, students reported that there was insufficient attention to English in their schooling system. On the other hand, Turjoman (2016) investigated the effect of private and public-school education on students' willingness to communicate. She found that students who studied in public schools were less

willing to communicate in English compared to those who studied in private schools.

2.2.4 Language proficiency

The role of language proficiency has been debatable as to whether it causes unwillingness to communicate among EFL students. Some researchers found that low English proficiency caused some students to be reluctant to speak (Tusi, 1996; Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b; Liu & Jackson, 2009) while others found that it was not a determinant factor (Wen, Clément 2003; Savasci, 2014; Soo and Goh, 2013). Instead, they found that the proficiency level of students is not a significant factor that hinders them from communicating as such a problem existed among EFL learners from beginner to more advanced levels.

2.2.5 Affective factors

Anxiety is one of the leading factors that cause students' unwillingness to communicate in the foreign language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope. (1986) stated that when individuals speak in the second foreign language, they become more apprehensive and anxious and hence more unwilling to participate in a conversation. In the literature, there is a connection between anxiety and confidence which eventually leads to learners' unwillingness to communicate. Tsui (1996) argued that students who lack confidence in themselves or in their linguistic abilities essentially suffer from communication apprehension. He also argued that lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes was causing students to be reticent. Similar claims were made by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) who stated that anything that increases state anxiety will reduce one's self-confidence and therefore one's willingness to communicate.

Furthermore, the fear of being wrong, making mistakes and being ridiculed is one of the commonly reported factors by EFL learners which lead to this phenomenon (Li and Liu, 2012; Littlewood, 2004; Reza, 2015; Liu 2005a; Liu 2005b). A strong relationship between anxiety and students' unwillingness to communicate was found (Liu and Jackson, 2009; Magogwe 2010). On the other hand, lack of confidence is also causing learners to be unwilling to communicate (Liu 2015a; Liu 2015b). Other affective factors such as shyness, lack of motivation and interest in the foreign language have also caused students' unwillingness to speak (Littlewood, 2004; Al-Halawachy, 2014; Alhmad, 2014; Reza, 2015).

2.2.6 Personality

Carter and Henrichsen (2015) pointed out that individual personality also contributes to students' unwillingness to communicate. Perfectionism is one of the reasons students were reluctant to speak (Savaşçı, 2013). Additionally, Mahdi (2014) found that introverted and inhibited learners were less willing to communicate as opposed to their extroverted peers.

2.2.7 Cultural causes

Cultural differences and beliefs can be one of the reasons students are unwilling to communicate in the language classroom. Li and Liu (2012) noted that various cultures forbid or strongly discourage individuals from speaking up in classroom settings. Likewise, Savasci (2014) stated that some cultures value deference towards the teacher and elder students. Cheng (2000) argued that reticence could be caused by inhibition which stems from cultural differences between the East and West. He claimed that Asian cultures generally value collectivism and discourage individual self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking whereas Western cultures value the opposite characteristics. He added that reticence could stem from anxiety and fear of making mistakes which could emerge from certain aspects of the Eastern cultures such as the desire to be right and perfect and fear of losing face.

2.2.8 Gap in the literature

In the Saudi context, some studies have investigated the unwillingness to communicate. For instance, Hamouda (2012) explored the causes behind students' reluctance to participate in English classes among 159 foundation year students at Qassim University. For the data collection, a questionnaire was used, and the results of the study revealed that low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, shyness and lack of confidence caused learners to be unwilling to participate. Furthermore, Al-wossabi (2016) interviewed teachers in the English Department at Jazan University to uncover reasons for students' reluctance to speak in the English classroom. It was reported that students' resistance to speak in class is due to the fear of making mistakes and learners' social and educational upbringing where memorization and repetition were encouraged rather than thinking and reacting. In the same context, Reza (2015) investigated reticence among EFL students. For the data collection, a questionnaire and interviews were utilized. The findings revealed that the role of teachers, anxiety, lack of motivation, attitudes, curriculum development, culture, and classroom environment were causing students to be reticent. Moreover, Alhmadi (2014) observed ten English speaking classes of the foundation year at Tibah University. She reported that the reasons behind Saudi students' lack of speaking were the English program and curriculum, teaching strategies, students' lack of motivation, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence. Rafada and Madini (2017) investigated speaking anxiety among 126 foundation year students at King Abdulaziz University. A questionnaire and interviews were utilized for the data collection. The results of the study revealed that students suffered from anxiety that lead to their reluctance to speak in the classroom. This anxiety stemmed from several factors. Namely, the teacher's lack of support and negative attitude, weak school education, lack of vocabulary, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation from peers and the teacher.

As illustrated in the previous studies, limited studies, in fact, investigated the EFL students' unwillingness to communicate in the Saudi context, particularly at King Abdulaziz University. In addition, to the best of researchers' knowledge, most of the previous studies that investigated the students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms were either quantitative or qualitative but not both. Accordingly, the present paper aims to adopt a mixed

methods approach to investigate the causes of Saudi preparatory year students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms at the English Language Institute in King Abdulaziz University.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The sample of this research is random, and students from different levels were included in the study to avoid biases and ensure validity. In total, 136 Saudi female preparatory year students studying English at the English Language Institute (ELI), in King Abdulaziz University participated in the study. Since September 2018, the ELI has adopted two main tracks for preparatory year students, science and art. Students are placed into four language proficiency levels based on the computer based placement test, namely, 101,102,103 and 104. These levels are adhered to the Common European Framework References for Language (CEFR), and the duration of each level is approximately 7 weeks in the academic year. The participants of this study were from both tracks and from all language levels. In total, 126 responses were received from the questionnaire, and 10 students were interviewed. To provide clarity when quoting participants' responses in this paper, the participant's number is presented first, then the participant's track and level is written in parentheses. The tracks are abbreviated as S for science track and A for art track, for example, participant 1 (S, 103).

3.2 Instruments and procedure

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the present study adopted a mixed methods approach to investigate the causes of students' unwillingness to communicate in the classroom environment. Creswell (2003) stated that the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data approaches in research provides a better understanding of the research problem. The current study is part of another research project that investigates several aspects of students' unwillingness to communicate in which a questionnaire and interviews were utilized. Data in the current study is obtained from an open-ended question from the questionnaire which tackled the causes of this phenomenon in particular. The question was "*In your opinion, what are the causes of students' unwillingness to communicate in English in the language classroom.*" Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the university campus. All interviews were one-on-one with participants from both tracks and all four language levels. Both the questionnaire and interviews were conducted in Arabic to avoid the language barriers, then transcribed and translated into English.

3.3 Data analysis

Since the participants' responses to the open-ended question were brief, the data was analyzed thematically first, then it was quantified and descriptive statistics of frequencies and

percentages were calculated. As for the qualitative data obtained from the interviews, they were analyzed thematically using the software NVivo.

4. Results

Based on the participants' responses to the questionnaire, there are seven causes of students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom. In table 1, causes reported by the participants from the questionnaire are presented with their frequencies and percentages. Beside these causes, two causes emerged from the interview. Namely, teacher-classmates related factors and students' mixed abilities.

Table 1. Causes of students UWTC in the classroom.

Item	Frequency	Percentage
1- Low proficiency level	27	21%
2- Fear of making mistakes	42	34%
3- shyness	14	11%
4- Lack of self-confidence	8	6%
5- Fear of negative evaluation	14	11%
6- Inefficient education at school	8	6%
7-Teacher's error correction method	5	4%

4.1 Low proficiency level

As table 1 demonstrates, one of the most significant causes of the participants' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom is the low proficiency level, which was reported by (21%) of the participants. In the interviews, three participants confirmed that. Participant 7 (A, 103) said: "*When a student tries to form a sentence in English but fails, she remains silent.*"

4.2 Affective factors

As table 1 shows, several affective factors were reported as causes of students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms. The most dominant cause reported by the participants was fear of making mistakes with a percentage of (34%). This fear was confirmed by all the participants in the interview. Additionally, (11%) reported shyness as another cause. However, this finding was only reported by two participants in the interviews and rejected by one. Participant 7 (A, 103) said: "*I have never seen a student so shy that she cannot answer a question.*" Fear of negative evaluation was also reported by (11%) and confirmed by four participants in the interviews. Moreover, (6%) of the participants reported that lack of self-confidence as another cause of students' unwillingness to communicate. This was also confirmed by three participants.

4.2.1 Sources of students' fear of making mistakes.

Considering the fact that fear of making mistakes was the most dominant cause reported by the participants, further investigation was required to understand the sources of this fear. To achieve that, data obtained from the interviews were provided to have a fuller grasp of this issue. Six participants blamed the society and students' upbringing as major contributors to this fear where they were ridiculed by their classmates. For example, participant 7 (A, 103) said: *"students have experienced fear since their English classes at school because of their classmates' reaction. Because if one student made a mistake, their reaction is not silence or tell her you are wrong, but everyone laughs. So, the student wouldn't try again."* Participant 3 (A, 102) also said: *"fear goes back to how we were raised, we live in a society of ridicule ... it's from the society."* One participant reported that ridicule could be unintentional. Participant 8 (A, 102) said: *"The fact that some students would laugh at others' mistakes could be unintentional because sometimes you know a word and she would pronounce it incorrectly which may sound funny."* Furthermore, one participant blamed the way students were raised in their homes. Participant 1 (S, 103) said *"Fear of making mistakes could be related to the student's childhood. Maybe she was punished when she made mistakes. Not all girls understand that making mistakes is normal; some have this huge barrier of fear."* Interestingly, perfectionism was another source of fear as reported by one participant. Participant 8 (A, 102) said: *"No one likes to make mistakes in front of others; everyone wants to be perfect and show his/her good qualities in front of others, especially in English."*

4.3 Inefficient English education at school

Six percent of the participants reported that the English education at school was a cause of their unwillingness to communicate. This finding was confirmed by nine participants in the interviews where several complaints were reported by them. For instance, not only do some teachers use their native language, i.e., Arabic for explaining the materials and communicating with the students but also inaccurate pronunciation was reported by some of the participants. In terms of the teaching methodologies adopted by the teachers, inconsistency in the teaching methods was described by the participants: *"it was confusing, one teacher would use a literary style like plays, and another would use conversations, dialogues or doing presentations. Each teacher would choose a teaching method depending on how she learned the language at the university"* said participant 8 (A, 102). In addition to that, a focus on memorization was also described by some of the participants *"at school, I only memorized, everything was like copy and paste"* said participant 5 (S, 103).

4.4 Teacher's error correction method

Four percent of the participants reported that the teacher caused them to be unwilling to communicate due to her method of error correction and intolerance to students' mistakes. This was confirmed by two participants in the interviews. *"Sometimes the teacher reacts unpleasantly and gives me judgmental looks as if to say how could you make this mistake,*

you learned that long ago" said participant 8 (A, 102).

4.5 Other teacher-classmates' related factors

There are other emergent themes from the interviews that were reported as causes of students' unwillingness to communicate associated with the teacher and classmates. First, three participants reported university teachers' oblivion to students' linguistic abilities and presumption of students previous or basic knowledge in English as a cause of students' unwillingness to communicate: *"Teachers assume that you had the basic knowledge and had a good foundation at school when in reality some don't even know what s+h sounds like"* Participant 6 (S, 103). Another cause reported by the two participants was the teacher's lack of concern: *"Some teachers care about delivering the assigned materials only regardless of the students' level. They want you to read when you don't even know the alphabet and write when you have zero language knowledge"* said participant 6 (S, 103). On the other hand, three participants reported unfamiliarity with a new teacher or classmates as reasons for the unwillingness to participate. Lastly, one participant reported that some teachers' behaviors caused the students great stress and fear particularly when they call on students and force them to participate. Such behavior caused them embarrassment because they might be unprepared or don't know the answer to the teacher's question.

4.6 Students' mixed abilities

Students' mixed abilities was one of the causes that emerged from the interviews and were reported by four participants. English classes consist of students with various abilities and linguistic backgrounds which caused some students to be unwilling to communicate in the classroom. Two participants reported that some competent unchallenged students prefer to remain silent in class: *"Honestly, I'm one of the girls that don't like to participate because there are things that I already know, so I give the chance for others to ask the teacher about things they don't know"* said participant 10 (A, 103). On the contrary, two participants reported that some students did not benefit from the previous level or barely passed it: *"Some have barely managed to pass level 2, so they don't know anything in level 3"* said participant 10 (A, 103). Hence, their linguistic abilities do not match their new level, so they remain silent in the classroom.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research clearly indicated that unwillingness to communicate is a complex phenomenon caused by a multitude of factors. The current research findings regarding what causes students to be unwilling to communicate revealed that fear of making mistakes, low proficiency level, fear of negative evaluation, shyness, lack of self-confidence, inefficient school education, factors related to the teacher and classmates, and students' mixed abilities caused the students' to be unwilling to communicate in the classroom

environment.

The most frequent cause of students' unwillingness to communicate in the classroom is the fear of making mistakes by (34%), which is consistent with (Hamouda, 2012; Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b; Al-wossabi, 2016; Rafada & Madini, 2017). The fear of making mistakes is the most dominant cause of unwillingness to communicate among all the other causes in the questionnaire. This finding is confirmed by all the participants in the interviews. Due to the predominance of this fear among students and its causative effect on their unwillingness to communicate, further investigation was conducted to understand the sources of this fear. It was found from the interviews that several sources were responsible for students' fear of making mistakes. Namely, fear of ridicule from their classmates due to their culture and upbringing, the influence of familial disciplinary practices, and attributes related to students' personality such as perfectionism. However, fear of ridicule is the main source of the students' fear of making mistakes as reported by the participants repeatedly (6 out of 10). In fact, the fear of being ridiculed has existed since students' English classes at school as participant 7 (A, 103) said: *"students have experienced fear since their English classes at school because of their classmates' reaction. Because if one student made a mistake, their reaction is not silence or tell her you are wrong, but everyone laughs. So, the student wouldn't try again."* Participant 3 (A, 102) also said: *"fear goes back to how we were raised, we live in a society of ridicule ... it's from the society."* Because this fear is deeply rooted in the students' early years of English education at school, its damaging influence has continued until they became adult language students at the university. This finding indicates that learners did not feel safe in the EFL classroom as they were constantly worried that their classmates will laugh at them if they made mistakes. These fears continued and lead to their unwillingness to speak in class to avoid being humiliated and embarrassed in front of their peers. This finding is in alignment with what Cheng (2000) described as fear of making mistakes due to cultural influences, Eastern cultures in particular, where the fear of losing face is one of its salient features.

Regardless of the sources of fear, it is noteworthy that students' lack of awareness about the importance of making mistakes and taking risks in the language classroom is noticeable. Actually, some are even oblivious to the seriousness of the negative impact ridicule has on their peers. For instance, Participant 8 (A, 102) said: *"The fact that some students would laugh at others' mistakes could be unintentional because sometimes you know a word and she would pronounce it incorrectly which may sound funny."* Indeed, as Leaver, Eherman, and Shekthman pointed out (2005), making mistakes by language learners not only common but also necessary. However, they added, mistakes can be threatening to students' self-esteem because they feel judged by their instructor and peers. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers are mindful of that and attempt to raise the students' awareness regarding this matter.

Another major cause of the students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classrooms is the linguistic barrier. Specifically, the students' low language proficiency which was reported by (21%) of the participants and confirmed by a number of the participants in the interviews (3 out of 10). This finding is consistent with (Tusi, 1996; Hamouda, 2012; Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b; Liu & Jackson, 2009) but contradicting to (Wen, clement 2003; Savasci, 2014; Soo and Goh, 2013) who found that students' proficiency in English was not a determining factor

of their unwillingness to communicate in the classroom. In this study, the low proficiency in English was the second main cause for students' unwillingness to communicate in the questionnaire. Students have limited command of the English language due to their low language proficiency. Consequently, they find difficulty in making a contribution in the classroom and articulate their ideas which eventually lead to their unwillingness to communicate as participant 7 (A, 103) said: "*When a student tries to form a sentence in English but fails, she remains silent.*"

The fear of being negatively evaluated by others is also causing students to be unwilling to communicate in the classroom by (11%). This fear had been reported by nearly half of the participants in the interviews regarding its occurrence in the EFL classroom (4 out of 10). This finding indicates that the classroom environment is an anxiety-provoking context. Therefore, students were constantly worried about the teacher and classmates' judgmental thoughts and negative evaluation of them. These feelings students experience in the classroom are consistent with what Carter and Henrichsen (2015) have described as adult learners' perception of the classroom as a platform where they are constantly fearful of others' evaluation. This finding is consistent with (Hamouda, 2012; Rafada & Madini, 2017) who found that Saudi EFL students were unwilling to speak in the classroom due to fear of being negatively evaluated by their teacher and classmates.

Another cause of students' unwillingness to communicate was shyness which was reported by (11%). This finding is also in agreement with (Hamouda, 2012; Al-Halwachy, 2014). However, in the interviews, only a few participants (2 out of 10) mentioned that shyness was causing students to be unwilling to communicate while one participant completely rejected the idea. It is plausible that shyness is, indeed, causing some students to be unwilling to communicate, but this shyness can be mistaken for other anxiety-related factors as well. According to McCroskey (1992), the use of the term shyness usually leads to confusion as it can result from anxiety or communication apprehension, social introversion, or both depending on different schools of thought in psychology. Shyness was also rejected by Al Halawachy (2014) who argued that shyness was not present when students code-switch in the class or when they speak their mother tongue with their teachers and peers outdoors.

Lack of confidence in one's linguistic abilities is another causative factor for students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL Classroom by (8%). This finding is also confirmed in the interviews by a number of participants (3 out of 10). This finding corresponded with other studies (Hamouda, 2012; Liu, 2005a; Liu, 2005b; Alhamdi, 2014). In this study, students do not feel confident enough to speak in the classroom and therefore became unwilling to speak. This lack of confidence could be influenced by students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes, a finding reported frequently by the participants as indicated earlier. As suggested by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998), anxiety decreases one's self-confidence and therefore reduces one's willingness to communicate.

The inefficient English education at school was another cause of some students' unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom by (6%). Even though only a few blamed the school education for their unwillingness to communicate in English in the

questionnaire, this cause was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews by almost all participants (9 out of 10). This contradiction can be interpreted in terms of the type of school (public, private, or international) that the students studied in and their varying learning experiences at schools. Turjoman (2016) found that students who studied in public schools were less willing to communicate in English compared to those who studied in private schools. However, in this study, the impact of the type of school on students' unwillingness to communicate is beyond its scope.

The inefficiency of English education at school was due to several factors as reported by the participants of this study. Namely, the use of the native language, i.e., Arabic in the classroom, teachers' inaccurate pronunciation, the inconsistency of the teaching methods, and the employment of old traditional teaching methodologies such as the audio-lingual method and the grammar-translation method. This was described as a cause of learners' unwillingness to speak also in (Reza, 2015; Al-wossabi, 2016). Similarly, Rafada and Madini (2017) also found that the school has indirectly affected learners' reluctance to speak in the classroom because it contributed to their speaking anxiety due to their insufficient vocabulary. These findings clearly suggest that it is vital that teachers are adequately prepared and familiarized with the current teaching methodologies such as the communicative approach to achieve the desired learning outcomes and abandon traditional, outdated approaches since the outcomes of these approaches are unsatisfactory and lead to learners' unwillingness to speak.

Moreover, another factor that caused unwillingness to communicate in the classroom was associated with the language teacher and classmates. In the questionnaire, only (4%) reported that the teacher's method of error correction was causing students to be unwilling and two participants confirmed this in the interview. Based on that, it can be assumed that the teacher did not have a determining impact on the students' unwillingness to speak. However, in the interviews, other factors related to the teacher and classmates emerged and has been repeatedly mentioned (9 out of 10) as causes for this phenomenon. Namely, the teacher's lack of concern, the teacher's oblivion to students' previous learning experiences and background, the teacher's calling on students', and unfamiliarity with the teacher and classmates. This discrepancy in the data obtained from the two instruments can be attributed to the varying experiences students' encounter with their language teachers at the university.

Undoubtedly, in the classroom environment, teachers not only have a major influence on the students' success but also "have the potential at any moment to increase or decrease WTC among the students" (Macintyre, Burns & Jessome, 2011, p.88). Therefore, in the current study, the teacher's negative attitude and intolerance to the students' mistakes, accompanied with the utilization of an unsympathetic and critical method of error correction had a harmful effect on the students in the classroom that eventually lead to their unwillingness to speak. This finding is in alignment with (Hamouda, 2012; Zarrinabadi, 2014) who found that the teacher's attitude and lack of support caused students' unwillingness to participate. In addition, a lack of concern for students' benefit also lead to the students' unwillingness to communicate. It is rather disquieting that some teachers are primarily concerned with only delivering the assigned materials and following the pace regardless of the varying English background knowledge of their students. This lack of concern and oblivion to students' prior

learning experiences and background especially in school have caused students to be unwilling to communicate in the classroom. Participant 6 (S, 103) said: "*Teachers assume that you had the basic knowledge and had a good foundation at school when in reality some don't even know what s+h sounds like.*" Another behavior that caused students' anxiety and lead to their unwillingness to communicate in the classroom is when the teacher calls on the students and forces them to participate. Such behavior can cause students to be embarrassed in front of their classmates and increase their anxiety. On a different note, students' unfamiliarity with the teacher and their classmates has also acted as another causative factor. Clearly, some teachers are unaware or indifferent to the importance of building rapport with their students and helping them to get acquainted with one another at the beginning of the language course.

Students' mixed abilities in the English language is another cause of their unwillingness to communicate in the EFL classroom. This finding emerged from the interviews and was described by four participants. In this study, as indicated earlier in the methodology section, students are placed into four language levels (101, 102, 103, and 104). However, some students who belong to the same language level have varying linguistic abilities. To illustrate, some students have barely passed the previous level, and therefore their linguistic competence is low compared to the other students while others are linguistically competent, and their abilities exceed their peers. This variation can diminish the students' chances of gaining the required attention to develop their linguistic abilities as with students whose linguistic abilities below the expected language level. Or it could also hinder the progress of their linguistic development as in the case of the students whose linguistic abilities surpass the other students on the same level. When students do not receive the required attention and language instruction based on their abilities and needs, also named as differentiated instructions, their chances of success decrease. In fact, Al-Subaiei (2017) found that students' mixed abilities' in the ELI in King Abdulaziz University as one of the challenges teachers face. She investigated this issue from the teachers' perspective using a questionnaire and found that some teachers struggle to meet students' different abilities due to lack of skill set and training. Hedge (2000) also stated that when teachers fail to address students' various needs, active students maintain their active state while their passive counterparts remain passive as well, without any positive development. Thus, the desired learning outcomes are not achieved, and as this study indicates they became unwilling to communicate in the EFL classroom.

6. Conclusion

Unwillingness to communicate is a major hinderance of students' success in learning the second/foreign language. The current paper attempted to unveil the causes behind this phenomenon among Saudi EFL students using a mixed methods approach. A multitude of causes contributed to students' unwillingness to communicate in the classroom. Namely, low proficiency level, fear of making mistakes, shyness, lack of self-confidence and other teacher-related factors such as the method of error correction and lack of concern and support.

In this study, affective factors are the predominant causes of this issue, particularly, fear of making mistakes. The present study was subjected to some limitations, one of which is the limited responses received from the participants. Another limitation is the inclusion of only female participants due to cultural constraints and ease of accessibility. Accordingly, it is suggested for future research to investigate this phenomenon on a larger population including both female and male participants. Investigating this problem by applying triangulation using different methods can reap illuminating results as well. Additionally, considering the strong influence affect has on learners' unwillingness to communicate, further investigation on the influence of other affective factors is needed.

To improve this phenomenon, some of the following suggestions can be beneficial. Teachers are advised to adopt strategies that alleviate students' fear in the classroom environment. It is advisable that teachers aim at providing an encouraging, supportive and safe learning environment for students to experiment in the language classroom. Raising the students' awareness regarding the importance of making mistakes as a natural process of learning is imperative as well. In addition to that, it needs to be illustrated to students that ridicule of each other's mistakes is not acceptable inside the classroom as it hinders their learning progress. Building rapport with the students and fostering a harmonious relationship is another critical step for teachers. Moreover, teachers are also advised to conduct a needs analysis at the beginning of the course before teaching any materials to ensure meeting all students' needs, and to have a fuller grasp of students' areas of strengths and weaknesses in the English Language. Based on the analysis, differentiated instructions can be an effective approach to reduce students' unwillingness to communicate. Lastly, considering the unsatisfactory outcomes of the English education at schools, language practitioners and policy-makers are urged to improve this predicament.

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Glossary

EFL: English as a foreign language

L2\ ESL: English as a second language

ELI: English Language Institute.

KAU: King Abdulaziz University

WTC: Willingness to Communicate

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