

The Relationship between Group Dynamics and Learners' Willingness to Communicate amongst Female EFL Students in a Saudi University

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Abstract

The willingness to communicate (WTC) is of significant importance to the development of communication in second language learning. The present study investigated the relationship between group dynamics (GD) and learners' WTC. A mixed-methods approach involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was utilized to collect data. The participants were 256 female preparatory year students from the science track at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Eight of these students also participated in the interviews. The findings revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between learners' perceived WTC and GD. Moreover, the perceived WTC of learners from level 1 was significantly different from that of learners from levels 2 and 3. The qualitative analysis revealed a set of GD factors that influence the participants' WTC. These factors were organized into three main themes that included nine subthemes. These themes are classmates-related factors, classroom environment factors, and teacher-related factors. The study also suggested some potential implications that can increase GD, which can contribute to enhancing learners' WTC.

Keywords: group cohesion, group dynamics, willingness to communicate (WTC)

1. Introduction

Communication forms the essence of English, and improving learners' communication competence is a key aim of many English language courses. It therefore follows that to increase learners' speaking communication, we should address the crucial construct of willingness to communicate (WTC) as this is an important determinant of learners' second language (L2) use (Clement et al., 2003). WTC has been defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Also, researchers (e.g., Kang, 2005; Rubin, 1975, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 334) considered learners with a strong WTC to be good language learners since they take advantage of all opportunities to use the target language. Based on the aforementioned reasons, fostering learners' WTC should be a fundamental goal of any language teaching program, and probing learners' WTC and its antecedents should be a priority of L2 WTC research.

WTC was initially studied as a personality trait that remains enduring across contexts and can be genetic (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Perceiving WTC as a personality trait led to examining it in relation to other personality traits such as communicative competence, language anxiety and motivation (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019). However, recent studies have begun to acknowledge the situational aspect of WTC which means that individuals' WTC can be changing according to other situational variables (Kang, 2005). This realization resulted in investigating WTC in relation to other contextual factors like classroom group dynamics (Alikhani & Bagheridoust, 2017; Doe, 2014) interlocutors (Eddy-U, 2015; Kang, 2005; Pawlak et al, 2016), and conversation topics (Kang, 2005). Group dynamics (GD) has also been studied across fields; however, in the field of SLA, it refers to the classroom ambiance that is shaped by the group's inner attributes and the developmental phases it goes through (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Accordingly, scrutinizing WTC in relation to GD will expand our understanding of it, which can be influential in improving learning outcomes in the classroom.

1.1 Research Problem

In the context of Saudi Arabia, many students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) consider oral communication a challenging skill, resulting in the majority of them avoiding speaking tasks during EFL classes (Alenezi, 2020). This reluctance should trigger researchers to understand the factors behind it. Most existing studies of WTC in the Saudi context have applied qualitative approaches to investigate the factors affecting students and have mainly focused on male participants (Alqurashi & Althubaiti, 2021; Alqurashi & Assulaimani, 2021; Alenezi, 2020). Therefore, the current study aims to address the following questions.

1.2 Research Questions

- Q1. What is the relationship between Saudi female EFL students' perceived group dynamics and their WTC?
- Q2. Is there a significant difference among different proficiency levels in terms of their perceived GD and WTC?
- Q3. How do GD influence the students' WTC?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Willingness to Communicate*

WTC in one's L2 was originally studied as a personality trait; however, other studies (Chan & McCroskey, 1987; McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991, as cited in Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014) tapped into the situational nature of WTC by highlighting the influence of factors such as interlocutors and setting on a person's disposition to speak. Perceiving WTC merely as a personality trait resulted in investigating it in relation to other individual variables. However, the studies that adopted qualitative methods and ecological perspective to investigate L2 WTC hugely contributed to acknowledging its situational dimension (e.g., Cao, 2011; Cao & Philp, 2006; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Peng, 2012). In terms of individual variables, communicative competence, language anxiety and motivation are the most pivotal in affecting learners' WTC (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019). Another critical factor that affects learners' WTC is the construct of an ideal L2 self, which refers to the positive visualization of one's future performance when using the target language (Wei & Xu, 2021). Likewise, learners' attitudes have been revealed to influence WTC, which has been defined as learners' integrativeness toward the L2 community (Léger & Storch, 2009; Yashima et al., 2004). Furthermore, age and gender (Chang, 2010; MacIntyre et al., 2002) and proficiency levels (Alqurashi & Althubaiti, 2021; Yashima et al., 2018) were other individual factors that were reported to influence L2 WTC.

Understanding the situational nature of WTC led to examining it in relation to numerous contextual variables, including the communication context, interlocutor, topic, and culture. Focusing on the classroom context has resulted in understanding how factors such as the teacher's role (Song et al., 2022; Wei & Xu, 2021), task features (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014; Poupore, 2018; Wood, 2016), and group dynamics (Alikhani & Bagheridoust, 2017; Doe, 2014) can significantly influence learners' in-class WTC. Additionally, cultural background is of great significance when studying learners' WTC since cultural values affect learners' beliefs about the teacher and learner's roles (Eddy, 2015; Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

2.2 *Group Dynamics*

In the classroom environment, students interact with each other, with their teacher, and with their physical surroundings. Hence, GD should be focalized when examining any construct that is related to the learning process. Classroom GD is described as the classroom atmosphere that is shaped by the inner characteristics of the class group and the developmental stages it goes through (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) proposed four stages that any group evolves through: group formation, transition, performing, and dissolution. One of the critical states that is reached before the performing stage is group cohesiveness, which refers to the positive relationship that is developed between individuals within the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), group cohesiveness increases the productivity of the group; thus, language learners who are in cohesive groups can experience more communication.

GD has been shown to directly or indirectly affect language learners' communicative behaviors

and WTC (Alikhani & Bagheridoust, 2017; Doe, 2014; Poupore, 2018). Doe (2014) conducted a quantitative study focusing on the relationship between WTC and group cohesion among 4,193 Japanese EFL learners, which revealed a correlation between the two variables. Another study that revealed the significance of positive GD on language learners' WTC is the quasi-experiment by Alikhani and Bagheridoust (2017). The findings revealed that the WTC of the experimental group, that received an instruction that mainly focus on group work, increased significantly more than the control group's WTC. Another experimental study that demonstrated the influence of GD on EFL learners' WTC was conducted by Ben Maad and Saadi (2020). The focus group received group dynamics-focused interventions, which involved giving students instructions contributed to increasing the group's cohesiveness. The findings revealed that the complexity of the utterances produced by the focus group increased, which was attributed to the reduced anxiety of the students as a result of the achieved group cohesiveness.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

In terms of WTC in the L2, MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a pyramid model that acknowledges the trait-like and situational aspects of WTC in the L2 by defining a set of variables that are considered to impinge on L2 WTC. They organized the variables into a pyramid consisting of six layers in which the three top layers, which include L2 use, WTC, the desire to communicate with a specific person, and state communicative self-confidence, exemplify the situational variables that vary according to the condition. On the other hand, the three lower layers, comprising interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation, self-confidence, intergroup attitudes, social situation, communicative competence, intergroup climate, and personality, represent the variables that remain constant regardless of the situation (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 371).

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Context

The study was conducted at King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The participants of this study were 265 female preparatory-year university students from the science track, eight of whom also participated in the interviews. The preparatory-year students are first-year students who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, according to their future majors: Art and Humanities, Science, Communication, English, Geosciences and Health. The participants are between 18-23 years old. For practical reasons, this study used the nonprobability convenience sampling technique which means choosing the participants based on their availability at the time of collecting the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Research Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

For the quantitative phase the study used a close-ended questionnaire with two scales that are in-class WTC and GD. The GD scale included 8 items from different sources (Dörnyei &

Murphey, 2003; Doe, 2014; Gałajda, 2017) that measured group cohesiveness. The items were modified by changing the negative worded ones and change the wording to suit the context of this study. The second scale included 10 items that measures in-class WTC which was adopted from Peng and Woodrow's (2010) study. It includes and was modified to suit the contexts of this study. The questionnaire was translated to avoid any misunderstanding. The questionnaire responses analysis started with a Spearman's rank correlation to test the relationship between WTC and GD, since the data is normally distributed. Following that, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the results of the participants from the three proficiency levels.

3.2.2 Interview

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect the qualitative data from 8 participants since it includes preparing questions for the interviews while allowing more elaboration from the part of the participants (Dörnyei, 2007). Some of the content questions were adopted from the interview questions of Nazari and Wills' study (2020) that investigated GD of Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) students. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to avoid any misunderstanding and make it easier for the participants to express their feelings and ideas without having language restrictions (Cohen et al., 2018). This study thematically analyzes the interview data using the NVivo software.

3.3 *Validity and Reliability*

3.3.1 Questionnaire Validity and Reliability

The first scale of this study's questionnaire was developed by combining items from different resources (Doe, 2014; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Gałajda, 2017) to cover all aspects of GD. For the second scale, all the items were adopted from Peng and Woodrow's (2010) scale that focuses on in-class WTC. In terms of the reliability, The Cronbach's alpha value of the first scale was .926 while the value of the second scale was .923, meaning that both scales are reliable.

3.3.2 Interviews Validity and Reliability

In this study, the researcher applied the peer debriefing strategy, which is asking an experienced researcher to discuss and negotiate the qualitative instrument, to increase the validity of the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.4 *Procedure*

The researcher started the data collection by piloting the questionnaire on 19 students from the science track towards the end of the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023. Then, the researcher used SPSS software to find the Cronbach's alpha value which was .9 for both scales of the questionnaire; therefore, it didn't need any modification. The researcher started the actual data collection in the middle of the second semester since students need to spend more time together to reach the group cohesiveness stage (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The quantitative data collection lasted for one week with students from the three proficiency levels participating the study. The data were then analyzed using SPSS and accordingly the interview questions were modified to accurately explain the quantitative stage results. Later, the qualitative data

collection started with the researcher conducting interviews with eight of the participants who participated in the quantitative phase. The researcher then used Nvivo software to analyze the interviews.

This study followed some ethical considerations. The data collection started after obtaining the data collection approval form. Besides, the participants are informed of confidentiality of their participation and their right to withdraw from participating at any stage of the study.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

4.1.1 The Relationship Between Perceived GD and WTC

In order to examine the relationship between Saudi female EFL students' perceived GD and WTC, a Spearman correlation was run. The results show a strong positive correlation between the two variables ($r = .470, p < .01$). This is in line with Ben Maad and Saadi (2020), who revealed a significant correlation between WTC and GD. Another study with similar results is Doe (2014), which only focused on group commitment as one aspect of GD. According to Doe (2014), the correlation between group commitment and WTC is significant.

4.1.2 The Differences in WTC between Different Levels

To compare the perceived WTC of students from the three proficiency levels, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in perceived WTC mean scores between at least two levels ($F(2, 251) = [4.119], p = .017$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test indicated that the mean score for level 1 was significantly different from level 2 and level 3 ($p < 0.05$).

4.2. Qualitative analysis

An inductive thematic analysis of the interviews was applied to answer the third research question which is exploring the GD factors that affect learners' WTC. The findings were organized into three main themes that included nine subthemes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic analysis results

Theme	Subthemes
Classmate-related factors	Using Arabic
	Classmates' positive characteristics
	Rapport with classmates
	Classmates' proficiency levels

	Being judged by classmates
Classroom environment factors	Seating arrangements
	Number of students
Teacher-related factors	Teachers' role in increasing learners' WTC
	Teacher-centeredness

4.2.1 Classmate-related Factors

All participants in this study indicated that their peers' interactions, characteristics, and actions can either increase or decrease their WTC. This theme includes five subthemes: using Arabic, classmates' positive characteristics, classmates' negative characteristics, rapport with classmates, and classmates' proficiency levels.

4.2.1.1 Using Arabic

Colleagues' interactions and behaviors can sometimes act as the rules that the rest of the class will follow during the classes, and one of these behaviors is the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. Some participants in this study revealed that when they noticed that one of their colleagues used Arabic to communicate in class, it made them feel like it is acceptable to use Arabic to communicate. Also, when P7 was asked to describe the group that she feels would increase her WTC she mentioned those who "*minimize the use of Arabic*".

4.2.1.2 Classmates' Positive Characteristics

The participants of this study revealed some characteristics that contribute to maximizing learners' WTC: classmates' cooperation and enthusiasm. Cooperation between classmates is essential for classroom interactions and communication. It makes classmates feel a sense of unity and trust in each other. According to P4, the group that she felt would increase her WTC is "*a collaborative and interactive group...A group that is helpful and shares their knowledge with each other and helps the rest of the students.*" This is consistent with Cao and Philp's (2006) study wherein half of their eight participants expressed the belief that if their contributions to a task are appreciated by their colleagues, it makes them more willing to communicate.

The enthusiasm of classmates is a salient factor that contributes to the increase or decrease of learners' WTC. For instance, P4 mentioned that "*If I was with an enthusiastic group, I would be motivated to learn in order to develop and communicate.*" This is reflected in the finding of Lee and Hsieh (2019), who demonstrated that Korean EFL learners stated that their WTC increases when their classmates show enthusiasm in their classes.

4.2.1.3 Familiarity and Rapport with Classmates

Learners' WTC is hugely influenced by the degree of familiarity with their interlocutor. The participants in this study revealed how their WTC rises when communicating with familiar classmates. P2 stated, "*Our EFL class group consists of students who were the same in two*

other courses before... We were very familiar to each other, and the communication between us became better.” This finding was reported by Cao and Philp (2006), who determined that learners feel more willing to communicate with familiar classmates. It is also supported by Pawlak et al. (2016), who revealed that students’ WTC significantly increased when talking to a familiar interlocutor.

Building rapport with classmates creates a feeling of connection and comfort that allows learners to communicate more easily. When participant P8 was asked to describe the group that would enhance her WTC, she stated, *“If we have a good relationship”* This substantiates the results of studies by Eddy-U (2015), Peng and Woodrow (2010), and Pawlak et al. (2016) that revealed the influence of having a positive relationship with classmates in creating a safe environment that increases learners’ WTC.

4.2.1.4 Peers’ Proficiency Levels

The majority of the participants expressed the belief that when they are in a class with peers whose English proficiency level is higher than theirs, they aspire to be like them, which increases their WTC. This concurs with Eddy-U’s (2015) findings, which indicated that many participants feel motivated to communicate when working with a classmate whose proficiency level is high.

4.2.1.5 Being Judged by Classmates

Some learners’ WTC might be reduced because they are afraid of being mocked by their peers when they make mistakes. For instance, P2 stated that *“My colleagues make fun of me when I make mistakes, they laugh,”* which makes her feel ashamed and avoid participation. This sentiment matches previous findings in the literature (Alenezi, 2020; Alqurashi & Althubaiti, 2021; Lee and Hsieh, 2019) that reported the fear of making mistakes and being laughed at as factors hindering learners’ WTC.

4.2.2 Classroom Environment Factors

Learners’ WTC is not only influenced by their classmates’ traits or behaviors, but it can also be influenced by physical factors in the classroom. Factors such as seating arrangement and the number of students can foster or hinder learners’ communication and WTC.

4.2.2.1 Seating Arrangements

The seating arrangement was mentioned by half of the participants as a factor that influences their WTC. As P3 stated, *“If we change the arrangement...it increases communication more, and we get closer to each other, and we have deeper communication.”* This is in line with Asaoka’s (2013) finding that rotating the seats of students led to increasing familiarity between classmates, which in turn increased their WTC.

4.2.2.2 Number of Students

Classes with a small number of students make it easier to build rapport between members, which positively affects their WTC. On the other hand, a large number of students in a class might negatively affect communication as noted by P3 *“For the rest of the courses we are in*

bigger classes, and I can't interact with many students, but in the English classes, the number of students is limited." Alqurashi and Assulaimani's (2021) study has similar findings to this study wherein all the participants revealed that a large class size hinders students' WTC.

4.2.3 Teacher-related factors

The teacher's role is crucial in shaping the group dynamics of a classroom and promoting learners' WTC. Teachers can make an effort to contribute to the increase of their learners' WTC, or they can behave in ways that decrease learners' WTC.

4.2.3.1 The Teacher's Role in Increasing Learners' WTC

Participants revealed that their WTC increases when their teachers make them feel comfortable, show interest in what they say, help them, and do things to support them. Similarly, studies such as those by Song et al (2022) and Wei and Xu (2021) also suggest that teacher caring correlates positively with learners' WTC. Also, the participant, P1, stated that her WTC increases when the teacher provides "*interactive activities*." This viewpoint is reflected in the studies of Alikhani and Bagheridoust (2017) and Asaoka (2013), which revealed the positive influence of applying strategies that improve classroom group dynamics on learners' WTC and communication.

4.2.3.2 Teacher-centeredness

A teacher-centered classroom is a traditional class arrangement where the teacher spends most of the class time explaining and talking while students are passively listening. Participants in this study revealed that this type of class decreases their WTC. As P1 stated, "*If the instructor just explains the lesson, then there will be only listening to the instructor, and there will be no communication.*" Likewise, Alrabai (2018) reported that EFL classes in the Saudi context are mostly teacher-centered, and such a teaching method prevents learners from having an active role in the class.

5. Discussion

5.1 Research Question 1

The current study revealed that there is a strong positive relationship between GD and WTC. Communication involves the interaction between a speaker and an interlocutor, and if their impression of each other is positive, we should expect a strong WTC from both. In the case of EFL classrooms, classroom GD plays a critical role in shaping learners' WTC. When the atmosphere of the classroom and the characteristics of the class group are encouraging, learners will feel relaxed and safe, which will lead to better group cohesion. In cohesive groups, students have positive relationships with each other, which increases their WTC levels. The participants of this study mentioned a number of factors that reflected the influence of GD on WTC.

5.2 Research Question 3

The qualitative analysis of the interviews also revealed a set of themes that represents factors

influencing learners' WTC. These themes involve GD-related factors and include classmate-related factors (using Arabic, classmates' positive characteristics, rapport with classmates, classmates' proficiency levels, being judged by classmates), classroom environment factors (seating arrangements, number of students), and teacher-related factors (teachers' behaviors that increase learner's WTC, teacher centeredness).

5.2.1 Classmate-related Factors

5.2.1.1 Using Arabic

The participants in this study expressed how seeing their colleagues using Arabic makes them feel that it is acceptable and discourages them from using English in EFL classes. According to Harmer (1991, as cited in Younes & Albalawi, 2016), when students notice that using their L1 in the language classroom is tolerated by their teachers, or when the teachers themselves use it, they will keep using their native language.

5.2.1.2 Classmates' Positive Characteristics

This study revealed the participants' belief that the positive attributes of their classmates—cooperation, support, kindness, respect, and enthusiasm—can significantly increase their WTC. According to Alrabai (2014), Saudi learners' reluctance to participate and communicate in class is mostly related to language anxiety. One factor that increases the language anxiety of Saudi EFL learners is being in a competitive group that lacks cooperation (Alrabai, 2014).

Being with enthusiastic classmates also creates a positive and inspiring atmosphere that contributes to an increase in learners' WTC. When learners are surrounded by enthusiastic peers, it can help them to realize their ideal L2 self, which has been shown to reduce learners' anxiety when using a foreign language (Peng, 2014).

5.2.1.3 Familiarity and Rapport with Classmates

Familiarity with classmates is a critical factor that was mentioned by many participants as having an influence on their WTC. According to Dörnyei (1997), The familiarity between classmates through sharing personal information and spending time together leads to class group cohesiveness, which is a significant characteristic of successful communicative language classrooms. When a person is familiar with their classmates, they build a rapport with them, and as a result, they feel comfortable speaking with them and in front of them.

5.2.1.4 Peers' Proficiency Levels

The proficiency level of classmates can influence learners' WTC either positively or negatively. On the one hand, some participants mentioned that when they have peers who speak English fluently, they become more willing to communicate with them in English and aspire to be like them, which can influence their ideal L2 self. Language learners' ideal L2 self has been shown to have a significant impact on learners' WTC (Wei & Xu, 2021). The perception of English as a prestigious language and the high salaries of those who can speak English in Saudi Arabia might also be reasons why some students are encouraged to master the language (Alkubaidi, 2014).

5.2.1.5 Being Judged by Classmates

When learners feel that they might be criticized by their peers, their WTC decreases. Those learners might be afraid of losing face or being corrected by the teacher; thus, they avoid communicating in English. One possible reason that can explain this apprehension is that Saudi EFL learners want to sound like native speakers, specifically American and British speakers. According to Almegren (2018), Saudi EFL learners are inclined toward American and British accents, and they believe that native-speaker teachers are the best language teachers.

5.2.2 Classroom Environment Factors

5.2.2.1 Seating Arrangements

In this study, some participants revealed that their traditional classrooms with fixed chairs that face the board prevent them from being comfortable when working on group tasks. Even if the teacher asks the students to form groups the fixed seats do not allow students to sit comfortably and have proper eye contact with each other, which can negatively influence their WTC. On the contrary, if the seats can be arranged in a way that allows students to feel more comfortable and have non-verbal communication, their WTC will increase. A study by Poupore (2018) showed that increases in non-verbal behaviors, such as laughter, hand gestures, eye contact, and smiling, led to an increase in interaction between learners.

5.2.2.2 Number of Students

The participants revealed that their WTC increases in classes with a limited number of students and vice versa. This can be related to the previously mentioned factor of familiarity between classmates. In small classes, students can reach group cohesiveness easily which can make them feel more comfortable and relaxed, enhancing their WTC. As Alrabai (2018) noted, being in large classes is one of the factors that increases the anxiety of Saudi EFL learners.

5.2.3 Teacher-related Factors

5.2.3.1 Teachers' Behaviors that Increase Learners' WTC

The behaviors of teachers in the classroom play a significant role in the increase or decrease of learners' WTC. The participants showed that when their teachers make them feel comfortable, show interest in what they say, and choose activities that encourage students to communicate, their WTC increases. The sensitivity of Saudi EFL learners toward their teachers might be influenced by the perception of the teacher's role in Arabic and Islamic culture, in which the teacher should dominate the learning process, which makes learners dependent on the teacher (Alrabai, 2018).

5.2.3.2 Teacher-centeredness

Traditional classes in which the teacher is talking most of the time and students are passively listening without having opportunities to work on communicative tasks with their peers can hinder and decrease learners' WTC. Teacher-centered classes prevent learners from having an active role in the learning process. However, limited class time (Alqurashi & Assulaimani, 2021), the exclusion of teachers when planning curriculums, and the prioritization of students

passing exams (Alrabai, 2018) are mentioned by Saudi EFL teachers as reasons that force them to have more teacher-centered classrooms.

5.3 Research Question 2

The findings revealed that the perceived WTC of learners from level 1 is significantly different from levels 2 and 3. One reason behind this variation is the difference between the learning experience in schools and universities (Alkubaidi, 2014). Thus, when learners are in their first level, they still need time to adapt to changes in the instruction methods in the university.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined Saudi EFL learners' perceived WTC in relation to perceived GD, especially group cohesion, among students from three proficiency levels. The investigation uncovered several factors that contribute to the influence of GD on learners' WTC. The findings of the quantitative part of the study revealed that there is a strong positive correlation between learners' perceived WTC and GD. The findings also indicated that the perceived WTC of students from level 1 differed statistically from that of students from levels 2 and 3. Furthermore, the thematic analysis of the interviewees' responses revealed several aspects of GD that were reported by the participants as having an influence on their WTC. These aspects were categorized into three main themes: classmate-related factors, classroom environment factors, and teacher-related factors. Classmate-related factors include some factors that increase learners' WTC, including classmates' positive characteristics and rapport. On the other hand, using Arabic and being judged by classmates were other classmate-related factors that hindered participants' WTC. Classmates' proficiency levels is another classmate-related factor that both increased and decreased learners' WTC. Seating arrangements and the number of students were classroom environment factors that were mentioned to have a significant effect on participants' WTC. Finally, teacher-related factors included teachers' behaviors that increase communication and traditional teaching methods that hindered learners from having an active role in their classes, which decreases their WTC.

6.1 Implications

The present findings present several implications for fostering learners' WTC in Saudi EFL classrooms. First, students should be given the opportunity to participate in tasks that allow them to become more familiar with each other and build a positive rapport. Teachers should also minimize the use of Arabic in the classrooms by encouraging students to use English and tolerating mistakes. The number of students in the classes where the research took place is small, which was reported by participants to be a factor that increases their WTC; thus, classes in other universities should not be overcrowded to allow students to build a cohesive group and allow teachers to apply strategies and techniques that enhance learners' WTC. Students should also have some input in the classroom seating arrangement as that can increase their verbal and non-verbal communication during class.

The significance of teachers in shaping their classroom group dynamic indicates that they

should be engaged in class activities that allow them to become familiar with their students and show interest in their work and achievements. Since teacher-centered classrooms impede learners from having an active role in the learning process, teachers should work on making their students more engaged through classroom activities that can increase their WTC.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations

Despite the valuable findings and the potential implications that were presented in this study, it is subject to some limitations. Regardless of the critical role of the teacher as a group member in shaping the classroom GD, this factor was not considered when designing the GD scale in the questionnaire. Thus, future studies should add items that focus on the teacher's contribution to the formation of group dynamics and reaching group cohesion. Another limitation that can affect the generalizability of the results to all Saudi EFL learners is that the participants were only university students from one institution. Therefore, further studies should include participants from other universities and different school levels.

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