English Language Use by Saudi Female Students in Higher Education: Insights for Educators and Policymakers

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Abstract

Saudi higher education recognizes the importance of teaching and learning the English language, leading to the establishment of several academic English departments to fulfill national needs. Mastery of English in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context requires more frequent language use, both inside and outside the classroom domain. Current research suggests that investigations into Saudi students' English language use inside the classroom have been addressed, but outside its boundaries and at the department level have yet to be addressed. This study aimed to address that gap to provide insights into female learners' perspectives on the Saudi EFL learning environment. It adopted a mixed-method approach for data collection. A seven-item survey with an open-ended section was filled out by Saudi female students (n = 381) studying in English departments nationwide. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with two questions were conducted with BA and MA English students (n = 10). The findings reveal the failure of Saudi English departments to provide students with the English practice opportunities they need and learners' dissatisfaction with the current learning environment. The implications of the study include the urgent need for decision-makers to intervene and change the current status quo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking a second/foreign language is a phenomenon that has gripped the contemporary world (Lee & Du, 2020). This phenomenon becomes more prominent when the language is English, mainly because it is the *lingua franca* of global affairs in the contemporary world (Alcaraz & Navarro, 2006; Meierkord, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2005), which reflects the importance of English mastery in EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) contexts. In several educational contexts, research has discussed the benefits of using L2 outside the classroom domain and institutions from various academic and social perspectives (Al-Musawi, 2014). Most studies concerning EFL use in educational contexts

are relevant to the classroom domain (e.g., Hoang & Boers, 2018). Several academics believe thatintensive exposure to foreign languages inside and outside the classroom is inevitable for students to improve their linguistic proficiency (Light & Littlewood, 1982; Tang, 2002). Others believe that students' use of their first language is normal to comprehend the foreign language, even in certain circumstances where it is an all-English-speaking environment. Hence, in part, the imposition of English has been faced with resistance (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2000). Moreover, several higher education institutions and international schools have enforced an English-only policy and prohibited using the first language (Alnasser, 2018; Choi, 2020; Hynninen, 2011; Knapp, 2011).

Regardless of scholars' beliefs, very little attention has been paid to students' perspectives regarding foreign language use outside the classroom domain and inside their institutions (e.g., in a cafeteria, library, corridors, or academic faculty). Unfortunately, the literature does not offer empirical research in this regard, which has been informed by the key beneficiaries— the students (Shvidko et al., 2015). This issue has left space for future studies to address. Since investigating this gap aims to explain several linguistic behaviors, the current study investigatesstudents' views about language use outside the domain of the classroom and at the department level to provide policymakers with insights into how learners use English and expect English to be used outside their classrooms.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. EFL in Saudi Arabia: An Overview

Introducing a new foreign language to any country will likely receive initial resistance, as was the case in Saudi Arabia when English was first taught. However, attitudes toward learning a foreign language changed because of the rapid development of the Saudi government during the twentieth century (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Saudi schools started preparing students to travel abroad and seek a Western education to keep up with twentieth-century requirements. In 1936, the Scholarship Preparation School was founded in Makkah to prepare students. This school was established merely to prepare students to travel abroad (Al-Gamdi & Abd-Jawad, 2008; Alsuhaibani, 2015). Essentially, English-language teaching in Saudi Arabia began at this school. Qualified Middle Eastern teachers then started to teach at the Scholarship Preparation School. Most of those teachers were Egyptians; hence, the curriculum for all subjects (except Islamic courses) was modified to be similar to those taught in the Egyptian education system, which was, to a great extent, influenced by the French system (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

More recently, in the last two decades, the country has offered around 200,000 scholarships toits citizens to study abroad in Western and European countries. Of course, studying abroad requires English-language preparation. Saudis and their families who returned from these missions have learned/acquired English to certain levels and are likely to form more positive perceptions about the language. This experience can, in turn, affect their beliefs about language use in daily life. Yaseen et al. (2016) argue that the views held by individuals in a community can lead to the involuntary establishment of frameworks that then form an ideology in any given context. Language ideology can be defined as the shared frameworks that coordinate and organize social interpretations as well as practices of people (in a society) (Isaacs et al., 2018), which can impact educational contexts in several ways, such as by stimulating identity formation, influencing practical systems, and significantly affecting knowledge and learning (Seidlhofer, 2005). Therefore, the more positive the beliefs are, the more learning may occur. Put differently, "learning a language is a matter of attitude, not aptitude" (Lozanov, 1988: 106).

In Saudi higher education, all Saudi universities and colleges today harbor English departments and English language centers that provide language-teaching services to English and non-English major students (Alnasser, 2022; Alsuhaibani, 2015). English is currently the medium

through which instructors communicate with students in medicine, engineering, technical education, and many other majors (Alsuhaibani, 2015; Peng, 2019). Shortly, Saudi universities are likely to internationalize their educational services per the Saudi government's 2030 Vision. Most Saudi students recognize English as a language required for passing examinations, but it is also of utmost importance in higher education, trade, and international business communication (Al-Thubaiti, 2019). As a result, students deem English a highly prestigious and practical language, which has seen a large-scale growth in student admission to many programs they had avoided (Peng, 2019). Sipra (2013) asserts that English currently enjoys an eminent status in many sectors of the Saudi economy for various reasons, including the need for students to interact with the rest of the world and the availability of different knowledge platforms offered in English. These findings suggest that Saudi learners, especially EFL students, perceive English mastery as necessary to succeed in their education and careers.

2.2. Characteristics of the Saudi EFL Context

To highlight how the Saudi EFL context differs from an ESL context, a brief description of the main characteristics of an ESL context is provided. According to Dinh (2021), the ESL context is where the dominant language is English, and most students are either visitors or immigrants. In this context, the classroom usually includes students from different backgrounds and cultures who do not share a native language. Additionally, ESL students are likely to receive intensive exposure to the target language in their daily lives and practices regardless of their English language skills (Dimitroff et al., 2018; Dinh, 2021). Therefore, it is commonly accepted that learning in an ESL context can lead to excellent language development owing to language exposure and learning opportunities for existing learners.

The EFL context is found in a country where English is not a formal language, and students in an EFL classroom usually share the same background, culture, and language. Their exposure to the target language may have been provided exclusively by their English teachers (i.e., limited exposure). Unlike ESL students, EFL students may have minimal opportunities to practice and use English (Alsuhaibani, 2015; Dimitroff et al., 2018), which emphasizes the need for more exposure to English through interactional opportunities rather than just memorizing the grammar and vocabulary of the language (Alshammari, 2011). More importantly, they need proper motivation to continuously develop their competence skills (Alshammari, 2011; Dinh, 2021). It should be noted that the differences discussed here were observed in the Saudi context.

Another archetypal feature of Saudi EFL classrooms is the level of teacher dominance over the learning process. Chan (2018) argued that the learning system is characterised by a highly tradition-oriented culture coupled with high levels of power and distance between learners and teachers. The learning environment in Saudi classrooms shows that learners are treated with high levels of reverence, and the learner-instructor relationship is very formal, with discourse in the classroom often occurring unidirectionally from the instructor to the learners. These characteristics are attributed to a culture that is teacher-centred (Yaseen et al., 2016). A unidirectional learning environment does not impose many opportunities for language practice; therefore, it is likely to be demotivating.

The educational system in Saudi Arabia does not discriminate between men and women but segregates between them (Nicolas-Conesa, Manchon & Cerezo, 2019; Saito, 2019). The single-sex schooling system in Saudi Arabia extends to classrooms in terms of teaching and learning practices (Saito, 2019). Even in these classrooms, instructors must use Arabic to explain tough concepts in English and to increase students' ability to understand the various ways of applying the language. This has had adverse impacts on English language learning because it undermines learners' communicative competence by minimizing their language exposure level, thus giving

them little opportunity to communicate in English (Alnasser, 2022; Dmitrieva, 2019). This is because classroom practice is one of the core ways to learn a target language (Lee, 2019).

2.3. Real-Life Language Use

Illes and Akcan (2017) explored the impact of giving EFL learners more opportunities to practice English on their linguistic proficiency. It was found that students were more motivated to use the language when allowing it to be *spontaneous*. It has been found that such spontaneous use can create situations that promote linguistic creativity beyond the classroom. These situations enable learners to experiment with language use and facilitate language acquisition. Larsen-Freeman (2007: 783) holds that "it is not that you learn something and then you use it, nor is it that you use something and learn it. Instead, it is in using that you learn—they are inseparable", which stresses the process of learning (that involves language use) rather than the product. Illes and Akcan (2017) and Waring (2013) argue that the free use of the foreign language can stimulate learners to recall the already acquired and learned knowledge and mix it with their reality (i.e., personal construct) to convey meanings to others. Markee (2005) explained that EFL learners need to have interactional opportunities that resemble *real-life* interactional needs. Allowing students to practice using English outside the classroom domain allows unplanned language use which prompts instant decisions and activates mentally internalised linguistic features and metalinguistic skills (Maybin & Swann, 2007). Ludic language use can "broaden the range of permitted interactional patterns" (Cook, 2000: 199). Furthermore, enjoyable free interactional contexts can better engage students and produce rich language use (Bell, 2009), and increase "metalinguistic awareness" (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007: 556). These arguments have implications for the Saudi EFL educational context in that the teaching and learning of English require creating more situations where students can freely practice within and beyond the classroom domain.

3. METHODS

The study context is a number of English departments in higher education institutionsin Saudi Arabian universities. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How frequently do Saudi female EFL students use English outside the classroom and within the domain of the English department?

RQ2: What perceptions do Saudi female EFL students have of current students English-language use at the department level?

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were undergraduate and post-graduate female EFL students studying in different departments in the five main regions of the country (namely: Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western and Central areas). The current study assumed a mixed-method approach to guide data collection by employing an electronic survey ($n = 381$) and conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 participants.

3.2. Survey

The survey was built with two parts. The first part included seven items and explored participants' use of English and how often they practiced. The second part was an open-ended section that allowed participants to provide open answers and additional comments. A point to mention here is that not all participants completed the survey; therefore, some items received more responses than others (as shown in the tables below). The interviews included two questions. Students from different English language departments were randomly selected for the interview and were both postgraduates and undergraduates (see Table 1). They were drawn from different faculties and universities concerned with English language education (classifiedas EFL users). The choice of 10 respondents was utterly arbitrary in that interview

participation was voluntary, simply because several students were approached and hesitated to participate. A further 381 respondents indicated their approval to participate in the electronic survey by providing their responses.

Table 1: Interviewees' characteristics.

Interviewee code	Sex	Current study level (BA, MA, PhD)	Years of practice with English	Code of Institution	Additional comments
1	Female	PhD	13	KSU	Applied Linguistics student
2	Female	MA	6	KSU	Theoretical Linguistics student
3	Female	BA	4	PNU	English and Translation major student
4	Female	MA	7	KSU	Theoretical Linguistics student
5	Female	MA	6	KSU	Theoretical Linguistics student
6	Female	BA	4	KSU	English Literature major student
7	Female	MA	6	KSU	Applied Linguistics student
8	Female	MA	10	AU	Aljouf University Lecturer and a PhD student
9	Female	BA	10	QU	Translation BA student
10	Female	BA	10	QU	Translation BA student

4. RESULTS
4.1.Survey Results
1. How important is English in your daily life outside the classroom?

Table 2: Importance of English language to female EFL students.

Scale	No. of Responses	Percentage
Very important	145	38.06%
Important	109	28.61%
Somewhat important	115	30.18%
Not important at all	12	3.15%
Total	381	100%

The majority of responses (66.67%) suggested that participants recognized the importance of the English language in daily life, with 38.06% reporting it as *very important* and 28.61% reporting it as *important* (see Table 2 for the full scale). Such recognition can indicate their motivation to learn and positive attitudes towards English. A smaller proportion (30.18%) reported that English was *somewhat important*, suggesting it may have limited importance to their linguistic proficiency development. It is possible that this proportion of participants may not feel the need to practice English more often because of their advanced skills in the English language or because they perceive English learning as an in-class process only. Finally, 3.15% reported that English-language use outside the classroom was *not important*. Overall, most students in English departments perceived English as important in daily life, with a respectful proportion who hesitated to deem it important.

2. How often do you use English outside the classroom?

Table 3: Frequency of English use outside the classroom.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Always	92	24.15%
Sometimes	201	52.75%
Rarely	84	22.05%
Never	4	1.05%
Total	381	100%

The majority (52.76%) reported that they *sometimes* use English outside the classroom (Table 3). This may suggest that they are interested in using English but do not have sufficient opportunities. A small proportion (24.15%) reported that they *always* use English outside their classrooms. Here, respondents may use English outside the classroom to practice language

skills more frequently or because they are fluent and accustomed to speaking it often. Additionally, this may suggest a high motivational level for and positive attitudes toward learning English. A similar proportion (22.05%) reported that they *rarely* use the English language outside their classrooms, which may suggest not being interested in practising or not having opportunities to use the language. Finally, only 1.05% of respondents reported that they *never* use English language outside their classrooms. Overall, it can be said that students' English use outside the classroom seemed somewhat limited and, therefore, mainly occurred inside the classroom. It can further be speculated that English departments did not encourage English language use outside the classroom domain, which we perceive as a concern that needs to be addressed.

3. How often do other students use English outside the classroom?

Table 4: Other students' use of English outside the classroom.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Always	46	12.07%
Sometimes	194	50.92%
Rarely	117	30.71%
Never	24	6.30%
Total	381	100%

The responses to this item were similar to those from the previous item. The majority (50.92%) reported that other students *sometimes* use English outside the classroom (Table 4). This may indicate that students in Saudi English departments did not have sufficient opportunities to practice and that they are not encouraged to use English very often. This speculation was supported by the smaller but respectful proportion (30.71%), who reported that students *rarely* use English outside the classroom. It is also possible to reject the hypothesis that learners were demotivated to use English by analyzing their responses to the fourth item (see below).

Moreover, only 12.07% of respondents reported that students *always* use English outside the classroom. Finally, only 6.30% of respondents think students *never* speak English outside the classroom. Overall, the findings here were in line with earlier results and indicated students' lack of English use outside of class, perhaps owing to the discouraging environment that did not offer many opportunities or motivation for language practice.

4. What is your opinion regarding the current use of English at the department level?

Table 5: Opinions regarding the current use of English at the department level.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Students should speak English more than now	292	76.64%
Students should speak English the same as now	63	16.54%
Students should speak English less than now	21	5.51%
Other	5	1.31%
Total	381	100%

As shown in Table 5, the majority (76.64%) reported that *students should speak English more than now* (Table 5). This finding supported our previous argument that students do not offer an encouraging environment for language practice. Additionally, the majority indicated the importance of practising English outside of class for language development. A smaller proportion of respondents (16.54%) reported that *students should speak English the same way as now*. Here, it can be speculated that this proportion was relevant to those who reported always using English (see the results in Table 4).

Furthermore, only 5.51% of respondents reported that *students should speak English less than now*. Additionally, some respondents provided other opinions (1.31%). One believes that speaking more English will improve students' language skills. Another wrote *neutral,* and one said, "they should practice the language in a way that does not conflict [with] their mother

tongue". Also, one stated it "depends on the situation". Finally, one said, "I do not see the use in using English in an Arabic speaking community, and it should be limited while using it with native speakers of English". Although these opinions can form an argument, they represented a very small percentage of all participants. Briefly, the findings here supported the idea that Saudi female EFL students neither practice English outside the classroom sufficiently nor did departments provide encouraging environments to use the language more frequently.

5. I practice English outside the classroom whenever possible.

Table 6: Practicing English in exiting opportunities.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	141	41.47%
Agree	127	37.35%
Neutral	56	16.47%
Disagree	14	4.12%
Strongly disagree	2	0.59%
Total	340	100%

Most participants responded favorably, either *strongly agreeing* (41.47%) or *agreeing* (37.35%) that they practiced English outside the classroom whenever possible (Table 6). Here, it can be argued that the vast majority (78.82%) were motivated to use the language on every possible occasion, but earlier findings suggested they do not use the language very often. Therefore, we emphasize that English departments did not promote language use, as expected by students. Those who reflected *neutral* responses (16.47%) or *disagreed* with the given notion (a total of 4.71%) formed the minority, and as speculated earlier, they could be those who believe English use should be limited to the classroom, or possibly because this small proportion was students who maintain good command of the language.

6. There should be more incentives (e.g., extra credit, treats, etc.) for students who speak English at the department level.

Table 7: Offering incentives for English language use.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	117	43.17%
Agree	65	23.98%
Neutral	44	16.24%
Disagree	34	12.55%
Strongly disagree	11	4.06%
Total	271	100%

The majority of the respondents (67.16%) either *strongly agreed* (43.17%) or *agreed* (23.99%) that there should be incentives (e.g., extra credits, treats, etc.) for students who use English at the department level more often (Table 7). This large percentage indicated that students needed language reinforcement and that their learning environment was not encouraging and may not offer many practice opportunities. Moreover, 16.24% of respondents reported being *neutral*, 12.55% *disagreed*, and 4.06% *strongly disagreed*. Overall, the idea of offering incentives to use English more often seemed to be widely accepted by Saudi EFL students, which decision-makers should consider.

7. There should be penalties (e.g., taking off points, giving more homework, etc.) for those students who speak Arabic at the department level.

Table 8: Penalizing Arabic language use.

Scale	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	17	6.27%
Agree	33	12.18%
Neutral	54	19.93%
Disagree	89	32.84%
Strongly disagree	78	28.78%
Total	271	100%

In the spectrum of the previous statement, most respondents either *disagreed* (32.84%) or *strongly disagreed* (28.78%) that there should be penalties (e.g., taking off points, giving more homework, etc.) for students who speak Arabic in the department level (Table 8). Furthermore, 19.93% of participants remained *neutral*, 12.18% *agreed*, and 6.27% *strongly agreed* with the statement. In short, the results suggested that the majority reject the idea of using penalties outside the classroom. In other words, it is acknowledged that the majority opt for positive encouragement to use English rather than penalizing them for not using it. Rejecting penalties may be linked to students' language struggles when expressing their ideas and that they need to employ their mother tongue at their convenience and for better communication purposes.

4.2. Open-ended Section

In the open-ended section, participants were provided with an open space to share any additional thoughts.

1. Please feel free to add any comments/suggestions that you have about the current English use in your department.

Because this section was optional, only 94 of the participants completed this part. Most comments explained that they did not have sufficient opportunities to practice English outside the classroom and that the environment did not encourage language practice. One participant, for example, explained that "we only speak English during class, so we don't really have fun speaking to others and practicing our second language", and another explained that "No language practice leads to language proficiency deterioration". This suggested that students require more opportunities for enjoyable language practice. In this regard, another participant explained that the department should "make English use enjoyable. And enhance it [by involving] art activities including musical instruments", suggesting the need for encouragement in a "fun, exciting way". This may emphasize that "students should feel free to use the language so that they don't become anxious". In a blunt description, a participant elaborated on the current status and discussed that "Many female students avert from using English outside the class because they believe that language use is not being valued; therefore, the department should encourage students to use it language through motivational competitions". It was also suggested that "The department should create a suitable environment for English language use outside the classroom because acquired language can diminish when there is no practice". The comments provided here seem to describe their dissatisfaction with the current status of English-language use.

Overall, the comments were in line with the findings and arguments discussed earlier that Saudi EFL learners were motivated to practice English outside the classroom and at the departmental level, but they may lack sufficient opportunities. It can also be concluded from the findings that Saudi EFL learners require learning in an encouraging environment that allows them to practice English freely without imposing any sort of stress, which is an environment that English departments currently lack.

4.3. Interviews

Ten participants were interviewed and asked the following two questions:

1- How important is it for students to use English outside the classroom?

The majority of the responses obtained from the interviewees regarding the importance of using English out of the classroom included the necessity for "practice", "social interaction", "expanding the learning time", and one response deemed speaking English outside the classroom as not necessary. Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 10 agreed that with continued practice of speaking and writing English outside the classroom, learners expanded their abilities and acquired valuable skills concerning learning more about the language. In terms of skills expansion, interviewees 2 and 9 agreed that there are more skills exposed to a learner when she learns a foreign language and thus, need further practice. Interviewees 5, 6, and 7 believed that speaking English outside the classroom enabled students to increase their level of social interaction, especially with non-Arabic-speaking people. This was because, through communication, they can learn the language and embrace new cultures associated with English-speaking people. In contrast, only interviewee 4 believed that using English outside the classroom was unimportant. However, the interviewer (the first author) noticed that she was a fluent English speaker, suggesting no need for her part to practice English (therefore, practicing English was unimportant to her).

2. In your opinion, how should English and Arabic be used at the department level?

The interviewees reported similar responses. The majority (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10) discussed that English should be dominantly used in the classroom and at the departmental level because it would stimulate language development that can help in written and spoken communication. Other interviewees (3, 7, 8, and 10) held slightly different views. They discussed that the Arabic language should be used only when explaining difficult concepts to students. In a more detailed discussion, respondents 7 and 9 proposed that at least 80 percent of the communication at the classroom and departmental levels should be in English. Respondents 4 thought that English should not be used outside the classroom. It should be noted here that this interviewee, in particular, reported not believing in the importance of using English out of class, and it was speculated that this was due to her mastery of English.

The interview findings concurred with those of the survey. The findings indicated that Saudi female EFL learners were motivated to use English; however, the EFL context in which they live did not provide the necessary opportunities. The findings also suggested that language use was perceived to be important and can lead to language development.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

English is taught in Saudi Arabia as a foreign language, and the government dedicates a great deal of attention to nurturing the language, as it is used in communication with other international countries. This creates a greater emphasis on the educational system to improve learning outcomes. Saudi students graduating from English language programs nationwide are expected to participate in official communication processes in the future relevant to trade, politics, etc. This presents a challenge for educators to prepare students for such prominent communicative tasks and equip them with advanced linguistic competence skills to succeed and efficiently serve their countries.

Nonetheless, the findings of the study did not confirm that the outcomes of Saudi English programs meet the government's expectations. The context of Saudi Arabia limits language use in the classroom domain. Some participants reported in the open-ended section of the survey that part of the discussions that took place in the classroom was in Arabic (L1). The study findings showed that most Saudi female EFL students occasionally used English outside class and were motivated to use it more frequently *but* did not have sufficient opportunities. Here,

an experienced instructor would be more than delighted to be responsible for nurturing such students in terms of developing their linguistic skills; in fact, they may see great opportunities for the rapid advancement of their linguistic skills. Such students are already motivated to practice what they learn in class and seek opportunities to practice freely and away from their instructors' evaluation. Therefore, it can be argued that Saudi female EFL students are *demanding* to establish a more suitable learning environment that promotes language use, especially when the surrounding environment inside and outside educational institutions does not provide quality practice situations. Most of the open-ended comments indicated students' dissatisfaction with their learning environment at the department level, an issue that requires immediate attention from policymakers. Moreover, the interview findings indicated learners' need for more English language use, owing to its great value to their success in studies and life.

The study findings also revealed some characteristics of the *encouraging environment* expected of Saudi female students. Generally, students were encouraged when the environment (in the English department) was somewhat similar to *real-life* situations, where they could practice using the language freely and away from any stress. Here, research has argued that offering EFL students such an environment can lead to increased linguistic development (Waring, 2013), especially when spontaneous language use is stimulated (Illes and Akcan, 2017). Another characteristic was that the environment should offer more enjoyable opportunities for English language use through extracurricular activities. Additionally, students appreciated incentives for language use and resented applying penalties for not using English. This supported the idea that learners may be unmotivated to use the language frequently when under pressure, and they learn better with positive reinforcement.

The current study calls for policymakers in Saudi higher education to make urgent reforms to its system concerning English language teaching and learning. A key performance indicator of the current problem is reflected in the low results Saudi students (graduating from English programs) achieve on international standardized language tests (such as TOFEL and IELTS), which can be attributed to the programmes' low quality. When most graduates go abroad to pursue higher studies, they do not meet the language test requirements and, therefore, join pre-sessional English language courses. This wastes time and money and can be addressed in advance.

An overview of the findings revealed that English departments still live in the traditional era where instructors respond very little to students' needs. The focus of students' teaching seems to be directed at the classroom boundaries. As discussed earlier, the EFL context does not offer many opportunities for language practice (Dimitroff et al., 2018; Dinh, 2021); this needs to be addressed with immediate action. What students need demands neither extraordinary efforts by faculty and administrators nor financial funding. The Saudi government has already equipped universities with the necessary facilities and employed instructors with various academic degrees and backgrounds, and these should be invested in creating a better, positive learning environment. A point to mention here is that Saudi Vision 2030 embeds in its strategic goals attention to raising the quality of the educational system through, for example, achieving programmatic and institutional accreditations. Here, one of the national and international standards for accreditation puts a huge emphasis on creating a learning environment that encourages students (and, of course, instructors and other employees). Even though overcoming this concern should already be underway, it still forms a huge concern for students and, of course, Saudi practitioners and researchers.

The study conclusions suggested that Saudi EFL students had little practice with English outside the classroom domain and that their English departments did not show much interest in exploring and responding to students' needs. This raises a few concerns about limiting

learner linguistic development and motivation. It is recommended that students approach language learning through enjoyment while avoiding factors that may negatively impact their anxiety levels. As to recommendations stemming from this study, the current study revealed the characteristics of the encouraging environment students look up to but did not explore in action, which could be a future research area. Additionally, since male students were not included in the study, we recommend comparing Saudi male and female students in terms of language use and the preferred characteristics of their learning environment outside the classroom and at the department level.

6. Statements and Declarations

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and publication.

All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of KSU. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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