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# The Emotional Experience Of Learning English As A Foreign Language: A Qualitative Study In The Context Of Saudi Arabia



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### Abstract

Foreign language acquisition is not only a cognitive but also an emotional process. Recently, numerous qualitative studies have deepened our understanding of the emotional worlds of EFL students, showing the diversity of emotions and their influence on EFL. In Saudi Arabia, EFL has posed significant challenges (e.g. lack of motivation for studying, negative emotions associated with EFL) to all actors involved, and studying emotional experiences of Saudi EFL students can help us surpass these challenges. This pilot qualitative study aimed to give a phenomenological description of emotions experienced by Saudi EFL students. Inductive Thematic Analysis yielded four main themes: kinds of emotions, motivation dynamics, English learning trajectory, and quality of the encounter. Significant variability and diversity of emotional experiences was evident – participants mainly felt happy and motivated by their extracurricular English activities, while they were more ambiguous with respect to their English teachers. It was also found that initial EFL experiences were more negative compared to the latter ones.

*Keywords:* English as a foreign language, Saudi Arabia, affectivity, emotions, motivation.

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## 1. Introduction

Investigating emotional aspects of learning a foreign language has recently become the point of focus for numerous researchers (Bigelow, 2019; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; Lopez, 2015; Pavelescu & Petric, 2018). It has been emphasized that the field of applied linguistics was under dominance of cognitivists, for quite some time (Dewaele, 2019), and that emotions were akin to an “elephant in the room”, something which everyone knows exists but which nevertheless gets ignored.

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It has been suggested that, in the study of complex phenomena such as emotions in foreign language acquisition, the quantitative approach tends to undermine the very richness and meaning of the studied phenomena (Rahman, 2017; Scherer, 2005). Reducing emotions to frequency patterns and cause-and-effect relationships without delving into language-learning classroom dynamics (Imai, 2010; van Lier, 2004) or into the “particularly thorny problem” of measuring, labelling, or defining “emotions” (Scherer, 2005, p. 696), can only shrink the scope of research, without bringing any meaningful understanding of emotions involved in the acquisition of a foreign language.

The qualitative approach, on the other hand, does not tend to reduce emotions to a set of numbers or cause-and-effect relationships (Garrett & Young, 2009; Morse & Mitcham, 2002). The qualitative approach is hermeneutic in nature, seeking primarily to make meaning out of people’s experiences (Beltz et al., 2016). This is a pursuit of idiographic knowledge. Importantly, qualitative studies often delve deeply into the idiosyncratic networks of constructs, expressed through individuals’ verbal narratives and personal themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

The present study explores the emotions of Saudi students who are acquiring English language as a part of their standard university curriculum. Alrabai (2020), in a recent review of Saudi literature on emotions experienced by students who are learning a foreign language, emphasized that future studies in this cultural context will have to be more diverse in terms of data collection and analysis techniques. The present study aims to follow Alrabai’s recommendations (2020, p. 43) by providing qualitative insights in a context (EFL in Saudi Arabia) that is still dominated by quantitative methodology.

## 2. Literature Review

Previous research on learning and teaching second languages (L2) has focused primarily on cognition (Imai, 2010), with minimal research being conducted on affective aspects of L2 learning and teaching (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). According to Dörnyei (2009b, p. 219), “everybody knows that the study of a second language can be an emotionally rather taxing experience yet affect has been an almost completely neglected topic in applied linguistics.”

### 2.1. *Emotions in Second Language Acquisition*

Dewaele and Pavelescu (2019, p.2) adopted the theory of constructed emotions that “sees emotions as domain non-specific constructions of the mind shaped in the course of socialisation.” Such a viewpoint is embedded, more generally, within the Dynamic Systems Approach (Fogel et al., 1992, p. 129), according to which “emotion is not felt experience alone, nor a pattern of neural firing, nor an action such as smiling. Emotion is the process that emerges from the dynamic interaction among these components as they occur in relation to changes in the social and physical context.” According to the Dynamic Systems Theory, the individual, subjective experience should be the centre of researchers’ attention, alongside the abandonment of linear causality in exchange for the concept of multiple causations (Griffiths, 2015). Moreover, core characteristics of dynamic systems are (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007):

1. Dependence on initial conditions
2. Interconnectedness of subsystems

Dörnyei, MacIntyre, and Henry (2015) reviewed a number of applied linguistics studies of student’s motivation and analysed them in the light of Dynamic Systems Theory. One of the studies reviewed has found that students’ motivation for studying a foreign language varies with respect to the following emotions: interest, boredom, neutral attention, and anxiety: this variability is determined by a mixture of motivational, affective, cognitive, and contextual factors.

This theory, according to Dewaele and Pavelescu (2019), is perfectly compatible with Horwitz's empiric approach (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) to emotions in foreign language acquisition, as anxiety continuously interacts with other factors such as physiological reactions, abilities, appraisals, interpersonal relationships, context, etc. In conclusion, a holistic viewpoint of emotions, materialized in mixed-method studies that triangulate various sources of data, can be seen as the ideal way to explore emotions in the field of foreign language acquisition. This study adopts such a viewpoint, attempting to initialize an all-encompassing and comprehensive study of emotions experienced by Saudi EFL students.

The literature on education has examined the emotional side of learning, in recent times, with a focus on anxiety (Al-Saraj, 2014; Alrabai, 2014; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2013; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2016; Götz & Hall, 2013; Khan & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Lim & Low, 2017; Mega et al. 2014; Rafada & Madini, 2017). EFL Learners may, for example, be anxious about their grades, feel apprehensive about their ability to talk in a foreign language, or get bored by their lessons. They may also feel utterly distressed until they receive positive feedback.

Positive/pleasing states can boost performance, while negative/unpleasing states can have the opposite effect. However, as Dewaele and Pavelescu (2019) point out, this is not always the case – as indifference can quickly turn into boredom and impede the learning of a foreign language. Negative emotions are not necessarily bad for learning a foreign language, “as they can help learners to eliminate an obstacle, but they can be paralysing” (Dewaele, 2015, p. 14).

Götz and Hall (2013, p. 192) noted that ‘pleasant emotions (e.g. enjoyment, pride) are positively related to achievement, whereas unpleasant emotions (e.g. anxiety, boredom) are negatively related’. This has been described as a ‘reciprocal’ and ‘congruent’ emotion-performance effect (Pekrun et al. 2017).

## 2.2. *Qualitative Research into Emotions Experienced by Foreign Language Students*

Dewaele and Pavelescu (2019) extensively investigated the learning experiences of two Romanian students of English, via a written language learning history task, semi-structured interviews, and lesson observations. The learning history task revolved around the initial experiences with English language and methods of learning the language, while also eliciting some of the most significant memories related to learning experiences. Interviews reiterated some of the questions related to learning history, while also focusing on feelings towards English language, contextual factors, and motivation for learning. The authors found that the most important experiences with English language were linked to authentic use of the language outside school, both in the form of face-to-face interactions and through computer-mediated interaction. Positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment) were related to this sort of authentic use of the foreign language.

Gregersen, Macintyre and Meza (2014) utilized, among other methods, interviews that revolved around general reflections of participants on their whole language learning experience, and inquired about students' subjective reactions to videotaped recordings of their speech in a foreign language (Spanish). The researchers differentiated between low-anxiety and high-anxiety participants, with respect to their emotions towards learning Spanish. Analysis of the transcribed interviews showed that highly anxious participants (HAPs) were the most focused on vocabulary and not being able to recall a specific word. Low-anxiety participants (LAPs), on the other hand, utilized certain strategies to mitigate their vocabulary difficulties.

One of the most comprehensive studies of experiences of Saudi EFL students is, perhaps, Massri's doctoral dissertation (2017), which focused on the concept of attitudes. Massri explored the experiences of 30 Saudi university students, via interviews, diaries, and narratives, while phenomenological analysis

was chosen as the data analysis method. The data was coded with respect to a three-component view of attitudes (cognitive, behavioural, and affective), and all attitudes were coded as positive, negative, or neutral. Subcodes included topics such as family and friends, finance, media and the Internet, travel, future job prospects, and EFL teachers. Emotions experienced with respect to family and friends and EFL were mostly positive, related to support and encouragement, while most participants were neutral with respect to the relationship between finances and learning English. Media, Internet, job prospects, and travelling are all themes that were generally related in a positive way towards studying English. On the other hand, experiences with teachers were both positive and negative, showing significant ambivalence of participants towards the ability of teachers to motivate them to learn English language.

Oteir and Abd Aziz (2017) focused on Listening Comprehension Anxiety experienced by Saudi students, using semi-structured interviews, and were able to identify three main themes: personal effect (lack of concentration, depression, and avoiding classes), social effect (isolation), and academic effect (low performance).

### 2.3. *Emotions and motivation*

These two concepts are somewhat interrelated, in that certain researchers consider emotions as a part of motivational processes, while other researchers postulate an inverse relationship (Kim & Pekrun, 2013). For the present study, it was decided that drawing a sharp distinction between emotions and motivation would only narrow down the diversity of the gathered experiences, so both concepts were included in this study of Saudi students' experiences with the English language

### 2.4. *Research Questions*

1. How is studying the English language experienced by Saudi EFL students throughout their education?
2. What emotions do Saudi EFL students experience towards learning English?

## 3. Method

It was decided that a phenomenological qualitative research design would be the most suitable to provide initial insights into how Saudi EFL students experience learning the English language.

Before recruiting a large number of participants and settling on a final set of instruments and questions, it was decided that a small-scale pilot study had to be undertaken. Pilot studies in the field of phenomenological qualitative research are valuable as they offer useful suggestions in several important areas (Kim, 2011):

1. Detecting issues related to sampling.
2. Reflecting on the role of the researcher in the context of a phenomenological qualitative study.
3. Modifying instruments, interview questions, and research questions.

Williams-McBean (2019) further emphasized that a qualitative pilot study helps to refine research protocols, predict future challenges, and leads to an increase in researcher's confidence and overall expertise, concluding that pilot studies are especially important for novice qualitative researchers.

### 3.1. *Sample*

Seven male Saudi Arabian students in their first year at the same Saudi Arabian community college participated in this study. The average age of the sample was 19.71 years (SD=1.5). They studied accounting (N=2), computer programming (N=4) and networking (N=1).

A combination of two nonprobability sampling techniques was utilized: purposive and convenience sampling, which are, more specifically, two sampling techniques that are often used when the researcher doesn't necessarily need a representative sample and especially when there are significant financial, time-related, and workload-related constraints (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). As this is a pilot study, probability sampling techniques were deemed as unnecessary and were left for future studies that would build upon the present study. The chosen combination of sampling techniques is quite common in qualitative studies (Oppong, 2013), and was used by Massri (2017) in his study which was invaluable for the construction of the present research.

Participants were recruited based on the following screening criteria: Saudi Arabian citizenship and residence; enrolment in the first year of study at a Saudi Arabian community college; male; and learning EFL.

The researcher personally contacted three departments at a Saudi college. Students were invited to participate in the study. Those who volunteered to participate consented to the use of their answers for research purposes alone. Seven participants decided to take part in the study. Although it may seem that seven participants constitute a relatively small sample, it was decided that for the purposes of the present pilot study, this sample size was enough.

### 3.2. *Data Collection Procedures*

Data was collected through narratives, journals, and interviews. Data collection took place over eight weeks. All instruments were in Arabic. The answers were translated to English before analysis.

The participants described their lifelong EFL learning experiences in writing in the narrative part, and submitted their answers via email. Next, they completed their journals, which they sent via email over four weeks. They were interviewed at the end of their journaling month. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face, whereas the rest were completed over Skype. Face-to-face interviews were recorded with a digital recorder, and Skype interviews were recorded with Callnote. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, and were transcribed and translated into English.

### 3.3. *Instruments*

Narrative, journal and interview data were uploaded into the same NVivo11 Pro file. All questions contained in these instruments were open-ended.

Narratives focused on the English language experience before school, in primary, intermediate and high school and college, as well as on experiences that happened outside school, such as reading, working, and watching movies. The final question asked the participants to evaluate their overall experience with the English language.

The journals contained the following questions: What positive and negative emotions did you experience today? What caused them? How did these emotions affect your motivation to study and learn English? What did you do to cope with the negative emotions and their effect on your motivation to learn English? It is evident that journals were constructed in a way that helped capture the current emotions related to studying English.

Interviews were structured and comprised two sections. Each had three open-ended questions. The questions in the first section were: How would you describe your overall English language experience in school and college? How do the positive experiences make you feel about your English learning experience? How do the negative experiences make you feel about your English learning experience? The second section, titled ‘Language Learning motivation’, included the following questions: What are your goals for the future? What are your goals for English? Is English important in your future? How? What kind of strategies do you use to keep yourself motivated? Interviews helped obtain a general impression of how participants experienced EFL classes, while also providing a more personal and rich connection between the researcher and participants.

### 3.4. *Data analysis*

These responses were subjected to NVivo-aided Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). TA is one way to analyse and interpret qualitative data; for instance, by inductively progressing towards broader themes and categories of answers (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). It is theoretically flexible and adaptable to various theoretical viewpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process was inductive, or ‘*data-driven*’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, P. 96).

The TA process involved six stages (Scharp & Sanders, 2018): getting familiar with the data, creating coding categories or subcategories, generation of themes, reviewing themes, labelling themes, and identifying exemplars.

## 4. Results

Few themes emerged which described the emotional and motivational side of EFL learners’ experiences. These themes “Kinds of Emotions”, “Motivation Dynamics” “English Learning Trajectory”, and “Quality of Encounter” are presented separately in the following subsections.

### 4.1. *Kinds of Emotions*

This theme included the static qualities of what the students considered an ‘emotion’. All emotions that were recognized at least once as emotional states in the answer to the first question in the students’ daily journals, and at least once in the context of studying EFL, were considered. Examples included feeling tired, sick, active or, as P4 noted in his journal, ‘busy packing my bags’.

Emotions corresponded to possible combinations of the extremes of two common scales or dimensions of emotions (Colibazzi et al., 2010; Scherer, 2005): intensity (arousal), ‘low’ and ‘high’; and valence, ‘positive’ (pleasant) and ‘negative’ (unpleasant).

Miscellaneous experiences were further categorized: absence of negative emotions; single state; and mixed and simultaneous kinds. These categories illustrated instances in which students showed their disagreement with the study’s general assumptions about emotions.

#### 4.1.1. *Examples of Emotions Experienced by Participants*

Various types of emotions were experienced by participants. Negative high arousal states were about feeling angry (P5, Journals, ‘I felt angry all day’); worried (P2, Journals: ‘I was worried during the exam’; P2, Journals: ‘I want badly to know if I did well or not in the exam’); and stressed (P1, Journals: ‘Another day full of stress’). Negative low arousal categories included feeling confused (P1, Journals: ‘A bit confused’); sad (P5, Journals: ‘I am going through some family issues which are making me sad’);

and unwell (P3, Journals: 'I am not feeling very well'). The least frequently discussed state was being angry.

Positive high arousal states included feeling happy (P5, Journals: 'I felt very happy and excited today'); motivated (P3, Narratives: 'I was really motivated to learn'); and satisfied (P1, Journals: 'I feel like I am excelling in English'). Positive low intensity states included being relaxed (P7, Journals: 'It was a relaxing day for me'); hopeful (P5, Journals: 'But I am hoping tomorrow will be a better day'); and grateful (P2, Narrative: 'This experience has been helpful'). Feeling grateful was the least frequently discussed positive state.

#### 4.1.2. *Miscellaneous Experiences*

The following categories emerged: absence of negative emotions (P6, Journals: 'I did not experience any negative emotions'); a single emotion (P5, Journals: 'I felt angry all day'); and mixed and simultaneous kinds (P3, Journal: 'I did not experience any negative emotions even though I was ashamed of my reading skills. I decided to focus more on reading').

The absence of negative emotions category observed how, when 'cornered' into identifying the negative emotions experienced for that day in their journals, the participants denied experiencing any of them, and claimed that they had only experienced positive emotions.

The category mixed and simultaneous kinds collected evidence illustrating how their emotional experiences were diverse and sometimes occurred in unexpected ways. Some students contested that emotions could be easily described in terms of valence by acknowledging their inability to classify their states as positive or negative. Some experienced 'mixed' emotional states, whereas others experienced different valences simultaneously or in shifts (e.g. P7, Journals: 'It was a very relaxing day for me until I got distracted').

Emotions were not always characterized by the conventional valence as expressed by student P4 in his journal (P4, Journals: 'I was busy finishing some chores at home. But I was relaxed as well'). P6 described how he had been 'busy', in his journal, an emotion that was categorized as having a negative high arousal value illustrative of feeling stressed. Yet, this 'busy' state was not a 'negative' emotion for him. In contrast, P7 was 'busy' in the context of the negative high arousal state of feeling 'worry' about his exams.

## 4.2. *Motivation Dynamics*

This theme included the circumstantial and driven shifts in the motivation to study English. Participants mainly explained their motivation through expressions like 'because' and 'due to'. This theme included the participants' motivation (manifestos) to master EFL. These manifestos proposed that someone's behavioural intentions, akin to the motivating goals, contribute to actual behavioural performance. It contrasted clearly with the circumstantial and reactive nature of the subthemes describing the impact of positive and negative emotionality in the participants' motivation. There were also logical opposite categories, which showed moments when the implicit assumptions of the instruments (concerning motivation) were contested by the participants.

### 4.2.1. *Manifestos or Rationale for Acting*

Manifestos or rationale for acting concerned the goals that motivated the participants' actions. As P7 noted in his journal, these were the goals that motivated their actions: 'I have a clear goal that I am going to accomplish'.

Students needed to improve their EFL skills to a certain level in order to get their diplomas. As P3 expressed in the interview, ‘As I am planning to do my bachelor and master’s degrees, I need to improve and speak better English’. Simultaneously, getting their diploma and passing their exams could also imply suspending their EFL practices for a moment.

The most commonly described manifestos were academic (P3, Interview: ‘I am planning to pursue my education. I want to get my bachelor’s degree’); English-language (P1, Journals: ‘So I can improve my language skills especially my reading skills’); professional (P7, Journals: ‘I reminded myself that English is the language of the future and most jobs require English proficiency’); and personal pursuits (P2, Interview: ‘It is very important in every aspect of life, such as travel’).

Academic pursuits comprised seeking to achieve an academic goal, including getting better grades, diplomas, or pursuing their education. English-language pursuits concerned improving EFL skills of any kind, from English in general to, for example, ‘conversation’ skills. Professional pursuits were related to increasing the odds of finding a job, a good job, or the job of their dreams. Personal pursuits comprised engaging in a desired activity, such as ‘travel’ and talking to those who did not speak Arabic.

These were the most common goals: English-language pursuits; emotional self-regulation; and academic, professional, and personal pursuits.

#### 4.2.2. *Reactions to Negativity*

Students’ reactions to negativity was a subtheme concerned with the impact of unpleasant states and self-perceptions of failure on students’ motivation to study or practice EFL. In such circumstances, their motivation to study English could be dragged down (P2, Journals: ‘I felt ashamed and my motivation to learn went down’); stay afloat (P3, Journals: ‘I am still working on my reading skills. I am really trying because I still have difficulties’); and be teased out (P2, Journals: ‘My English language skills are not very good, so I have been working very hard from the beginning of the semester to improve and prepare for my classes’).

In the worst case scenario, students’ motivation was dragged down. Their motivation and/or their study practices either weakened in intensity or were eroded fully. In the (apparently rarer) best case scenario, their motivation and/or study efforts were teased out; that is, became apparently stronger. Between these extremes, a less, if at all, detrimental reaction is the ‘stayed afloat’ category, which denotes their persistence, regardless of their circumstances. Some argued that their motivation resisted or should resist ‘everything’ and was affected by ‘nothing’.

#### 4.2.3. *Reactions to Positivity*

While experiencing positive states and self-perceptions of success, their motivation and/or study practices were boosted (P2, Journals: ‘My motivation increased because of the positive emotions I experienced today’); stayed put (P3, Journals: ‘These emotions did not affect my motivation. My motivation level is the same’); and spoiled (P7, Journals: ‘It did affect my motivation. I did not do anything to improve my English’).

#### 4.2.4. *Logical Opposites Strategy and Motivation Claims*

There were several questions based on the causality model, particularly in the Journals and Interviews. These questions presumed that the participants’ emotions necessarily affected their motivation levels, as per kinds of emotions, and the way they felt about their English learning practices.



It was presumed that participants actively and deliberately tried to change these effects in such a way that negative emotions had to be actively coped with or fought against (fourth question in the Journal).

Many participants did not agree with these assumptions in explicit terms. Categories illustrating this included poor to null coping (P2, Journals: 'I did not deal very well with my negative emotions'), always as a reply to the fourth question in the Journal, when they claimed to have been unable to shift, in any satisfactory way, a state they perceived as emotionally negative. It also included the category of questionable emotion-motivation causality (P1, Journals: 'I only experienced positive ones but they did not have an effect on my motivation'). This category referred to a verbal acknowledgement that their emotions had not 'affected', had not had an 'effect', or had not 'influenced' their motivation to study or practice the English language – or at least not in any 'noticeable' or significant manner.

### 4.3. *English Learning Trajectory*

The English learning trajectory included time-based subthemes, such as school grades (skills in primary school, skills in intermediate school, skills in high school, and skills in college), value of English, and the statement that school was worse than college.

**Mastered skills per grade level.** Six participants had had their first encounter with English language in primary school (P3, narrative: "My first experience of English was in the 6th grade of primary school"). There was only one participant (P4, narrative) who had been exposed to English language before primary school by his mother. By the time they reached intermediate school, all participants had had at least some encounter with the English language.

Participants most commonly recalled having acquired passive skills in primary school. For instance, P2 stated in his narrative: "It consisted of learning the English alphabet and simple words with their pictures," including vocabulary and the alphabet. In intermediate school, fewer participants recalled acquiring passive skills, such as vocabulary and grammar (P3, narrative: "new grammar and new words"), and some recalled, instead, practicing reading or writing (P4, narrative: "I remember that I used to write few sentences or short stories in order to practice the new grammar and new words"), and/or oral skills (P4, narrative: "I was also trained to listen carefully"). The type of educational content recalled from high school was similar to that from intermediate school.

Some participants claimed to have learned barely anything. In these remarks, the emotional dimension was expressed through evaluative judgments and beliefs. For instance, P7 (interview) noted that his "experience was negative in primary and intermediate school. I didn't learn anything, and I didn't care at all. I didn't understand the importance of English." In this comment, markers of emotionality included the term "care" and the absolute expressions "anything" and "at all."

Overall, most respondents appeared to have arrived at college without having developed EFL skills. The exception was P7 (interview), who mentioned that he "joined an English language institute which helped gain confidence in myself and my language skills." During college, participants felt they learned something and the majority recalled learning reading and writing, vocabulary and grammar, and/or oral skills. For example, P7 (interview) remarked how college "was the first time in which I started to speak English and carry out a conversation with someone. I started to use English as a medium of communication."

**The value of English.** Participants' beliefs regarding the value of English were mainly described when asked about the importance of English for their future. In these comments, two opposing trends were detected. The first was that English was in demand (P5, interview: "I want to improve my English because it will help me succeed in everything I do, especially that I am planning to pursue my education"). Some participants acknowledged that mastering English was important, if not "crucial,"

“essential,” and a “need” at social, personal, and professional levels. This attitude toward English was generally expressed with the help of present and future verb tenses.

The opposing trend suggested that English had been undervalued (P6, Narrative: “My family and the community I lived in did not speak English or even have an appreciation for the language”).

Thus, the importance assigned to English was limited, applicable only to students attending colleges in SA, where mastering EFL is a necessity. This was mentioned by P2 (narrative), who confessed that he had been forced to develop his EFL skills because he had been admitted to a college where the use of English was mandatory: “I was accepted into college. As soon as I read the course description, I was disappointed because I saw I needed to study English.”

In sum, beliefs related to the importance of English seemed to have changed. Prior to college, not everyone believed that English language had value for their present and future lives. After entering college, everyone recognized its value, even if merely due to the pressure of their academic institutions.

This conclusion was reinforced by answers stating that school was not as good as college (P1, interview: “It was a negative experience for me at school... In college, things have been excellent”). This subtheme included descriptions of positive or excellent learning experiences in college, and of negative, bad, or faulty learning experiences in school. Every participant made at least one such claim. Together, these remarks illustrated that their EFL classes in school had been less effective and more unpleasant compared to college.

It has to be noted that not every school learning experience was necessarily negative; exceptions were explicitly acknowledged. For instance, P6 (narrative) mentioned that, “My experience of learning English was negative apart from primary school and the last grade of high school. As for my experience in college, it has been very positive.” Overall, there was only one remark explicitly comparing the quality of the classes in college with that of school classes. This was from P1 (narrative), who claimed that, “What I am currently studying at college is a bit similar to what I was taught in school.”

#### 4.4. *Quality of the encounter*

Unlike the English learning trajectory, the quality of the encounter disregarded the temporal character of participants’ EFL experiences. Instead, it focused primarily on their emotional valence.

**Unpleasant encounters.** Unpleasant encounters (P1, Journals: “I was disappointed (...). The reason I am feeling this way is because my English class got cancelled so I stayed home”) referred to “negative,” “difficult,” and “complicated” experiences with negative emotional qualities. Unpleasant encounters often involved one or both of the following situations: Poor teachers and/or Self-perceptions of failure.

The ‘poor teachers’ subtheme reflected disliked and/or unhelpful pedagogic strategies or behaviours of EFL “teachers”, “school administration,” and/or “school atmosphere.” For instance, P2 (interview) claimed that, “Teachers had a careless attitude without doing anything effective in pushing their students to improve. It was a very negative experience. English was treated as a subject without value.”

The category, ‘self-perceptions of failure’ referred to moments when respondents described their performance as poor, struggling, unsuccessful, or failed (e.g., P3, journal: “I tried to read an article in English, but I was struggling. I am ashamed of myself. I need to improve my English reading”). It also covered remarks suggesting that English was a hard, strange language or denoting an implicit experience of hardship (e.g., P1, narrative: “It has been a difficult experience. I find it difficult to pronounce some words in English. There are a lot of things that I need to learn”). Every participant identified a situation in which he felt like a “failure” in the sense described, none of which referred explicitly and exclusively to teachers’ evaluations of performance.

**Pleasant encounters.** The subtheme, ‘pleasant encounters’ (P1, journal: “This positive feedback increased my motivation to learn and enhance my skills.”) referred to experiences described as “positive,” “interesting,” or “excellent.” The most common contexts of this positive emotion were: self-perceptions of success, appreciated teachers, motivating casual conversations, and helpful extracurricular activities.

‘Self-perceptions of success’ (e.g., P1, journal: “I feel like I am excelling in English. My grade was very satisfactory”) consisted of respondents’ appreciation of their own EFL performance, usually but not necessarily triggered by others’ feedback. ‘Appreciated teachers’ (e.g., P1, Narrative: “I remember the teacher encouraging me to memorise English alphabets and numbers”) referred to their recognition of the esteemed, effective and/or motivating intervention of their formal teachers and/or educational institutions (e.g., P5, narrative: “I also was lucky that my teachers were quite supportive and encouraging”), and/or of their relatives as teachers (P3, narrative: “My older brother had a great influence on my English language skills. He really helped me a lot”).

‘Motivating casual conversations’ (e.g., P4, journal: “I have never felt more motivated. I went with my best friend to a coffee shop and we practised English together for almost 2 hours”) consisted of pleasant social interactions involving EFL with non-Arabic speakers. Finally, a set of non-social helpful extracurricular activities (e.g., P1, narrative: “I like to listen to music and watch movies which helped me a lot with my English. I also like to play video games”) was also described as a context with positive emotional overtones.

Among these activities, the most commonly cited were: audio and audio-visual resources (P6, journal: “Now, I will have more time to practice English and watch TV shows and movies. This will help me improve my language skills), private language institutes (P2, journal: “He decided to join an English language institute with me. This will be of great help to us”), and books (P7, narrative: “One of the main reasons I was able to improve was reading books”).

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to capture the EFL emotions of Saudi students in all their diversity and complexity. It was found that the interviewed group of Saudi students experienced a wide variety of emotions that were linked to EFL classes, as well as diverse responses to the emotions that were experienced. The emotions were described along the two main dimensions of valence and intensity (arousal).

The findings suggested that students’ amusement and joy improve EFL performance, particularly and this has also been asserted by other authors (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Ismail, 2015). Additionally, negative emotions are prejudicial to EFL performance, as was previously noted (Al-Saraj, 2014; Ismail, 2015). However, this wasn’t always the case, as not all negative emotions negatively influenced EFL performance, as was also reflected in the findings of other authors (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019).

One of the main implications of this research is that social circumstances affected the valence of participants’ emotions. EFL classes in college were more pleasing than school classes (English learning trajectories). Early experiences with the English language had a profound impact on participants, which corresponds to one of the basic postulates of Dynamic Systems Theory – dependence of complex systems on the set of initial conditions (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007).

All participants identified positive experiences with English that were unrelated to official education, such as *helpful extracurricular activities* and *motivating casual conversations*. Moreover, *unpleasant encounters* did not include any activity which was exclusively performed outside the school context. These findings supported previous results (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; Piniel & Albert, 2018) which asserted that the negatively valenced emotion of anxiety was more common inside the classroom, while

positively valenced emotions, such as enjoyment and relaxation, were more common outside school settings.

Participants most often did not establish causal links between their states and different situations, which was asserted previously by Piniel and Albert (2018). Causal explanations were offered as only one of many descriptions of participants' experiences with EFL. Moreover, our findings are in accordance with the interpretations of foreign language acquisition dynamics coming from the Dynamic Systems Theory; more specifically, the assertion that the simple linear causation viewpoint has to be exchanged for the concept of multiple causations (Griffiths, 2015) and complex interconnectedness of subsystems (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007). Participants did not simply react to emotions, and in turn, emotions were not a simple reaction to events. Fogel et al. (1992) long ago emphasized that emotions only exist within complex interactions between physical and social systems and the results of this research corroborate their hypotheses.

The themes and corresponding circumstances echoed previous findings on the relationship between EFL performance and subjective evaluation of EFL, where external factors, such as teachers, and personal factors, such as differently valenced emotions and self-perceptions of success or failure, were found to affect the emotional experiences and performance of EFL students (Al-Saraj, 2014; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Ismail, 2015). These factors affecting emotional experiences related to EFL classes generally correspond to those identified by Massri (2017) in his study of motivational factors influencing Saudi EFL students.

Looking into the future, a larger and more diverse sample will be necessary to provide more reliable and valid insights. Another important implication surrounds the data collection instruments used in this study. Although they were enough to provide insight into the subjective experience of our participants, significant revisions have to be made. Namely, it seemed as if all the instruments were too "structured". Also, in some instances it was evident that the researcher's questions actively shaped the answers, which is something we would want to avoid. In the future the focus will be on the interviews, which were structured and relatively short in the present research.

Ultimately, the goal of our future studies will be to provide valuable insights that would improve the experiences of all actors involved in Saudi EFL education. EFL education in Saudi educational institutions has changed considerably in the last decade (Aldossary & Albedaiwi, 2021; Bhuiyan, 2016) and we may expect to see significant improvements in light, particularly in light of the Saudi Ministry of Education's decision to introduce English from the first grade of primary school. However, as our results show, there are still significant barriers, relating to Saudi EFL learners' emotions which have to be studied in greater detail, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Alrabai, 2020).

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