

**Investigating Factors Influencing Willingness
to Communicate in the Virtual Learning
Communities among EFL Majors**

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ABSTRACT

The present research aimed at investigating the degree of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the virtual learning communities (VLCs) among the third year EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University. To meet such an end, the mixed methods approach (explanatory sequential design) was utilized. Specifically, a questionnaire assessing the degree of WTC in VLCs was completed by the research quantitative sample (totalling 125) who were randomly selected from the third year EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University. Likewise, semi-structured interviews were conducted with qualitative sampling (totalling 7) who were assigned via the most convenient sampling technique. The results of the quantitative as well as qualitative analyses confirmed that the degree of WTC was relatively low; more critically, there were many positive as well as negative factors influencing WTC in VLCs. The research recommended focusing on VLCs as it is a promising environment in the 21st century and adopting effective teaching learning practices in order to increase the EFL learners' WTC.

Keywords: Investigating, Willingness to Communication, Virtual Learning Communities (VLCs).



استقصاء العوامل المؤثرة في رغبة التواصل في مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية لدى طلاب شعبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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المستخلص

هدف البحث الحالي إلى استقصاء درجة رغبة التواصل في مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية والعوامل المؤثرة فيها لدى طلاب شعبة اللغة الإنجليزية، كلغة أجنبية، بكلية التربية، جامعة الأزهر، ولتحقيق هدف البحث تم الاعتماد على المنهج الكمي (التصميم التفسيري المتتابع)، وتمثلت عينة البحث الكمي في ١٢٥ طالبًا تم اختيارهم بطريقة عشوائية، وتمثلت أداة البحث الكمي في استبانة، طُبقت على العينة الكمية لتحديد درجة رغبة التواصل لديهم في مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية؛ كما تم اختيار عينة البحث الكمية تم اختيارهم بطريقة العينة الأكثر ملاءمة والبالغ عددها سبعة طلاب، وتمثلت أداة البحث الكمية في مقابلة شبه مقيدة، تم إجراؤها مع العينة الكمية. وأسفرت نتائج البحث الكمية والكيفية عن انخفاض مستوى الرغبة في التواصل لدى الطلاب، بالإضافة إلى وجود عديد من العوامل التي تؤثر سلبيًا على الرغبة في التواصل في مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية، وأوصى البحث بضرورة إلقاء الضوء على مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية باعتبارها إحدى بيئات التعلم الواعدة في القرن الحادي والعشرين، بالإضافة إلى حتمية تبني ممارسات التعليم والتعلم الفعال نحو زيادة الرغبة في التواصل لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استقصاء، رغبة التواصل، مجتمعات التعلم الافتراضية.

Introduction

Willingness to communicate (WTC) assumes a pivotal indispensability in the cultivation of EFL learners' communication proficiency. It has been deemed as an integral and inherent constituent of the communication process, and the interlocutor's WTC is assumed to increase the participation effectiveness and interactivity frequency. In essence, learners with higher degrees of WTC are more motivated, self-confident, and more active users of the target language in the communication contexts and vice versa.

Meticulously, individuals with higher degrees of WTC are more likely to participate effectively in the interconnected world and are more capable of expressing their thoughts and feelings in different social situations. However, those with lower degrees of WTC might miss critical opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings (MacIntyre, et.al., 1998; Robson, 2015). Consequently, verifying the students' WTC degrees might assist the educationalists and stakeholders to adopt the most effective teaching practices which might maximise the teaching learning process outcomes. As such, adopting effective teaching practices might assist in devising more engaging learning environments which in turn might boost students' the development of their skills and competences (Solvik, & Glenna, 2021). Those with higher degrees of WTC are more incentivised to use the target language to communicate in different situations to acquire higher degrees of fluency in using the target language (Clément, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003; Derwing, et. al., 2008; Sheybani, 2019). Thus, engendering WTC in the language learning classroom has been deemed as a critical factor in language development, and it is suggested to be a crucial goal targeted by educationalists (MacIntyre et al. 1998; Yarwood, & Bennett, 2022).

Formerly, the advent of the WTC concept is traced back to McCroskey (McCroskey and Baer1985; McCroskey and Richmond1990, 1991). WTC had its origins in Burgoon's (1976) conception of "unwillingness-to-communicate: a chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication" (p.60). McCroskey reconceptualized unwillingness-to-communicate later and introduced the term WTC as "a slightly more specific construct, defined as the



intention to initiate communication when given the opportunity” (MacIntyre et al.2001, 370).

WTC is a multi-dimensional construct that represents a static intentional behaviour (not a static trait) (MacIntyre, et. al., 2003; McCroskey, 1992). WTC is 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, 547). On the other hand, it is delineated as a stable individual difference among the learners; besides, it is considered the final step before the actual use of the target language to communicate. As such, it has been found that a number of factors, mainly internal and external, seem to jointly influence interlocutors’ WTC (Zhang, et. al., 2022).

Furthermore, comprehending the underpinning factors of WTC might contribute to developing training teaching practices that might conduce such development. Primarily, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) depicted WTC as a composite of personality characteristics, including introversion, extroversion, communication apprehension, self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety, and communicative competence, among others, which influence the individual’s final decision to talk. WTC includes three different components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Cognitively, WTC is mainly influenced by the communicator’s topic familiarity, background knowledge, and communication competence (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Affectively, WTC is entirely affected by the interlocutor’s different emotional factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, and self-perception (McCroskey, 1992). Behaviourally, WTC might be judged by the interlocutor’s participation in communication and utilisation of the language of communication effectively (MacIntyre et al., 2003).

Another noteworthy aspect is that three robust theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive overview of the factors affecting the participants’ WTC: socio-psychological, cognitive, and affective factors. Initially, sociopsychological factors address environment- and culture related factors (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The cognitive perspective, on the other hand, emphasises how a person’s views, and perceptions may influence his or her WTC (Chichon, 2019; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). More critically, the affective factor, the

role of emotions, has a substantial effect on the participants' WTC (McCroskey, 1992; Mulyono, et al., 2020).

Another remarkable facet, it is believed that there are large differences in communication tendencies among people in different cultures and within one culture; additionally, cultural impact is a critical factor in intercultural communication (McCroskey and Richmond, 1990; Xiao, & Huang, 2016). It was delineated that a number of linguistic, communicative, and social psychological factors might impact WTC as depicted in his comprehensive model (the heuristic model). It is also pinpointed that WTC ought to be given priority from the very beginning as it is a primary goal of language instruction (Aydin, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

From an alternative viewpoint, a number of studies identified the individual factors as a component that plays an intervening role in WTC. For instance, learners with varying degrees of introversion and openness are likely to show varying degrees of WTC (McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991; Rafiee, & Abbasian-Naghneh, 2019). Other groups of factors categorised as situational factors, which address the context such as the topic of conversation, the participants' prior knowledge and experience, and the audience's size, have significant effects on WTC (McCroskey, 1997; Yashima, 2002). Another element of importance, cultural factors are also another important predictor of WTC as the variations of the different cultural ingredients, such as values and norms, might impact WTC (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Freiermuth, and Jarrell's (2006) research revealed that online chat provided a comfortable environment for interaction.

On the other end of the spectrum, research has underscored that instructional strategies, specific learning environments, and tasks are conducive to the fostering of WTC. The importance of creating a supportive communication environment that lowers students' anxiety while increasing their self-perceived communicative competence to generate greater WTC: thus, increasing interaction and communication (Cao, 2006; Compton, 2004; Lu & Hsu, 2008; Rafiee, & Abbasian-Naghneh, 2019).

More interestingly, with the advent of the virtual world and the various channels of communication in light of the trends of globalization, VLCs appeared side by side with the traditional



communities. In simpler terms, traditional learning communities necessitates a physical space is the place of face-to-face interaction, such as the traditional lecture halls; Contrariwise, VLCs are mainly constructed using various technological means such as Google Classroom, discussion forums, and social media platforms. Thus, both environments entail a number of merits and drawbacks that affect the choice as well as the quality and outcome of interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Tzanavaris, et al., 2021). Due to the current generation of students' attachment to new technologies and the virtual world, VLC, with its numerous benefits, would be a suitable environment for communication; in consequence, VLCs have become a popular means of communication among tertiary education students (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

Such communities typically consist of groups of learners who communicate with one another and with various course content via online platforms such as learning management systems, social media, or video conferencing tools (Beldarrain, 2006). The VLC is defined as "a learning atmosphere, a context providing a supportive system from which sustainable learning processes are gained through dialogue and the collaborative construction of knowledge by acquiring, generating, analysing, and structuring information" (Carlen & Jobring 2005, p. 273). Palloff and Pratt (2007) defined VLCs as "groups of people who share a common purpose, interact and collaborate with each other over time to achieve shared goals, and are supported by technology". To that end, it is assumed that mixing the different services provided by the VLCs with the students' comfort zone specifically, staying connected with the community of peers with similar interests and attitudes might positively lead to improved academic performance as well as higher degrees of satisfaction among students (Xu, & Jaggars, 2013).

Several models have been developed demonstrating the functioning and outcomes of VLCs. Garrison, et al. (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework and identified three interrelated elements of successful VLCs: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Firstly, cognitive presence demonstrates the learners' capability to assemble and reinforce meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. Secondly, social

presence exhibits the learners' ability to present themselves as real people in the virtual community and establishes a sense of interpersonal connection and community. Finally, "teaching presence" refers to the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes in order to attain the educational objectives in the learning community. The CoI framework has been widely adopted as it has been shown to be a useful vehicle for evaluating the quality and efficacy of such communities (Gorsky, Blau, 2009).

Theoretically, Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) stressed that learning in VLCs is considered a social process as effective learning occurs through active participation which involves communication with others. Tu (2000) linked the VLCs and Vygotsky's social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) taking into account the significance of social interaction in social learning; considering that, VLCs are conducive environments to social interaction. Vygotsky's social learning theory was summarized in three elements, namely tenor (personal factor), mode (behaviour); fields (environment). Tu (2000) delineated such elements within the social presence framework highlighting the significance of robust social learning context, the appropriate VLCs technologies, and the learner's engagement in active learning experiences.

Recently, a myriad of research examined the potency of evolving technologies such as social media, mobile devices, virtual reality, and augmented reality to sustain VLCs. Kaplan (2021) highlighted that VLC is a mandatory channel in modern society, besides having potential for developing knowledge and attaining productive interactivity. Instructors ought to be trained in order to be able to employ such communities in the teaching learning process effectively. VLCs can extend and enhance communication in traditional communities. Furthermore, VLCs might provide a channel for interaction among people of different disciplines and interests (Anita et al. 2012; Gaia Moretti and Schlemmer 2012). O'Toole (2019) confirmed that VLCs have a positive influence on CPD, including enhanced social learning processes, learning formal and informal language, and increasing the degrees of interaction. A study by Lomicka (2020) recommended the significance of social presence in VLCs in order to achieve connectedness and trust. More importantly, educators ought to be creative in employing strategies to guarantee fruitful interaction among the participants. Goal setting,



feedback, and encouragement of collaboration might foster a sense of community and interaction in the VLC.

Suleri and Suleri (2019) highlighted that the availability of resources plays a critical role in the success of VLCs as the learners' engagement and performance mounted greatly in a blended learning environment. Added to that, equity and access are major challenges of VLCs; not all learners may have equal access to technology and stable internet connectivity. On the other hand, a plethora of empirical studies addressed the outcomes of VLCs uncovered that participation in VLCs enhances students' sense of belonging and engagement (Chia & Pritchard, 2014; Hurtado, et al. 2020; Strunga, 2015). A meta-analysis by Gorsky and Blau, (2009) found that the presence of an effective instructor or facilitator is a key predictor of student satisfaction and success in online communities. Another facet worth noting, Wegener and Leimeister (2012) demonstrated that the quality of feedback provided by instructors and peers is a critical factor that promotes deep learning in VLCs. Alshumaimeri and Alhumud (2021) exhibited that virtual classrooms can play a significant role in enhancing students' communication skills.

In essence, WTC is a critical aspect of the EFL learners' development and proficiency as it is closely linked to a plethora of factor as being multifaceted construct such as motivation, self-confidence, and apprehension. Apart from that, VLCs emerged lately as attractive platforms for learners particularly tertiary students with different backgrounds and interests. They also enhance interaction and connection as well as comfort among students. As such, addressing the factors influencing WTC can assist in providing comprehensive view concerning the adoption of VLCs in the teaching learning process, where educators can develop environments which boost students' WTC and, consequently, advance their communication skills.

Purpose of the Research

WTC is considered a vital factor which should be prioritized for developing the EFL communication skills. The emphasis is placed on authentic language communication as an important part of language learning in order to increase the use of the target language by language

learners both in the language classroom and in more naturalistic settings.

With such factors in mind, the current research endeavoured to assess the status quo of WTC in the VLCs so as to gain insight into the communication behaviours of the EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University. As such, the research also sought to investigate the affecting factors whether negative or positive in order to gain deep understanding of the reasons underlying such degrees of communication. Subsequently, the present research sought to find answers for the questions.

1. What is the degree of WTC among EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University?
2. What are the factors influencing the EFL majors' WTC in VLCs at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University?

As is demonstrated, the present research is expected to gain deep understanding of the degree of WTC and the influencing factors among EFL majors in order for this research to be a base for future research to adjust the learning environment and make the best use of such communities to enhance the learners' WTC in line with the great developments in technology.

Methods and Procedures

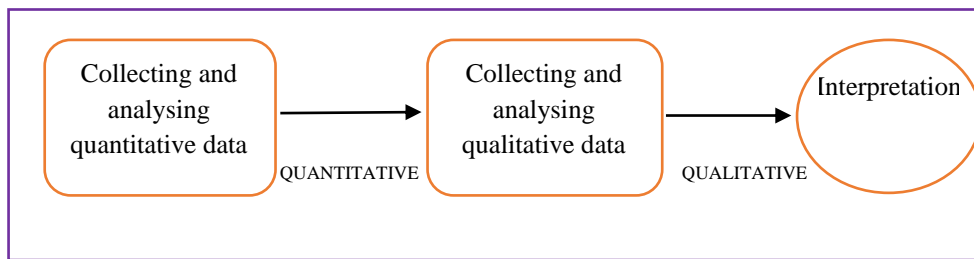
Research Paradigm

The research paradigm means “a set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientist about how problems should be understood and addressed” (Kuhn, 1967, 41). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a paradigm comprises three elements, namely, epistemology, ontology, and methodology. The present research adopted the pragmatic paradigm, which is based on the proposition that researchers should use the philosophical and/or methodological approach that works best for the research problem that is being investigated (Creswell and Clark 2011; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998).

Ontologically, it was assumed the availability of VLCs as well as a degree of WTC as a measurable construct which could be affected by a plethora of factors and the learners may be varied according to

their WTC degrees. Epistemologically, a mixed methods was utilised to collect and analyse both quantitative data -via a questionnaire- and qualitative data -via semi-structured interviews- as to attain a comprehensive understanding of the degree of WTC among the study participants while using the VLCs as well as uncovering the underpinning factors. Methodologically, the researcher adopted the mixed method (explanatory sequential design) to identify the factors influencing WTC in VLCs among EFL learners, as shown in figure (1).

Figure (1): The explanatory sequential design adopted in the present study.



Quantitatively, the descriptive survey method was adopted to fulfil the purpose of the research. Namely, investigating the status-quo of WTC among the EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University. The quantitative data yielded specific numeric data that was statistically analysed to produce results for identifying whether the students had higher or lower degrees of willingness. The researcher developed a questionnaire for collecting data from the participants. The questionnaire was administered to the participants via Google Forms online. The data obtained from the survey was collected and analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation) and inferential ones (*t*-test, hypothetical mean). The results obtained from the statistical analysis were interpreted and reported considering the objectives of the research.

Qualitatively, the phenomenological method was adopted to thoroughly investigate the target phenomenon of the current research, namely WTC. The qualitative data yielded the participants' views to the semi-structured interviews. The actual words of the participants delineating their different perspectives on the research topic have formulated a complex and comprehensive picture of the factors

affecting WTC. Stated differently, when combining both quantitative and qualitative data, the results will be a very powerful mix (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Research Population and Participants

The population of the current research was the EFL majors at the Faculty of Education for Boys (Cairo), Al-Azhar University. For the sake of generalising the attained results, the probabilistic sampling method was adopted by the researcher in collecting the quantitative data. Qualitatively, the population of the present research was the research participants (members participated in the current research due to demonstrating their views concerning the target treatment).

Quantitatively, the participants of the present research were 125 EFL majors out of 293 who were enrolled at the Faculty of Education for Boys (Cairo), Al-Azhar University, during the academic year 2022–2023 AD. Qualitatively, the convenience sampling technique (also known as availability sampling), which is a specific type of non-probability or purposeful sampling) was adopted by the present research from the members of the population who were conveniently available to participate in research. The total number of participants was seven EFL majors at the Faculty of Education for Boys (Cairo), Al-Azhar University, who took part in the research after providing their consent before participating in the research.

Research Instruments

To accomplish the purpose of the current research, a wide range of data collection instruments were developed by the researcher, both quantitative and qualitative, to attain a comprehensive result of the target research constructs, namely:

- A willingness to communicate questionnaire consisting of 17 items to assess the participants' WTC (quantitative perspective).
- Semi-structured interviews for investigating the factors influencing the participants' WTC (qualitative perspective).



1) The willingness to communicate questionnaire.

A deep review of literature pertaining to WTC was conducted as a primary step for developing the questionnaire (Alavi, & Esmailifard, 2021; Harare, 2019; Katiandagho, & Sengkey, 2022; Liu, F., et al., 2021; Mehmet, 2020; Mohammadi, et al., 2019). The review of literature highlighted the theories, constructs and practices which have close relationship to the target questionnaire idea. The items of the questionnaire were formulated to be aligned with the questionnaire objectives. The language of the items of the questionnaire was taken into account to be accurate and understandable by the research participants in order to produce valid reliable outcomes. The questionnaire was built in the format of five-point rating system of Likert ranging from *always* to *never*.

The questionnaire was submitted to a jury of specialists to assure its content validity. The members were requested to judge the items in terms of their relevancy, sufficiency, and intelligibility.

For assuring the reliability of the questionnaire, the Alpha Cronbach technique was used. The results of the analysis showed that the questionnaire reliability was 0.67, indicating that the questionnaire was highly reliable and ready to be administered to the research participants.

2) Semi-structured interview.

According to Wisker (2001), the technique of interview is of immense use and value in qualitative research as it targets the in-depth and holistic description or reflection of an activity or situation. The present research made use of the interview (semi-structured) with the aim of collecting in-depth data in a social context, which primarily helps understand the viewpoints of the participants concerning the underlying construct. The interview lasted for about 30 minutes with each participant and was recorded after obtaining their consent. The interviewer, the researcher, played the role of moderator in organizing, conducting, and controlling the interview process.

The audit trail was positioned to examine both the process and product of the inquiry and determine the trustworthiness of the findings as an additional lens for establishing credibility apart from the researcher. The audit followed systematic procedures after carefully studying the documentation provided by the researcher. Making use of the research documents, the auditor developed several comments, which were taken into consideration.

Results and Discussion

The present research sought to investigate the degree of WTC as well as the factors influencing WTC among EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research was designed to address two primary research purposes, namely the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research. Specifically, the quantitative aspect aimed to answer the main question pertaining to the degree of WTC.

1. What is the degree of WTC among EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University?

The subsequent null hypothesis was formulated, providing potential answer to the quantitative research questions as follows:

1. *There is no statistically significant difference at 0.01 level between the mean scores attained by the research participants regarding their responses to the WTC questionnaire and the hypothetical mean.*

Due to the nature of the hypothesis, sample size, and target data, deciding on the appropriate statistical technique necessitates adopting a one-sample *t*-test. Besides, the assumptions of the *t*-test for one sample were assured before conducting the analysis as the data were continuous, the data followed the normal probability distribution, the sample was a simple random sample from its population, and each individual in the population had an equal probability of being selected in the sample (NCSS, 2020).



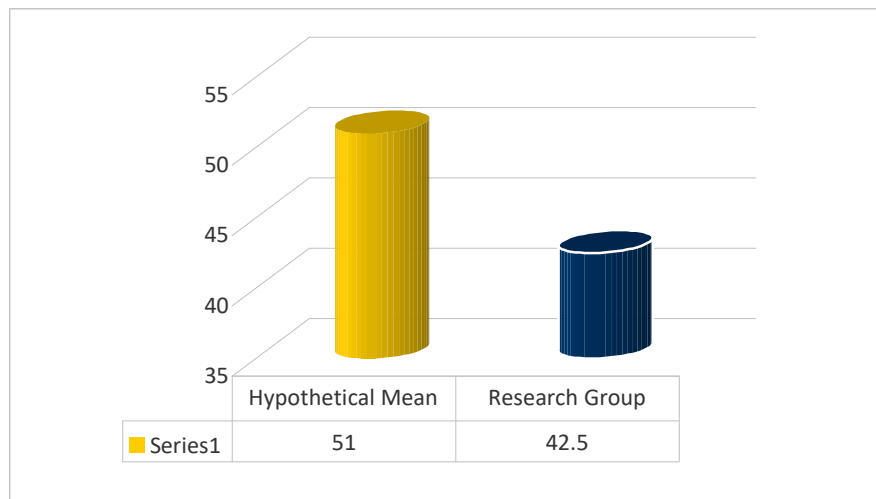
Subsequently, a comparison between the participants' mean score and that of the hypothetical mean was made to verify the degree of WTC. The following table (1) shows the results of the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses:

Table 1: One sample t-test result (the research group and the hypothetical mean)

Group	Mean	DF	t-Value	Sig. (2tailed)
Research Group	42.50	124	10.37	0.001
Hypothetical Mean	51.00			

The presented data demonstrate that a statistically significant difference exists between the mean scores attained by the research group participants, as assessed by the WTC questionnaire. The *t*-test results yielded a value of 10.37, which is considered significant (sig. = 0.002, tailed = $P > 0.01$). Furthermore, Figure 1 below provides a comprehensive visualization of the discrepancy in WTC between the research group and the hypothetical mean.

Figure 2: The mean differences between the research participants and the hypothetical mean.



Close inspection of the above figure shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the research participants' responses and the hypothetical mean. Thereupon, the first null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative one was accepted testifying "*there is a statistically significant difference at 0.01 level between the mean scores attained by the research participants regarding their responses to the WTC questionnaire and the hypothetical mean in favour of the hypothetical mean*". Accordingly, in the light of the results drawn above, the EFL majors at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University have lower degrees of WTC.

Qualitatively, the researcher sought to answer the second research question articulating: "*What are the factors influencing the EFL majors' WTC in VLCs at the Faculty of Education, Al-Azhar University?*" through eliciting the participants' views regarding the factors influencing their usage of the virtual learning communities. Semi structured interviews were conducted making use of Creswell and Clark (2017) model of qualitative data analysis, and coding. To explain further, the attained data were thoroughly scrutinized, as such a multifaceted process required careful examination of the findings that emerge from the detailed data. Procedurally, the audio recorded of the interviews was listened to thoroughly; the recorded audio was transcribed verbatim, and prior to any data analysis, the accuracy of the transcription was confirmed by listening to the audio recorded while simultaneously reviewing the written transcription. The transcript was then independently analysed by the researcher, word by word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence. The researcher identified and developed the themes in terms of their properties and dimensions through the process, which involved the generation of basic themes or categories to describe features of the data and to make constant comparisons between themes.

Another point worth highlighting, the researcher embarked on investigating the factors impacting WTC in VLCs with the assumption that the target factors would principally be positive. Such an assumption is based on the widely held idea that VLCs offer a supportive and encouraging environment that is more advantageous than the traditional environment. However, upon conducting a thorough analysis of the transcript of the data attained from the interviews, many negative factors emerged as influencing the



willingness of the students to communicate in such learning communities. Consequently, the second question of the research targeted two sub-dimensions: positive factors and negative ones. The shadowing lines depict the themes generated from the qualitative analysis.

Figure (2): Summary of the factors affecting the EFL majors' WTC.

Factors influencing WTC	Negative Factors:	Technical difficulties
		Lack of planned systematic learning outcomes
		Lack of guidelines
		Sophistication of the language used
		Perception of inadequate communication competency
		Lack of interpersonal relationships
		Unavailability of users
		Lack of adequate feedback
	Positive Factors:	Anonymity
		Practice opportunities
		Written communication
		Participant-centered topics
		Control over learning process
		Access to resources
Reducing social anxiety		
Collaborative learning		
Tracking and analytical tools		

Firstly: The negative factors

- Technical difficulties: VLCs are mainly based on technology; thus, poor internet connectivity is the principal problem that students might encounter. Unreliable internet, software malfunctions, or system crashes can hinder the learning experience and exacerbate communication. To that end, the learner fails to attain the anticipated outcomes. The subsequent direct excerpt cites the participants' views, "*The internet in Egypt is very bad and is glitching every time. Sometimes, it stops working in the middle of talks*".
- Lack of planned systematic learning outcomes: As VLCs are considered supplemental activities rather than specified target content prescribed by the educational institution, there is a lack

of systematic learning outcomes connected with such extra activities. Thus, participation in such communities might not develop the skills intended. Sometimes, the student does not understand the overall aim of taking part in such communities. The quotation that follows cites the views of the participants, “*Sometimes, I speak with my mate for a long time, and I learn only a few new words*”.

- Lack of guidelines: The absence of clear expectations or guidelines may obstruct the teaching learning process in general and the communication in VLCs in particular, as the participants might not understand the task requirement or the expected outcomes. Such confusion and misunderstanding might make communication ineffective. In consequence, setting clear guidelines might ensure better collaboration and attainment of the intended outcomes. The excerpt below cites the opinions of those involved, “*I’m not sure about the benefits of talking for a long time with a friend or what I should do to learn more*”.
- Sophistication of the language used: As the users of VLCs are from different cultures and backgrounds, the language used might contain a plethora of informal structures as well as several culture-bound and idiomatic expressions; in turn, difficulty in understanding is created. Consequently, students with language difficulty might misinterpret or fail to figure out the intended message, which might lead to confusion and hindered communication. The subsequent quotation cites the opinions of those involved, “*He is always using very difficult language. Sometimes I don’t understand him. He said to me, (... , but phonetics is alphabet soup)*”.
- Perception of inadequate communication competency: The learners’ belief that they have insufficient competency in VLCs is one of the critical negative factors affecting the learners’ participation from the very beginning. Such difficulties, which might result from various factors such as technical problems, language barriers, and the absence of the proper guides or intended learning outcomes, might cause obstacles regarding participating and engaging with the other members. Sometimes, learners, due to such negative perceptions, may feel isolated and neglected by the other members of their communities. The next direct excerpt cites the viewpoints of



the participants, *“I feel depressed when I don’t know what I can do to take part in the talk”*.

- Lack of interpersonal relationships: As taking part in VLCs is a supplementary activity rather than core content prescribed by the educational institution, the participants are from various countries and nationalities. Such variation might result in restlessness and uneasiness in communication; thus, the learners might fail to attain the intended learning outcomes. The learners might feel less encouraged to take part in the discussion topics. The following extract cites the stances of those who took part, *“I don’t have a good relationship with my mates. Every time I talk with different persons”*.
- Unavailability of users: VLCs users are there for different intents and purposes, and not all of them are present to practise his language or communicate in English. Some learners confirmed that finding a partner who wants to participate is not an easy step as most users are there for specific purposes. The excerpt that follows cites the outlooks of the participants, *“Some people refuse to talk with me or leave me in the middle of the conversation”*.
- Lack of adequate feedback: In traditional learning environments, the participants may receive different forms of feedback: from the instructor and the peers, which greatly assist in adjusting the learning process accordingly. Feedback in VLCs might be less frequent and less personalized, which can lead to a lack of engagement and participation. The subsequent direct extract references the mindsets of those involved, *“I think if our doctors were with us, they may teach us how to speak in a very good way”*.

Secondly: The positive factors

- Anonymity: Anonymity is a key aspect of VLCs, enabling the learners to develop their own virtual identities such as avatars, usernames, and pseudonyms. Learners may avoid expressing their thoughts or feelings in front of their peers and instructors lest they be perceived as less knowledgeable or incompetent enough. Nevertheless, in VLCs, learners may participate without being afraid of negative judgments, which might give

them a sense of creativity and self-expression. Thus, creating pathways based on real identities ought to produce fruitful outcomes and better engagement. The excerpt below cites the perceptions of the participants, “*No one knows me, and there are no students from my friends, so they won’t bully me, and I don’t feel anxious*”.

- Practice opportunities: VLCs provide the participants with the opportunities to practise their language and enhance their communication skills rather than just practising the language for assessment purposes, either directly or indirectly. The environment, being relaxed and supportive, can enable the students to be overwhelmingly engaged in communication activities. The next extract directly references the perspectives of the interviewees, “*No one will give me marks or say you are wrong, but I learn new things from my friends*”.
- Written communication: VLCs provides the learners with the text-based service as a means of communication in the form of posts, e-mails, and chat messages. Making use of writing enables the students to express themselves without being anxious; it relatively reduces the negative feelings of shyness or insecurity as they can easily think about the language, they wanted to use, which in turn impacts their WTC positively. The subsequent excerpt cites the impressions of those who took part in the research, “*There are some friends who like to write to me, and I love writing sometimes*”.
- Participant-centred topics: The participants pointed out that they could converse with other participants about issues pertaining to their own interests, leading to enjoyable learning experiences. The interest-based topics that are tailored to the individuals’ needs and interests encourage them to feel motivated to take part in the community effectively, which means more WTC. The more inclusive learning environment created provides the participants with a variety of opportunities to interact with community members from various backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives. Another notable element, is that VLCs provide numerous channels in different fields for people of diverse, degrees, backgrounds, and perspectives. The following direct quotation cites the thoughts



of those who took part, “*I choose to speak only about technology because I like it*”.

- Control over the learning process: Apart from the traditional learning activities, VLCs offer more flexibility as the participants are allowed to choose the topics, the pace, and the preferred means of communication. This flexibility enables the participants to feel more comfortable and motivated to communicate. Such degrees of control can help increase the learners’ sense of ownership in the learning process. Learners who perceive the learning process as relevant are likely to participate in communication and learning activities. The subsequent excerpt cites the opinions of those involved, “*Every one of us chooses the task that he wants to do. I choose to speak only about technology because I like it*”.
- Access to resources: VLCs empower the learners with a wide range of interactive resources, such as multimedia content, dictionaries, and virtual tools. Such resources can help boost the learning experience and promote communication among participants. Furthermore, VLCs provide many communication channels to choose from, such as video conferencing, chat rooms, and discussion forums, which can effectively facilitate communication and collaboration among the community participants. Such various tools suit the styles and preferences of the learners, which might develop the learners’ WTC. The next direct extract cites the viewpoints of the participants, “*I always use Google to translate difficult words, and I sometimes have a programme transcribe the conversation*”.
- Reducing social anxiety: social anxiety as a psychological condition characterised by excessive fear or discomfort in social situations is one of the main factors affecting the learners’ WTC, yet VLCs play critical roles in reducing the social anxiety and shyness of the participants who may feel uncomfortable or Uneasy in traditional face-to-face learning. This sense of anonymity can help reduce social anxiety, promote greater WTC, and encourage participation in discussions and activities. The excerpt that follows cites the

outlooks of the participants, *“My friends won’t bully me, and I don’t feel anxious, so I feel happy to speak with my virtual friends”*.

- Collaborative learning: Based on the socio-linguistic principles of Vygotsky, VLCs promote collaborative learning and different forms of interaction via the ideas of teams, groups, rooms, and classes, which can help foster a sense of community belonging and shared responsibility even if they are in different parts of the world. On the other hand, peer-to-peer interaction and mutual support among participants are promoted. This can help promote greater WTC participation. The quotation below cites the perceptions of the participants, *“We form two or three groups and search about a topic and explain it to each other”*.
- Tracking and analytical tools: VLCs are empowered with abundant powerful tools for monitoring and tracking the progress of the learners’ and their participations, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Such instantaneous, personalised feedback might optimise the learning process and maximise the learning outcomes. The next excerpt directly references the perspectives of those who took part, *“The site knows me and helps me find me, and after I finish, it tells me about the time I spent in the talk”*.

Interpretation of the Results

A plausible interpretation of the attained results could be summarized in that VLCs offer a lot of pathways and opportunities for target language practise that had a facilitating impact on the research participants’ WTC; such result echoes with that of Harrison and Thomas (2009). It is also noted that factors such as VLCs users, response time, and conversation termination, as well as language and unpleasant experiences, negatively influenced the participants’ WTC in VLCs, such outcome resonates with that of Lee and Lee (2020).

Considering the main findings of the present research, a number of difficulties were detected by the users of the VLCs which ought to be taken into account by the stakeholders to best optimize the VLCs usage so as to improve the outcomes of the educational process.



Technical difficulties are one of the main problems encounter the VLCs users which necessities the development of the infrastructure in order to ensure the efficiency of treatment adopted. Additionally, adopting the VLCs entails a comprehensive framework portraying the intended learning outcomes and delimiting the target skills which might ensure fruitful outcomes, such result corresponds to that of Wegener and Leimeister (2012).

Although the EFL majors are proficient users of such channels, they lack main competences required for controlling and efficiently managing their teaching learning experiences which necessitates structured and well-defined frameworks with clear roles and responsibilities for mentors and mentees. Another further aspect worth noting is the difficulty of figuring out the messages of the native speakers imposes a critical need for developing the students informal speaking and writing skills as well as being able to use the modern technologies such as subtitles, captions, and dictionaries to aid understanding and maximise the learning outcomes; such finding is in line with that of Wegener and Leimeister (2012).

Another area of concern which is closely related the personality and the participants' confidence summarized in the negative self-perception which entails providing more opportunities and developing supportive environments for assisting the learners gain the target skills. Such a target can also be achieved through designing interactive and group activities along with discussion forums and projects. Another factor worth considering is empowering the participants with strategies and techniques to interact effectively with the others in VLCs; such result aligns with that of Liu, et al., (2020).

Students' feeling that they are not competent enough to participate effectively in VLCs is a great barrier to engagement; consequently, instructors should be supportive, as should other community members. Learners' negative perceptions ought to be given the due attention as they may give up the participation process from the very beginning. Varying the degree of difficulty of the topics negotiated as well as providing scaffolding by instructors might produce significant outcomes. Moreover, instructors should empower their students with a number of instructions to help them communicate

effectively with people from different backgrounds and cultures. Another item of interest is that instructors should encourage students to participate effectively in VLCs as an authentic means of brushing up their language skills in general and their communication skills in particular; such finding matches that of Liu, et al., (2020).

Finally, considering the data elicited from the quantitative as well as the qualitative analyses, instructors ought to assign a time for learners to clarify the numerous knowledge and skills that might be gained from participating in VLCs. Another component worth acknowledging is that there should be some kind of assessment or feedback from the instructors to students for maximising the benefits gained from participation in VLCs. Furthermore, there ought to be clear guidelines that might include the topics of discussion, the potential benefits, and the intended learning outcomes. Via reinforcement of learning through constructive feedback, the outcome of the interaction process would be maximised to an ultimate degree as well as any misconception or a problem encountered might be overcome.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the results attained and the interpretation demonstrated, the present research has several future scopes for future researchers.

1. Investigating the motivational drivers for engaging in VLCs.
2. Searching the influence of social presence on EFL majors' WTC in VLCs.
3. Investigating the role of self-efficacy beliefs on WTC in VLCs.
4. Questioning the correlation between EFL learners' self-efficacy and WTC in VLCs.
5. Probing the impact of task-based learning in enhancing the EFL learners' WTC in VLCs.



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