

Impact of Authentic Task-Based Learning and Assessment on Omani University Female Students' Willingness to Communicate in English

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Received 6 May 2024, Received in revised form 20 June 2025
 Accepted 20 July 2025, Available online 30 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental study explores the impact of authentic task-based learning on Omani university female students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. The research examines key factors such as self-perceived communication competence (SPCC), communication anxiety, motivation, and the practical applicability of learning experiences. A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, beginning with quantitative data collection via questionnaires completed by 145 students, followed by qualitative interviews with nine selected participants. Results demonstrate that over 66% preferred familiar topics; 79% favoured pair work; WhatsApp (80%) and MS Teams (48.30%) were top communication tools. However, barriers such as unfamiliar topics, fear of making mistakes, and limited language proficiency hinder effective communication. The study highlights a strong correlation between WTC and confidence levels, emphasizing the role of authentic content and assessment in fostering student confidence, increasing practice opportunities, and promoting collaboration. These findings offer pedagogical insights into effective language instruction strategies aimed at enhancing learners' WTC in EFL settings—crucial for preparing students for academic, professional, and societal participation.

Keywords: *Authentic foreign language teaching; communication anxiety; higher education; motivation; self-perceived communication competence*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, English has emerged as a global lingua franca, facilitating international communication and collaboration (Alharbi 2019; Shrishty 2022). A lack of English proficiency can lead to missed opportunities across cultural, political, educational, and socio-economic domains. Given that many universities worldwide offer courses in English, students who are unable to communicate effectively in the language may

face barriers to academic mobility and broader global engagement. As a result, there is growing interest in enhancing English language proficiency, with numerous studies exploring various dimensions of English language acquisition.

A central element of effective language use is the willingness to communicate (WTC), defined as the readiness to initiate conversations in a second language (MacIntyre et al. 1998). WTC is a critical outcome in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, strongly

associated with second language acquisition and learners' social, academic, and professional success (Dörnyei et al. 2006; Kang 2015; MacIntyre et al. 2002). Without sufficient WTC, students are less likely to engage in communicative tasks, thereby missing opportunities to practice and internalize the target language (Vongsila & Reinders 2016). Moreover, WTC encompasses not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural understanding, relationship-building, and personal development (Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga Cuéllar 2018).

Promoting WTC among university EFL learners is therefore essential. Studies have shown that factors such as topic familiarity, type of interlocutor, learning context, motivation, communication anxiety, and SPCC influence learners' WTC (Al-Amrani 2019; Shirvan et al. 2019). The importance of connecting language learning to real-world contexts is increasingly recognized, particularly in light of the evolving demands of globalized education and employment.

Since the 1990s, many tertiary institutions in Oman have adopted English as the medium of instruction (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman 2018). University students are expected to develop English proficiency to engage meaningfully with course content and participate in academic exchange. However, studies have reported that Omani students often hesitate to speak in English due to communication anxiety, preference for familiar settings, and perceptions of contextual formality (Al-Amrani 2019). In online environments, limited opportunities to use English further constrain their communicative engagement (Al-Amrani & Harrington 2020).

Authentic task-based learning, which simulates real-world scenarios, is a promising strategy for enhancing communication in EFL contexts (Herrington et al. 2010). Although communicative language teaching and educational technology have been emphasized in Omani EFL reforms, persistent challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher-centered instruction, and exam-driven approaches continue to inhibit language acquisition (Al-Issa & Al-Belushi 2012; Alhassan 2021).

Thus, this study seeks to address these challenges by exploring how authentic learning tasks affect female university students' WTC in English, particularly in virtual environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study addresses the effects of authentic activities on students' motivation, confidence, and real-world language application, with the goal of identifying effective strategies for improving WTC in EFL settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies across various contexts have examined authentic learning and WTC within second language (L2) education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, experimental research focusing on WTC in EFL remains limited. Existing studies have primarily approached the issue from three perspectives aimed at enhancing learners' WTC in non-native settings.

To further understand WTC among Omani learners, Al-Amrani and Harrington (2020) explored perceptions of online learning and its impact on communication. Their findings emphasized the importance of digital fluency, interactivity, and structured dialogue in fostering SPCC and WTC. These studies underscore that WTC is context-sensitive, influenced by both cultural and environmental factors, and that effective interventions must consider these dynamics. The second approach focuses on the influence of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) on WTC. Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) found that Japanese EFL learners participating in online chats exhibited greater WTC than in traditional face-to-face settings due to reduced immediacy and social pressure. Similarly, Kissau et al. (2010) observed that asynchronous online learning among North American French learners facilitated reflective communication, despite some students reporting lower initial confidence. Reinders and Wattana (2010) examined the impact of multiplayer online gaming on WTC among Thai learners, finding increased engagement and reduced anxiety in virtual environments. These findings suggest that online platforms can provide psychologically safer spaces for language practice.

The third line of inquiry reviews the role of authentic task-based learning in fostering WTC. Designed to replicate real-world experiences, authentic tasks help students engage in meaningful communication beyond the classroom (Herrington et al. 2003; Woo et al. 2007). While studies such as Chaisiri (2013) demonstrated the effectiveness of technology-mediated oral tasks in Thailand, research in Omani higher education remains scarce. Additional investigations are needed to assess the feasibility and impact of authentic tasks in diverse EFL environments. Scholars like Kurniawan et al. (2018), Trihastutie & Fadilah (2019), and Toyoda et al. (2021) have contributed valuable insights into communicative variables; however, their transferability and practical relevance across educational contexts must be critically assessed.

In conclusion, while prior research illustrates the potential of authentic task-based learning to improve WTC in EFL, more context-specific studies are needed to determine its effectiveness, scalability, and adaptability, particularly in settings like Oman where cultural and institutional factors play a pivotal role.

METHODOLOGY

This study used task-based authentic learning and assessment to evaluate the impact of authentic tasks on students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. The main focus was on the roles of motivation, skill development, confidence building, and real-world applicability. It sought to determine how authentic activities enhance students' communication readiness and to assess their effectiveness in achieving language learning objectives. A mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture contextual complexity. This well-established methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of research questions through triangulation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The authentic tasks were designed to simulate real-life English usage scenarios, encouraging students to apply their linguistic knowledge in meaningful, practical contexts.

A mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, was employed to understand the contextual nuances of the study. This well-established social sciences research approach aims to achieve depth by comparing empirical results from multiple vantage points (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In other words, task-based authentic learning and assessment were implemented by developing activities that allowed students to engage in real-life EFL contexts. The tasks were designed to improve students' language proficiency when students were put in a real-world communication situation.

PARTICIPANTS

Quantitative data were collected from 145 third-year female students enrolled in the "Spoken English Communication I" course at Sohar University, Oman. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27, and all were majoring in English Language and Literature. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of nine students. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A sequential data collection strategy was implemented. First, students completed a structured questionnaire assessing variables related to WTC, including self-

perceived communication competence (SPCC) and communication anxiety (CA). The survey employed a Likert scale and was adapted from McCroskey (1992) to ensure consistency and validity. Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement and deepen the quantitative findings. These interviews explored students' experiences and preferences in EFL communication. Instructors played a minimal role during data collection to avoid introducing bias or influence. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and one-way within-subjects (repeated measures) ANOVA to assess the impact of interlocutor type and context on WTC. Qualitative data were analyzed deductively, with themes aligned to the survey constructs. An explanatory narrative synthesis presented the emerging themes. Students also participated in several authentic communication activities, such as small talk, self-introduction, photo descriptions, and job interviews to examine how these influenced their WTC.

TASK AND ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a four-month online course was developed comprising four modules aimed at enhancing students' WTC in English through task-based learning and assessment. Each module focused on a specific communication skill and integrated multimedia resources to support student engagement and learning.

MODULE 1 – SMALL TALK:

Students were introduced to the fundamentals of small talk through PowerPoint slides with voiceovers, online reading materials, and multimedia resources. Weekly Q&A sessions via MS Teams and an online discussion forum facilitated student interaction and teacher engagement over three weeks.

ASSESSMENT 1 – SMALL TALK:

Students were randomly paired to simulate a two-minute conversation at a virtual party. They applied small talk conventions and interactional competence, recorded the session via MS Teams, and completed self-assessment rubric prior to submission.

MODULE 2 – DESCRIBING PHOTOS:

Building on previous skills, students learned to describe images in detail. Supporting materials included instructional

videos, websites, and readings to help them recognize themes, express opinions, and relate images to personal experiences.

ASSESSMENT 2 – DESCRIBING A PHOTO:

Students created a PowerPoint presentation with a voiceover that analyzed a given image. They were required to articulate ideas, express personal reflections, and demonstrate coherent structure. A self-assessment rubric guided the evaluation process.

MODULES 3 & 4 – JOB INTERVIEW:

These modules focused on developing skills for effective job interviews. Instructional support mirrored previous modules, emphasizing theory and practical communication.

ASSESSMENT 3 – JOB INTERVIEW:

Students conducted a 4–5-minute interview simulation, alternating roles as interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees were evaluated on spontaneity, fluency, and conceptual understanding, while interviewers were allowed limited use of scripted questions. Students selected partners and submitted recordings along with a completed self-assessment rubric.

In summary, this course emphasized real-world language application. Each module incorporated authentic

communication tasks, digital resources, peer collaboration, and reflective self-assessment, which collectively aimed to increase students' WTC and communicative competence in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preprocessing steps, such as outlier removal, were applied to ensure the statistical validity of the observed empirical quantitative data. Additionally, the survey design ensured that all data was present, as it was intended to be fully completed before submission. The current data's normality has not been tested, as it is commonly assumed when sample sizes are 30 or more. The central limit theorem (CLT) indicates that the distribution of sample means approximates a normal distribution with larger sample sizes, regardless of the population's distribution (Kasiulevičius et al. Sainani, 2012; 2006; Zhang et al. 2022). Qualitative data was used to gain further insights into the research variables by analysing the emerging themes. The data was then subjected to statistical testing to assess its reliability. As shown in Table 1, all the constructs under investigation showed a Cronbach's alpha (α) greater than 0.70, demonstrating internal consistency of the data collection instrument, as confirmed by George and Mallery (2003) and Field (2009).

TABLE 1. Internal Consistency Reliabilities of the Scales Used in the Study

Variables	N	No of Items	Cronbach's α
WTC in English	145	20	0.92
SPCC in English	145	12	0.95
CA in English	145	12	0.90
Motivation to communicate in English	145	3	0.80
Attitude toward English learning situations	145	2	0.75
Integrativeness: Orientation and attitude	145	3	0.70
Instrumental orientation	145	2	0.93

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES AND WTC IN ENGLISH

This study explored the multifaceted aspects influencing students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English as a foreign language (EFL). To inquire about how students' preferred conversational topics in EFL relate to their WTC, and how various learning activities and online communication channels impact this connection, some aspects include the preferred conversational topics, the

impact of selected topics on EFL communication, preferred learning activities, the effect of these activities on willingness to communicate, preferred online communication channels, and the influence of these channels on students' EFL communication. The results have been presented in two broad categories, covering positive and alternative feedback to give an overall picture of the empirical results. The key results are shown in Table 2 and summarised in the following:

Regarding the preferred topics influencing EFL conversation, a total of 45.50% favoured small talk, 35.90% found job interviews interesting, 32.40% enjoyed

describing photos, and 28.30% were interested in self-introduction. 66.8% reported that the preferred topic substantially influenced their WTC in EFL. Similarly, the research question, “How do authentic learning topics and activities impact students’ WTC in EFL?” was directed to the interviewees and aligned with the former results. Students expressed higher motivation and enthusiasm when indulged in activities like small talk, introducing themselves, describing photos, and doing job interviews. For example, (student 2) declared that authentic learning activities, especially small talk, were helpful in creating an actual communication condition.

1. Other interviewed students stated that these tasks motivated them to communicate in English, eventually improving their vocabulary and sentence structure.
2. A total of 79.30% of students indicated that they were most comfortable in in-pair activities of their choice, emphasising confidence from familiar partnerships. In contrast, 22.80% in randomly distributed pair activities and 14.50% in live

discussions felt less at ease, underscoring the importance of peer selection and familiarity in EFL communication comfort. Correspondingly, the qualitative data corroborated the quantitative findings as the interviewees felt more comfortable working with known peers. In contrast, they felt less comfortable when being put in randomly distributed pair activities or when they conducted the live discussion task.

3. The learning activities explored in the courses at Sohar University demonstrated a high score (72.2%), underscoring their substantial impact on WTC in EFL.
4. WhatsApp (80%) and Microsoft Teams (48.3%) were the students’ preferred communication channels, and discussion channels (2%) were less preferred. The data shows that online communication channels significantly influence EFL communication willingness. The results of this study have shown the possible and preferred channels or types of communication that significantly impact WTC in EFL.

TABLE 2. Factors Influencing Communication Preferences on WTC in EFL

Theme	Topics	Percentage (%)
Preferred Topics for English Foreign Language Conversation	Small talk	45.50%
	Introducing yourself to others	28.30%
	Describing photos	32.40%
	Job Interviews	35.90%
Influence of Topics on WTC in EFL	very high	23.40%
	high	43.40%
	medium	29.00%
	small	04.20%
	very small	23.40%
Preferred Learning Activities for Comfortable EFL Communication	In pairs - of your choice	79.30%
	in Pairs - randomly distributed	22.80%
	in live discussion	14.50%
	with classmates outside the classroom	28.30%
Effect of Learning Activities on WTC in EFL	very high	22.90%
	high	49.30%
	medium	25.70%
	small	2.10%
	very small	0.00%

continue ...

... *cont.*

Preferred Online Communication Channels for EFL Students	MS Team	48.30%
	WhatsApp	80%
	Email	18.60%
	Telephone	11%
	Discussion forum	2.10%
Influence of Online Communication Channels on EFL Students' WTC	very high	21.50%
	high	41%
	medium	36.80%
	small	0.70%
	very small	0.00%

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF EFL STUDENTS' WTC ACROSS CONTEXT AND INTERLOCUTORS IN DESCENDING ORDER

The data measures students' WTC in EFL across different contexts and interlocutor types. Notably, they are most

willing to converse with servers (mean = 6.99), previous university teachers (mean = 6.54), and salespeople (mean = 6.49). Willingness gradually declines in less familiar situations, with the lowest mean score (2.81) when speaking publicly to strangers. On average, students' overall willingness to communicate is 5.02, with a moderate standard deviation of 2.65, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Student WTC in English across different contexts and interlocutor types in descending order

Situations (N=145)	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Talk with a restaurant staff (waiter/waitress)	0	10	6.99	2.45
Talk with your former university instructor	0	10	6.54	2.53
Talk with a salesperson in a store.	0	10	6.49	2.79
Talk with a shop clerk.	0	10	6.27	2.74
Talk with a nurse in the clinic.	0	10	6.22	2.68
Talk with a friend while standing in line.	0	10	6.00	3.07
Talk in a small group (about five people) of friends.	0	10	5.72	2.85
Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.	0	10	5.52	3.02
Talk with a librarian.	0	10	5.41	2.52
Talk in a large meeting (about ten people) of friends.	0	10	5.19	2.72
Talk in a small group (about five people) of acquaintances.	0	10	5.12	2.69
Talk with an acquaintance in a café.	0	10	5.07	2.69
Talk in a large meeting (about ten people) of acquaintances.	0	10	4.54	2.70
Speak to a group (about 30 people) of acquaintances in public.	0	10	4.23	2.81
Talk in a small group (about five people) of strangers.	0	10	3.94	2.40
Speak in public to a group (about 30 people) of friends.	0	10	3.86	2.62
Talk with a stranger on the bus.	0	10	3.60	2.48
Talk with a stranger while standing in line.	0	10	3.48	2.44
Talk in a large meeting (about ten people) of strangers.	0	10	3.39	2.39
Speak in public to a group (about 30 people) of strangers.	0	10	2.81	2.49
average			5.02	2.65

The communication settings (public, meeting, group and dyad) and the types of people students converse with (strangers, acquaintances, friends, and professionals) directly influenced the level of students' WTC in English (see Table 4). Thus, students demonstrated a high WTC in English when talking to their friends as opposed to conversing with acquaintances and strangers.

This is also revealed in the interviews when students expressed great comfort and WTC when talking to familiar peers but not when they were randomly put with unfamiliar peers. For instance, (student 4) revealed that "working with a colleague I have known before is more comfortable for me." On the other hand, the qualitative findings showed how students were willing to communicate when discussing familiar topics or topics they have practised about. The familiar topics made them talk confidently to their peers.

On the other hand, the majority of students struggled with unfamiliar topics because they were not prepared in terms of context and/or language.

To examine the impact of interlocutor type—types of people students engage with—on students' WTC in English, a one-way within-subjects (or repeated measures) ANOVA was performed in this study. The analysis revealed the significant impact of interlocutor type on the students' WTC in English: Wilks' Lambda = 0.34, $F(3, 142) = 90.61$, $p < .001$. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, allowing us to infer that the variance of the different data sets is not equal, $\chi^2(5) = 94.13$, $p < .001$. Given that the significance of Mauchly's test is attained, giving us the authority to trust the statistical output from SPSS.

TABLE 4. Impact of Interlocutor Type on L2 WTC

Interlocutor	N	Mean	SD
Professionals	145	6.28	2.20
Friends	145	5.46	2.89
Acquaintances	145	4.89	1.96
Strangers	145	3.45	2.06

Conversely, Table 5 revealed that students' WTC in English was highest when talking in small groups, while

it was lowest in a public setting. Approximately five people were involved in small group discussions compared to 30 in public communication.

TABLE 5. Impact of Context Type on L2 WTC

Context	N	Mean	SD
Dyad	145	4.89	2.11
Small group	145	4.93	2.22
Large meeting	145	4.37	2.15
In public	145	3.63	2.19

The context type had a significant impact on students' WTC in English according to the analysis conducted via a one-way within-subjects (or repeated measures) ANOVA: Wilks' Lambda = 0.59, $F(3, 142) = 32.77$, $p < .001$. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(5) = 43.47$, $p < .001$.

1. Impact of authentic topics: Students were highly motivated to communicate in English when involved in authentic circumstances like small talk, job interviews, describing photos, and self-introductions.
2. Role of learning activities: The different learning activities implemented in the course had varying impacts on students' WTC. Working in pairs, whether with a chosen partner or randomly

assigned by the teacher, emerged as an effective strategy for fostering communication. Students felt more comfortable when working with a known peer, allowing them to engage in open discussions and communicate in English. Yet, working with unfamiliar peers was less comforting to the majority of students. This activity urged students to interact with new people, increasing their capacity to hold discussions with a variety of people. Yet, the quantitative data did not align with the qualitative one as a significant percentage of students stated that they felt less comfortable during live conversations (14.50%) and pair activities assigned randomly (22.80%).

3. Influence of self-confidence: When students talked about familiar topics, they felt confident

and were more willing to engage in conversations. Conversely, when confronted with unfamiliar topics, they were less confident since they needed to acquire formal language to express their ideas about such topics. The key takeaway is that cultivating self-confidence through practice, feedback, and exposure to diverse language contexts can significantly boost students' willingness to communicate in English.

4. Positive learning experience: The findings revealed that students had positive learning experiences, which highly influenced their willingness to communicate when they acquired new vocabulary. Students expressed enthusiasm and motivation when they experienced personal growth and skill development through the learning activities. The opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in real-life scenarios, such as conducting small talk or participating in a job interview, provided a sense of achievement and readiness to communicate in English.

The other research questions were explored by analysing a complete set of data, as in Table 3 above, but only conclusive results were presented for convenience.

STUDENTS' SPCC IN EFL ACROSS DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND INTERLOCUTOR TYPES

The data analysed in this instance assesses students' self-perceived communication competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) across various contexts and interlocutor types. Notably, students feel most competent when speaking with friends (mean = 7.08), followed by acquaintances (mean = 6.23) and small groups of friends (mean = 5.68). Competence decreases as familiarity with interlocutors decreases, reaching the lowest in public speaking to strangers (mean = 3.57). On average, students rate their overall competence at 4.90 out of a possible 10, with moderate variability (std. deviation = 2.68).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the impact of interlocutor type on the students' SPCC in English. A significant impact of interlocutor type was evident: Wilks' Lambda = 0.68, $F(2,143) = 41.58$, $p < 0.001$. However, Mauchly's Test of Sphericity revealed a violation of the assumption of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 105.76$, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 6. Impact of Interlocutor Type on Students' SPCC

Interlocutor type	N	Mean	SD
Friends	145	5.11	2.08
Acquaintances	145	5.18	2.39
Strangers	145	4.05	2.40

As seen in Table 7, students perceived themselves as most competent when communicating with others in dyadic or small groups. However, they were least comfortable when addressing the public or large groups. In the qualitative findings, (student 2), for example, noted that in the small talk task, she felt closer to the person she was talking to, which motivated her to communicate with a stranger quickly she might meet for a short period of time.

However, the same students and interviewees were uncomfortable indulging in live discussions with big groups. The context type significantly influenced students' SPCC in English when a one-way within-subjects (or repeated measures) ANOVA analysis was conducted: Wilks' Lambda = 0.35, $F(3,142) = 41.58$, $p < 0.001$. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(5) = 102.10$, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 7. Impact of Context Type on Students' SPCC

Context	N	Mean	SD
Dyad	145	5.88	2.28
Small group	145	5.08	2.35
Large meeting	145	4.65	2.33
In public	145	4.00	2.37

The qualitative findings corroborate the quantitative data mentioned in this section. The interview explored how authentic topics and learning activities influenced students' perceived communication competence in EFL. The research question guiding this investigation is: "How do authentic topics and learning activities influence students' perceived communication competence and WTC in EFL?" The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Confidence and self-evaluation: A clear correlation exists between students' perceived communication competence and confidence level. Some students felt highly confident in their ability to communicate when expressing their thoughts about the addressed topics. Other students admitted to their incapability to communicate effectively due to their fear of making mistakes or their lack of knowledge of the topics discussed. Unlike the qualitative data, the quantitative data did not address the context or the topics but only focused on the interlocutor type.
2. Impact of practice and interaction: Students' perceived communication competence improved during peer-to-peer interaction. Students noted that engaging in learning activities with their peers, whether they chose them or were randomly chosen by their teacher, allowed them to develop their communication skills, pinpoint areas for improvement, and gain confidence. This finding enhances the qualitative analysis.
3. Topic-specific competence: Students' perceived communication competence was influenced by their familiarity or unfamiliarity with the topic or learning activity. Students felt competent when discussing topics they had previously practised extensively. However, students acknowledged lower confidence levels when faced with unfamiliar topics in some activities like the job interview. These findings did not appear in the quantitative analysis; they were solely derived from the qualitative data.
4. Learning and participation: Engaging in the learning process developed students' communication competence. Students recognised that participating in the course's assigned activities, discussions, and tests enhanced their communication skills and confidence. This finding did not corroborate with the quantitative data as the analysis did not show how indulging in authentic activities improved students' communication skills.

5. Collaboration with and learning from peers: Peer-to-peer learning and collaboration significantly impacted the development of students' perceived communication competence. Students reported that working with classmates of their choice created an encouraging setting for them to exchange experiences, get valuable feedback, and improve their English communication skills.

These findings highlight the importance of creating supportive learning environments that boost students' confidence, address familiar and unfamiliar topics, motivate active engagement, and promote collaboration among students. With a thorough understanding of these factors, EFL instructors may create practical learning activities that enhance students' communication competence.

STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION ANXIETY IN EFL ACROSS DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND INTERLOCUTOR TYPES

The data in this section is a set of descriptive statistics concerning students' communication anxiety in EFL across different contexts and interlocutor types. Based on a sample of 145 participants, the data reflects their levels of anxiety on a scale of 0 to 10, where higher values indicate more significant anxiety. Notably, students experience the highest levels of communication anxiety when speaking in public to a group of acquaintances (mean = 4.93) and in a large meeting with acquaintances (mean = 4.63). Anxiety levels are also notable when communicating with friends (mean = 4.57) and acquaintances (mean = 4.61). Interestingly, interactions with strangers in various contexts elicit moderate levels of anxiety. On average, students' communication anxiety is rated at 4.47, with a standard deviation of 2.95, implying a moderate degree of variability in their reported anxiety levels.

According to Table 8, the interlocutor types and social context types had variable impacts on students' anxiety levels when engaging in communication with others. Students were more anxious when communicating with acquaintances compared to strangers or friends. This did not align with the qualitative findings, as interviewees were less anxious communicating with their friends while feeling less comfortable and highly anxious when talking to unfamiliar peers.

A one-way within-subjects (or repeated measures) ANOVA was used to evaluate the impact of interlocutor

type on the students' anxiety level when communicating in English. The results revealed a notable implications: Wilks' Lambda = 0.93, $F(2,143) = 5.01$, $p = 0.008$.

Mauchly's Test of Sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 151.84$, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 8. Impact of Interlocutor Type on Students' Communication Anxiety

Interlocutor type	N	Mean	SD
Friends	145	4.22	2.38
Acquaintances	145	4.64	2.43
Strangers	145	4.33	2.46

Based on the quantitative analysis, the students experienced a high level of anxiety when speaking in front of a large group. At the same time, they were less anxious about engaging in small groups or dyad conversations (see Table 10). However, the qualitative analysis did not support this finding. According to a one-way within-subjects (or

repeated measures) ANOVA analysis, the context type did not affect the learners' communication anxiety in English: Wilks' Lambda = 0.96, $F(2,143) = 2.06$, $p = 1.09$. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity showed that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated, $\chi^2(5) = 175.02$, $p < .001$.

TABLE 9. Impact of Context Type on Students' Communication Anxiety

Context	N	Mean	SD
Dyad	145	4.44	2.55
Small group	145	4.29	2.28
Large meeting	145	4.51	2.36
In public	145	4.63	2.55

According to the qualitative analysis, the research question that addressed the factors influencing communication apprehension in EFL students was "What are the primary factors contributing to communication apprehension or anxiety among students in EFL settings, and how do these factors collectively affect their willingness to communicate effectively in English?". The findings are presented as follows:

1. Lack of Knowledge or Confidence in the Topic: Not having sufficient knowledge about the discussed topics affected students' confidence. Their anxiety and apprehension increased in formal or unfamiliar activities like job interviews as they feared their ideas were not delivered clearly. This finding was not conveyed in the quantitative data as it only addressed the social context (friends, acquaintances, strangers-table 9) and the context type (dyad, group, public, meeting -table 10).
2. Fear of Making Mistakes: Experiencing foreign language anxiety stems from students' fear of making mistakes while communicating in English, especially when interacting with native English speakers or individuals fluent in English. Students were concerned about mispronouncing

words or being judged or misunderstood by others. This finding aligned with the quantitative data.

3. Limited Vocabulary or Language Skills: Some students felt anxious because they lacked the vocabulary to express their ideas confidently. Their limited language proficiency was a contributing factor to their communication anxiety.
4. Lack of Familiarity with Conversation Partners: Students experienced variable levels of comfort based on their familiarity with the conversation partner. They felt less anxious working with familiar partners and more apprehensive conversing with unfamiliar peers as they knew nothing about their language proficiency or communication skills. Interestingly, this contradicted the quantitative findings, which revealed that students were less anxious communicating with strangers and friends while feeling more nervous talking to acquaintances.
5. Performance Pressure: Students' anxiety levels increased when they were concerned about speaking flawless English and communicating effectively in formal settings like job interviews. This finding corresponded with the quantitative data within such settings.

6. **Personal Shyness or Introversion:** Shy or introverted students noted that they experienced communication apprehension, especially when conversing with strangers. This finding did not align with the quantitative data, as students experience a high level of anxiety conversing with acquaintances compared to strangers or friends.

These factors highlight the complex interplay between language proficiency, self-perception, and social dynamics that can impact students' willingness to communicate in English as a foreign language.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the significance and impact of authentic learning activities on Omani university female students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English, using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The combination of quantitative data from 145 students and qualitative insights from nine in-depth interviews allowed for robust triangulation of findings, providing a nuanced understanding of the key factors influencing WTC, including topic familiarity, peer dynamics, communication anxiety, and self-perceived communication competence (SPCC).

Quantitative results indicated that 66.8% of students reported a strong influence of preferred topics—such as small talk (45.5%) and job interviews (35.9%)—on their willingness to communicate. This trend was echoed in interviews, where students described greater enthusiasm and motivation when engaging in tasks grounded in familiar, real-life contexts. For example, Student 2 shared that small talk tasks allowed her to apply English in natural settings, such as at a restaurant or mall, boosting her confidence. She stated the following:

Small talk is the most significant because I feel close to the person when I talk to her. I feel I can communicate with foreigners when I meet them in a place for a short period of time. I can communicate easily with them. Most of the time, we meet people who do not speak Arabic, especially in a restaurant or the mall, for example. This meeting is for a short period of time, and I can communicate with them easily.

This convergence of survey and interview data affirms that topic familiarity is a key driver of student motivation and communicative willingness in EFL. According to Dörnyei (2005), some EFL students demonstrate communication skills but frequently steer clear of interpersonal interactions. This is opposite to the findings in this study, as small talk was the most favourable topic

among the interviewees simply because, as illustrated by one of them, “we talked about simple stuff.” Among other students, this student regarded small talk as pertinent and helpful for actual communication circumstances. Concerning the other authentic task-based learning activities, students noted that the tasks were interesting and boosted their desire to communicate in English. For instance, student 3 said, “Describing pictures and job interviews provided me with the capability to choose my words, organise my sentences, and gain self-confidence.”

Students reported the highest SPCC scores when communicating with friends ($M = 5.11$) and in dyadic contexts ($M = 5.88$). Interview data reinforced this, with students noting that authentic activities like introductions and small talk gave them a sense of mastery. Student 6 reported that preparing for a job interview improved her self-presentation skills and reduced her hesitation. Student 6 illustrated that “job interview and introducing yourself” because these two places affected the development of my English language and how I introduced myself to others without fear or hesitation. They also benefit me in the future when doing a job interview and being prepared to respond to them with a decent and useful answer”. This consistency across data types suggests that authentic, well-scaffolded tasks contribute to skill development and self-efficacy in communication. Moreover, these various authentic task-based learning activities helped motivate students and enhance their readiness to communicate in English. Dörnyei (2005) emphasises that intermediary elements exist between having the communicative ability and using it.

Thus, the researchers inquired about how learning activities, like working with known/unknown peer(s) and in classroom discussions through live sessions, influenced their WTC in English. This question aims to measure students' readiness to communicate in English with others, whether the person is familiar or unfamiliar to them. This activity has proven to be a successful method for enhancing communication. Working with a familiar peer made students feel more comfortable pursuing a conversation, allowing them to have open talks and improve their English communication abilities. For instance, student 1 admitted that when she chose a familiar classmate to work with, she “knew how to deal with her. Based on this background, we would help each other. If I had not known the answer to a question, she would have helped me and vice versa.” Student 4 agreed with student number 1, stating that “working with a colleague I have known before is more comfortable for me.”

This is also aligned to 79.3% of students who reported that they preferred working in pairs of their own choice, indicating that comfort with familiar peers contributed to higher WTC. This was reinforced by qualitative findings;

students consistently expressed a sense of ease when paired with classmates they already knew. Student 1, for instance, explained that she could rely on a familiar peer to support her during a conversation, facilitating mutual learning and boosting confidence. This alignment across datasets highlights the critical role of psychological safety and peer trust in promoting communicative risk-taking. The results of this study corroborate the findings of a study done in Oman by Al Amrani (2019), who posits that communication anxiety was typically low in peer-to-peer interactions but increased while speaking to strangers. English was utilised more frequently in conversations with close friends and smaller groups of people. The results from this study, particularly with insights from students 5, 7, 8, and 9 and others, showed that working with unfamiliar peers made it harder for pupils to communicate with strangers, which aligns with Al Amrani's conclusions. However, this study discovered that pupils who collaborated with strangers helped to break the ice. Thanks to this task, they are now more self-assured and capable of interacting with a range of people. Student 4 emphasised the significance of having the experience of conversing with an unfamiliar peer:

When the professor randomly assigned us to different groups, I knew no simple information about my partner. This helped me to apply the small talk, introduce myself properly, and all the strategies I learned about these topics. When you talk to someone you know, you will not be able to succeed in introducing yourself.

Therefore, such learning activities attempt to boost students' self-confidence and give them a positive learning experience. Quantitative data which revealed higher anxiety in formal settings or with unfamiliar interlocutors, with the highest anxiety scores observed during public interactions ($M = 4.63$). Although survey data suggested students were more anxious with acquaintances than strangers, interviewees provided a more nuanced view: anxiety was often context-dependent and influenced by self-confidence and topic familiarity. For instance, students described heightened anxiety when lacking vocabulary or fearing mistakes, particularly in formal tasks like job interviews. These divergent but complementary findings demonstrate the added value of qualitative data in explaining the emotional and cognitive dimensions behind statistical patterns.

The study emphasises the importance of creating learning problems that mimic L2 use in the real world. While MacGrath (2002) highlights their function in training students to engage in authentic communication outside of the classroom, Nunan (2001) underlines that authentic assignments imitate real-world behaviours in the classroom. With the proper assistance and scaffolding, using such tasks is consistent with student-centred and problem-based learning approaches, effective teaching strategies for the

twenty-first century (Herrington et al. 2003). In this study, the interviewers asked the students to rate and describe their WTC, communication apprehension, and perceived communication competence while learning activities that mimic real-life experiences. Students responded differently to this question. As they all agreed on their WTC in English in authentic learning settings, some factors weakened their communication habit and sometimes made them anxious to pursue a conversation. The lack of specific knowledge about the topic under discussion weakened students' confidence to interact in a conversation. Students' concerns about using wrong terminologies, committing grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing some words, or lacking proper word diction, especially among native speakers of English, increased the level of communication apprehension. The students' experience in this sense was similar to those in Kurniawan, Fadilah, and Triastutie (2018). The six Indonesian students were involved in authentic tasks: Dictogloss, Jigsaw-Game, and problem-solving. The researchers found that the students' low WTC was caused by not understanding the assignment, while their high WTC was due to an engaging communicative task, such as problem-solving. On the other hand, this current study linked anxiety to the need to communicate effectively in English, especially in formal settings like job interviews. Students were under pressure to speak in excellent or nearly perfect English, which increased their anxiety about communicating clearly.

Thus, the impact of authentic task-based learning and assessment on students' WTC in English can be summarised as follows:

1. **Motivation and Engagement:** Students demonstrated a high level of motivation and developed their language skills when they were engaged in authentic learning activities like small talk, introducing themselves, describing photos, and job interviews.
2. **Vocabulary and Dialogue Techniques:** Students reported that engaging in authentic learning activities helped them acquire new vocabulary and practice different communication skills, which helped them communicate more effectively and confidently in English.
3. **Confidence Building:** Authentic learning activities enhanced students' communication skills. Consistent practice and feedback positively impacted their confidence and allowed them to engage in further conversations.
4. **Relevance to Real-Life Situations:** Students found authentic learning activities, especially job interviews and small talk, similar to real-life situations. Additionally, they realised that these

activities could help them build their personal and professional lives. Thus, they were motivated to engage fully in them and improve their WTC in English.

5. Skill Development and Self-Expression: Task-based learning activities significantly enhanced students' language skills, allowed them to express their ideas effectively, and allowed them to experience personal growth.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of authentic task-based learning on Omani female university students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study explored how authentic learning tasks such as small talk, self-introduction, photo descriptions, and job interviews affect students' motivation, confidence, and communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

The findings revealed that students' WTC is influenced by several interrelated factors: familiarity with topics, confidence in language use, peer dynamics, and anxiety about making mistakes. Students showed greater willingness and competence when working with familiar peers and when discussing well-practiced topics. Conversely, communication anxiety increased in unfamiliar situations or when paired with unknown peers, especially in formal contexts like job interviews. This anxiety was linked to limited vocabulary, fear of errors, and low self-confidence.

The study's findings have important pedagogical implications for curriculum design and instructional strategies in EFL education. EFL instructors should prioritize authenticity, provide opportunities for structured peer interaction, and address language anxiety through positive reinforcement and familiar contexts. These insights underscore the importance of fostering supportive learning environments where students feel safe to take communicative risks. Incorporating authentic, real-world tasks into language instruction can significantly enhance learners' confidence, vocabulary, and practical communication skills. When students are allowed to collaborate with peers of their choice and practice relevant, meaningful content, their WTC in English improves substantially. By doing so, educators can better prepare students for academic, professional, and social communication in English.

Moreover, the triangulated findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands of this study underscore the pedagogical value of designing EFL instruction around

authentic, familiar, and socially supportive learning contexts. When students are given opportunities to engage in realistic communication tasks—such as job interviews, photo descriptions, and small talk—they demonstrate higher motivation, greater confidence, and improved perceived competence. Allowing students to choose their communication partners enhances psychological comfort and encourages active participation, while integrating familiar digital platforms such as WhatsApp and MS Teams extends the learning environment in accessible, low-anxiety ways. These strategies collectively foster a more inclusive and confidence-building atmosphere, where learners are more willing to take communicative risks and apply language skills meaningfully. Therefore, EFL educators are encouraged to adopt a learner-centered approach that incorporates task authenticity, peer support, and digital flexibility to improve students' willingness to communicate and overall language development. Future research should explore long-term impacts of authentic learning on linguistic competence and investigate how these strategies can be scaled across diverse educational settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors would like to thank Sohar University for the publication funding.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicting interest.

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