

Unraveling Advanced EFL Learners' L2 Willingness to Communicate in Extramural Digital Settings

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Considering the importance of willingness to communicate (WTC) as a critical component of effective pedagogy (MacIntyre et al., 1998), the present qualitative study investigated the affordances extramural digital settings (EDSs), as newly emerged popular environments, offer to advanced EFL learners. To this aim, we asked a purposeful sample of 8 Iranian undergraduate English students of both genders (4 males, 4 females), with an age range of 19 to 21, to partake in the study. Results of the analysis of semi-structured interviews suggested that despite providing advanced EFL learners with unique opportunities for the use of the target language, different aspects of EDSs might have diverse effects on each individual's L2 WTC. More specifically, L2 WTC was subject to considerable fluctuations because of the simultaneous and aggregate effect of different factors and the fluctuations exhibited substantial variation from learner to learner, moment to moment and in accordance with different purposes. The factors identified were classified into three major categories: Affective (attitude and self-confidence), contextual (interlocutor, social disapproval and cultural influences), and linguistic (language proficiency) variables. The findings of the study may offer insights into materials development by suggesting the integration of some activities and tasks which focus on the use of various social media platforms to the course materials. Moreover, English instructors need to acquire information on which social media platforms are more appropriate and could create an interesting and collaborative environment for students to communicate in the target language. For instance, they could form groups on social media to engage students in regular authentic interaction in L2 outside of the classroom context.

Keywords: advanced EFL learners, affordances, extramural digital settings (EDSs), willingness to communicate (WTC)

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1 Introduction

One of the earliest definitions offered for L2 WTC is “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Given the central position that communication skill has taken up in the process of L2 (second/foreign language) learning and teaching, WTC is also assumed to play a pivotal role in this process (Kang, 2005). Much scholarly work has focused on L2 WTC from various perspectives such as trait-like (Yashima, 2002), situated perspective (Yashima et al., 2018), dynamic and situated perspective (psychological and situational variables; Kang, 2005), and socio-cognitive perspective (integrated individual, linguistic and environmental factors; Cao, 2013). While previous research has mainly centered upon L2 WTC in actual classroom environments (Alimorad & Farahmand, 2021; Fallah, 2014; Khajavy et al., 2014; Pawlak et al., 2015; Peng & Woodrow, 2010), L2 WTC researchers have more recently devoted more serious attention to online environments due to their widespread popularity amongst people around the globe (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Lee, 2019; Lee & Drajadi, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019; Reinders & Wattana, 2014).

Tellingly, the importance of online environments could by no means be overlooked. To clarify the point, in 1990, Dörnyei defined EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts as situations where one or two languages are taught officially at school, but they do not have the opportunity to be used in that context. However, recently, such a rigid distinction between a second and a foreign language context seems to be blurred because of the opportunities technology has created for meaningful use of the target language even in the absence of its native speakers (Lee & Lee, 2019). Therefore, employing technology in L2 learning and teaching has led to devoting special attention to digital settings particularly in EFL contexts (Lee & Drajadi, 2019). In this vein, current technological advancements have introduced new resources which assist L2 students and instructors by opening up various possibilities for learning and teaching languages (Sykes, 2018). An obvious example is the Internet which has offered easy access to infinite amounts of information (Socket & Toffoli, 2012). To illustrate, the Internet has removed restrictions faced in regular classrooms and has created a new avenue for learning through online classes (Reinders & Wattana, 2014). Further, online games have enormous potential for assisting L2 learners by replacing traditional linear courses with interactive games that engage students and stimulate learning (Sykes, 2018).

Given such technological developments, it seems vital to examine the possibility of traditional formal teaching being complemented using novel informal learning resources. While the former refers to learning in a designed course offered in classrooms, institutes or universities and directed by a formal curriculum where the learning goals and educational outcomes are identified (Eaton, 2010), the latter is known as unofficial and unscheduled learning where

there are neither classes, nor evaluations, and in which knowledge acquisition never completes while learners are in control of their own learning (Cross, 2006). According to Sockett and Toffoli (2012), in such learning which is constant and long-period interaction with the L2 sources, the students' role changes to real English users. Various terms such as informal digital learning of English (IDLE, Lee, 2017), online informal learning of English (Sockett, 2014), out-of-class English learning (Lai et al., 2015), extramural English (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016), and extramural digital (ED, Lee, 2019) contexts have been utilized to denote the novel virtual learning environments.

In fact, learning in digital environments has the potential to improve EFL learners' English proficiency and create positive changes in their WTC (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Kissau et al., 2010; Lee, 2019; Lee & Dressman, 2017; Reinders & Wattana, 2014). Nevertheless, prior research suggests that despite such enormous potential and the growing interest in and widespread use of social media around the globe, little is known about the factors that contribute to EFL learners' L2 WTC in EDSs (Lee, 2019). That being so, bridging this gap served as the main impetus for conducting the present study.

2 Literature Review

Previous research suggests that using computer-based activities in EFL contexts could help learners develop speaking capability and have a constructive effect on their WTC (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017). Given this new perspective, a surging number of studies attempted to address issues related to the potential of improving learners' WTC utilizing the affordances offered by EDSs. Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006), for instance, employed a counterbalanced research design to examine the use of online chat in doing classroom tasks compared to face-to-face settings in similar tasks between nine small groups of Japanese university students. The study revealed that online chat provided an enjoyable atmosphere for students making them more willing to communicate in the virtual environment. Results also showed the advantages of chatting in increasing students' motivation and decreasing their anxiety and reticence to communicate in the target language.

In another study, Kissau et al. (2010) set up a mixed methods study to examine the effects of participating in online courses on students' L2 WTC. In this study, six students participated in an online intermediate- to advanced-level French course at a public university in the United States. The same questionnaire was administered before and after the course to measure the students' perceived competence and anxiety in L2 communication. In addition, they were given online readings and answered some related questions via online postings. They also answered the comments made by their classmates

in each of the readings for participating in the discussion. After conducting an interview at the end of the course, the researchers found that online courses alleviated students' anxiety while increasing their confidence and WTC.

Focusing on the effects of participating in digital games on EFL learners' WTC in English, Reinders and Wattana (2014) examined thirty Thai students attending a 15-week university language course aimed at developing different language skills as well as practical English communication. Results suggested that students, while not being worried about making mistakes, felt more comfortable when playing games. Further, playing the game decreased their anxiety and increased their risk-taking and WTC in the target language.

In Turkey, Buckingham and Alpaslan (2017) carried out a quasi-experimental study at a primary school to examine the potential influence of the provision of out-of-class speaking practice on young learners' speaking proficiency grades and their WTC. To this aim, they studied two intact classes of Grade 3 Turkish learners. The experimental group was provided with recorded communicative exercises as asynchronous speaking practice homework while the teacher served as the children's interlocutor. The control group, on the other hand, received traditional paper-based exercises. Both groups, however, received the same content of materials which were based on the class syllabus. Then, after a four-month period, the speaking test scores of the two groups were compared. Results suggested that the use of the interactive recordings led to a significant improvement in the participants' oral performance scores and had a positive impact on their L2 WTC. Further, the students who had initially got lower scores enjoyed more successful results at the end of the experiment. ANOVA results also showed that the experimental group improved in their ability to respond confidently having fewer pauses and hesitations, even though their responses were of similar lengths before and after the treatment.

Lee and Dressman (2017), too, conducted a study among 94 Korean university students to examine WTC among EFL learners in informal learning outside the classroom when learners participated in different out-of-class activities. They found the positive effect of digital activities in general on L2 WTC. They also showed that engaging in different types of form-focused activities (e.g., focusing on linguistic elements like practicing grammar instructions on Google or watching pronunciation on YouTube) or meaning-focused activities (e.g., real digital environments like reading news or chatting online) help learners acquire high proficiency in speaking English and grasp more opportunity to communicate.

More recently, in the same context of Korea, Lee (2019) conducted a qualitative study on 98 university students to identify the factors that promoted or hindered students' L2 WTC in EDSs. As put by Lee, Korea's educational system emphasizes exams and tests, which might have directed teachers to instruct the knowledge around the exams making students try to achieve good grades. Accordingly, such an approach decreased their communicative skills

both in the class environment and in online contexts. However, familiarity with the interlocutors or groups via social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and Line) led to less anxiety and provided a more relaxed environment to communicate as well as more WTC. Moreover, from an individual perspective, L2 self-confidence and anxiety were the significant predictors of L2 WTC in EDSs.

In the above-mentioned study, informed by Benson's (2011) study, Lee (2019) classified L2 learning in digital settings into two groups; namely, extracurricular digital contexts and ED contexts. The former refers to students' engaging in digital activities outside regular classrooms while their teachers evaluate them (e.g., watching relevant YouTube videos as their homework). The latter, on the other hand, refers to situations where students are independent of regular classrooms and engage in learning not assessed by a teacher with the help of online resources (e.g., the Internet, YouTube, etc.). Building upon MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) definition of WTC, Lee (2019, p. 5) operationally defined L2 WTC in the EDSs as "a readiness to enter into the oral and written discourse in the extramural digital context at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2". Pointing out that previous studies have primarily focused upon L2 WTC in regular classrooms and extracurricular digital settings, he attempted to highlight the clear need for research on learners' L2 WTC in EDSs. Therefore, in response to Lee's (2019) call for more studies in other countries with diverse socio-political and cultural backgrounds and Chik's (2013, p. 835) call for "expanding CALL beyond formal learning settings", the current study set out to uncover the affordances EDSs offer to advanced Iranian EFL learners which likely promote their L2 WTC. Hence, it strives to seek answers to the following research question,

What affordances do EDSs offer to advanced Iranian EFL learners which contribute to their willingness to use English in such contexts?

3 Method

3.1 Context and participants

In Iran, senior high school students are required to sit a standardized university entrance exam to compete with other qualified candidates for entering the university. In this regard, those who intend to pursue English-related majors such as English Language and Literature (ELL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) have to answer an extra set of English questions which are more difficult compared to the general English questions all other candidates are supposed to answer. Although English pedagogy at Iranian high schools has recently witnessed considerable modifications in terms of the textbooks taught, language teaching methods implemented, and the roles of

teachers and students, the university entrance exam is still heavily focused upon measuring grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary with speaking and listening skills being completely absent from the test (Iranmehr & Davari, 2017). Therefore, having very recently graduated from high school, freshman university students have undergone such a shared experience before getting into university. In such an educational context, 8 B.A. freshman students of ELL (N=3) and TEFL (N=5) who had already experienced such a recruitment policy constituted the participants of the study. They were 4 males and 4 females and their age ranged from 19 to 21. All participants were Iranian and their native language was Persian. They were selected based on a purposeful sampling procedure from amongst the advanced level students who displayed a strong tendency to participate in classroom activities using English; that is, they were the most active students in their classes as perceived by their teachers. To keep the identities of the participants confidential, all names reported throughout this paper are pseudonyms. Detailed information about the participants is presented below.

Mina

Mina was 20 years old and had started learning English before going to school. Her family encouraged her to learn English and sent her to an English class. When she was nine, she went to New Zealand with her family for five years and learned English in a native environment.

Negar

Negar was 19 years old and had started learning English when she was five. She had already passed four different course books (Top notch, Headway, Interchange, and Four Corners) at English institutes completely. At the age of 17, she had attended IELTS classes and participated in a mock online exam and received a band score of 8. She felt comfortable and was able to communicate well with native speakers and could easily communicate her meaning.

Ali

Ali was 21 years old and had started learning English when he was seven just for one year and then, he had stopped learning English. His family had sent him to an English class again when he was in the fifth grade. At first, he hated English but gradually became more interested in learning it. He continued studying it until secondary school; then, he decided to study on his own because he liked self-directed learning. He was good at grammar and he had learned grammar rules through the movies which he had watched. He liked to

watch movies and listened to audiobooks frequently. His listening skill was good which naturally influenced his speaking skill.

Armin

Armin was 20 years old and had started learning English from the age of twelve. His family had sent him to an English class because his brother studied English too and when he was a high school student, he quit the English class because he thought he did not learn anything anymore. He was good at English and could express himself. His scores were good at university and he thought he did not need to study much.

Dante

Dante was 21 years old and had started learning English when he was in the fifth grade for seven years. He had quit it when he was at a high level. Then, he started learning French. He used to watch movies, play games, listen to English music; then, he started to chat with other English speakers on social media. He wrote poems and stories in English. He was fluent in English with good pronunciation and intonation which helped him to pursue a teaching career.

Robert

Robert was 19 years old and had started learning English when he was in the 7th grade. When he saw his friends went to English classes, he was encouraged to study English to be able to watch and understand English cartoons. He was good at English and could express his meaning. He was used to listening to English music, and his listening was good.

Haniyeh

Haniyeh was 19 years old and had started learning English when she was in the 8th grade because her English was very weak at school and she had to go to class; then, she got interested in learning it and continued studying English to the end of her high school. At the time of the study, she was satisfied with the knowledge that she had, but she wanted to be much better and she attempted to expand her vocabulary knowledge in different fields and listening at a professional level. Her general English was very good but she wanted something more and she thought it was not enough for her. Given that she wanted to be perfect, she had to practice more.

Kimia

Kimia was 20 years old and had started learning English when she was nine. It was not her own decision to learn English though. Her family immigrated to the U.A.E and she had to learn English for communication and she had English at school every day. Gradually, she got interested in learning English and continued studying it. Her general English was very good but for academic purposes, she believed she needed to study more.

3.2 Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the necessary data (See the appendix). The researchers developed the interview questions based on the available literature on L2 WTC in EDSs (Lee, 2019; Subtirelu, 2014). The questions were open-ended in order not to impose any predetermined idea on the interviewees so that they could be able to express their ideas freely. Overall, there were 15 questions: the first question asked them to choose a pseudonym; some of the questions sought the participants' demographic information; some were general questions soliciting their tendency to use EDSs; and some probe into their preference (or lack thereof) for the use of English in EDSs as well as the reasons behind that. The interviewees were offered the option to be interviewed in either English or Persian. Persian data were then translated into English by the researchers. Each student was interviewed once and the lengths of the interviews were between 15 to 45 minutes depending on the amount of information each interviewee provided. This variation in the length of the interviews could be attributed to their tendency to use technology as well as their perceptions of the reasons why they were (un)willing to use English in EDSs in that those who used technology more often had more ideas to talk about.

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The data were collected during summer, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not possible and therefore, all the interviews were carried out using the mobile phone and the participants' voices were recorded after obtaining their consent. Tellingly, this could be considered an advantage though in that telephone interviews enjoy less interviewer bias while they can be completed faster (Ary et al., 2019). After the interviews, the researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim and translated the Persian ones into English for the purpose of data analysis. Then, the participants' responses to the interview questions were analyzed thematically. That is, common and recurrent themes referring to the factors contributing to L2 WTC in EDSs were inductively identified and extracted. To ensure the credibility of the analyses, member checks were done; that is, some of the data or the translations along

with their interpretations were randomly given to some of the participants and they were asked to check their accuracy and conciseness. Also, both researchers independently analyzed and compared segments of the data. Any possible disagreements or misunderstandings were resolved through discussion.

4 Results

The participants' answers to the interview questions were analyzed and categorized into affective (attitude, and self-confidence), contextual (interlocutor, cultural influences and social disapproval), and linguistic (language proficiency) variables as elaborated in the following sections.

4.1 Affective variables

Based on the interviewees' responses, affective variables constituted two sub-categories including attitude and self-confidence.

4.1.1 Attitude

Some interviewees acknowledged they spent much time on social networking sites like Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram and YouTube in order to grasp every available opportunity for using the target language. As Negar mentioned,

I believe that if someone is interested in learning English, they never stop learning and always pursue learning English. I always listen to English music and watch short English clips through Instagram. In fact, I involve myself in English activities which I believe may influence my accent, pronunciation and improve my speaking skill. I always watch fun clips and follow European fun pages on Instagram. All my activities on social media are related to English and I am following the English pages.

Armin also mentioned,

I joined a movie and series channel on telegram and helped them to translate the movies. In fact, I would translate subtitles for movies from English into Persian or I would translate the movie actors' news and put it in the channel. It helped me to practice English in an interesting way.

Ali explained his experience in this way,

I think the best platform for learning English is YouTube. I use YouTube for educational contents. It is more effective for language learning because I can get information through uploading and viewing short videos and it is beneficial for improving my knowledge. It has a broad variety of subjects. For example, I had to present a lecture about a book from Schopenhauer. Before reading the book, I decided to know about the writer on YouTube. I watched a 12-minute video which gave me key information; then, I started reading the book and it was so effective in understanding the book.

Mina noted,

I utilize YouTube and Instagram and on average spend one hour on them during university time and three hours per day during summer holidays. Before I was accepted to university, I used YouTube for fun and entertainment but after I got accepted at this university, I use YouTube and pay more attention to accent, expressions and how lecturers use the language. I watch mostly documentaries and educational videos and series on YouTube.

Similar to what his friends said, Dante commented, “I just use Instagram for watching videos and communicating with others in English. I post comments and I’d like to read others’ comments under the videos”. He also mentioned,

I use Reddit more frequently which is one of the most visited websites in the U.S. although it is not popular in our country. Reddit has a variety of topics which are called Subreddits; for example, when I have a question about singing, I go to singing Subreddit and ask my question, there are a lot of people who answer my question from professionals on the subject to amateurs. I use it for informative and entertainment purposes. It helped me to improve my knowledge in different subjects.

Considering that they voluntarily participated in a number of L2-related activities in EDSs, it could be argued that they have been trying to actively seek opportunities to communicate in English. That is why they intentionally chose and engaged in such activities in order to extend the time allocated to the use of the target language. According to what they said, it could be inferred that they showed a strong tendency towards learning and practicing English in that they had consciously adopted a positive attitude to the use of English in EDSs. Lack of enough opportunities to communicate in English in their EFL context might be a reasonable justification for such endeavor.

4.1.2 Self-confidence

Two of the participants had experienced living abroad, which had resulted in an abundance of authentic English communication during that specific phase of their learning process and this, in turn, had led to their high levels of self-confidence while using English. In this regard, Mina mentioned, "I can express my emotions and thoughts in English better than in my native language and overall, I feel more comfortable using English than Persian." Kimia also commented, "when I was nine, I had to learn English for communication in that country and we had English in our school every day. Now, I am more willing to communicate in English." She also mentioned, "I am more confident communicating in L2 on social media (via chat or voice message) rather than face-to-face conversation."

Although the rest of the participants had never experienced living in English speaking countries, they too exhibited high levels of self-confidence during interactions in English. In fact, they admitted that connecting to other English speakers and exchanging views on different topics through social media had boosted their self-confidence. In this vein, despite living in an EFL context throughout their entire life, the rest of the participants also concurred with their peers regarding their high self-confidence in using L2 rather than L1. As expected, those with higher self-confidence were more willing to initiate L2 communication in EDSs. Ali, who always communicated in L2 unless the interlocutor did not know English, noted,

On social media, I prefer to chat in English with my classmates even when my classmates use Persian. I also speak English with my roommates in the dormitory and I am very comfortable while speaking English. When we are at the dormitory kitchen, others think that we are foreign students and we are asked if we come from Lebanon!

He also stated that he was ready to speak English at any time and could comfortably express himself in English. He preferred to practice English and gain the benefit of every opportunity to increase his chances of exposure to the target language. Discord, as an example of a platform designed for creating communities and virtual hangouts on social media, creates an exciting opportunity for people around the world to exchange messages. Dante who served as an English teacher and had experienced plenty of interactions with different people via social media commented,

Before it [Discord] was filtered [it is worth mentioning that Discord is no longer filtered in Iran], I used it. The interesting point was that twenty people talked to each other and messages were exchanged from different nations simultaneously. It gave me a good feeling that people from different parts of the world can communicate with a common

language. My English communication skill significantly improved and chatting helped me to feel confident.

He added,

I prefer to speak English which is easier for me than speaking Persian because I can express myself perfectly. If I could, I would not speak Persian. I chat with other English speakers on Reddit and Instagram. Sometimes explaining some subjects is too easy for me in English. For example, I am interested in the comedy genre, especially dark humor which in Persian I cannot express and ask my questions. Therefore, I would like to communicate with other English speakers and it is informative as well as entertaining.

4.2 Contextual variables

In the following part, themes related to the context are introduced and explained; that is, interlocutor, cultural influences, and social disapproval.

4.2.1 Interlocutor

The interviewees also referred to interlocutor familiarity as a factor contributing to their tendency to communicate in English. As Mina pointed out, “My friends and classmates know English and it is much easier and flexible for me to chat on social media in English”. Also, Negar echoed,

As I have studied English since childhood, I have lots of friends (native friends or my friends in English classes) who know English and it is a positive point for me. For example, on social networks like Instagram, I write my comment about a photo or video on my friends' pages and they respond to my comment; in this way, a conversation starts. I always chat in English with my classmates who used to be at the same English language institutes. When I start a conversation in English, they automatically use English in my response.

Ali also said, “I prefer to chat in English on WhatsApp with my classmates” In a similar vein, Armin stated,

On Telegram, I always chat in English with one of my friends who is one year younger than me. He is going to study English at university and take the entrance exam. I feel comfortable talking to him in English. We chat on Telegram and I think it is a good feeling that I can communicate with someone who understands me in a foreign language.

He added,

I do not like to use English when I have to use it in a simple way and when I cannot use idioms and phrases because I think the phrases will not be understood. But with fluent English speakers or my classmates, I prefer to use English because I am sure that they understand me easily.

As pointed out by Armin, in addition to interlocutor familiarity, their level of English proficiency proved decisive leading to his preference for communicating with those in a similar or higher level of English proficiency. Likewise, some of the interviewees pointed to their strong tendency towards communicating with native speakers or professional English teachers on social media. Haniyeh, for instance, justified her preference in this way, "I am sure that they speak correctly and I can improve my language skills". Not surprisingly, she considered native speakers as yardsticks against which standard and perfect English could be measured and evaluated.

Kimia talked about her feeling in the presence of native interlocutors on social media versus face-to-face interaction,

When I want to communicate with native speakers who are older than me, I feel uncomfortable and uneasy. I prefer to communicate with them on social media, it is much easier for me. Overall, communication on social media is much more comfortable.

Seemingly, the physical presence of native speakers makes Kimia feel inhibited and therefore, less willing to communicate. From her standpoint, social platforms could remove such affective barriers making the communication event less embarrassing and more encouraging for her. Contrary to what Kimia had experienced, Dante recounted a different story,

Recently, I understand when I chat with American native speakers, especially with teenagers in chat rooms, I lose my self-confidence. I feel anxious because of their speed of conversation or using some expressions which I'm lacking in knowledge. Sometimes for undetermined reasons, I use the Persian forms and patterns. In fact, sometimes I become embarrassed in front of young native speakers.

Despite having high self-confidence and being proficient in English, Dante's feeling anxious while communicating with young native interlocutors led to unconscious code-switching to his native tongue, thereby making him feel embarrassed and humiliated. Considering these points, it could convincingly be argued that native speakers seem to indirectly influence L2 WTC. That is, sometimes, by adversely affecting students' self-confidence and provoking their anxiety, native speaker interlocutors could potentially decrease

students' L2 WTC. Nevertheless, for some students like Kimia, in EDSs, the virtual presence of native speakers could serve as a stimulating factor encouraging them to initiate communicating in English. That being so, native speaker interlocutors could play the role of a double-edged sword because of their differing effects on different students' WTC in EDSs.

An interesting point worth mentioning was found in Robert's responses. He made use of EDSs to realize his agency by making his voice heard throughout the world, "When I want to make my voice heard, I use Twitter. I use English in order to convey my thoughts to a large number of people all over the world through tweets and retweets". In fact, he assumed that English is a common communication tool shared by the majority of people in different parts of the world. This international status of English made him empowered enough to repeatedly communicate his ideas utilizing the affordances of EDSs. Thus, to make his voice heard by a larger number of audiences all over the world, Robert took advantage of this opportunity using English.

4.2.2 Cultural influences

According to the interviewees' responses, in some specific virtual situations, they preferred to use Persian; for example, for Iranian food recipes or Persian literature. As Mina noted, "For food recipes, I prefer to search in Persian because I understand better how to cook the food but for other situations, I prefer to search in English". Ali also mentioned that, "I never search in Persian except when I want to know about a subject which is specified in Iran like rich Persian literature". Therefore, it can be interpreted that some topics like food or literature are an integral and important part of the Iranian culture which are different in other societies. In fact, they had an opportunity to bond to their culture in L1. Also, as the participants expressed, Persian literature is widely documented and elaborated in Persian resources which are more understandable.

On the other hand, unfamiliar interlocutors on social media could provide non-native speakers with a unique opportunity for becoming familiar with other cultures. That is to say, intercultural communication enticed the participants into communicating with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. As an example, claiming that social media have offered endless possibilities for intercultural communication, Negar desired to have friends from different cultures,

I have had European friends since I was sixteen. Some of them are EFL speakers who are learning English. I can talk with my foreign friends via WhatsApp and sometimes we have video calls two or three times a week. I have been getting familiar with their cultures and customs which I am interested in.

She added, "It is very precious for me that I can connect with other

communities and interact with other people across the world, I get familiar with other cultures and we exchange our knowledge.” In a similar vein, Dante mentioned,

I am happy and have a good feeling that I can communicate with people who know English all over the world and understand each other without any limitation. We can discuss a common issue, no matter where I am or where they are. I suppose I was in a room and learning English opened a door to a new world.

Kimia noted, “Some people all over the world are eager to know about other cultures and I try to introduce my culture and interact with those people”. Similarly, Haniyeh commented, “Instagram is a platform which I can introduce my culture through online conversations and get familiar with other cultures”.

4.2.3 Social disapproval

From some of the participants' point of view, there are some situations which might not be conducive to the use of English. As declared by Armin, “If I start to chat in English in some situations or in some groups on social media, others might think I want to show off, which irritates me.” This means when other people use Persian on social media, it makes some students avoid using English because of feeling anxious. Given that such behavior might lead to their being misjudged by their peers, to express their solidarity and protect their face, they prefer to resort to the use of their native language. In fact, fear of drawing others' attention and social disapproval makes them unwilling to use the target language.

4.3 Linguistic variables

The only linguistic variable mentioned by the participants was their own language proficiency or the language proficiency of their interlocutors which is explained in the following part.

4.3.1 Language proficiency

As mentioned above, two of the participants, Mina and Kimia, had experience of living abroad and they had high English proficiency to communicate in L2. However, some of the participants without any abroad experience had high English proficiency and could carry on conversations with comfort too. For example, Dante had high language proficiency with good pronunciation and intonation which helped him to be an English teacher in an institute. He also wrote poems and stories in English. Dante commented, “I just use Instagram for watching videos and entertaining and communicating with others in English. I post comments and I'd like to read others' comments under the videos”. Negar as a student for whom English is an important part of her life

noted, “Social media have given me the chance to interact with English speakers and practice and learn online, I welcome that.”

Almost all participants were interested in improving their knowledge of English and they were being exposed to English in their free time through the medium of social networks. In fact, their high language proficiency contributed to their use of the target language in-depth discussions with other English users. For example, they followed people who use English on Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and participated in online communities to exchange knowledge and discussed different issues. In other words, target language proficiency affected their L2 WTC making them more willing to use the target language in EDSs. However, when the participants had a sense of lack of English proficiency (lack of knowledge of idioms or acronyms) on social networks, their WTC was negatively affected. Also, as reported earlier, some of the participants preferred to communicate with interlocutors in similar or higher proficiency levels. In fact, interlocutors’ proficiency level was also important for some of the learners because they could serve as models of the target language for them.

5 Discussions

On the basis of the analyses of the students’ responses to the interview questions, it could safely be argued that the students themselves had voluntarily ventured into using English in EDSs without being obliged to do so by their teachers. Nevertheless, almost all of them attempted to seize every possible opportunity to improve their English proficiency. One reasonable justification for this could be their being highly proficient students of English-related majors (i.e., ELL and TEFL). Another plausible explanation would likely be the affordances provided by the EDSs, which encouraged them to willingly utilize such opportunities for educational purposes. Tellingly, when learners freely choose such facilities as informal learning environments, they will most likely adopt positive attitudes towards the learning opportunity. This finding corroborates what Yashima et al. (2004) observed in their study where those learners who displayed more tendency to engage in L2 strived to expose themselves more to the English language, which promoted more effective learning. Also, the same finding resonates with previous research on WTC in real classroom situations which pointed to the influence of learners’ attitudes on their motivation and WTC (Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2014). However, unlike some of the participants in Lee’s (2019) study who considered themselves passive L2 users in EDSs because of the Korean teacher-centered English pedagogy, the students in this study, despite going through a roughly similar experience, seemed to be cognizant of EDSs’ considerable potential for target language learning purposes. Hence, they attempted to make maximum use of such opportunities to engage in not only form-focused (e.g., focusing on their accent, pronunciation, and speaking skill)

but also meaning-focused activities (e.g., listening to English music, watching fun clips, and commenting about others' photos and videos).

Another closely related and important, though rarely considered and largely neglected, purpose for which students might use English in EDSs, as mentioned by Robert in this study, could be presenting one's ideas to wide audiences throughout the world. Conspicuously, to achieve such an objective, one can undoubtedly make use of the affordances EDSs have created. We are constantly observing the reflection of what happens in the virtual world in our real-life situations. Further, dramatic changes might originate from seemingly small and negligible tweets sent and resent through EDSs, which highlights the importance of attending to such contexts. Interestingly, such an impetus for using the target language in EDSs by the students has not been addressed by previous research, thus making this finding worth more investigation in future studies.

In line with the results of previous studies in actual instructional contexts (Alimorad & Farahmand, 2021; Clement et al., 2003; Fallah, 2014; Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2014; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004), a roughly similar trend was observed in the current study in that some students' repeated exposure to the target language boosted their self-confidence and higher levels of self-confidence, in turn, contributed to their being more willing to use the English language in EDSs. Nevertheless, the interview data indicated that not all learners might share such an experience. Some learners, despite being highly self-confident and proficient in English, might lose control of themselves while faced with native speakers even in virtual contexts.

Moreover, contextual variables such as interlocutor, exchanging cultural information and social disapproval affected L2 WTC in EDSs. More specifically, while some participants reported that they felt more comfortable and more willing to communicate in English with familiar interlocutors (their friends and classmates), some others preferred communicating with unfamiliar ones. This preference originated from their attempts to seize the opportunity to practice using English, improve their knowledge of English, get familiar with other cultures, and share their local culture with interlocutors with different cultural backgrounds.

Regarding exchanging cultural information, almost all participants believed that unfamiliar interlocutors on social media provided a unique opportunity for cross-cultural communication. This finding is consistent with Lee and Lee's (2019) study which indicated that those students who always used social networks to develop their understanding of other cultures revealed more tendency to interact in the target language in EDSs. However, contrary to Lee's study (2019) which suggested that it is the familiarity with the interlocutor in EDSs that determines the desire to communicate in the target language, in the present study, besides familiar interlocutors, students were interested in communicating with other English users around the globe.

Therefore, it could be concluded that interest in knowing more about other cultures and communities is closely linked to more tendency to communicate in the target language. Social disapproval, on the other hand, made the students reluctant to interact in English even with familiar interlocutors, which supports Tavakoli and Davoudi's (2017) argument concerning EFL contexts. As rightly put by them, communicating in the target language out of the classroom might seem unusual and abnormal in EFL contexts due to the learners' being judged negatively. It seemed that negative social evaluation and social disapproval adversely affected students' L2 WTC even in EDSs. This finding contributes evidence of the complex nature of interlocutors during interactional exchanges in both real and virtual communication contexts.

Finally, it was found that despite the vital role played by language proficiency, native interlocutors' approach towards communicating with non-native students could interact with their language proficiency to deteriorate their WTC. That is, native speakers' speed of communication as well as their use of less frequent words and expressions could adversely cause non-native speakers to avoid using English. All in all, it seems that all the factors identified are interrelated, thereby supporting the dynamic and complex nature of WTC in EDSs. WTC fluctuations in EDSs were either facilitated or hindered because of the aggregate effect of these affective, contextual and linguistic variables which happened simultaneously and varied from learner to learner, moment to moment and based on different purposes.

6 Conclusions and Implications

Results of this study indicated that despite knowing that EDS activities they engaged in were not obligatory educational ones supposed to be evaluated and scored by the teacher, almost all the participating students took full advantage of the affordances presented by the EDSs for improving their knowledge of the target language in terms of both different language skills and components and the culture of the target language community. However, an important point worth considering is that in spite of being known as a "virtual" world as opposed to the "real" world where we live, the kinds of feelings students experience are "literally real". That is to say, the feelings aroused because of the contextual variables in the EDSs could be immensely influential in students' making decisions on how to perform or react in these settings. Evidently, EDSs have removed the physical borders amongst different countries of the world and have even renewed macro global policies which tend to restrict people's access to endless possibilities across the borders, thereby giving EFL students access to not only native speakers of English but also non-native speakers of differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This opportunity will inevitably make everyone wanting to communicate with such interlocutors use a lingua franca known by all the people who are active there. Therefore, from

a theoretical point of view, it could convincingly be argued that we may need to reconsider and redefine our earlier distinctions between EFL and ESL contexts as well as the ones between virtual and real learning environments.

Pedagogically speaking, on the other hand, the principal implication of the findings of this study could be the potential for the incorporation of social media into L2 pedagogy. Such findings might offer insights into materials development in order to modify the course materials of EFL textbooks by integrating some activities and tasks which focus on the use of various social media platforms. In this way, language learning will not be detached from authentic communication, which increases the efficiency of the materials for learners. Furthermore, regarding the widespread popularity of EDSs, the results of this study might suggest new teaching strategies (e.g., blended learning and flipped classes) in order to improve the way students learn language and stimulate their L2 WTC. More specifically, instructors in EFL contexts need to be provided with relevant information to know which social media platforms are suitable for language learners to create an interesting and collaborative environment for students to communicate in the target language. Also, they may utilize social media platforms for group works out of the classroom. For example, by forming groups on social media, they could encourage students to engage in regular authentic interaction in L2 outside the classroom context so that they could experience deeper engagement in the learning process. Depending on students' proficiency level, instructors may use YouTube clips for the related course materials and make students gather information and prepare a report and share and discuss their ideas in class, which could lead to more effective learning outcomes. Also, educators can utilize social media (e.g., online forum, Reddit, Discord, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp and etc.) to connect with other English users and native speakers to develop their students' communicative competence including, but not limited to, both linguistic and cultural.

Despite these implications, future research is definitely needed to ascertain the efficiency of using EDSs as instructional opportunities. For further research, a larger sample of participants could be recruited to consider other potentially influential variables like different proficiency levels and majors. Moreover, given that the students who participated in the current study were young adult ones who could be considered "digital natives" (Prensky, 2009) and thus, possibly passionately interested in exploring the possibilities of the virtual world, similar research seems necessary to uncover the preferences of older language learners who might not be that computer and internet literate. This study was a qualitative piece of research employing semi-structured interviews; future studies may develop questionnaires to examine L2 WTC in EDSs in order to corroborate or refute the current findings. Additionally, future studies could focus on the improvement of different language skills after a period of intervention using social media platforms (i.e., experimental and quasi-experimental studies). Finally, further studies could

examine and compare students' and teachers' perceptions of the affordances offered by EDSs.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- 1- Please choose a pseudonym for yourself.
- 2- How old are you?
- 3- What is your major?
- 4- When did you start learning English? Why did you decide to learn English in the first place?
- 5- How good do you think your English is now? Describe your English abilities in detail.
- 6- In what situations is it difficult for you to use English?
- 7- In what situations, is it easy for you to use English?
- 8- Which social media (WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook) do you use most frequently?
- 9- How much time do you spend on social media?
- 10- What is your purpose of using social media?
- 11- What types of L2 activities in social media do you engage in? Can you describe how you engage in those?
- 12- Do you believe you are more willing to communicate in English when engaging in digital activities? Why or why not?

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13- Tell me how you feel about communicating in English online? Do you feel nervous, comfortable, and/or confident?

14- When do you prefer to use Persian or English?

15- Describe the situations when you use English or the people that you use English with while on social media.

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