

## The Notion of Emotion in EFL Learning and Teaching in Saudi Arabia: A Critical Review of 20 Years of Research

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### Abstract

This paper provides a broad critical review of the research that examined the emotional factors such as learners' attitudes, motivation, language anxiety, autonomy, and self-esteem in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia over a period of 20 years (2000-2020). The aim of this critical review is to answer some questions relating to identifying the most common themes of research efforts in this area, the strengths, and weaknesses among it; and to explain how such efforts have contributed to the development of English language learning/teaching within the Saudi context. The study is significant in that the findings identified some issues with thematic orientation in Saudi EFL emotion research—particularly regarding under- and over-explored topics due to an element of randomness in how research topics related to EFL emotions are often selected and explored, with some topic areas receiving excessive attention and others receiving little or no attention. Some issues related to research design and methodology were also acknowledged and assessed. The study suggests that it is useful to develop ways to coordinate and streamline future research on EFL emotions in Saudi Arabia and to work towards developing new research protocols that investigate the practicalities of language learning emotions in real learning situations.

*Keywords:* anxiety, attitudes, EFL learning/teaching, emotion, motivation, Saudi Arabia

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## Introduction

According to Aragão (2001), the term *emotion* in the context of second/foreign language acquisition is a subcomponent of the broad term *affect* that encompasses emotion and other concepts such as feeling, mood, attitude, personality factors, and learner variables that influence language learning. Stevick (1980) hypothesized that success in language learning depends more on what goes on *inside* and between the people in the classroom. Arnold (2011) presumed that the *inside* domain refers to the individual factors of the language learner, such as self-esteem, anxiety, inhibition, attitudes, motivation, and learner styles.

The key goal of this paper is to provide a comprehensive critical review of the research conducted by Saudi scholars over the past 20 years (between 2000 and 2020) that investigated the role of emotional factors in learning English in the Saudi EFL context. There are many diverse reasons for choosing this specific timeframe to review. First, studies conducted before 2000 are quite outdated and are therefore considered to be irrelevant to the dynamic present and future reforms in teaching/learning English in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the volume of EFL emotion research in Saudi Arabia before 2000 was rather small in terms of both the number of studies that were conducted and the scope of the topics that were examined. Although the scale of the research on EFL emotions in Saudi Arabia also remained relatively low during the period between 2000 and 2010, there has been strong growth in this type of research since 2010. Since then, EFL emotion research in the country has witnessed a sharp steadily rise.

Most of the literature reviewed in this paper is devoted to examining a wide range of widely recognized issues that fall under the category of L2 psychological/emotional factors that have been found to affect the process of attaining non-primary languages. Among these variables are learners' *motivation, attitudes, anxiety, autonomy, and self-esteem*.

## Literature Review

In view of the vast nature of the present review due to the considerable proportion of Saudi EFL research that has addressed emotional variables, a categorization of this literature based on the covered themes is necessary.

### *Research on L2 Motivation*

Of all emotional factors, L2 motivation has been the most researched emotional variable in the past 20 years in the Saudi EFL context. This research was dedicated to investigate the levels and types of L2 motivation among Saudi EFL learners, the correlation between learner motivation and other emotional factors, language skills, learning strategies, and EFL achievement, and many other aspects.

A large body of language motivation research has been devoted to examining the levels and types of L2 motivation of Saudi EFL learners. Out of all motivation orientations, instrumental motivation has been found to be the dominant type of motivation among Saudi EFL learners as acknowledged by Alfawzan (2012), Alkaabi (2016), Alrabai (2014a), Daif-Allah and Aljumah (2020), Massri (2017), and Moskovsky and Alrabai (2009), among many others. Students who

participated in these studies reported a strong desire to attain competence in English because they perceived it to be particularly beneficial for career building and professional advancement. Nevertheless, Saudi students in other studies (e.g. Sharma, 2018; Zayed and Al-Ghamdi, 2019) demonstrated higher integrative motivation than instrumental motivation. This reflects their interest and willingness to learn EFL for integrative motives, such as a desire to go overseas to study or work, and their readiness to interact with the target language and its culture and community.

Regarding other types of motivation, the learners in the study of Moskovsky and Alrabai (2009) reported high intrinsic motivation which, according to the researchers, does not reflect genuine learner motivation but rather mere positive attitudes towards learning English since it is inconsistent with their generally low competence. The majority of the participants in Alkaabi's (2016) study had high extrinsic motivation to learn English, with female students showing higher intrinsic motivation than male students.

A few studies have explored the relationship between learner motivation and other emotional variables. The findings of Sharma (2018) demonstrated a strong significant correlation between learners' attitudes and motivation. Likewise, a strong correlation was found among motivation, attitudes, and self-confidence in a study by Zayed and Al-Ghamdi (2019). In this study, a significant but weak correlation was observed between motivation and anxiety.

Changes in learner motivation over time in terms of levels and type of orientation is another aspect of the L2 motivation research that has been conducted by some Saudi scholars (e.g., AlMaiman, 2005; Al Shaye, 2014). The findings of AlMaiman's (2005) study revealed a significant decline in the motivation of Saudi year seven school children after one year of exposure to English instruction. The participating students from year nine and year 12 in Al Shaye's (2014) study were found to hold different motivational orientations because at different points in time, they had different goals.

The role of learner L2 motivation in relation to specific language skills has been investigated by other studies. The results of Alshamrany (2019) showed a positive and significant correlation between the motivation and attitudes and speaking ability of Saudi EFL students (i.e., motivation and attitudes had a positive influence on students' speaking proficiency).

Other studies have tested the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and learner motivation. For example, the findings of Al-Otaibi's (2004) study revealed a strong correlation between students' degree of motivation and language learning strategy use, with highly motivated participants using more strategies than students with moderate or low levels of motivation.

There have been many attempts to explore Saudi learners' L2 motivational intensity. Alrahaili (2013) emphasized that learner attitudes were related to both intended and actual learning efforts (motivational intensity). However, he acknowledged that intended efforts were not

necessarily reflected in actual efforts for most participating students in his study. In Al-Hoorie's (2018) investigation, motivational intensity was significantly lower in second-semester students than in first-semester students in terms of their effort dedicated to daily study and preparation for exams.

The demotivating constraints that learners encounter while learning English in Saudi Arabia have also been thoroughly explored (see, e.g. Al Johani, 2009; Al-Khairy, 2013; Alrabai, 2016). These studies identified the primary reasons for the low motivation of Saudi learners such as the inappropriate teacher behaviors, the lack of teacher support, lack of encouragements or praise to students, overcorrecting students' mistakes, criticizing students' learning attempts, the unappealing textbooks, peer pressure, inappropriate teaching methods, the insufficient use of modern teaching aids, students' low self-esteem, low self-confidence, high language anxiety, low motivational intensity, and low autonomy.

Some comparative studies have attempted to establish the extent to which the context (EFL vs. ESL) can influence Saudi learner motivation. The results of Fodah's (2013) study indicated that Saudi ESL learners had slightly higher levels of motivation than EFL learners. In addition, relatively minor differences were observed in the prevailing types of motivation between the two groups, with stronger instrumental orientation found among learners in the EFL context. In a similar study, Alnatheer (2013) found that the Saudi ESL students who study in Australia demonstrated higher levels of motivation than the EFL cohort of learners who study in Saudi Arabia. The ESL learners in this study showed significantly higher levels of communicative competence than EFL learners.

Very few studies have examined the role of technology in enhancing Saudi learners' L2 motivation. The findings of a study by Ali and Bin-Hady (2019) revealed that learning English through WhatsApp had a positive influence on students' attitudes, anxiety, and motivation.

Teacher motivation is another domain of L2 motivation research in Saudi Arabia. Shoaib's (2004) research emphasized that Saudi EFL teachers' strong commitment to their jobs as EFL instructors is usually challenged with a range of administrative and institutional obstacles, which are considered to be key demotivating factors for Saudi EFL practitioners.

Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self-system theory influentially inspired some recent Saudi motivation research. A noteworthy Saudi study that produced evidence in support of the influence of learner self-guides on learning intentions in the Saudi setting was the study of Almuawwi (2013). Assulaimani (2015) produced another notable study whose key objective was to examine the extent to which learner self-guides are linked to, and can be used to predict, L2 proficiency. Assulaimani's results were consistent with previous research assumptions regarding learners' learning intentions in that participants' self-guides were indeed linked to higher intended efforts. However, other findings of the study were unpredicted in that the relationship between self-guides and learner achievement occurred in the opposite direction (i.e., low levels of self-guides were linked to high achievement (and vice versa).

Teachers' and learners' perceptions of potential strategies that might help enhance learner motivation in language classes have also been explored. For example, teachers in the study of Alshehri and Etherington (2017) believed that students are motivated by strategies that help them achieve better academic outcomes, whereas students believed being more motivated by strategies that promote social aspects of actual learning, such as participation and interaction. Similarly, Shousha (2018) investigated the perceptions of teachers and students regarding ten motivational strategies proposed by Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) to motivate language learners. In this study, some motivational strategies (e.g. "develop a good relationship with the learners") were almost equally important to both teachers and students.

Other studies have gone beyond the theoretical suggestions proposed by earlier studies and take a more practical approach by attempting to assess the actual effectiveness of teachers' in-class motivational practices for learner motivation. For example, a frequently described groundbreaking study by Alrabai (2010) on teachers' motivational strategies has had notable achievements in this regard. Alrabai's research was the first empirical study to examine the theoretical link established by earlier studies (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) between teachers' motivational practices in the classroom and their learners' language learning motivation. Alrabai utilized a controlled intervention that involved 14 teachers and nearly 300 Saudi EFL learners who represented a variety of age ranges, education levels, as well as diverse geographic and demographic backgrounds. A set of preselected motivational strategies for EFL delivery were utilized in the experimental group, whereas the control group was exposed to traditional EFL teaching. The findings of Alrabai's research showed a statistically significant increase in only the motivation levels of the experimental group and can be seen as providing incontrovertible evidence of the capacity of teachers' motivational behaviors to enhance their learners' motivation. The empirical investigations conducted by Alqahtani (2015) and Alrabai (2014a) supplied strong independent support for Alrabai's (2010) findings. The protocols of these two studies included an EFL proficiency measure that enabled them to provide compelling evidence that teachers' motivational practices usually lead not only to learners' enhanced motivation, but also to better EFL learning outcomes.

### ***Research on L2 Attitudes***

In the past 20 years, many studies have attempted to explore the attitudes of Saudi learners concerning EFL learning in recent years (e.g. Alkaff, 2013; Alsamadani and Ibnian, 2015; Faruk, 2014; Massri, 2017). All these studies verified the positive attitudes that Saudi EFL learners hold towards English language, English language speakers, and English language learning.

Alrahaili's (2013) study is one of the prominent studies on learner attitudes in Saudi Arabia. This study deployed a new research protocol in that it went beyond exploring the levels and types of language attitudes among a specific group of L2 learners to identify the factors that underlie the prevailing EFL attitudes in the Saudi context. Alrahaili conceptualized language attitudes as falling into two quite different categories, namely, attitudes towards the target language (TL) and the TL speakers and their culture, and attitudes towards the learning situation (the teacher, the course, the

learning resources, peer relationships, the classroom dynamics, etc.). This conceptualization was built on Stephan and Stephan's (1996) integrated threat theory—as the conceptual basis of the social-psychological predictors of L2 learner attitudes. One novel idea in Alrahaili study was that the two categories of attitudes emerge from different factors. According to this study, TL attitudes are determined by sociopsychological constructs such as in-group contact, in-group identification, para-social contact, and perceived out-group threat. Attitudes regarding the learning situation are, on the other hand, basically dependent on learners' beliefs about language learning.

The findings reported by the above studies confirm that there have been positive changes in the social attitudes towards and perceptions of the English language and its speakers among Saudis. These recent changes could be attributed to Saudis' growing access to the TL and its community and culture via social networks, as suggested by Alrabai (2016), and to the increased awareness of both Saudi individuals and the Saudi government of the importance of the English language due to its importance as a lingua franca within the globalized knowledge economy (Kirkpatrick & Barnawi, 2017). According to Mitchell and Alfurai (2016), the global importance of English has required the Saudi government to invest heavily in EFL provision and to launch reforms within Saudi educational settings to enable Saudi citizens to effectively participate in the global workplace and society. One of the major educational reforms implemented by the Saudi government in recent years was the launch of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in 2005 to enable Saudi students to take university courses at English-speaking universities. This reform, according to Alrabai (2016), was associated with a rising interest among Saudis to seek knowledge in the English language about English-speaking countries and has played a major role in the positive shift in Saudi students' attitudes with respect to the English language and its community.

The factors that affect Saudi EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English have been examined by Saudi scholars. Some research has been conducted to determine the extent to which religion influences Saudi learners' attitudes concerning EFL learning. By building on a study by Aldosari (1992), Alswuail (2015) conducted an attitudinal study in which she investigated the impact of culture and religion on EFL learners' attitudes and their engagement in English language classes and the attitudes of EFL teachers and religious officials towards English language. Similar to Aldosari (1992), Alswuail (2015) found that learners and teachers held very positive attitudes towards English and observed a significant positive correlation between learners' attitudes and their language class engagement. The key difference in Alswuail's findings compared to the results of Aldosari concerns the attitudes of religious officials, who reported basically positive attitudes towards English learning. This is a very significant finding, as it reflects a positive cultural shift within the Saudi community in relation to the English language and its speakers.

Apart from religious, cultural, and social barriers, some instructional and institutional factors impact Saudi learner attitudes with respect to learning English. Students in the study of Alsamadani and Ibnian (2015) recognized lack of vocabulary, a lack of teacher support, and a lack of exposure to English in daily life situations as the factors that affect their English learning attitudes. Additionally, Massri (2017) acknowledged family obligations and/or pressure, financial

implications, higher education achievements and travel/study abroad as other factors that influence the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners.

The association between learner attitudes and interrelated emotional variables has also been explored in previous research. The majority of participants in Alkaabi's (2016) study reported high extrinsic motivation to learn English associated with positive attitudes towards English and its native speakers. Female students in this study showed higher intrinsic motivation to learn English and higher positive attitudes towards both learning English and to the native speakers of English than male students.

### ***Research on L2 Anxiety***

Similar to many other EFL contexts, there have been many recent attempts to investigate the issue of foreign language anxiety (FLA) in the Saudi context.

Investigating the levels and sources of FLA was the most researched issue in Saudi Arabia. Al-Saraj (2014) investigated language anxiety among female Saudi learners and determined that the behavior of language teachers was the primary source of learners' anxiety in addition to other factors including a fear of negative evaluation, a competitive learning atmosphere, the style of teacher-learner interaction, and the teaching method.

Alrabai (2014b) reported on the findings of a three-year, large-scale study that involved three rounds of data collection to investigate the levels and sources of FLA among 1,389 Saudi EFL learners. The majority of participants in this study reported moderate to high levels of FLA. In addition, four sources of FLA appeared among learners: communication anxiety; comprehension apprehension; negative attitudes regarding English class; and test anxiety. Based on the highly consistent findings from the three rounds of data collection, the study proposed a context-based model of FLA in the Saudi EFL context.

Al-Khasawneh (2016) assessed the level and sources of foreign language learning anxiety among 97 English major Saudi university students. The participants reported moderate levels of language anxiety; with the following being the main sources of language anxiety among students: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Asif (2017) explored the views of 100 EFL lecturers in Saudi Arabia concerning the sources of language anxiety among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia from the teacher perspective. Respondents specified L1 interference with the L2; a fear of making mistakes; a gloomy classroom environment; performance anxiety; a lack of English vocabulary; and the cultural differences between learners and the TL community as causes of language anxiety among their learners.

Gawi (2020) examined the level and sources of FLA among fifty Saudi male students studying English language at Albaha University. Participants in this study exhibited an overall moderate level of foreign language classroom anxiety represented in moderate levels of test

anxiety, low levels of fear of negative evaluation, and higher levels of communicative apprehension.

In addition to the above studies that reported on global language anxiety, other studies have attempted to investigate learner anxiety regarding specific language skills. Aljafen (2013) established that Saudi EFL students in his study shared almost the same moderate levels of English writing anxiety. The causes of writing anxiety identified in the study included learners' unsuccessful past learning experiences, their lack of confidence in writing, and the assessment procedures that their institution follow.

Al Yami (2015) examined the causes of speaking anxiety among nine Saudi ESL learners who studied in Australia and the manifestations of such anxiety. In this study, the triggers of anxiety were classified into socio-contextual factors (e.g., gender proximity and teacher behavior), psycho-linguistic factors (e.g., a lack of confidence and a fear of incorrect L2 usage), and combined overlapping factors (e.g., speaker perceptions of the listening audience and linguistically demanding classroom tasks). The data collected via semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire in a study by Rafada and Madini (2017a) indicated that EFL teachers' behavior and practices, a lack of vocabulary, language test structure and procedures, the classroom atmosphere, and peer anxiety were the main sources of learner' speaking anxiety.

More recently, the research of Al-Khotaba et al (2019) established a significant negative correlation between foreign language speaking anxiety and the speaking achievement of 100 preparatory-year Saudi university EFL learners: learners with high language anxiety had lower achievement on the speaking test, while learners with low language speaking anxiety had high achievement on the speaking test.

The relationship between learner anxiety and other emotional factors has been investigated in the Saudi setting. A study by Almurshed and Aljuaythin (2019) revealed completely contradictory findings in relation to the association between learner anxiety and motivation: learners were found to be highly motivated to learn English but reported experiencing high levels of FLA. This surprising finding contradicted a well-established conclusion in the L2 research (see, e.g., Liu, 2012; Tahernezhad, Behjat, & Kargar, 2014) that language anxiety is negatively correlated with language motivation (i.e., high levels of language anxiety usually lead to a low of motivation in learners, and vice versa).

Some studies attempted to identify the relationship between learner anxiety and language performance. The results of Tanielian (2017) demonstrated a moderate, negative correlation between Saudi learners' FLA and their language performance, which is a well-established finding among previous research (e.g., Aida, 1994; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Salehi & Marefat, 2014; and many others).

Because earlier research established that language anxiety is prevalent among Saudi EFL learners, there have been attempts to suggest strategies that might support learners in coping with

their language anxiety and help teachers control their students' anxiety. In this regard, students in the study of Al Yami (2015) recommended that learners learn additional vocabulary and sufficiently prepare prior to speaking to cope with their language anxiety. In addition, Asif (2017) proposed that using effective teaching tactics, such as humor, friendly relationships, and supportive learning environments, and using technology, attractive learning material and efficient ways of correcting learner errors can help minimize anxiety among Saudi EFL learners. Furthermore, Rafada and Madini (2017b) suggested using English internet sites, traveling abroad, talking to native speakers, performing more presentations, etc. to control learners' language anxiety.

Shifting from the theoretical domain to application, Alrabai (2015) investigated the practicality of certain teacher strategies in controlling learners' anxiety in the language classroom. He first identified the levels and types of anxiety among over 500 Saudi EFL learners at the first phase of his study. At the second phase, teachers in the treatment classes utilized a set of anxiety-reducing strategies that specifically targeted the sources of language anxiety previously established among learners at the first phase as part of an experimental 8-week treatment with a group of over 230 Saudi EFL learners. A well-matched control group in terms of size and learners' characteristics was not exposed to any anxiety-reducing strategies. The effect size of the treatment revealed a considerable decrease in anxiety levels in the experimental group, compared with an increase in the level of anxiety in the control group. These findings empirically validate the theoretical assumptions about the teachers' capacity to control learner's anxiety in language classroom.

### ***Research on L2 Autonomy***

There is widespread recognition among Saudi EFL researchers, teachers, and learners regarding Saudi EFL learners' general lack of autonomy (e.g. Alsaedi, 2012). Nevertheless, research efforts dedicated to the issue of learner autonomy have until very recently been rather limited in Saudi Arabia.

Some studies have been conducted to explore the levels of autonomy of Saudi EFL learners. Saudi participants in the study of Alzubi, Singh, and Pandian (2017) exhibited a low level of learner autonomy, as demonstrated by low levels of linguistic confidence, social comparison, and locus of control. Alrabai (2017a) measured the EFL autonomy of a large participant sample of 630 Saudi school and college students and its association with their academic achievement using a questionnaire survey and achievement tests. A significant correlation between learner autonomy and English achievement among the Saudi EFL learners involved in this study was established, as the learners were found to have low levels of autonomy and low achievement.

Other studies in the Saudi context have been conducted to test learners' readiness to be involved in autonomous/independent EFL learning. For instance, Tamer's (2013) study assessed the readiness of 121 male Saudi university students with respect to their perceptions of responsibilities, abilities, motivation, and inside/outside class self-directed activities. This study had inconsistent findings: learners reported high levels of motivation and confidence in their abilities, but they reported low responsibility for their own learning. The narrow scope of the study (all the participants were of the same gender, were studying at the same school level, and were

recruited from only one institution) could be a reason for the inconsistent findings. By building on Tamer's (2013) study, Alrabai (2017b) used a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to gain insights from a population of 319 Saudi EFL students regarding their readiness for independent learning. Learners showed low perceived responsibility levels, decision-making abilities, motivation, and involvement in self-directed learning confirming a low readiness for independent learning.

A large body of research has explored the teacher and learner perceptions of the role of autonomy in EFL teaching/learning in Saudi Arabia (Al Asmari, 2013; Almusharraf, 2018; Alrabai, 2017c; Asiri & Shukri, 2018, 2020; Javid, 2018). EFL learners in these studies believed that promoting learner autonomy could productively increase students' language learning and were also willing to take responsibility for their learning when encouraged by their teachers to do so. Teachers, on the other hand, highlighted their learners' low ability to learn independently perceiving their students as being passive, dependent, lacking initiative, and non-autonomous. Teachers also confirmed their limited experience with how to promote learner autonomy in the language classroom because they lacked the requisite knowledge, proper training and professional expertise in this regard.

### ***Research on L2 Self-Esteem***

Research on learner self-esteem in the Saudi EFL context has been very limited. After an extensive search of the related literature, this researcher is aware of only two self-esteem studies conducted in this context to date. The first is the study of Al-Hattab (2006) who examined the relationship of global self-esteem, situational self-esteem, and task self-esteem with writing achievement among 81 Saudi EFL school students. The learners in this study demonstrated average global self-esteem. A positive correlation has been identified between learners' writing achievement and only their situational and task self-esteem.

The second study on learner self-esteem in Saudi Arabia is the study of Alrabai (2017d) who examined the levels of self-esteem among a sample of 263 Saudi EFL learners. The learners demonstrated low levels of self-esteem, with no gender differences in self-esteem detected between male and female participants. The researcher attributed the low self-esteem of Saudi EFL learners to a variety of misbehaviors demonstrated by the teacher toward his students, such as harsh criticism, unfair comparisons, unrealistic expectations, and an absence of praise, warmth, affection or interest.

### **Discussion**

Considering the number of studies and the range of topics reviewed in this paper, it seems virtually indisputable that the Saudi research effort in the area of language-related emotions has made remarkable progress over the past 20 years. The researcher has witnessed an ever-growing number of publications on language-related emotions by Saudi Arabais—some of them in leading journals on applied linguistics. It seems undeniable that some of the studies reviewed here have made important contributions to the field—both to L2 teaching/learning practices and to L2 acquisition theory more generally. Most impressively, this research effort not only shows steady

growth but also seems to be building increasing strength and momentum; the thing that merits to be acknowledged and thoroughly commended.

However, we can also point to a number of weak aspects in most of the studies reviewed here. Identifying these weaknesses and giving them due consideration is essential to ensure the future growth and success of the research on emotions in EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. The first point of weakness concerns the majority of the research that was selected for investigation, which seems to be characterized by an element of randomness and imbalance. As the above review has shown, some issues/areas related to language emotion have received a considerable amount of attention, while others have been largely or even completely neglected. For example, learner motivation (especially with respect to the types of motivation) is an area that has been given an extraordinary amount of attention, particularly relative to some other topics such as learner self-esteem which remains one of the rarely investigated topics in the Saudi EFL context. In addition, no study has investigated the relation between emotions and some pedagogical aspects of language delivery, such as teaching methodology and teaching materials.

Moreover, the bulk of the research effort on emotional factors seems to have been devoted to developing the theoretical aspects of these constructs. The studies that utilize in-class experimental interventions remain very rare. To date, only four studies of this type have been conducted in the Saudi EFL context (Alqahtani, 2015; Alrabai, 2010; 2014a [on learner motivation]; and Alrabai, 2015 [on learner anxiety]). All of these studies were, however, concerned with examining the instructional interventions utilized by EFL teachers, while none of them examined the usefulness of the self-regulating strategies used by EFL learners that could greatly help in regulating their emotions. Additionally, no study has attempted to implement experimental treatments in language classes in Saudi Arabia for the purpose of supporting, for example, learner autonomy or learner self-esteem. This is because researchers avoid conducting experimental studies of this nature since they are time- and effort-consuming and are truly challenging in terms of the study design, execution, data collection and analysis, findings, interpretation, etc. The findings of these types of studies, however, remain very reliable since they have the capacity to illustrate the role of emotions in EFL learning.

Additionally, there is a noticeable tendency among the Saudi EFL research on language-related emotions to focus on investigating emotional factors (e.g., the levels of attitudes, motivation, and anxiety) in relation to specific language skills (e.g., writing and speaking). The studies by Aljafen (2013), Al-Khotaba et al. (2019), Alshamrany (2019), and Al Yami (2015) are examples of this kind of research. It is well acknowledged that academic literacy encompasses four language skills, specifically, writing, listening, reading, and speaking, in addition to other skills such as critical thinking, reasoning and study skills. According to Asif (2017), focusing on writing and speaking may give the false impression that academic literacy practices are mutually exclusive or separable individual skills, while in reality, they are neither mutually exclusive nor separable.

A potential explanation for the over- or under-exploration of certain topics is that some researchers may have already had clearly defined interests in a particular area and chose a research topic on this basis with little or no consideration about its overall strategic importance. In the majority of Saudi EFL emotions research, a topic is selected simply because it is aligned with a prospective supervisor's research interests with no global or strategic considerations necessarily playing a role in the topic selection process. This tendency has probably contributed to the sense of arbitrariness in the thematic orientation of Saudi EFL research that we alluded to above; it may also have played a role in how the study design and methodology were conceived for a number of studies.

In addition to the problems related to the randomness and imbalance in the selection of topics, this review has also identified a number of serious weaknesses in the methodological designs of various language emotion projects in Saudi Arabia. Most of the studies reviewed adopted nonexperimental designs. These studies followed typical descriptive and/or correlational research methods by describing a specific phenomenon (e.g., high anxiety among Saudi EFL learners) or attempting to identify the correlational relationship between variables (e.g., attitudes vs. motivation) without attempting to investigate this relationship in more detail. In addition, most of the studies reviewed were cross-sectional. This research design involves the assessment of linear relationships between the research variables at a single point in time and can only infer the possibility of cause-effect relationships based on established correlations among the variables. This design, however, does not allow for a determination of the cause-and-effect relationships among the research variables and cannot therefore be used to make valid claims about actual causality. Even in some studies that implemented experimental treatments and adapted longitudinal research designs (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015; Alrabai, 2010, 2014a, 2015), the design was not fully experimental but rather quasi-experimental because of a lack of the random assignment of the participating learners to conditions (in all of these studies, students were not randomly assigned to the study groups (experimental vs. control) but rather were assigned to their teacher groups based on their teachers' allocation).

Regarding causality, Alqahtani (2015) and Alrabai (2014a) were the only researchers who attempted to investigate the causal relationship of motivation, as an emotional factor, with learner EFL achievement. However, these two studies and all the other studies reviewed in this paper did not empirically assess the causality of other emotions (e.g., anxiety, attitudes, and self-esteem) with learner achievement. Furthermore, no study in the Saudi context has attempted to experimentally establish causal relationships among different emotional variables (i.e., which emotional variable(s) cause(s)/predict(s) other emotional variables). Some of the researchers whose work has been reviewed here should be commended for the sampling procedures that they followed. The study of Alrabai (2010) can be described as exemplary in this regard. Similarly, Alrahaili (2013) and Assulaimani (2015) employed mixed-gender sampling. Their study samples included participants of both genders; a dedicated female research assistant was hired to recruit and collect data from female participants in each of the two studies. Nonetheless, some of the studies that we have discussed here (e.g., Almurshed & Aljuaythin, 2019; Al Yami, 2015; Fodah, 2013; Massri, 2017) are vulnerable to criticism concerning the size of their participant samples.

Further, other studies lacked diversity in the sample selection. In a large number of the reviewed studies, a single-sex sample (either male or female) was used (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015; Alrabai, 2014a; Rafada & Madini, 2017a, 2017b). Other studies recruited participants from only one institution (see, e.g., Aljafen, 2013; Al-Khasawneh, 2016; Tamer, 2013; Tanielian, 2017). In addition, most of these studies also focused on the role of emotions in learners at the university level, which has resulted in widespread concern about the role of emotions in learners at the school level. These flawed sampling procedures undeniably influenced the validity and generalizability of their findings. In the case of investigations with small sample sizes, the generalizability of study findings is contested since it is illogical to generalize the behaviors of a small number of participants to the entire community of Saudi EFL learners. Although single-sex sampling is clearly a reflection of the separated nature of the Saudi educational system based on deeply rooted Saudi religious, social, and cultural norms, the findings of the single-sex investigations remain unrepresentative of the entire population of Saudi English language learners.

Data collection instruments are another weak aspect of the methodologies of the Saudi investigations of EFL emotions. Most of the reviewed studies followed a quantitative approach for data collection by employing questionnaire surveys. Although no one would deny the usefulness and practicality of surveys as they have the capacity to capture broad tendencies and enable the collection of a large portion of data over short periods of time, surveys typically lack the ability for an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under investigation since the responses to surveys may be influenced by a variety of factors. Only a handful of the studies reviewed here (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015; Alrabai, 2014a, 2015; Alrahaili, 2013) took advantage of the wealth of other available data collection options (e.g., classroom observations).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper provides critical commentary on some of the key issues related to the role of emotion in EFL teaching/learning in the Saudi context over the past 20 years. By examining both the demonstrated strengths and the perceived weaknesses of the Saudi research on EFL emotion during this period, the paper identifies areas that deserve further examination and offers ideas about how future this research can be streamlined and how a unified and consolidated EFL research program can be achieved. The paper also considers ways in which EFL teaching and learning practices can be improved and better learning outcomes can be achieved by considering the role of emotion in this process.

The identified areas of weakness included issues related to the thematic orientation of the Saudi research on EFL and emotion—particularly under- and over-explored topics—and the research design and methodology. This paper identifies an element of randomness in the way that EFL research topics are often selected and explored, with some topic areas receiving a disproportionately large amount of attention (e.g. motivation, attitudes, and anxiety) and others receiving little or no attention. We assert that research efforts should be more balanced and should give due attention to the entire spectrum of interrelated emotional factors that are currently known to play a role in the process of L2 acquisition and to contribute to a learner's emerging L2 competence. Undeniably important and interesting domains of L2 research that deserve to be

explored further are learners' autonomy, self-esteem and language aptitude. In addition, each of the learner emotions should be examined regarding all language skills to build a deeper understanding of their relationships and contributions to each individual language skill.

To avoid imbalance and randomness in the investigation of topics, it would be useful to develop ways to coordinate and streamline future emotion-related research in Saudi Arabia and to work towards the development of a unified and consolidated EFL emotion research program in the country. One way to bring this about would be the establishment of a specialized association in Saudi Arabia—for example, a National Association of Psycholinguistics—which would be responsible for guiding Saudi research in the psycholinguistics area (including emotions about EFL). A National Association for Psycholinguistics Research would have the capacity to bridge the gap between academic research efforts and actual EFL delivery by facilitating and optimizing the implementation of emotion research findings into actual classroom practices.

Importantly, it is necessary for EFL emotion research to take a more practical classroom-oriented approach to the study of these factors and focus on designing and implementing experimental interventions with the purpose of boosting teacher practices and learner emotional behavior. Given the interrelated relationship between emotions in language learning, it is necessary to conduct research investigations that truly assess the causal relationships among the variables via the utilization of experimental interventions and longitudinal studies rather than cross-sectional studies. A longitudinal design implemented via an experimental intervention allows stringent inferences of causality by examining the relationships among the study variables and can therefore help build a deeper understanding of the relationships among the variables under investigation.

Apart from the need to achieve greater thematic balance in the research topic section, the Saudi EFL emotion research will need to adopt a more stringent research design (i.e., empirical, experimental, and longitudinal), more representative sampling (i.e., size and matching), more diverse instruments and data collection techniques (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, mixed), more stringent data analyses (including effect sizes), etc.

EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are to acknowledge the fact that they play a crucial role in managing their learners' emotional states—including their anxiety, attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy—because anything that they do in the classroom can positively or negatively influence their learners (Alrabai, 2015, 2017d; Alshehri, 2014, etc.).

The Saudi government has played a critical role in promoting EFL education in the country. There are therefore compelling reasons to maintain and even strengthen the scholarship program to enable more Saudi nationals to complete their education in English-speaking countries. The benefits from this approach would be multiple, substantial and long-lasting.

A significant limitation of this paper is that it did not, due to space limits, review some Saudi studies relating to other affective factors (e.g. learner learning styles). While such factors

remain of little importance compared to other ultimately important factors (e.g. motivation and anxiety), it, nonetheless, falls on future research to bridge this gap.

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