

Affective Readiness and Instructor Mediation in Online EFL Learning: Evidence from Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study explored the under-researched role of affective factors in digitally mediated language learning in Saudi EFL settings. It was based on Social Cognitive Theory and Control-Value Theory, using a convergent mixed-methods design involving 238 students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This included collecting reflective journals from 42 students and conducting interviews with 16 instructors. Results indicated that the learners had neutral to moderately positive affective orientations with significantly lower anxiety levels and increased engagement in speaking and listening activities, supported by the perceived safety of the online environment. Teacher immediacy and adaptive pedagogy, which were highlighted in the qualitative data, were essential for maintaining motivation. On the other hand, writing was the least engaging skill due to the lack of individualized evaluation and feedback. The study found that affective development is not only an outcome of online language learning but also a major factor that influences both engagement and perceived progress. It therefore necessitates the creation of emotionally responsive and learner-centered online pedagogies, enabled by professional training in instructors' affective mediation strategies.

Keywords: Affective development, affective readiness, emotional engagement, skill-specific influence, online EFL learning, teacher mediation, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The global trend of online and hybrid learning has radically transformed the pedagogical and affective landscape of English language learning. Since digitally mediated classrooms often fail to provide the interpersonal immediacy and real-time scaffolding found in physical classrooms, students are expected to engage with content more autonomously in these settings (Ge, 2025; Roddy et al., 2017; Mohamed et al., 2023). Although this model is flexible, it can also be a source of affective challenges, such as disengagement, communicative anxiety, and a lack of motivation, particularly in productive tasks such as writing and speaking. This is especially relevant in locations such as Saudi Arabia, where online learning has imposed considerable technological and emotional burdens on both students and teachers following the shift from traditional teacher-centered education (Alfaleh et al., 2025; Elyas & Picard, 2018; Mohamed et al., 2025).

An emerging body of second language acquisition research indicates that affective variables, such as self-efficacy, motivation, boredom, enjoyment, and anxiety, directly affect concentration, perseverance, and the learning experience (Ali El Deen et al., 2026; Dewaele & Meftah, 2024; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Further explanations of the relationship between emotional states and learners' sense of control and task value are provided by theoretical frameworks such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002).

Despite this emphasis, there have been few empirical studies on the mediating role of emotions in digital language learning, particularly in Saudi EFL contexts. Previous research has tended to focus on technological readiness or cognitive skills rather than emotional involvement in particular language areas (Hung, 2016; Rapanta et al., 2021).

To address this gap, this paper examines the connection between learners' affective orientations and instructors' pedagogical adaptations in Saudi online EFL contexts. This study is guided by three main objectives and is grounded in the theoretical frameworks mentioned above:

1. To examine how affective orientations (anxiety, enjoyment, and motivation) of Saudi EFL learners affect their engagement and perceived improvement in online English learning.
2. To determine the emotional patterns and skill-related considerations of Saudi EFL learners in the process of adapting to digital learning.
3. To explore the perceptions and responses of EFL teachers to the affective and academic needs of students in online courses with a special focus on the development of skills and engagement.

By narrowing down the discussion to the interaction between learners' affective orientations and the responsiveness of teachers, this paper

attempts to clarify the nuanced role of emotions during online language learning and achievement processes.

This paper merges the affective orientations of the learners and the pedagogical mediation of the instructors to provide answers to three guiding research questions:

RQ1. How do Saudi EFL learners' affective orientations (e.g., anxiety, enjoyment, motivation) influence their engagement and perceived progress in online English language learning?

RQ2. What emotional trajectories and skill-specific reflections do Saudi EFL students report as they adapt to digitally mediated language instruction?

RQ3. How do EFL instructors perceive and respond to students' affective and academic needs in online learning environments, particularly in relation to skill development and engagement?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Centrality of Affect in Second Language Acquisition*

It is generally understood that affective variables, including motivation, enjoyment, and anxiety are critical to second language acquisition (SLA). Even though in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, negative emotions were initially conceptualized as a hindrance to input reception, more recent perspectives are more dynamic. According to contemporary theories, affect is context-dependent and flexible. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) may coexist and interact with each other, contingent on situational conditions, including task design and teacher support. Further demonstrating that FLE is socially and personally constructed, Botes et al. (2021) associated it with communication readiness and self-assurance and showed that enjoyment is a driving force behind success rather than a consequence of it.

The Control-Value Theory provides a powerful explanatory framework (Pekrun et al., 2002), and Shao et al. (2019) adapted it to SLA. Positive emotions stimulate deep learning, whereas negative emotions promote disengagement, based on evaluations of the task's value and control. Teimouri (2017) further expounded on this by linking motivation to self-concept and found that an externally motivated ought-to self is a predictor of stress and disengagement, whereas an ideal L2 self is a predictor of positive affect and effort.

Taken together, these models reframe affect as essential to learning, having a direct impact on interaction, persistence, and attention. It is no longer optional to incorporate affective considerations into pedagogical design as digital learning environments expand.

2.2 *The Reconfigured Affective Landscape of Online EFL Learning*

Online learning has revolutionized the emotional landscape of EFL teaching, both positive and negative. Digital spaces also impose greater pressure on learners' self-regulation, digital fluency, and affective resilience due to the lack of social cues and immediate feedback as in traditional classrooms (Ge, 2025; Mohamed et al., 2023). This has led to the inclusion of affect as a factor influencing engagement, persistence, and the eventual acquisition of skills in such situations.

Positive feelings such as enjoyment and curiosity may thrive in the online space when appropriately supported. Instructional designs that are clear, provide learners with autonomy, and offer easily accessible support may help develop intrinsic motivation and a sense of control as antecedents to affective readiness (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Nevertheless, these advantages do not occur automatically; they depend on students' digital self-efficacy. Learners with low technical confidence are the most vulnerable to anxiety and frustration when encountering technical challenges, unclear instructions, and perceived loneliness in asynchronous communication (Hung, 2016).

As an effective regulator, the instructor's role is crucial in this digital sphere. Empathy, immediacy, and responsiveness behaviors exhibited by teachers are known to lower learners' anxiety and strengthen their engagement, especially in interactive abilities such as speaking and listening (Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). Nevertheless, in teacher-centered pedagogical cultures, including Saudi Arabia, the immediate shift to online education became a dual challenge: technological ignorance and a sense of emotional distance (Mohamed et al., 2025). Instructors frequently experienced an affective gap as they attempted to maintain engagement in online classes without sufficient training.

Recent academic literature has reached a consensus that affect in online EFL learning is not an incidental by-product but a mediating process. Affective readiness occurs under the influence of students' beliefs, their previous experiences, and the emotional atmosphere created by the instructor and shapes learners' ability to cope with the cognitive and technological demands of the environment. Even a strong digital curriculum will fail without conscious emotional scaffolding. On the other hand, conditions with a focus on psychological safety and emotional bonding can make learners stronger and promote greater engagement.

2.3 *The Dual Role of the Instructor: Pedagogical and Affective Adaptation*

In EFL contexts via the internet, teachers need to balance a dual role: on one hand, they must act as instructional facilitators, and on the other hand, they must serve as affective scaffolds. The lack of physical presence only increases this dual role because it reduces the chance of spontaneous feedback and relational connection. Hence, successful online teaching is not only dependent on technological competence but also on the ability to deliver regular affective support (Peacock & Cowan, 2019).

The studies have proven that teacher immediacy, including the ability to use student names, offer empathetic feedback, and demonstrate enthusiasm, is considered one of the most important contributors to motivation, emotional safety, and engagement (Boudouaia et al., 2026; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). However, not every teacher is prepared to transfer these relational practices to the virtual world. According to

Hung (2016), one of the most effective predictors of online performance is teacher readiness, including technical confidence, digital pedagogical competence, and flexibility. The sudden digital shift revealed systemic gaps in digital infrastructures and professional development in places such as Saudi Arabia. Teachers said they felt overwhelmed by the concurrent pressure of learning new technologies and responding to growing student anxiety and inattentiveness, particularly in high-stakes, interactive skills such as speaking and listening (Aldayel, 2024).

However, most teachers could modify their practices to foster positive and constructive learning settings through deliberate strategies. Some of the strategies that were found to decrease anxiety and promote participation were task scaffolding, effort-based affirmation, and multimodal resources. Such practices are particularly crucial when dealing with EFL students, who might be culturally inclined to depend on instructors for emotional support.

Finally, emotional responsiveness is not merely an additional feature of online EFL teaching but a pillar of this mode of instruction. By integrating affective support into their teaching models rather than considering it as something that is external to the classroom climate, instructors will be in a better position to maintain student motivation and assist them in acquiring skills. As the hybrid and online forms are here to stay, the process of adapting as a teacher should be a technical skill as well as the deliberate development of emotional connection.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Grounded in Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory and extended by Pekrun et al.’s (2002) Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, this study’s conceptual framework positions affect as a central mediating mechanism between instructional practices and learner outcomes in online English language learning. The framework, depicted in Figure 1, comprises three interrelated components:

1. **Learner Affective Readiness:** This component encompasses learners’ dynamic emotional states, including anxiety, enjoyment, motivation, and self-efficacy, which directly influence learners’ engagement, willingness to communicate, and online resilience. Drawing on Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and Botes et al. (2021), affect is conceptualized as fluid and skill-sensitive, exerting varying degrees of influence across different domains (e.g., speaking, writing, reading, listening).
2. **Instructor Adaptation and Emotional Scaffolding:** This element represents the role of the instructor, whose digital pedagogical competence and affective support strategies (e.g., immediacy, empathy, responsiveness) directly shape the learning environment. As underscored by Hung (2016) and Resnik and Dewaele (2021), teacher readiness and practices are crucial moderators of learner emotion and participation in virtual settings.
3. **Language Skill Development (Perceived and Observed):** This is the outcome variable, representing progress in language proficiency. The framework proposes that learners’ emotional trajectories and their interaction with the quality of instruction jointly influence skill development. The mediating role of emotion is hypothesized to be strongest for highly interactional skills like speaking and listening, while influencing more autonomous skills like writing and reading primarily through motivational pathways.

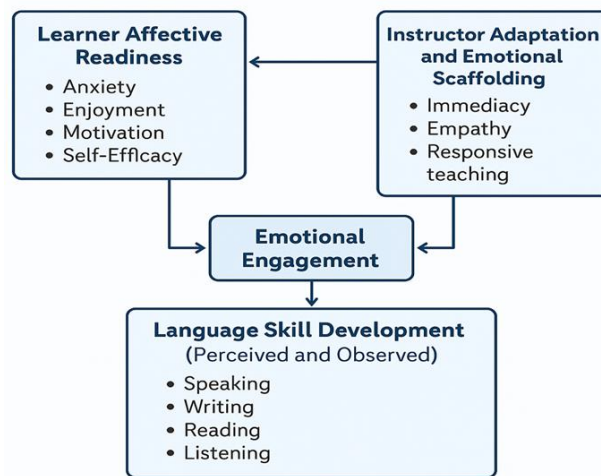


Figure 1. Affective Mediation in Online EFL Learning Contexts

The distinction between affective readiness and emotional engagement should be made. In the current study, these constructs complement each other but have different roles. Affective readiness is the underlying emotional orientation of learners toward the learning process (their anxiety, motivation, self-efficacy, and perceived control) before or during task work (Bandura, 1986; Pekrun et al., 2002). Conversely, emotional engagement refers to learners’ immediate, task-related emotional responses during the learning process, including interest, enjoyment, or boredom (Botes et al., 2021; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Although affective preparedness influences the circumstances in which learners are ready to engage, emotional engagement is the visible expression of this preparedness in response to instructional design

and interaction (Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). This distinction enables the study to conceptualize affect as both a prerequisite and an active consequence of learning processes (Shao et al., 2019).

2.5 Research Gap

Even though there is evidence that learners’ affect influences online language development through instructor emotional scaffolding, the extent to which this process is skill-specific remains unclear. Previous research frequently treats proficiency in a monolithic manner, ignoring how affective factors, such as motivation, enjoyment, and anxiety, may have different effects across skills. For instance, because speaking and reading have different cognitive and social demands, anxiety may affect speaking more severely than reading.

By investigating how instructor support influences distinct affective states and how these predict perceived advancement in speaking, listening, reading, and writing in online Saudi EFL contexts, this study fills this knowledge gap. This study attempts to clarify how instructional and emotional factors combine to create skill-specific learning outcomes by going beyond generalized models.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) to investigate the emotional responses of Saudi EFL learners and the pedagogical adaptations of their instructors in online learning environments. A thorough examination of affective and instructional dynamics was made possible by this method's ability to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. While qualitative insights clarified the underlying emotional and pedagogical processes, quantitative data revealed broad trends in affective states and perceived skill development. The design successfully captured the connection between instructor adaptation and learner affective readiness by combining survey responses with reflective journals and teacher interviews. This approach is in line with recent calls for mixed-methods, context-sensitive applied linguistics approaches, especially in educational contexts that have received little attention (Dörnyei, 2007; Ivankova et al., 2006).

3.2 Context and Participants

English is an obligatory subject in Saudi Arabia, which is closely associated with academic success, global mobility, and economic prospects (Elyas & Picard, 2018). Instruction is teacher-centered and exam-centered, which restricts the autonomy of learners (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Online learning introduced new challenges: some students, particularly females, felt emotionally safer and more engaged online (Hamdan, 2014), whereas other students felt more anxious and disengaged because of technological difficulties and low digital literacy. Due to these interrelated sociocultural and infrastructural factors, Saudi Arabia is a rather intriguing location to consider the interaction of affect, pedagogy, and technology in EFL teaching.

The purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the experiences of the learners and teachers were extensive. The ethics committee approved the study before participants were recruited. Informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers and students. The informed consent was signed by the parents or the legal guardians of the students in case the student participants were below the age of 18 years before they could take part in the research. A total of 238 Saudi EFL learners, who represented different academic levels, including upper primary (7.6%), intermediate (25.6%), secondary (32.4%), and university (34.5%), aged between 9 and 22 years, were included in the student sample. Such a stratified design allowed a cross-sectional comparison of affective responses at the most important stages of development and academic performance. Demographic data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Stage	Percentage of Participation	Age Range
Upper Primary	7.6%	9-12
Middle School	25.6%	13-15
High School	32.4%	16-18
University	34.5%	19-22

The sample consisted of 16 English language teachers from public schools and universities, and they had to have at least 1 academic term of experience teaching online. The respondents were chosen based on their first-hand experience in remote EFL teaching, as well as their ability to offer reflective insights into the impact on learners, their engagement, and pedagogical adjustments.

Since the participants represented various levels of education (primary, secondary, and university), possible developmental differences were also considered during the study design and data interpretation. Instead of considering the sample as a homogeneous group, the study used a cross-sectional approach to reflect variation in affective response among educational levels. The analysis mainly focused on general trends and patterns of affect in online learning and not the direct developmental comparison of the age groups. Moreover, all of them were active in teaching EFL in similar curricular frameworks that assisted in sustaining contextual consistency among groups. The standardized survey tools and the thematic analysis procedures also contributed to the unification of the interpretation of responses as these tools and procedures are commonly used. However, developmental differences have been recognized as a factor which might affect affective responses and are taken into consideration when interpreting findings.

3.3 Instruments

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, which combined a student survey, teacher interviews, and student reflective journals to examine affective readiness, instructional adaptation, and development of perceived language skills as viewed through multiple lenses, respectively.

A student survey that was created in the multi-stage process was the main quantitative tool. Items were adapted from existing SLA and educational psychology models, such as foreign language enjoyment and anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002), and online learning engagement models. Three experts reviewed the instrument for content validity and made changes to it. A pilot study (n = 30) confirmed clarity and reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .82 to .91. The final survey used a 5-point Likert scale covering four areas: online learning environment, teacher support, interaction quality, and perceived skill development.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with EFL instructors to understand students’ emotions, teaching adjustments, and emotional support online, 42 students kept reflective journals for six weeks to track their emotional experiences and learning experiences.

Together, these methods gave a comprehensive, triangulated view of both the emotional and teaching sides of online EFL learning. Sample survey items and journal prompts are in Appendix A and Appendix B.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this study, a convergent analysis approach was employed, which involved the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and integrating them in the interpretation. This provided a complete picture of the interaction of emotions and teaching practices in online EFL learning. In the quantitative part, descriptive statistics were calculated using the student survey data. Means and standard deviations were used to summarize the data across four areas, which include emotional response, teacher support, interaction quality, and self-perceived language skill growth. Cutoffs were applied as follows: (<2.4 = negative; >3.6 = positive) to interpret Likert-scale responses and spot patterns in levels of engagement and emotions. The quantitative strand was not only used to perform measurement, but also as a means of finding structural tendencies of affectivity among the subgroups of learners. Qualitative data (teacher interviews and student reflective journals) were thematically analysed in line with the six-step model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial round of open coding helped to create more detailed emotional and pedagogical themes, which were reduced during the axial coding process to pursue the emergent patterns of emotional regulation, development of digital adaptation, and skills. Dual analysis and negotiated consensus were used to improve coding reliability. The interpretive integration was realized in the form of cross-mapping of statistical patterns and thematic knowledge that allowed the study not only to describe what students and teachers experienced in terms of emotions, but also to provide an explanation of how they did it in specific educational and linguistic contexts.

4. Results

This section shows the results of both the quantitative and qualitative data based on the three research questions of the study. Student survey data (n = 238), reflective journal data (n = 42), and instructors’ interview data (n = 16) were analyzed using a convergent mixed-methods approach. Findings are presented according to themes based on the research question, and triangulation is applied to show areas of convergence and divergence among the methods.

4.1 Findings for Research Question 1

To address Research Question 1, which investigated the influence of affective orientations on online engagement and perceived progress, quantitative data from the student survey were investigated. The scales were found to be reliable, and the overall composite score of the affective orientations had excellent internal reliability (0.91). A one-sample *t*-test against the theoretical neutral midpoint of 3 revealed that learners’ overall affective orientation was significantly above neutrality, $M = 3.35, SD = 0.62, t(237) = 8.52, p < .001, \text{Cohen’s } d = 0.55$. This represents a small-to-moderate effect, indicating that learners generally reported a neutral-to-positive affective stable state, adequate for sustaining participation. Domain-specific analyses (Table 2) indicated that all affective dimensions were rated significantly above the midpoint, with perceived skill improvement showing the strongest effect (Cohen’s $d = 0.43$) and teacher interaction the weakest (Cohen’s $d = 0.20$).

Table 2. One-Sample T-test for Affective Domains Against Neutral Midpoint (Test Value = 3)

Domain	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen’s <i>d</i>
Online Learning Environment	3.34	1.32	3.91	< .001	0.25
Perceived Skill Improvement	3.46	1.31	6.70	< .001	0.43
Online Teacher Interaction	3.27	1.34	3.03	.003	0.20
Overall Composite Score	3.35	0.62	8.52	< .001	0.55

A one-way repeated-measures ANOVA was then conducted to compare perceived improvement across the four language skills. Results indicated a significant effect of skill type, $F(3, 711) = 15.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$, representing a small effect size. Descriptive statistics and post-hoc comparisons are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Post-Hoc Comparisons for Perceived Skill Improvement

Language Skill	Mean	SD	1. Listening	2. Speaking	3. Reading
1. Listening	3.70 ^a	1.30	—		
2. Speaking	3.49 ^b	1.28	.021	—	
3. Reading	3.51 ^b	1.32	.019	.870	—
4. Writing	3.21 ^c	1.36	< .001	.002	< .001

Note. Means with different superscripts (a, b, c) differ significantly at $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-adjusted).

Post-hoc analyses with Bonferroni adjustment confirmed that listening was rated significantly higher than speaking ($p = .021$), reading ($p = .019$), and writing ($p < .001$). Writing received the lowest ratings overall ($M = 3.21$), significantly lower than all other skills (all $p \leq .002$). Speaking and reading did not differ significantly ($p = .870$).

Qualitative data contextualized these patterns. Students reported reduced anxiety and greater willingness to participate in speaking and listening tasks due to the perceived safety of the online environment:

“I used to feel nervous reading aloud in class, but online, I feel safer to try.”

“Speaking on Zoom is less scary than in front of classmates.”

The result of this observation conforms to Control-Value Theory (Pekrun et al., 2002) because the online platforms seemed to enhance learners' sense of control by reducing social risk, and thus, the value of interactive engagement. On the other hand, writing was the least engaging skill. Student annotations indicated a lack of depth in instructional material *“We just click answers. No real writing. No feedback.”*, which led to boredom and disinterest. Other students also described the writing activities as limited to multiple-choice, sentence-based completion, or automatic quizzes, and little or no room to develop an extended voice or individual feedback. Others claimed that assignments were not interactive or revisionary, and writing was no longer a communicative act but merely a procedural process. This emotional detachment resembles the framework proposed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and supports recent empirical data showing that writing was the most boredom-prone ability among Saudi EFL learners. It is also consistent with research on feedback engagement, which highlights the importance of feedback in writing tasks and the fact that the lack of meaningful, dialogic feedback will severely decrease the emotional and cognitive commitment of learners to a writing task (Ali El Deen, 2023; Boudouaia et al., 2026).

Affective orientations exerted differentiated influences across skills: the online environment effectively reduced negative affect (e.g., anxiety) in interactive domains, fostering progress in listening and speaking, but failed to cultivate positive affect (e.g., interest, enjoyment) in writing, where reductive instructional design hindered engagement. Thus, affect acted not as a uniform construct but as a skill-specific mediator of engagement and progress, underscoring the need for pedagogical differentiation tailored to the affective demands of each language skill.

4.2 Findings for Research Question 2

Through the analysis of reflective journals of students ($n = 42$) along with triangulation of open-ended survey responses, a non-linear and emotionally sensitive adaptation path to online EFL learning emerged. Rather than reflecting a uniform change, learners indicated a complex interaction of affective gains and losses as they navigated digital learning environments, new forms of interaction, and emerging academic demands. Two general emotional patterns were found: (1) increased comfort and autonomy, and (2) increased frustration, fragmentation, and detachment.

4.2.1 Emotional Relief and Reduced Exposure

The most frequently reported affective benefit was a decrease in performance anxiety. Students contrasted the social norms of the face-to-face classroom, focused on classroom judgment and intimidation, versus privacy and control of the online classroom. This change led to increased affective safety and willingness to engage, especially with oral activities.

“In physical classes, I hated reading out loud. Online, I can mute or rerecord—I'm more confident this way.”

The use of digital platforms allowed learners to control their exposure, interact at their own speed, and deemphasize the effects of real-time assessment. This reduced social presence helped many of them to express themselves better, particularly in speaking and listening. Students repeatedly mentioned that they felt less monitored, more in control, and less fearful of making errors—trends in line with the quantitative results of RQ1.

4.2.2 Autonomy and Temporal Flexibility

Learners also highlighted the motivational benefits of temporal and spatial autonomy. The ability to revisit lessons, pause, or pace their study created a sense of empowerment, particularly among introverted learners, those with heavy schedules, or those who self-identified as “slow processors.”

“I could listen to the lesson again if I didn't understand the first time. That's not possible in class.”

Such reflections align with research on learner autonomy and affective agency (Chik & Ho, 2017), underscoring how asynchronous and semi-synchronous formats can better match learners' affective rhythms and cognitive styles.

4.2.3 Social Disconnection and Affective Gaps

Alongside these benefits, many students reported emotional costs, particularly a sense of isolation and disconnection. The absence of face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers was repeatedly cited as a key factor in reduced motivation. Nearly two-thirds of journals referenced missing classroom “energy,” spontaneous exchanges, or casual social contact.

“I felt invisible. No one asks you how you are doing anymore.”

This disconnection often intersected with skill-specific concerns. Learners linked reduced writing engagement to a lack of feedback and to passive reading experiences, which they linked to the absence of discussion or interpretive dialogue. While these emotions were not typically framed as acute distress, they reflected reduced stimulation and emotional flatness, which eroded motivation over time. Several described the online environment as “emotionally safe but emotionally empty.” These patterns resonate with Zembylas’s (2008) notion of affective friction, whereby learning structures inadvertently undermine emotional investment.

4.2.4 Differentiated Emotional Profiles Across Skills

Students reported skill-specific affective trajectories.

- Speaking and listening: The most positively rated, linked to multimodal exposure (videos, recordings), repeated input, and self-paced participation.
- Reading: Emotionally neutral; few opportunities for interpretive or collaborative interaction.
- Writing: Reported to be the worst-affected skill, with highly reductive tasks (apparently just answering MCQs) and the lack of authentic writing practice or constructive feedback.

“I forgot how to write. We don’t do paragraphs, just answer MCQs. I miss that part of English.”

Figure 2 combines these opposing experiences and represents the affective journeys of learners on the four core skills. Emotional involvement is depicted to increase in speaking and listening, is not shown in reading, and decreases significantly in writing.

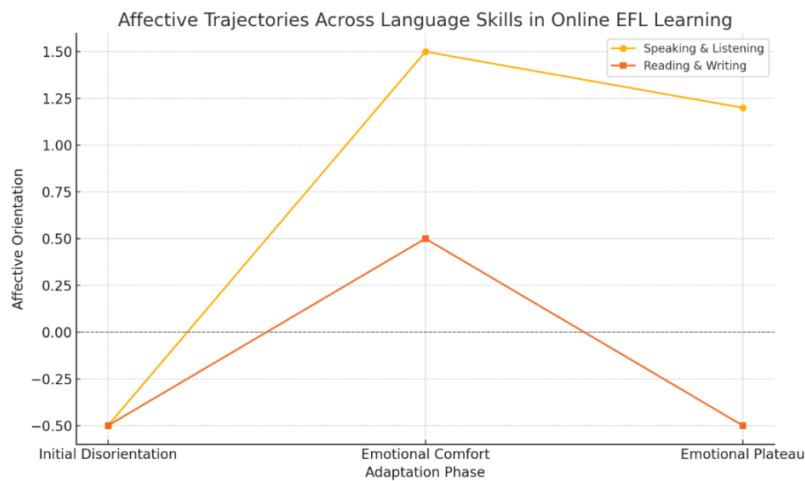


Figure 2. Affective Trajectories Across Language Skills in Online EFL Learning

Students felt more emotionally engaged with speaking and listening, stayed neutral on reading, and felt disconnected from writing. These patterns depended on whether they had feedback, interaction, and chances to express themselves. This suggests the need for rethinking skill development through emotional engagement rather than just cognitive support. Writing suffered the most; it lacked emotionally rich instruction with personal voice, feedback dialogue, or room for expression.

4.3 Findings for Research Question 3

The survey of 16 Saudi EFL teachers revealed that online instruction required rapid instructional and emotional adaptations for which teachers were unprepared. Affect functioned both as a challenge and a mediator of learning. The perceptions of the teachers indicated the influence of emotionality on their teaching decisions and perceptions of student development, particularly in the various language competencies.

4.3.1 Affective Recognition and Realignment

Almost all instructors reported noticeable shifts in their students’ emotional profiles after the transition to online learning. In the early weeks, heightened anxiety, confusion, and reluctance to engage were common, particularly during synchronous sessions. Over time, this resistance lessened as students became familiar with the platforms and as teachers adopted affect-sensitive strategies. One instructor remarked:

“At first, the cameras were off, the microphones were off, and the students were off. But once I changed my tone, used humor, and gave them space, I started getting real responses.”

This highlights a broader realization: affective sensitivity, not technical delivery alone, was essential to sustaining student presence. Instructors increasingly recognized that cultivating emotional safety was a prerequisite for meaningful engagement.

4.3.2 Emotional Scaffolding and Pedagogical Adaptation

Teachers addressed digital disengagement with adaptive strategies: chat box prompts, public praise, and light, student-focused content. Many used Kahoot, Flipgrid, and WhatsApp to create interactive and emotionally supportive spaces. One teacher turned speaking tasks into voice-note debates on WhatsApp, saying:

“It wasn’t just about speaking anymore—it became about confidence, voice, identity. They wanted to hear themselves and be heard.”

Pedagogical adjustments also involved pacing; many instructors emphasized effort over performance, shifting grading policies toward participation and engagement. This aligns with affective pedagogy frameworks that prioritize emotional scaffolding in learning (Resnik & Dewaele, 2021).

4.3.3 Skill-Specific Observations and Emotional Resonance

Distinct emotional patterns were reported across the four language skills, paralleling student self-reports. Listening and speaking benefited most, largely due to the use of multimedia tools and asynchronous voice submissions, which enabled shy students to participate more confidently. Reading received mixed evaluations: while access to digital texts expanded, deep engagement was limited without collaborative discussion. Writing was consistently identified as the most neglected skill, constrained by multiple-choice assessment practices and reduced opportunities for feedback. As one instructor reflected:

“We killed writing by replacing it with clicks.”

Here, disengagement was understood not only as cognitive but also as emotional, students were less invested because writing no longer felt personal or expressive.

4.3.4 Teachers’ Emotional Labor and Resilience

The interviews also revealed the emotional strain on instructors themselves. Many described the burden of simultaneously managing platforms, sustaining morale, and meeting curricular goals. As one explained:

“We became IT support, counselors, and motivators—not just teachers.”

Despite these challenges, instructors also expressed a sense of growth. Many reported becoming more attuned to the emotional texture of student learning and redefined success as *engagement rather than completion*. By the end of the term, emotional scaffolding had become an integral part of their professional identity.

5. Discussion

This study explored how Saudi EFL learners and instructors navigated the affective and pedagogical terrain of online language instruction. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002), the findings reveal that affect is not merely a by-product of instructional design but a primary mediator of engagement and skill development in digitally mediated learning. The results are discussed in relation to the three guiding research questions.

5.1 Affective Orientations as Predictors of Engagement and Perceived Progress

The quantitative and qualitative findings led to one clear conclusion, i.e., the affective orientations of learners (particularly, enjoyment, anxiety reduction, and self-efficacy) played a central role in predicting engagement and perceptions of progress. Students with positive emotional orientations reported greater engagement in speaking and listening tasks, greater autonomy, and readiness to perform tasks. This implies that affective readiness does not just play a facilitating role, but also functions as an enabling process that directly promotes the willingness of learners to undertake communicative activities. These results support the hypothesis by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) that foreign language enjoyment (FLE) does not simply represent the opposite of anxiety, but instead accompanies the negative affective factor, while coexisting with anxiety rather than eliminating it. Although the affective tendency was generally comparable, the discrepancies between the levels suggested that developmental factors might have an impact on the process of learners’ emotional experience and regulation in online environments.

The qualitative data indicated that the average survey scores reflected overall neutrality, although the qualitative responses indicated that this neutrality often masked an internal affective recalibration: the learners were neither indifferent nor relieved (with performance anxiety), oscillating between relief and social isolation. The increase in the comfort of speaking and listening, listed among the outcomes of digital autonomy, aligns with the claim made by Botes et al. (2021) that emotional safety boosts the urge to communicate. It also suggests that learners’ perceived control can be reinstated by reduced social pressure in online settings, thereby increasing their willingness to participate despite residual emotional ambivalence.

5.2 Emotional Trajectories and Skill-Specific Patterns of Adaptation

Narratives of students showed non-linear emotional patterns, starting with anxiety and disengagement and ending with conditional comfort, especially with empathetic teacher behaviors. It was possible to engage more because the affective benefits of online learning, including the opportunity to speak without fear of social judgment or to repeat lessons, allowed more interaction. But this came at a cost that many students complained about: they felt invisible, emotionally empty, or unchallenged, especially in reading and writing. This implies that online learning spaces both alleviate negative affect and create new forms of affective detachment, with a dual emotional organization of relief and detachment.

The emotional stratification of skills was remarkable. Speaking and listening excelled where multimodal input and asynchronous interaction were allowed, whereas writing was limited by the absence of dialogic feedback and opportunities for creativity. This is in line with Control-Value Theory proposed by Pekrun et al. (2002), as students felt more control over oral activities and attached more emotional value to them compared to reading and writing which were perceived to be cognitively challenging but affectively flat.

It is important to note that affective responses were not independent but moderated by the personalities of learners and previously acquired exposure to digital tools and their perceived correspondence with the instructional activities. Students who identified as introverted or self-paced tended to report higher levels of engagement, which supports the idea that emotional fit with modality is a key factor that determines persistence (Chik & Ho, 2017). This also indicates that online learning could have a different impact on learners whose affective preferences align with autonomous and flexible conditions, and disadvantage those who need social interaction to be motivated.

5.3 Instructor Perceptions and the Affective-Pedagogical Nexus

The attitudes of teachers highlighted the dual challenge of adapting to technology and emotional labor. Teachers realized that unless emotionally disengaged students received cognitive and emotional scaffolding, technical fluency alone would not be useful. Voice-note feedback, personalized messages, and flexible pacing were among the strategies that helped reinvigorate student engagement, aligning with emotionally responsive teaching (Resnik & Dewaele, 2021).

The teacher's affective scaffolding also influenced skill development through a different lens. Although teachers reported some positive changes in speaking and listening (e.g., fluency, confidence), they were concerned about reduced writing competence, which they usually explained by policy restrictions (e.g., MCQ-based tests) and the absence of dialogic activities. This supports the fact that affectively thin instruction, which does not provide a chance to express, interact, and receive feedback, undermines motivation and mastery of skills (Teimouri, 2017). This tendency aligns with recent findings suggesting the crucial importance of feedback involvement in the writing process, which indicate that a lack of meaningful feedback decreases cognitive investment and emotional engagement in writing activities (Boudouaia et al., 2026).

Besides, the emotional pathways of the instructors were similar to the students. They started feeling overwhelmed and uncertain, but most of them showed adaptive resilience and a redefined teaching identity that focused on affective presence. This change underscores the reciprocal nature of teacher-student emotional interactions in online classrooms where teacher immediacy can serve as a moderator to learner disengagement. This reciprocity implies that the process of affective regulation in online learning is co-constructed, and teacher adaptability and emotional awareness have a direct impact on the engagement and persistence of students. These tendencies are aligned with recent studies on online EFL settings, which emphasize the parallels between teacher and learner experiences of emotional adaptation throughout digital transition (Mohamed et al., 2023).

5.4 Toward a Dynamic Model of Affective Readiness in Online EFL

The conceptual idea that affective readiness, as a precursor to emotional engagement, mediates the relationship between instructional design and language skill development in online EFL contexts is supported and strengthened by this study. Affect is a central process that influences engagement, perseverance, and self-regulation and not a secondary process. This implies that affective preparedness needs to be redefined as a developmental process that transforms in response to exposure to instructional circumstances and not a predetermined learner characteristic.

The data indicate that affective readiness is dynamic, and it depends on emotional histories, familiarity with digital tools, and instructional feedback. This finding is in accordance with Botes et al. (2021) and Pekrun et al. (2002), highlighting the malleability of affective states. For example, initial anxiety is often transformed into motivation in the context of flexible, multimodal, and emotionally supportive instructions.

Notably, the affective reactions were discovered to be skill-based. Speaking and listening elicited positive feelings such as enjoyment and perceived control, but writing tended to be related to disengagement. Tasks that enhanced autonomy and authenticity (voice recordings, interactive dialogues) increased affective involvement, but decontextualized tasks (i.e. impersonal writing tasks) did not elicit emotional investment, which contributed to disengagement even in the absence of high anxiety. This supports the idea of emotional engagement not being evenly distributed among all skills but rather being dependent on how much tasks can be interacted with, provide feedback, and express personal feelings, and the results align with the recent evidence on feedback engagement in writing (Boudouaia et al., 2026).

The model further highlights reciprocity: affect influences what the students do, which is mediated by pedagogy. The need for flexible, emotionally sensitive design is emphasized by the trend towards recorded lessons and asynchronous communication.

Teachers are also co-regulators of emotions. Relational connections required to keep motivation up were developed by teachers with the use

of empathy, humor, and frequent feedback. This is especially so in contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where sudden shifts toward online learning heightened the need for emotional support. Students indicated they would feel emotionally empty without such scaffolding. This puts teacher presence as an affective anchor at the forefront, which can provide not only emotional stability but also continued interaction in digitally mediated settings (Al-Khresheh et al., 2022; Mohamed et al., 2023).

In conclusion, this research provides a coherent conceptualization of affective preparedness that integrates the presence of teachers, demand-specific challenges, and emotions of learners as co-constructors of engagement. Online curricula design, teacher preparation, and pedagogical assessment should all utilize affect as a component rather than as an addition. By placing affective development at the core of the instructional design, the study responds to the research gap identified, the idea of how the impact of emotional processes influences not only engagement but also skill-specific learning outcomes in an online EFL setting.

5.5 Practical Implications

The results have implications for EFL teaching practice, curriculum development, and policymakers in online and hybrid settings. To begin with, affective readiness must be considered a primary element of pedagogy because the emotional safety of learners, their decreased anxiety, and the sense of autonomy play a major role in engagement, especially in oral skills. Teachers ought thus to embrace affect-sensitive approaches, such as supportive conditions, low-stakes speaking activities, and regular emotional support. Second, the design of pedagogy must be skill-sensitive. Online environments enhanced speaking and listening but were less effective for writing because of a lack of practice and feedback. The curriculum design must consequently encourage emotional investment across all skills, especially in interactive and feedback-rich writing exercises. Third, teacher development needs to be institutionalized. Training must not be confined to technical competencies but must include emotional support approaches, digital interactional skills, and adaptive pedagogy (Al-Khresheh et al., 2022). Finally, hybrid learning models should provide a balance between the emotional advantages of online learning and the social interaction that is found in face-to-face learning in order to guarantee both autonomy and meaningful participation in EFL learning.

5.6 Limitations

Although triangulated techniques and a context-sensitive design were strengths of the study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was carried out in the Saudi environment, which may limit generalizability to other environments. Second, the use of self-reported data (surveys and journals), even with triangulation with interviews, could result in bias. Third, conclusions regarding writing were drawn based on perceptions and not on the direct analysis of the work of students. Also, the study may have introduced developmental differences in affective responses due to the inclusion of participants of different levels of education. Lastly, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to track long-term changes in affect and skill development. In future studies, longitudinal, performance-based, and cross-cultural methodologies should be adopted in order to uncover more of these dynamics.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the affective orientations of Saudi EFL students and pedagogical adaptations of instructors in digitally mediated English learning. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, it was able to capture both quantifiable trends and the qualitative aspects of online language learning. It was found that the learners demonstrated neutral to moderately positive affective orientations, especially in listening and speaking due to reduced social anxiety and greater flexibility in the online setting. On the other hand, writing became the most neglected skill, which was constrained by digital assessment practices and reduced interactional feedback.

The research also revealed the significant influence of teachers on the creation of the online learning environment. With the continued progress of the semester, the instructors also became more confident and effective despite their lack of training in the beginning, resulting in emotional scaffolding, which helped students engage. The combination of emotional support, institutional involvement, and acquaintance with digital tools helped students to adapt gradually. This implies that online learning experiences require pedagogical flexibility and affective preparation in order to succeed.

To monitor the changes in academic and emotional progress of students across time and educational contexts, subsequent research should be based on cross-cultural and longitudinal designs. It would be better to have direct assessments of productive language skills and especially writing to understand the performance outcomes in online environments. Moreover, the existing evidence-based practices in online and hybrid EFL settings might be complemented by experimental studies focusing on the impact of evidence-based interventions, i.e., peer interaction schemes, feedback with emotional responding, or socio-emotional learning units. Also, future research can be enhanced with the study of these affective dynamics in more homogenous age groups or in longitudinal designs to capture the variation in development. The study of the emotional dimension of pedagogy remains essential and timely with the evolution of digital learning on the international level.

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Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Appendix A. Sample Survey Items

The student survey consisted of Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) across four domains. Sample items include:

1. Online Learning Environment

- I find online English classes enjoyable.
- I feel more comfortable participating in online classes than in face-to-face settings.
- I sometimes miss the interaction of traditional classroom learning.

2. Teacher Support and Immediacy

- My teacher provides helpful feedback during online lessons.
- My teacher encourages participation and interaction.
- My teacher creates a supportive and engaging online learning environment.

3. Interaction Quality

- I have opportunities to communicate with classmates during online lessons.
- Online activities allow me to actively participate in learning.
- I feel connected to my classmates during online classes.

4. Perceived Skill Development

- Online learning has improved my listening skills.
- Online learning has improved my speaking skills.
- Online learning has improved my reading skills.
- Online learning has improved my writing skills.

Appendix B. Reflective Journal Prompts

Students were asked to complete weekly reflective journal entries guided by the following prompts:

- How did you feel during this week's online English lessons?
- Which activities made you feel more confident or motivated? Why?
- Did you experience any difficulties or frustrations? Explain.
- Which language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) did you feel improved this week?
- How did your teacher's feedback or support affect your learning experience?
- What would you like to improve in future online lessons?