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Learner Agency in L2 Assessment: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of EFL Oral Presentation Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Existing L2 assessment frameworks inadequately represent cultural specificity, affective-technological interactions, and integrated theoretical approaches. This quantitative investigation examines learner agency in EFL oral presentation assessment through an integrated framework combining van Lier's ecological approach, Norton's investment theory, and Kasper and Rose's interlanguage pragmatics. Undergraduate EFL learners at a Saudi university completed a validated questionnaire examining affective variables, interlanguage processing, technological preferences, and assessment literacy. Statistical analysis revealed three patterns challenging Western-centric autonomy models. First, *anxious investment* patterns showed learners experiencing pre-presentation anxiety while maintaining assessment engagement, with anxiety positively correlating with strategic preparation behaviours, extending Norton's investment theory to cultural contexts where identity aspirations override emotional comfort. Second, overwhelming preference for computer-mediated assessment correlated with environmental control desires, self-assessment capabilities, and anxiety management, demonstrating that technological affordances enhance rather than compromise authentic learner agency. Third, sophisticated assessment literacy combined with collaborative learning preferences revealed *collective autonomy*—culturally specific expressions integrating individual metacognitive competence with traditional values emphasising social learning. Cross-construct analysis revealed systematic relationships supporting integrated theoretical explanations, with cultural factors mediating relationships between individual capabilities and environmental preferences. Findings challenge deficit models, instead supporting culturally responsive frameworks that recognize cultural specificity as a scholarly strength. The research contributes theoretical understanding while informing evidence-based practices for inclusive L2 assessment design.

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through hybrid approaches integrating technological affordances, collaborative scaffolding, and identity construction within culturally appropriate frameworks.

Keywords: cultural Responsiveness; Anxious Investment; Collective Autonomy; Technology-mediated Assessment; Oral Presentation

1. Introduction

The theoretical construct of learner agency has gained considerable attention in applied linguistics research, particularly within the paradigm of learner-centred L2 assessment^[1,2]. Learner agency, defined as learners' capacity to act purposefully and reflectively in their language learning processes, represents a fundamental shift from traditional behaviourist assessment models towards more socioconstructivist approaches that recognise learners as active participants in the assessment process^[3,4]. Within this framework, oral presentation assessment serves as a particularly rich site for investigating learner agency, as it requires the integration of multiple linguistic competencies, including phonological accuracy, lexical appropriateness, pragmatic awareness, and discourse organisation^[5,6].

The sociolinguistic dimensions of L2 assessment have emerged as a critical research area, examining how social, cultural, and contextual factors influence both assessment practices and learner responses to assessment^[7,8]. In EFL contexts, where learners have limited exposure to authentic communicative situations, oral presentation assessment provides what Bachman and Palmer^[9] term *task authenticity*—assessment tasks that mirror real-world language use demands. However, the effectiveness of such authentic assessment depends significantly on learners' perceptions, beliefs, and willingness to engage with the assessment process, making learner agency a crucial variable in assessment validity^[10,11].

Contemporary applied linguistics research emphasises the importance of understanding assessment through multiple theoretical lenses, including social cognitive theory, which posits that learning occurs through the dynamic interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors^[12]. Within this framework, oral presentation assessment represents a complex sociolinguistic event where learners must navigate not only linguistic demands but also social expectations, cultural norms, and institutional require-

ments^[13,14]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this landscape by introducing computer-mediated assessment modalities, creating new opportunities to examine how technological mediation affects learner agency and L2 performance^[15,16].

From an interlanguage pragmatics perspective, oral presentations require learners to demonstrate not only grammatical and lexical competence but also pragmatic awareness—the ability to use language appropriately in specific social and academic contexts^[17–19]. Research in interlanguage development suggests that learners' perceptions of their linguistic competence significantly influence their willingness to engage in communicative tasks, creating what Dörnyei^[20] terms the *motivational dimension* of L2 learning. Understanding these perceptions becomes crucial for developing assessment practices that support rather than inhibit interlanguage development.

This investigation contributes to current debates in applied linguistics regarding the relationship between assessment authenticity, learner autonomy, and L2 development^[21,22]. The following literature review establishes the theoretical foundations for examining these complex relationships within culturally specific EFL contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Learner Agency in L2 Assessment

Learner agency has emerged as a central theoretical concern representing a paradigmatic shift from structuralist to post-structuralist understandings of L2 learning and assessment^[21–23]. Defined as learners' capacity to act purposefully and reflectively in their language learning processes, agency represents a fundamental shift from traditional behaviourist assessment models towards socioconstructivist approaches that recognise learners as active participants^[3,4]. Oral presentation assessment serves as a particularly rich site

for investigating agency, requiring integration of multiple linguistic competencies, including phonological accuracy, lexical appropriateness, pragmatic awareness, and discourse organisation^[5,6].

This investigation integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks. Van Lier's^[24] ecological approach conceptualises agency as learners' capacity for reflexive action within their linguistic environment, emphasising dynamic relationships between individual cognition and social context. This positions L2 assessment as complex sociolinguistic activities where learners negotiate identity, demonstrate competence, and exercise autonomy^[25]. Recent research by Alruwaili^[26] demonstrates how students exercise both ecological adaptation and identity investment simultaneously, supporting multi-framework approaches to understanding learner agency.

Norton's^[27] seminal work on investment and identity provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding learner agency in assessment contexts^[28]. Norton argues that learners' investment in L2 practices reflects their desire to acquire symbolic and material resources, challenging traditional notions of motivation as individual psychological traits^[27–30]. In assessment contexts, investment manifests through learners' willingness to engage with evaluation processes and their negotiation of academic discourse conventions^[25]. Alali and Alruwaili^[31] extend this framework by examining how Saudi EFL learners construct *imagined identities* that sustain investment in English learning within technical training contexts.

Kasper and Rose's^[17] interlanguage pragmatics framework identifies pragmatic competence as comprising both pragmalinguistic knowledge (form-function mappings) and sociopragmatic knowledge (contextual appropriateness). In oral presentation contexts, learners must demonstrate both dimensions whilst managing real-time language production under evaluative conditions^[32–37]. Thomas's^[38] distinction between pragmatic failure and grammatical error becomes crucial, as pragmatic failures may be interpreted as social incompetence rather than developmental phenomena^[39,40]. Cohen's^[41] work on pragmatic consciousness-raising suggests that explicit awareness of pragmatic conventions enhances communicative performance, yet limited investigation examines how assessment anxiety affects pragmatic processing in diverse cultural contexts.

2.2. Affective Variables and Cultural Mediation

Cross-cultural research reveals significant variations in how affective variables influence L2 performance across different cultural contexts^[38,39]. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's^[42] foundational research established foreign language anxiety as comprising communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. However, Wang et al.'s^[36] investigation of Chinese and Iranian EAP students demonstrates that cultural values, educational traditions, and linguistic factors fundamentally shape anxiety experiences, with Iranian students showing higher communication apprehension than Chinese learners despite shared EFL contexts. This cultural specificity becomes particularly relevant for Saudi EFL contexts, where traditional pedagogical approaches emphasising accuracy over fluency and collectivist cultural values prioritising group harmony may create unique anxiety patterns not captured by existing Western-developed instruments^[7,8]. MacIntyre et al.'s^[43] pyramid model of willingness to communicate integrates stable personality traits with situational variables, suggesting that learners' assessment participation depends on complex interactions between individual differences and contextual factors^[44,45].

Moving beyond deficit-focused models, Lin and Wang's^[37] research reveals that foreign language enjoyment and engagement significantly predict willingness to communicate, independent of anxiety levels, suggesting that cultivating positive emotional experiences may enhance communicative engagement more effectively than anxiety reduction approaches. Dörnyei's^[20] L2 motivational self-system revolutionised understanding by emphasising future self-concepts and identity construction, suggesting that assessment engagement reflects aspirational identity construction rather than merely current competence^[41,46,47].

2.3. Technology-Mediated Assessment and Environmental Affordances

The integration of technology in language assessment has generated substantial research interest, particularly regarding computer-mediated communicative assessment^[15,48,49]. Warschauer's^[50] concept of technological affordances illuminates how digital environments can enhance or constrain learner agency through temporal flexibil-

ity, multimedia integration, and reduced social evaluation anxiety, while potentially limiting nonverbal communication channels^[51,52]. Chapelle and Chapelle's^[49] framework for computer-assisted language learning evaluation provides theoretical grounding emphasising language learning potential, meaning focus, and authentic assessment contexts.

Emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 provided unprecedented opportunities to examine technology-mediated assessment, though crisis contexts may limit generalizability^[16,53,54]. While some studies report enhanced learner confidence in digital environments^[55], these findings require cautious interpretation as contrasts with traditional assessment may reflect situational factors rather than inherent technological advantages. The digital divide and varying technological literacy levels create equity concerns often overlooked in enthusiasm for computer-mediated assessment.

The cultural specificity of technological engagement becomes particularly relevant for assessment contexts, where traditional evaluation formats may carry cultural legitimacy that digital alternatives lack. In Saudi educational contexts, face-to-face interaction with authority figures during assessments may be valued as demonstrating respect that computer-mediated interaction cannot replicate. Limited research has systematically compared learner agency across traditional and digital formats while accounting for cultural factors, requiring empirical validation across diverse cultural contexts where traditional authority structures may influence technology adoption.

2.4. Assessment Literacy and Learner Autonomy

Assessment literacy has evolved from educator-focused competencies to encompass learners' understanding of assessment processes and criteria^[56]. Stiggins's^[57] formulation emphasises learners' ability to understand assessment purposes, interpret results, and use feedback for improvement, aligning with broader movements toward learner autonomy in L2 education^[58–60].

Little's^[59] influential work distinguishes between psychological autonomy (capacity for self-direction) and political autonomy (freedom from external control), providing theoretical justification for learner-centred assessment approaches. However, this distinction reflects Western individ-

ualistic assumptions that may not translate to collectivist educational contexts where respect for authority and collective harmony remain valued alongside individual achievement. In Saudi educational contexts, learner autonomy may require reconceptualisation to accommodate Islamic values of seeking knowledge through guidance from respected authorities while fostering critical thinking capabilities.

Boud's^[61] research on sustainable assessment emphasises learners' long-term capacity for self-evaluation and performance monitoring, suggesting that effective L2 assessment should develop autonomous assessment capabilities extending beyond formal educational contexts^[57]. The convergence of assessment literacy with learner agency theory reveals important implications extending beyond cognitive skill development, as Norton's investment theory suggests that learners' assessment literacy development reflects identity aspirations rather than merely current evaluation understanding^[25,27].

2.5. Research Gaps and Theoretical Integration

Despite significant advances in understanding individual constructs, limited research has systematically examined how these multiple dimensions converge within authentic academic discourse contexts, particularly in EFL environments where learners face unique challenges demonstrating communicative competence. The predominance of research in Western or East Asian contexts creates substantial gaps in understanding how cultural factors specific to Arabic-speaking, Islamic educational environments influence learner agency in assessment contexts^[26,31].

Contemporary applied linguistics research emphasises understanding assessment through multiple theoretical lenses, including social cognitive theory, which conceptualises learning through dynamic interactions between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors^[12]. Oral presentation assessment represents complex sociolinguistic events where learners must navigate linguistic demands, social expectations, cultural norms, and institutional requirements^[13,14]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this landscape by introducing computer-mediated assessment modalities, creating opportunities to examine how technological mediation affects learner agency^[15,16].

Three critical research gaps emerge from this theoretic-

cal review:

First, cultural specificity in agency expression remains underexplored, with Western-developed frameworks requiring cultural specification to account for how identity aspirations manifest within collectivist contexts where traditional authority relationships coexist with contemporary communicative competence requirements. Alruwaili's^[26] and Alali and Alruwaili's^[31] research demonstrates that Saudi EFL learners construct *potential spaces* for English use and develop *imagined identities* sustaining investment despite institutional constraints. Still, these culturally specific manifestations require systematic investigation within assessment contexts.

Second, affective-technological interactions in assessment contexts need investigation, particularly how cultural factors mediate relationships between anxiety, environmental control, and digital assessment preferences^[62]. The convergence of Wang et al.'s^[36] findings on cultural variations with Lin and Wang's^[37] research on enjoyment factors suggests that effective assessment design must address both emotional regulation and positive engagement simultaneously. Yet, limited research examines how technological affordances might serve these dual functions in diverse cultural contexts.

Third, integrated theoretical approaches are necessary to address the complex interactions between ecological affordances, identity investment, and pragmatic competence development under evaluative pressure. Existing single-framework approaches inadequately represent the sophisticated patterns of learner agency evident in multicultural EFL contexts, where environmental constraints, cultural values, and identity aspirations create unique dynamics^[21,22].

This investigation addresses these gaps by examining learner agency manifestations across affective, linguistic, technological, and evaluative dimensions within Saudi EFL contexts, contributing to the theoretical understanding of cultural specificity in L2 assessment while informing culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. To address these theoretical gaps and contribute to culturally responsive L2 assessment understanding, this investigation examines three interconnected research questions:

RQ1: How do affective variables interact with cultural values to influence learner engagement in oral presentation assessment contexts?

RQ2: What role do technological affordances play in

supporting or constraining authentic learner agency expression in evaluative contexts?

RQ3: How do assessment literacy capabilities manifest within culturally specific frameworks of learner autonomy and collective identity construction?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Building upon the theoretical foundations and empirical gaps identified in the literature review, this quantitative investigation employs an integrated theoretical framework combining van Lier's^[24] ecological approach, Norton's^[27] investment theory, and Kasper and Rose's^[17] interlanguage pragmatics framework to examine culturally mediated expressions of learner agency in Saudi EFL contexts. The design addresses three critical research gaps: (1) cultural specificity in agency expression, (2) affective-technological interactions in assessment contexts, and (3) integrated theoretical approaches across multiple competence domains, leveraging Bandura's^[12] social cognitive framework, examining triadic interactions between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors.

3.2. Participants and Context

Twenty-seven undergraduate EFL learners participated (19 female, 8 male; mean age = 21.3, SD = 1.2), representing intermediate to advanced proficiency levels (CEFR B1-C1) across academic levels 5–8 of an English linguistics program at a Saudi university. All participants were Arabic L1 speakers with 12+ years of English instruction and current enrolment in advanced linguistic courses. Rather than positioning this as a limitation, the investigation leverages cultural and educational specificity as a theoretical opportunity to examine agency within collectivist educational frameworks.

Sample Size Justification: A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.7 indicated $n = 27$ provides adequate power ($1 - \beta = 0.80$) for detecting medium to large effect sizes ($r = 0.50$) at $\alpha = 0.05$ for correlational analysis, with post-hoc analysis confirming actual power of .82 for the largest observed correlation ($r = 0.72$). This aligns with established practices for exploratory cultural research in applied linguistics.

tics^[63,64].

Cultural Homogeneity as Theoretical Strength: The linguistically homogeneous Arabic L1 background enables investigation of cultural specificity while controlling for variation that might confound cross-cultural studies. This addresses Alruwaili's^[26] call for deeper investigation of *potential spaces* for English use within Saudi contexts and supports Alali and Alruwaili's^[31] research on *imagined identities* among Saudi EFL learners.

3.3. Instrumentation

The research instrument operationalises key constructs through a 46-item questionnaire specifically adapted for Saudi EFL contexts, developed through a three-stage validation: (1) initial item generation, (2) expert review by three applied linguistics faculty, and (3) pilot testing with 12 graduate students for cultural appropriateness.

Affective Variables in L2 Performance (8 items, $\alpha = 0.82$): Adapted from Horwitz et al.^[42] FLCAS for oral presentation contexts, incorporating Wang et al.'s^[36] cross-cultural anxiety research and Lin and Wang's^[37] positive emotion factors. Items examine anxiety-engagement relationships, revealing *anxious investment* patterns. Sample item: *I feel anxious before oral presentations, but I still prepare thoroughly.*

Interlanguage Processing Strategies (6 items, $\alpha = 0.78$): Operationalises metacognitive awareness of L2 production processes, drawing from Kasper and Rose's^[17] interlanguage pragmatics framework and Cohen's^[41] pragmatic consciousness-raising research. Items examine strategic L1 utilisation and code-switching patterns. Sample item: *I sometimes think in Arabic first, then translate to English during presentations.*

Technological Mediation and Environmental Affordances (8 items, $\alpha = 0.85$): Examines preferences for computer-mediated versus traditional assessment formats, drawing from Warschauer's^[50] technological affordances framework. Items investigate environmental control desires and digital engagement patterns. Sample item: *I feel more confident presenting online than in traditional classroom settings.*

Assessment Literacy and Cultural Autonomy (16 items, $\alpha = 0.83$): Operationalises understanding of evaluation processes and self-assessment capabilities within cultural frame-

works, drawing from Little's^[59] autonomy constructs, Stiggins's^[57] assessment literacy framework, and Boud's^[61] sustainable assessment principles. Sample item: *I can accurately assess my own presentation performance without instructor feedback.*

Items employ 5-point Likert scales and frequency indicators, presented bilingually (Arabic-English) with back-translation verification. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the four-factor structure ($\chi^2 = 1.23$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.27$; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05).

3.4. Data Collection and Cultural Responsiveness

Data were collected via an anonymous online survey through the university's Blackboard platform during three weeks in May 2024. All 45 eligible students enrolled in advanced linguistics courses were invited; the final sample of 27 represents a 60% response rate, acceptable for voluntary educational research^[63]. Participants completed the questionnaire in a single session (average: 18 minutes), with minimal missing data (<2%). The bilingual format addressed linguistic barriers while maintaining ecological validity for participants navigating Arabic-English academic contexts.

3.5. Data Analysis Framework

Data analysis employed SPSS 28.0 with both descriptive and inferential procedures. Prior to analysis, data were screened for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions. Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated normal distributions ($p > 0.05$), while scatterplot examination confirmed linear relationships and homogeneous variance.

Descriptive Analysis: Provided pattern identification and participant characteristics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions interpreted through theoretical lenses to identify patterns consistent with *anxious investment*, *collective autonomy*, and technology-enhanced agency hypotheses.

Correlational Analysis: Pearson correlations examined relationships between continuous variables, focusing on anxiety-engagement relationships testing *anxious investment* patterns, technology preference-environmental control associations examining ecological affordances, and self-assessment capability-peer assessment confidence relation-

ships investigating *collective autonomy* expressions.

Categorical Analysis: Chi-square tests examined relationships between academic levels and assessment format preferences. Cramer’s V provided effect size measures following Cohen’s^[64] conventions (0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large).

Statistical Significance: Evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$ level, with correlation interpretation following Cohen’s conventions: small (0.10–0.29), medium (0.30–0.49), and large (0.50+) effects. Confidence intervals (95% CI) were calculated for all correlations, with effect sizes reported for all significant relationships to ensure practical significance alongside statistical significance^[64].

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The investigation received IRB approval (Protocol #2024-EFL-027) and adhered to ethical principles for culturally responsive research^[65,66]. Participants provided digital informed consent after reviewing bilingual information about research purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits. The online survey generated anonymous participant codes with no identifying information linkage, with responses stored on encrypted university servers.

Researcher Positionality: The researchers acknowledge their position as L2 educators within the same institutional context, providing cultural insider knowledge while maintaining analytical objectivity through systematic quantitative methodology^[67]. Data analysis was conducted collaboratively with external validation to address potential bias.

Cultural Strengths Framework: This investigation adopts a cultural strengths framework, positioning diversity as a scholarly resource rather than a limitation, challenging deficit models, and investigating how cultural specificity serves as a resource for sophisticated agency expression.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Participant Profile and Assessment Experience Context

Participants demonstrated extensive assessment experience relevant to the investigation, with 85.2% having completed 5 oral presentations across multiple linguistic subdisciplines, including applied linguistics, phonetics, discourse analysis, and literary studies. This breadth of assessment exposure provides the foundation for meaningful investigation of learner agency, as Norton’s^[27] investment theory suggests that agency develops through sustained engagement with challenging L2 practices. Descriptive statistics for the primary constructs are presented in **Table 1**. Technology preference scores demonstrated the highest mean ($M = 3.76$), challenging traditional conceptualisations of assessment authenticity while supporting Warschauer’s^[50] framework of technological affordances. Assessment literacy scores ($M = 3.45$) suggest well-developed metacognitive awareness, while moderate interlanguage processing scores ($M = 2.89$) indicate strategic rather than deficit-based L1 utilisation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability for Primary Constructs.

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max	α	Theoretical Framework
Affective Variables	3.24	0.67	2.1	4.5	0.82	Horwitz et al. ^[42] ; Wang et al. ^[36]
Interlanguage Processing	2.89	0.54	1.8	4.0	0.78	Kasper & Rose ^[17] ; Cohen ^[41]
Technology Preferences	3.76	0.71	2.3	5.0	0.85	Warschauer ^[50] ; Chapelle ^[49]
Assessment Literacy	3.45	0.59	2.4	4.6	0.83	Little ^[59] ; Stiggins ^[57]

4.2. The *Anxious Investment*: Extending Norton’s Investment Theory Through Cultural Mediation

4.2.1. Statistical Evidence for Culturally Mediated Anxiety-Engagement Patterns

The quantitative findings reveal theoretically significant patterns that extend beyond traditional anxiety-

performance relationships documented in Western contexts. The investigation reveals a theoretically significant paradox that directly addresses the first research gap regarding cultural specificity in agency expression. While 74% of participants report pre-presentation anxiety—confirming the relevance of foreign language anxiety constructs established by Horwitz et al.^[42]—an identical 74% simultaneously disagree with avoiding presentations due to low self-confidence.

This pattern creates what we term *anxious investment*, extending Norton's^[27] investment theory to account for cultural contexts where identity aspirations override individual comfort zones. The correlational patterns supporting the *anxious investment* framework are detailed in **Table 2**. The positive correlation between anxiety levels and strategic

preparation behaviours ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$) fundamentally challenges Western psychological models that position anxiety as primarily inhibiting, instead supporting the complex cultural mediation patterns identified by Wang et al.^[36] in their cross-cultural investigation of communication apprehension.

Table 2. Anxiety-Investment Correlational Patterns.

Variable Pair	r	p	Effect Size	Theoretical Connection
Anxiety × Strategic Preparation	0.58	< 0.01	Large	Norton ^[27] investment theory
Anxiety × Note-taking Behaviour	0.63	< 0.01	Large	van Lier ^[24] ecological affordances
Anxiety × Presentation Avoidance	-0.12	> 0.05	Small	Challenge to deficit models
Fear of Failure × Preparation	0.71	<0 .01	Large	Dörnyei ^[20] motivational self-system

The absence of a negative correlation between anxiety and engagement ($r = -0.12, p > 0.05$) contradicts traditional deficit approaches while supporting Norton's^[27] argument that investment reflects desire for symbolic resource acquisition rather than mere psychological comfort.

4.2.2. Cultural Specification of Investment Theory

This *anxious investment* pattern extends Norton's^[27] theoretical framework by demonstrating how cultural values specific to Saudi educational contexts—where educational achievement carries significant social and familial implications aligned with Islamic values of knowledge seeking—sustain learner engagement despite emotional challenges. The correlation between fear of failure and strategic preparation ($r = 0.71, p < 0.01$) supports Alali and Alruwaili's^[29] findings on *imagined identities* among Saudi technical training students, where learners construct future self-concepts that motivate continued investment in challenging L2 practices.

The preference for collaborative presentation formats (55.5%) correlates significantly with peer assessment confidence ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$), revealing culturally mediated expressions of agency that challenge Western individualistic assumptions about autonomy development. This pattern aligns with Lin and Wang's^[37] findings on Chinese university students' preferences for supportive assessment formats, extending their positive psychology approach to L2 engagement by demonstrating how collaborative affordances provide anxiety management while maintaining investment in communicative competence development.

The persistence of engagement despite anxiety reflects what might be termed *culturally mediated investment* that integrates Norton's identity construction theory with the cultural specificity demonstrated by Wang et al.^[36]. Rather than representing incomplete autonomy development, these patterns suggest sophisticated navigation between individual psychological responses and collective cultural values that honour both personal competence development and traditional educational frameworks, emphasising respect for authority and community support.

4.3. Technology-Enhanced Environmental Agency: Reconceptualising Assessment Authenticity

4.3.1. Overwhelming Preference for Digital Assessment Contexts

Moving beyond affective dimensions, the technological preferences data challenge fundamental assumptions about assessment authenticity in L2 evaluation. The preference for computer-mediated assessment represents the most theoretically significant finding for reconceptualising assessment authenticity, with 70.3% of participants finding online presentations more effective than traditional classroom delivery. This preference directly challenges traditional conceptualisations of task authenticity outlined by Bachman and Palmer^[9] while supporting Warschauer's^[50] framework of technological affordances as legitimate environmental resources for communicative competence demonstration. The relationships between technology preferences and various agency indicators are presented in **Table 3**. The correlation

between online preference and environmental control desires ($r = 0.72, p < 0.01$) provides strong empirical support for van Lier's^[24] ecological approach by demonstrating that learners actively seek environmental affordances that optimise their communicative performance capabilities. Rather

than technological dependence, this pattern reveals sophisticated agency operating through strategic environmental modification that extends van Lier's ecological framework to include digital contexts as legitimate spaces for authentic L2 performance.

Table 3. Technology-Agency Correlation Matrix.

Technology Preference ×	r	p	Effect Size	Theoretical Framework
Environmental Control	0.72	< 0.01	Large	van Lier ^[24] ecological approach
Self-Assessment Capability	0.58	< 0.05	Large	Little ^[59] psychological autonomy
Anxiety Management	0.65	< 0.01	Large	Horwitz et al. ^[42] anxiety reduction
Autonomous Learning Preference	0.54	< 0.05	Large	Benson ^[3] learner autonomy

4.3.2. Extending Chapelle's CALL Framework

The convergence of technology preference with self-assessment capability ($r = 0.58, p < 0.05$) extends Chapelle and Chapelle's^[49] computer-assisted language learning evaluation framework by demonstrating that digital environments support rather than replace metacognitive development. This finding challenges assumptions about construct validity in computer-mediated assessment^[53] by showing that technological mediation may enhance rather than compromise learner agency when properly implemented.

The preference for asynchronous discussion formats (66.6%) provides additional evidence for temporal dimensions of technological affordances that Chapelle's framework identifies as crucial for authentic CALL implementation. The correlation between temporal flexibility and self-assessment capability ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$) suggests that time affordances enhance metacognitive processing rather than simply reducing performance pressure, supporting meaning-focused assessment approaches that prioritise communicative purpose achievement over format replication.

4.3.3. Cultural Mediation of Technological Engagement

The overwhelming preference for technology-mediated assessment within Saudi educational contexts requires interpretation through the cultural lens established in the literature review. Traditional authority relationships—where direct face-to-face evaluation with instructors carries specific cultural meanings related to respect demonstration and hierarchical acknowledgement—may be modified through digital interaction in ways that reduce cultural evaluation anxiety while maintaining Islamic values of respect for knowledge

and authority.

This pattern extends recent research on emergency remote teaching^[16,57] by revealing that enhanced confidence in digital environments may reflect cultural affordances rather than simply technological conveniences. The correlation between technology preference and anxiety management ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$) suggests that computer-mediated assessment provides culturally appropriate solutions to evaluation challenges that traditional formats may not address for learners navigating between collectivist cultural values and individualistic academic discourse expectations.

4.3.4. Implications for Assessment Authenticity Theory

These findings fundamentally challenge Bachman and Palmer's^[9] traditional conceptualisation of task authenticity by demonstrating that format replication may be less important than communicative purpose achievement and learner agency optimisation. The strong correlations between technology preference and multiple competence indicators suggest that authentic assessment should focus on environmental conditions that enable optimal communicative performance rather than rigid adherence to traditional evaluation formats.

The evidence supports O'Sullivan's^[32] argument for reconsidering authenticity in second language assessment by showing that technological mediation may enhance rather than compromise what Bachman^[30] terms *interactional authenticity*—where learners' engagement reflects genuine communicative purposes rather than mere compliance with institutional requirements. The sophisticated environmental optimisation strategies demonstrated through technology preference patterns indicate that digital assessment may pro-

vide more authentic opportunities for agency expression than traditional formats that may artificially constrain communicative performance.

4.4. Collective Autonomy: Cultural Specification of Assessment Literacy

4.4.1. Sophisticated Assessment Literacy Within Traditional Frameworks

Complementing the affective and technological findings, the assessment literacy patterns reveal sophisticated metacognitive capabilities that extend Little's^[59] autonomy constructs while challenging Western individualistic assump-

tions about autonomous development in collectivist educational contexts. The finding that 77.8% of participants demonstrate self-assessment capability represents what Little conceptualises as *psychological autonomy*, yet this emerges within Saudi educational contexts traditionally characterised by teacher-centred authority structures that emphasise guidance from respected authorities. The assessment literacy patterns and their cultural integration indicators are summarised in **Table 4**. The correlation between self-assessment capability and peer assessment confidence ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$) reveals what Stiggins^[57] conceptualises as transferable assessment literacy extending across multiple evaluation domains.

Table 4. Assessment Literacy and Cultural Integration Patterns.

Assessment Capability	Percentage	Correlation	Cultural Integration Indicator
Self-Assessment Capability	77.8%	$r = 0.71$ with peer assessment	Individual metacognition
Peer Assessment Confidence	66.6%	$r = 0.68$ with collaborative learning	Social learning integration
Bias Awareness	33.3%	$r = 0.54$ with academic level	Critical evaluation sophistication
Peer Observation Benefits	62.9%	$r = 0.62$ with group preference	Collective learning preference

However, this statistical relationship requires cultural interpretation, as it emerges within educational contexts where Islamic values emphasise seeking knowledge through community engagement and mutual support rather than individual competition.

4.4.2. Collective Autonomy as Cultural Adaptation

The recognition of potential bias in peer evaluation by 33.3% of participants demonstrates critical awareness extending beyond basic assessment capability to include understanding of evaluation validity and fairness concerns that Davies^[38] identifies as crucial for sophisticated assessment literacy. This bias awareness correlates significantly with higher academic levels ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that assessment literacy sophistication develops alongside L2 proficiency through the sustained investment patterns identified in Norton's^[27] theoretical framework.

The combination of high individual capability (77.8% self-assessment) with strong collaborative learning preferences creates what we term collective autonomy—a culturally specific expression of learner agency that integrates Little's^[59] psychological autonomy with Saudi cultural values emphasising community learning and mutual support. This

concept extends Boud's^[64] sustainable assessment framework by demonstrating how autonomous capabilities can develop within rather than despite traditional authority structures when appropriate cultural scaffolding is provided.

The substantial benefit derived from peer observation (62.9%) provides empirical support for social cognitive approaches outlined by Bandura^[12] while revealing collaborative dimensions of agency that challenge Western individualistic assumptions about autonomous development. The correlation between peer observation benefits and group presentation preference ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that Saudi EFL learners express agency through social learning mechanisms that integrate individual competence development with cultural values emphasising collective harmony and mutual support.

4.4.3. Integration with Pragmatic Competence Development

The assessment literacy sophistication connects directly to the interlanguage pragmatics challenges identified in the literature review. The correlation between self-assessment capability and pragmatic awareness ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$) supports Cohen's^[41] pragmatic consciousness-raising framework by demonstrating that metacognitive awareness extends across

linguistic and evaluative domains simultaneously.

However, this integration must be interpreted through the cultural-pragmatic navigation challenges that Thomas^[38] identifies in academic discourse contexts. The sophisticated bias awareness (33.3%) combined with collaborative learning preferences suggests that Saudi EFL learners develop pragmatic competence through social evaluation processes that honour both Western academic discourse expectations and traditional cultural values, emphasising respect for authority and community guidance.

The relationship between assessment literacy and pedagogical awareness—where 51.8% identify needs for specialised presentation skills instruction despite general course satisfaction (59.2%)—indicates strategic resource identification that extends Norton’s^[27] investment theory. This pattern demonstrates how assessment literacy serves identity construction through strategic pedagogical resource acquisition rather than mere evaluation capability development.

4.4.4. Implications for Autonomy Theory in Diverse Contexts

These findings require reconceptualisation of Little’s^[59] autonomy constructs to accommodate cultural contexts where autonomous capabilities develop through culturally responsive scaffolding that maintains respect for traditional authority relationships while fostering critical thinking capabilities. The correlation between instructor

criterion clarity and self-assessment capability ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that transparent evaluation standards support rather than inhibit autonomous development when implemented through culturally appropriate pedagogical frameworks.

The collective autonomy concept challenges either/or conceptualisations of traditional versus progressive pedagogical approaches by revealing how sophisticated metacognitive awareness can develop within cultural frameworks that honour both individual competence development and community values. This finding extends recent research on culturally responsive pedagogy by demonstrating practical integration of Western academic requirements with traditional Saudi educational values.

4.5. Cross-Construct Integration and Theoretical Synthesis

Cross-construct analysis reveals systematic relationships supporting integrated rather than isolated theoretical explanations, as demonstrated in **Table 5**. The convergence of anxiety-preparation correlations ($r = 0.58$), technology-anxiety relationships ($r = 0.65$), and assessment literacy-environmental optimisation patterns ($r = 0.58$) indicates that emotional regulation, environmental modification, and metacognitive awareness operate as complementary dimensions of learner agency.

Table 5. Theoretical Framework Integration Matrix.

Framework Integration	Primary Correlation	Secondary Relationships	Theoretical Implication
Norton × van Lier	$r = 0.65$ (anxiety × technology)	Environmental optimization serves investment	Identity construction through ecological modification
Little × Norton	$r = 0.71$ (assessment literacy × investment)	Autonomy develops through identity aspiration	Psychological autonomy requires cultural mediation
Kasper & Rose × van Lier	$r = 0.63$ (pragmatic awareness × environment)	Pragmatic competence depends on context optimisation	Interlanguage development requires ecological support

These convergent patterns establish that learner agency operates through integrated systems described by social cognitive theory^[12], where cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors interact dynamically rather than independently. The three primary theoretical contributions—anxious investment, technology-enhanced environmental agency, and collective autonomy—collectively advance applied linguistics by demonstrating that learner agency in diverse cultural contexts operates through sophisticated integration of indi-

vidual competencies with cultural values and environmental affordances.

4.6. Practical Implications and Future Research Directions

The convergent findings support hybrid assessment approaches integrating technological affordances^[50], cultural scaffolding requirements, and identity investment opportuni-

ties^[28]. Implementation should include environmental flexibility, temporal accommodation, and collaborative components honouring traditional values while fostering individual competence development.

The *anxious investment* patterns suggest acknowledging emotional complexity as sophisticated engagement rather than limitation, focusing anxiety management on environmental support rather than individual remediation. The sophisticated assessment literacy (77.8% self-assessment capability) suggests readiness for enhanced learner participation in assessment design, building on existing metacognitive capabilities while respecting traditional authority relationships.

Critical future directions include longitudinal studies tracking *anxious investment*, environmental optimisation, and *collective autonomy* pattern development; cross-cultural comparative research across Arabic-speaking and collectivist contexts; mixed-methods investigations combining quantitative patterns with qualitative exploration; and intervention studies implementing culturally responsive approaches while examining long-term outcomes.

The evidence establishes that learner agency in Saudi EFL contexts operates through sophisticated integration of individual competencies with cultural values and environmental affordances, supporting innovative pedagogical approaches that enhance educational outcomes through culturally responsive recognition of diverse learner capabilities.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Key Findings and Theoretical Synthesis

This investigation reveals that learner agency in Saudi EFL assessment contexts operates through sophisticated interactions between cultural values, technological affordances, and identity construction processes that challenge traditional Western-centric models. The research demonstrates how affective variables interact with cultural frameworks in ways that fundamentally reshape our understanding of anxiety's role in L2 performance. Rather than serving purely inhibitive functions, anxiety coexists with sustained assessment engagement when cultural values emphasising educational achievement as religious and familial obligation support learner investment despite emotional challenges.

The examination of technological affordances reveals that digital environments can enhance rather than com-

promise authentic learner agency expression. Participants demonstrated strong preferences for computer-mediated assessment formats, with these preferences correlating significantly with environmental control desires, self-assessment capabilities, and anxiety management strategies. This pattern challenges traditional conceptualisations of assessment authenticity by suggesting that environmental optimisation through technology may provide more authentic opportunities for communicative competence demonstration than rigid adherence to conventional evaluation formats.

Assessment literacy capabilities manifest within culturally specific frameworks that integrate individual metacognitive awareness with traditional values, emphasising community learning and mutual support. The sophisticated self-assessment capabilities demonstrated by participants coexist with strong collaborative learning preferences, revealing what emerges as *collective autonomy*—a culturally adapted form of learner agency that develops within rather than despite traditional authority structures when appropriate cultural scaffolding is provided.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions to Applied Linguistics

Three primary theoretical contributions advance understanding of learner agency across diverse cultural contexts. The concept of *anxious investment* extends Norton's investment theory by demonstrating how cultural mediation enables sustained engagement despite emotional challenges when learners perceive assessment opportunities as necessary for accessing symbolic resources valued within their cultural contexts. This contribution reconciles apparent contradictions in cross-cultural anxiety research while providing frameworks for understanding how identity aspirations can override individual comfort zones.

Technology-enhanced environmental agency challenges traditional assessment authenticity models by revealing that digital affordances support strategic environmental optimisation, enabling optimal communicative performance. This finding extends van Lier's^[24] ecological approach to include technological contexts as legitimate spaces for authentic L2 performance while addressing concerns about construct validity in computer-mediated assessment through empirical evidence of enhanced rather than compromised learner agency.

Collective autonomy reconceptualises Western individualistic autonomy models by revealing culturally specific expressions that honour both individual competence development and community values. This contribution extends Little's^[59] autonomy constructs to accommodate contexts where psychological self-direction develops through culturally responsive scaffolding that maintains respect for traditional authority relationships while fostering critical thinking capabilities.

These contributions collectively demonstrate that effective theoretical frameworks must accommodate rather than ignore cultural variation, supporting movement beyond universal models toward culturally responsive approaches that recognise diversity as a scholarly strength, enhancing rather than limiting educational outcomes.

5.3. Implications for Assessment Practice

The findings support hybrid assessment approaches that integrate technological flexibility with collaborative scaffolding and identity construction opportunities within culturally appropriate frameworks. Practical implementation should prioritise environmental options enabling learners to optimise assessment conditions while maintaining communicative authenticity, temporal accommodation supporting diverse processing and preparation styles, and collaborative components that honour traditional values while fostering individual competence development.

The research suggests that anxiety management in assessment contexts should focus on environmental support through technological affordances and collaborative formats rather than individual remediation approaches that may ignore cultural factors sustaining both emotional challenges and continued investment in challenging L2 practices. Educational policies should thoughtfully integrate digital assessment innovations developed during emergency remote teaching while maintaining attention to cultural values, technological equity, and long-term competence development goals.

The sophisticated assessment literacy demonstrated by participants indicates readiness for enhanced learner participation in assessment design and evaluation processes that build on existing metacognitive capabilities while respecting traditional authority relationships through culturally responsive adaptation rather than replacement of cultural strengths.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The single-institution design and cultural homogeneity, while providing depth for understanding Saudi EFL experiences, limit generalizability to other contexts and require replication across diverse cultural settings to test the broader applicability of theoretical contributions. The cross-sectional design prevents examination of agency development over time, while self-report measures may introduce response bias despite anonymous administration procedures.

Data collection during COVID-19 transition periods may have influenced technology preferences beyond normal circumstances, though this provided unprecedented opportunities for examining digital assessment affordances within naturalistic educational contexts. The correlational design prevents causal inferences, though theoretical frameworks support directional hypotheses for future experimental investigation.

Future research should pursue longitudinal investigations tracking the evolution of *anxious investment*, environmental optimisation, and *collective autonomy* patterns to illuminate developmental trajectories and inform pedagogical sequencing decisions. Cross-cultural comparative studies examining these concepts across different Arabic-speaking, Islamic, and collectivist educational contexts would test generalisability while contributing to broader theoretical frameworks for understanding cultural mediation in L2 assessment.

Mixed-methods investigations combining quantitative patterns with qualitative exploration would provide deeper insights into mechanisms through which cultural values, technological affordances, and identity construction interact in authentic assessment contexts. Intervention studies implementing culturally responsive assessment approaches based on these findings would offer practical guidance while examining long-term communicative competence outcomes to address authenticity concerns.

5.5. Significance for L2 Assessment

This investigation establishes that learner agency operates through sophisticated integration of individual competencies with cultural values and environmental affordances, requiring theoretical approaches that recognise cultural specificity as a resource for rather than a barrier to autonomous de-

velopment. The research contributes to growing recognition that effective L2 assessment must move beyond standardised universal models toward culturally responsive frameworks that accommodate diverse expressions of learner agency while maintaining academic rigour.

The sophisticated agency patterns documented indicate that culturally diverse learners possess complex capabilities that, when properly recognised and supported through integrated theoretical approaches, enhance rather than compromise academic achievement while preserving cultural identity. By positioning cultural variation as essential for a comprehensive understanding of learner agency, this research supports the movement toward inclusive pedagogical approaches that honour learners' cultural heritage while fostering advanced L2 competencies necessary for global success.

The theoretical and practical implications extend beyond Saudi EFL contexts to inform culturally responsive approaches across diverse educational settings, contributing to applied linguistics scholarship that recognises cultural diversity as fundamental to understanding authentic learning processes. As L2 education continues evolving toward more inclusive approaches, the integration of environmental affordances, identity construction opportunities, and cultural scaffolding principles provides foundations for assessment innovations that support rather than constrain the sophisticated capabilities that culturally diverse learners bring to their educational experiences.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.A.A.; investigation, M.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, M.A.A.; writing—review and editing, H.M.A.; supervision, H.M.A.; project administration, H.M.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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