

Third Language Learning: Insights from MA Students Through the L2 Motivational Self-System & Attribution Theory Lenses

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Abstract

This qualitative study uses a semi-structured interview to investigate why Saudi learners stop learning a third language and whether these reasons are permanent or temporary. The participants were six female master's degree students who had experience learning a third language outside of formal education or informal settings. This study identifies the most popular foreign languages learned as a third language (L3) by female postgraduate students in Saudi Arabia. It examines their attitudes and motivation towards learning these languages, explores the reasons why they stop learning them, and draws implications for foreign language teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. The findings indicated that most participants who stopped learning had temporary reasons, such as lack of time and being busy with work or life responsibilities, even though they had the motivation to learn at the beginning. The study also revealed the profound influence of social media and the internet on the participants' learning process, underscoring the role of technology in foreign language learning.

Keywords: foreign language learning, multilingualism, postgraduate students, L3, plurilingualism, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Learning languages is essential for people to communicate with each other. Globalization and social media have impacted our lives and influenced people to learn languages not spoken in their countries. Despite terminological disagreement on what defines an L3, the study of trilingualism and the acquisition of L3 has emerged as a new field of study in recent years, reflecting the popularity of third and fourth language learning (Griessler, 2001). Explaining further, Cenoz (2013, p. 73) states that “[s]ome learners are bilinguals who actively use their two languages in everyday life and are learning a third language. They may be early bilinguals exposed to two languages from birth, but may also have acquired a second language at school.” For example, we refer to individuals who are learning a third language, such as immigrant children who speak one language at home and another at school, or individuals who speak a majority language in bilingual educational programs, as ‘active bilinguals’. On the other hand, we refer to learners who have already acquired a foreign language through school or community interaction, and who are currently engaged in learning a third language, an additional foreign language, as ‘foreign language users’ (Cenoz, 2013). According to Cenoz (2013), studies on bilingualism and second language acquisition (SLA) have not taken into account the distinctions between target language acquisition (TLA) and SLA, and thus TLA can be seen as a reaction. Since TLA is a large field, studies on variables influencing its evolution are concentrated, and although multilingualism is a much larger concept that does not always relate to acquisition, the phrase TLA is occasionally used synonymously with the term “multilingualism.” Bilingualism refers to the proficient ability to communicate in two languages in various contexts, encompassing speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Trilingualism, on the other hand, denotes the capacity to speak and understand three languages. A trilingual individual is someone who is skilled in three different languages and can effectively use them in various situations. Multilingualism, on the other hand, refers to the ability to use and understand more than two languages and is a broader term that includes individuals who speak four, five, or even more languages. Plurilingualism, on the other hand, goes beyond simply learning multiple languages and includes the ability to use many languages in different settings and combine linguistic skills in a flexible manner (for all these definitions, see Grosjean, 2010; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Council of Europe, 2001). In this paper, to reduce confusion to a minimum, we have opted to use the term ‘third language’ or L3 to refer to the language the Saudi MA students chose to learn after Arabic (L1) and English (L2 or FL). These postgraduate students learn Arabic as

their mother tongue and English as their foreign language at school and university.

2. Review of the Literature

While it is possible to teach second, third, and additional languages in contexts where only one language is spoken, the phenomenon of TLA is more commonly observed among immigrants and those who speak minority languages (Cenoz, 2013). Third language learning—also known as trilingualism or multilingualism beyond two languages—involves a unique set of cognitive and linguistic processes compared to learning a second language and involves various aspects, such as prior experience with language learning, effects of transfer between languages, interference, language distance, learning strategies, cognitive benefits, motivation and cultural factors, age and learning context, language use and maintenance, and individual differences, to name a few.

2.1 Initial Language Experience

Individuals who decide to acquire a third language usually have past experience with two languages, which might influence their approach and proficiency in the third language. Swain et al. (1990) studied the impact of L1 literacy on L3 proficiency early on, and their findings support the notions that learning a mother tongue can enhance the learning of a third language and that bilingual education programs supporting L1 literacy are generally beneficial for learning other languages. For example, prior experience with a second language (L2) can substantially affect learners' perception of tones in a third language (L3) and influence perception in an L3 setting, altering the auditory cues that are prioritized during tone perception (Qin & Jongman, 2015). According to the results of a more recent study, Sadouki (2021), previously acquired languages can have a beneficial cross-linguistic influence and help speed up the process of learning the target language. In bilingual societies, linguistic abilities acquired in the L1/L2, and patterns of language use may subsequently affect L3 development, according to Soto-Corominas, Segura, Roquet, Navarro, and Met (2024). This means that students whose proficiency in L1 is relatively weak may not be able to take advantage of their bilingualism to the same extent as their peers with stronger abilities, putting them at risk of falling behind in L3 development. They propose that L3 development may benefit from promoting skills in a specific bilingual community's less spoken language. These studies demonstrate the beneficial impact of L1 and L2 literacy on L3 learning (Soto-Corominas et al., 2024). However, Hauk's (2015) study of communicative anxiety revealed significant fluctuations depending on whether learners are using L2 or L3, suggesting that anxiety levels in L3 are typically higher than in L2, influenced by factors such as the learner's native language, previous language experience, and the social environment.

2.2 Transfer Effects

Learners frequently carry over linguistic traits, pedagogies, and even cultural components from their first and second languages into their third language. Depending on the similarities and contrasts between languages, this might help or hinder learning. Bartolotti and Marian (2016) argue that for bilingual L3 learners, it is important to understand how their two existing languages interact when learning a third language. In their research, "twenty English-German bilingual adults were taught an artificial language containing 48 novel written words that varied orthogonally in English and German wordlikeness..." (p. 2733), where the results show that bilinguals use both languages during L3 learning, supporting a scaffolding learning model, and "that bilinguals can flexibly transfer L1 and L2 knowledge to the L3 as appropriate at early stages of instruction" (p. 2738). Zibin, Allawama, Akayleh and Naimat (2024) studied forty university students in Jordan and found that learners' reliance on Arabic is due to structural similarities that are highly aligned in L1 and L3. For example, Arabic and French are more typologically similar than English and French. They also observed a positive transfer between the two languages, and they suggest that this transfer becomes stronger with exposure, unlike in the early stages of acquisition. In a similar vein, participants' remarks in a study by Sadouki (2021) demonstrate that there is some knowledge of the potential linkages between the function of metalinguistic awareness and the role of L2 in L3 vocabulary 'decoding/learning' because French and English are both Indo-European languages and more typologically connected; they use French as a scaffold when studying English. However, Slabakova (2016) posits that the transfer from previously acquired languages (L1 and L2) 'does not occur in a wholesale manner', but rather selectively and comprehensively, shaped by numerous cognitive, experiential, and linguistic factors. Unless learners' L2 proficiency enables them to develop positive transfer or they have separate language use, the transfer from L1 to L2 is inevitable in a bilingual context. However, we cannot predict or generalize this transfer, as it primarily depends on the mastery of L2, the language distance between the three languages, and the developed pragmatic competence in L3 (Belfarhi, 2019). According to Sanchez (2014), L2 can activate and integrate with L3, prompting learners to transfer vocabulary or grammatical structures from L2 into L3 production, which intensifies over time, particularly in multilingual environments where learners simultaneously engage with multiple languages. Sokolova and Plisov's (2019) study also shows that cross-linguistic transfer can happen in different ways depending on how a learner's first foreign

language (L2) interacts with their first language (L1). This shows that the grammar, sentence structure, and pronunciation that students already know have a big impact on how well they learn a new language in formal settings.

2.3 Interference

Similar to how transfer can facilitate learning, interference can happen when characteristics of one language inadvertently affect how another is used, especially in vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics. It is a normal aspect of learning a language, and although it might result in mistakes, it also provides information about the relationships between languages and the learner's cognitive processes. As previously mentioned, both L1 and L2 can positively influence learners when they are learning L3, enabling them to utilize a wider range of linguistic skills. For instance, they can draw connections between new language structures, vocabulary, and ways of communication to both languages they already know, rather than just one, as is the case for monolingual individuals (Cenoz, 2013). However, it is not always positive transfer or interference. According to Mägiste (1984), the likelihood of interference increases with the number of languages a learner possesses, and it doesn't originate from merely passively understanding a language. Furthermore, when attempting to predict which aspects of language are expected to exhibit interference, Mägiste (1982) believes it depends on the task, the approach, and the degree of language processing. For example, in a study on immigrant students, Edele, Kempert and Schotte (2018) discovered that balanced bilinguals with high proficiency in both their first language (L1, like Turkish or Russian) and L2 (German) learn L3 better than monolinguals, while students who are only proficient in their minority language (L1) or have limited proficiency in both L1 and L2 do not benefit from this advantage—i.e. immigrant students' proficiency in L3 is primarily influenced by their competence in L2, not L1. Sánchez (2014) suggests that multilingual individuals do not merely segregate their language systems; rather, they frequently encounter an interaction that can both enhance and hinder L3 acquisition, influenced by characteristics such as proficiency and linguistic similarity, indicating that the dynamics of L3 acquisition cannot be comprehended without acknowledging the influence of previously acquired languages (such as L2), which may either hinder or facilitate L3 learning based on factors like language similarity, learner experience, and context. Huang, Steinkrauss, and Verspoor (2020) investigated whether learning two languages simultaneously impacts the proficiency and development of the L2, using data from Chinese learners studying both English (L2) and Russian (L3), where the main finding revealed that learning an L3 does not necessarily hinder L2 development but introduces more variability in certain areas, such as fluency.

2.4 Language Distance

The linguistic gap between the learner's L1 and L2 and the third language is an important factor. Due to shared elements, languages with comparable structural makeup are generally easier to learn than those with more dissimilar structures, which can be more difficult. According to Belfarhi (2019), not only do languages differ grammatically, but they also differ pragmatically, and even languages from the same family may differ pragmatically, let alone those descending from different families. For example, the EFL learner from Algeria, who speaks both Arabic and French, is particularly concerned with pragmatic transfer. While Arabic shows linguistic distance from English, French is pragmatically closer to English than Arabic. However, Algerian EFL learners prefer to transfer from Arabic to English rather than from French (Belfarhi, 2019). However, there are some linguistic characteristics or structures (gender and inflectional morphology) that are more comparable between Arabic and French than between French and English, even though Arabic and French are members of different language families—Semitic and Romance, respectively (Zibin et al., 2024). Sadouki's (2021) findings demonstrate that the participants' increased cognitive control during language learning is a result of the foreign languages they learn having similar linguistic structures. According to Bartolotti and Marian (2016), in language learning, similarity to one language yielded the same advantage as dual-language overlap, while 'wordlikeness' in each language increased the accuracy of word generation as when linguistic overlap occurs, it can be a very useful tool and even for those who may have had difficulty learning a foreign language, acquisition happens rather easily due to their resemblance to already-used terms and patterns. Llama, Cardoso and Collins (2009) examined the impact of two primary factors—language distance (typology) and language status (L2 as native or non-native)—on the phonological acquisition of a L3 and found that L2 phonological characteristics were transferred to the L3 more significantly than anticipated based on linguistic similarity. According to certain research, learners who are already bilingual—that is, who have established their L1 and L2 parameters appropriately—seem to pick up an L3 comparatively more quickly and possibly more skillfully than learners who pick up an L2; however, the connection and patterns of language dominance between the languages may affect variation, and the way in which prior non-native languages were learned could also influence the results (Klein, 1995). Wach (2016) emphasizes that cross-linguistic transfer from L1 can serve both as a facilitative tool and a potential source of errors, depending on the

similarities and differences between the languages involved. A significant insight from Sokolova and Plisov's (2019) research is that diverse linguistic backgrounds might result in distinct problems or benefits for L3 learners, where students whose L2 was French and those who acquired German as L2 exhibited distinct patterns of influence on their English (L3) production, including verb placement and sound, which corroborates hypotheses indicating that linguistic similarity and the sequence of acquisition significantly influence the impact of cross-linguistic transfer on L3 learning.

2.5 Language Learning Strategies

To improve their proficiency in a third language, effective learners frequently use specific strategies such as vocabulary learning techniques, immersion exposure, and practice in authentic contexts. When learning a second language, bilinguals have an advantage over monolinguals because they are more experienced language learners, have developed specific learning skills and strategies, and can draw from a wider range of linguistic and cultural contexts. "When facing the task of learning a third language, these skills and strategies can be reactivated and adapted to the new challenge" (Cenoz, 2013, p. 72). For example, in an older study by Rivers (1996), most of the college students learning an L3 exhibited self-directed learning behaviors, such as creating flashcards for vocabulary, tables for conjugation, wall charts of related vocabulary, purchasing and sharing target language videos through unofficial channels, writing unassigned compositions that are sometimes not desired by the teacher, having a computer shipped to them so they can download target language content from the Internet and chat online with native speakers, conversing in target language outside of the classroom, and participating in social gatherings hosted by embassies and the local community. Ten years later, Wach (2016) examined how Polish learners employ their L1 as a strategic asset in acquiring the grammar of English (L2) and Russian (L3) and found that learners frequently transfer linguistic knowledge from their L1 to their L2 and L3, particularly when faced with similar grammatical structures. The purpose of Pawlak and Kiermasz's (2018) study was to examine how Polish university students majoring in English employed strategies while also having to achieve a high level of proficiency in a second language and found that strategy use in L2 was higher than in L3, both generally and in relation to particular strategies (such as memory and traditional), which could be explained by the students' varying motivation to master the two languages as well as their proficiency levels in both. The main factor explaining the variation in strategy application, both in terms of quantity and quality, was the significant proficiency gap between L2 and L3. This gap may have contributed to the higher overall frequency of strategy use in L2, but it may also explain why L3 users reported using some strategic devices more frequently, as they were better suited for learning and using a language that is still not widely known (Pawlak & Kiermasz, 2018). Grenfell and Harris (2015) examined strategic behaviors and cognitive processes used by bilingual students learning L3 and found that they typically utilize a more extensive array of strategies than monolinguals, leveraging their existing linguistic resources and experience with multiple languages to aid in the acquisition of a new language and frequently exhibiting enhanced flexibility in adjusting strategies according to context, making them more adaptable in multilingual learning settings. According to Kemp (2007), individuals who are multilingual tend to employ a greater number of strategies for learning grammar in comparison to those who have knowledge of fewer languages, and as the number of languages increases, so does the number of strategies they utilize, the frequency with which they use these strategies, and the probability of developing unique strategies. However, Haukás (2015) discovered that L3-German learners used significantly fewer strategies and did so less frequently than L2-English learners, possibly due to reduced motivation to learn L3 German and a lack of awareness about the transfer of strategies from previous language-learning experiences, which suggests that the number of languages spoken, along with learners' motivation, context, and familiarity with strategy application, influence strategy utilization.

2.6 Cognitive Benefits

According to Daud's (2024) research, people who are multilingual frequently exhibit improved cognitive skills, such as increased working memory, higher problem-solving ability, and improved multitasking abilities. These cognitive benefits can help people acquire a third language. In her study of the effects of prior linguistic experience on the acquisition of preposition stranding by a group of 17 monolingual and 15 multilingual immigrants learning English as an L2, Klein (1995) observed that despite both groups of learners making the same types of mistakes, the multilingual group learned more lexical items that triggered parameter setting than the monolingual one and explained these results as the result of multilingual learners' improved cognitive skill, which enabled them to pay closer attention to potentially triggering data in the input. "However, enhancement in learning lexical items may result from the enhanced cognitive or metalinguistic skill that prior linguistic experience develops" (Klein, 1995, p. 455). Jessner, Allgäuer-Hackl and Hofer (2015) emphasized that multilingual and metalinguistic awareness can yield substantial advantages for learners, especially regarding linguistic and cross-linguistic competencies. They also suggest that encouraging students to reflect on their language usage and the interconnections between

languages promotes deeper comprehension and the acquisition of additional languages (Jessner et al., 2015). Using students' existing language skills while learning a third language improves their overall language skills and encourages them to use different languages to improve their metalinguistic awareness, help their cognitive development, and speed up the learning process (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). Additionally, early bilinguals benefit from formal instruction in L2 when learning L3, which improves metalinguistic awareness, allowing students to effectively assimilate structures that are different from their current linguistic repertoire (Park & Starr, 2015). De Bot and Jaensch (2013) assert that linguistic and psycholinguistic studies show differences in the processing of L3 when compared to L1 or L2, while neurolinguistic research shows that proficient multilinguals typically activate the same brain regions during language use.

2.7 Motivation and Cultural Factors

An important factor in learning a third language is motivation. Driven by personal interests, professional goals, or cultural ties to the language, learners are more likely to stick with it and reach better competence levels. Zoltán Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Self System, a framework for understanding motivation in second language learning, consists of three main components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self represents the ideal image of oneself as a successful language user and includes the learner's aspirations and goals related to the language, such as becoming fluent or achieving professional success. "Dörnyei (2005) argued that possible selves are the most powerful motivational self-mechanisms that characterize what an individual would like to become, what he/she might become, and what he/she is afraid of becoming" (Azizi, Nazariani, & Gholami, 2020, p. 2). The ought-to L2 self reflects the learner's sense of obligation or duty related to language learning and includes expectations from others, such as family, teachers, or society, and the perceived need to meet these expectations to avoid negative outcomes. The desire to fulfill these obligations and prevent failure drives motivation in this context. Finally, the L2 learning experience focuses on the immediate experiences and context of language learning, including the learner's experiences in the classroom, interactions with teachers and peers, and the overall learning environment. Positive learning experiences can boost motivation, while negative experiences can hinder it. Together, these system components explain how different aspects of self-concept influence language learning motivation, demonstrating that motivation encompasses not only personal goals but also the expectations placed on learners and the broader context in which learning occurs. However, Azizi et al. (2020) assert that the term L2 in language teaching encompasses not only second languages, but any language acquired later in life as a foreign or second language, making the L2MSS theory applicable to both. Subekti (2018) looked at 56 Indonesian college students taking English for Academic Purpose (EAP) classes to see if there was a link between their achievement and their L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which is made up of ought-to L2 Self, Ideal L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience, and found that, despite what many experts think, the L2MSS did not predict academic performance. Azizi et al. (2020) discovered a positive correlation between the L3 learning experiences of EFL teachers and their ideal L3 selves, influenced by seven elements such as the learning environment, motivation, positive attitude, effort, language use, peer influence, and ability. In ascending order, 'positive attitude' (a component of the Ideal L3 self) and 'learning environment' (a component of the L3 learning experience) are the most important sub-variables for EFL learning success (Azizi et al., 2020). Kim's (2009) study on L2 self and motivation suggests that students should internalize their ought-to L2 self and transform it into their ideal L2 self to improve learning, and that L2 learning motivation only exists when students combine their original L2 learning motives with learning goals and involvement. More recently, Lorenz, Toprak-Yildiz and Siemund (2024) investigated the connection between L2MSS and L2 achievement. They discovered that the three parts of L2MSS did not consistently correlate with achievement. This means that L2MSS can predict learners' self-reported learning goals but not their actual achievement. According to Hromova's (2019) research, students are becoming more and more interested in both intellectual growth and a hands-on approach to learning foreign languages, and the three main reasons people learn languages are 'self-development', 'opportunities', and 'necessity', where they defined the first as acclimating to a new culture and expanding their horizons through interacting with the world, the second as professional development, and the third as a requirement for either moving overseas in search of a better life or fulfilling university coursework. "Worrying patterns of students' perceptions of learning languages, such as unclear reasons for learning languages and illogical shift of pronouns signifying the students' avoidance of responsibility, lack of self-confidence, and referring to general values accepted in society" (Hromova, 2019, p. 82) were also found in the study. Learners with high motivation and a positive attitude toward learning can learn a foreign language properly, according to Öztürk (2014). Wang and Liu's (2017) study showed that learners' motivation to acquire L3 varies significantly over time. The participants' "ideal L3 selves" initially increased but then experienced a decline, while their "ought-to L3 selves" consistently decreased over a two-year period. This suggests that learners' motivational trajectories are fluid and shaped by continuous language experiences. Interestingly, Bui (2023) emphasizes that L2 and L3 motivations are distinct constructs, not merely

extensions of each other, shaped by various factors such as personal objectives, learning environments, and previous language experiences. The introduction of a new language (L3) can modify the motivation for an existing L2, potentially leading to competition or conflict between the two. In a context similar to this study, Alnofaie (2017) found that globalization has clearly impacted Saudi youth's positive attitudes toward and motivation for studying other languages, underscoring the need for a strategy that supports the teaching of a variety of foreign languages and advocates for a reconsideration of foreign language teaching in Saudi HE institutions.

2.8 Age and Learning Context

Age can influence the acquisition of a third language, with younger students often demonstrating more adaptability in their language learning than adults. The learning context, encompassing formal schooling, immersion settings, and self-directed study, can also impact the pace and depth of learning. According to Cenoz (2013), L3 is frequently learned and used, especially in multilingual environments where speaking multiple languages is commonplace, and although the most multilingual continents are Asia and Africa, many other regions of the world also experience third language acquisition (TLA). While differences may also exist in relation to a wide range of variables, including motivation, age, and teaching styles, TLA occurs outside the framework of bilingual education as well, which is common in the context of immigration, and multilingual speakers use languages as a resource for effective communication and the creation of their own identities (Cenoz, 2013). Munoz's (2014) research revealed that early language lessons may yield some short-term benefits, but prolonged exposure to high-quality input and cumulative practice significantly influences long-term oral proficiency in a foreign language, suggesting that creating environments that provide extensive language exposure is more crucial for long-term proficiency than starting language lessons early. Concerning foreign language anxiety (FLA), Bensalem (2019) studied 96 Arabic undergraduate college-level EFL students revealing that Saudi multilinguals suffered from low to moderate levels of FLA, with female participants feeling more anxious than male participants, and older participants had lower levels of FLA because they are more seasoned language learners and therefore have lower anxiety levels. Stafford, Sanz, and Bowden (2010) conducted a study on the impact of variables such as age and bilingualism on the acquisition of L3, and found that age influences learning variability, particularly when the target structure is morphologically intricate and memory cannot readily access prior knowledge from the learners' L1 or L2, suggesting that within bilingual populations, the timing of bilingual development (early versus late) can influence L3 learning outcomes, particularly in contexts involving complex grammatical structures.

2.9 Language Use and Maintenance

Opportunities for language use and regular practice are key components of a successful third language acquisition. Maintaining proficiency in a language requires constant exposure and use. According to Payne and Almansour's (2014) study, students in Saudi Arabia find ways to learn foreign languages of their choice outside of traditional classroom settings using online social media sites to communicate with students from other countries, which helps them to expand their linguistic and cultural horizons. "Students went to great lengths to source posters, books and other materials in hard copy from the target countries to immerse themselves as much as possible in the target languages and cultures" (Payne & Almansour, 2014, p. 336). Furthermore, a case study involving 34 teachers in Saudi Arabia revealed that EFL teachers need further clarification on the use of plurilingualism in the classroom, as their comprehension of the concept was unclear and limited to the verbal use of two languages (Alsaawi, 2020). As a result, multilingual speakers are aware of their own and others' multilingual practices, which helps them achieve their goal of linguistic competence. According to the plurilingual approach to communication competence, a person should be able to use all their language resources wherever and without limitations (Alsaawi, 2020). According to Santos, Cenoz and Gorter (2015), limited exposure to English and the presence of other languages can exacerbate communicative anxiety. According to Rivers (1996), compared to second language learners of the same target language, L3 learners are faster and much more successful in acquiring the new language, and the behaviors of the third-language learner are those of self-directed learning, such as self-assessment, confidence, autonomy, and meta-linguistic awareness. Regarding opportunities for language use, Mitra (2012, cited in Alnofaie, 2017) made a significant contribution to the field of autonomous learning in out-of-class contexts. His work, which focused on how Indian village children learned computer skills and English via computers without any formal instruction, provided us with the Self-Organized Learning Environment (SOLE) learning theory, which suggests that learners can learn effectively when provided with the necessary resources. In Al-Nofaie's (2016) case study, the media significantly influenced the two children's decision to learn Japanese, a rarely spoken foreign language in Saudi Arabia, but they had access to a variety of digital language tools, which aided their learning without the need for formal instruction. This is in line with what Payne and Almansour (2014) observed: "Student language learning can also be seen in their use of technology and the use of language with friends. Respondents often configured their iPhones, Emails and Facebook pages to the target language and culture" (p. 336). Furthermore,

Maluch and Kempert (2017) assert that language use behaviors may be crucial for the development of bilingualism, particularly the frequency with which a bilingual engages with and employs both languages and alternates between them. However, “bilingualism may lead to advantages in L3 learning, yet several factors may play a role in this process. Failing to take these factors into account may be leading to biased conclusion in empirical studies ... ” (Maluch & Kempert, 2017, p. 4).

2.10 Individual Differences

Every learner is unique, and factors such as aptitude, personality traits, and prior language learning experiences can shape the third language learning process. A wide range of elements, including age, attitude, motivation, ability, exposure level, and anxiety, influence the acquisition of foreign languages and account for variations in each person’s proficiency (Daif-Allah & Aljumah, 2020). According to Rivers (1996), a learner of a third language possesses several qualities such as autonomy, self-awareness, confidence, and self-direction—characteristics that bear a remarkable resemblance to Rubin’s (1975) *The Good Language Learner*, which defines the characteristics of a successful language learner by combining the qualities of an excellent language learner. While input quantity, language learning experience, and instructor dedication are all highly significant elements, a number of additional, potentially contentious aspects may also significantly impact FLL achievement: parental involvement, which translates to a home setting that supports multilingualism, and language aptitude, attitude, and motivation, which are especially crucial because learning a language typically accompanies tolerance and understanding of other cultures (Griessler, 2001). Undoubtedly, learners can stop learning their target languages when they face obstacles during their learning process. Khan (2016) identified several obstacles and barriers that learners faced when learning English, including learning habits, information retention abilities, linguistic issues, attitude towards learning, and the nature of learning styles, methods, and pedagogies. For instance, a job opportunity can motivate learners, but a lack of clear objectives “will be like a journey without a destination” (Khan, 2016, p. 3). Some of the reasons learners cite are temporary, and some of them are permanent reasons, according to Weiner’s (1972) attribution theory.

3. Theoretical Background: Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System & Weiner’s Attribution Theory

Gardner’s socio-educational model of L2 motivation focuses on the concept of integrativeness, which refers to their “genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community” (Gardner, 2001, p. 5; cited in Kim, 2009). In his work, Dörnyei (2005) introduced three key components of the L2 motivational self-system: the Ideal L2 self, the Ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. His work has since become one of the most widely accepted theories of language learning motivation (Alnofaei, 2017). First, the ideal L2 self represents desired future images after attaining L2 proficiency. L2 learners may dream of employment security, financial success, and respect from others. The ideal L2 self is a broad concept that includes both integrativeness and instrumentality. Learners’ desirable L2 self-images can be related to their aspiration to assimilate into L2 societies or to their realistic expectation to succeed in schools or workplaces. Given this, the ideal L2 self focuses on how L2 learners internalize external reasons for L2 learning. Images of the ‘ideal L2 self’ are effective if learners understand the reasoning and envision bright futures following L2 mastery. Second, the ‘ought-to L2 self’ is more concerned with negative consequences coming from not achieving sufficient L2 proficiency. For instance, when learners feel compelled to learn to avoid failing a test or losing their job, we can attribute their motivation to external factors rather than their intrinsic interest in learning. “Instrumental motives with a prevention focus—for example, to study in order not to fail an exam or not to disappoint one’s parents—are part of the ought self” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 28). Third, Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self system encompasses the ‘L2 learning experience’ which is associated with ‘executive’ motives, as it involves the creation and maintenance of L2 learning, meaning that even though an L2 learner may establish an ideal L2 self or an ought-to L2 self during the initial stage of L2 learning, the self-image might not be maintained unless appropriate L2 learning experiences are recognized by the learner. Decades earlier, Weiner’s (1972) article explored the interplay between attribution theory, achievement motivation, and their implications for education, where Attribution Theory focuses on how individuals explain the causes of their successes and failures, how people attribute their achievements or setbacks to internal factors (like ability or effort) or external factors (like luck or task difficulty), and how these attributions influence future motivation and behavior. Weiner’s (1972) attribution theory involves two dimensions—stability (temporary vs. permanent) and controllability (whether the cause is within a person’s control or not)—to help explain how people evaluate their own and others’ triumphs and failures. According to Weiner’s framework, causes for success or failure are frequently classified into many dimensions, one of which is the stability of the cause, which can be split into temporary and permanent reasons: (1) temporary causes are viewed as not permanent or changing over time; this dimension is typically described as “unstable” and is commonly regarded as variable and unreliable indicators of a person’s long-term abilities or characteristics;

while (2) permanent causes are regarded to be stable and long-lasting; this dimension is referred to as “stable” and is frequently viewed as unchanging and having a long-term impact on how individuals credit causes for their triumphs and failures. The stability dimension encompasses both temporary and permanent reasons, which influence how individuals perceive their performance and future expectations.

4. Method

This investigation is based on two theories: Weiner’s (1972) attribution theory and Dornyei’s (2009) L2 motivational self-system. This study investigates why Saudi MA students stopped learning a third language and whether these reasons are temporary or permanent. Some of the participants in the study are instructors of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and the study is conducted with a group of six Saudi female students pursuing master’s degrees. All participants share a common linguistic background, as they are native Arabic speakers (L1) who are proficient in English (L2) and have previously undertaken the study of a third language (L3), which they ultimately ceased learning. The selection of participants for this study was carried out using purposeful sampling, where participants were chosen based on their experiences that were pertinent to the process of learning L3. It is important to note that each participant achieved a minimum score of six on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is required for entry into the master’s program. However, it is not possible to make any definitive claims regarding the participants’ language proficiency or skills in L3. The participants’ primary mode of communication in their spare time is Arabic, whereas the language of instruction for their Master of Arts degree is English. In this study, the investigation is guided by the primary research question: What factors contributed to the decision of Saudi master’s students to stop learning a third language, and what factors motivated them to learn a third language in the first place? The purpose of this study was to investigate this question by employing a qualitative methodology that consisted of semi-structured interviews to collect the perspectives of the participants. Before the interviews, the participants gave their informed consent, which indicated that they had a clear understanding of the objectives of the research as well as the purpose for which their data would be ultimately used. Interviews were conducted online, with each one lasting approximately thirty to thirty-five minutes. This was done to maximize flexibility and accessibility. As a means of protecting the participants’ right to privacy, the researchers decided not to record the interviews but rather to take extremely detailed notes instead. The researchers focused on six primary questions during the interviews, which included the following subjects: Which language did they choose as their third language to study? What compelled them to acquire this language? What kept them going while they were learning? How were they able to acquire this language? When they were learning, did they encounter any challenges? Lastly, why did they ultimately decide to stop learning the language that they had chosen? Following the interviews, the data that was collected was coded and organized into broad themes. This made it possible to conduct an in-depth examination of the L3 learning experiences of the participants, which ultimately led to a number of research findings.

5. Results

In the semi-structured interviews, all six participants shared the language they chose to learn as their L3, their motivations for learning it, their methods of learning, what kept them going, and what ultimately led them to stop. Firstly, the languages the participants chose to learn as their L3 belonged to different families. Urdu does not share a common origin with French and Spanish, while German belongs to the West Germanic subgroup within the larger Indo-European language family (see Table 1). Four out of six participants chose a Romance language as their L3, with Spanish and French being the most popular.

Table 1. Languages chosen as L3 by participants

Participant	L1	Language family	L2	Language family	L3	Language family
P1	ARABIC	SEMETIC	ENGLISH	INDO-EUROPEAN	SPANISH	ROMANCE
P2					FRENCH	
P3					FRENCH	
P4					GERMAN	WEST GERMANIC
P5					URDU	INDO-ARYAN
P6					SPANISH	ROMANCE

All the participants expressed a personal desire to learn a third language, so they all had the motivation to learn and a positive attitude towards learning the third language. The motivations varied, with some driven by the need to communicate, others finding inspiration in the culture and language, and some residing overseas. According to Hromova's (2019) classification, learners acquired L3 for three reasons: (1) self-development (interest, fashion, curiosity, ease, and language similarities); (2) opportunities (possible future work, communicating with colleagues and neighbors); and (3) necessity (moving abroad with family, communicating in a new environment). Some participants exhibited the first element of Dornyei's theory (2009), which is the ideal L2 self. However, they did not demonstrate the 'ought-to self', as their choice of L3 was motivated by interest rather than necessity, and they did not experience any significant pressure or fear of failure. Furthermore, the participants maintained a high level of motivation throughout the learning process, noting similarities between their native language and the third language they were learning (language distance between their L1 or L2 and L3). They perceived L3 as a challenge and a source of pride, and they used various strategies to learn, such as memorizing and translating or looking for patterns. For example, P1 said, "The structure of the language was challenging, and I like to challenge myself and learn it," while P2 found that "[t]he similarities between Arabic and Spanish in terms of grammar and vocabulary" helped her maintain momentum. The participants relied heavily on the internet, including YouTube and Instagram accounts, as well as Google Translate, in their attempts to learn the third language, demonstrating the crucial role of technology and the internet in language learning. They all utilized mobile applications, YouTube channels, watched movies with subtitles, and listened to songs in the third language to enhance their language learning, demonstrating the impact of social media on their learning methods. However, some of these methods did not aid in comprehensive language acquisition. Two of the participants took language courses, one traditional and one online using Google Translate. For instance, P4 said, "I learned it through watching movies with subtitles and songs," while P5 explained, "I took a course, used some language applications, and used Google Translate." Finally, the most common reasons for the participants' stopping were the lack of time and scarcity of people with whom to practice the language. One participant felt that learning L3 while studying for her degree and working as an EFL teacher was overwhelming, which led her to stop. Meanwhile, most participants found autonomy challenging and at times required guidance from a teacher or facilitator. One participant felt that while learning L3, her perception of the possible benefits of learning changed, while P6 was faced with lower-level classes when she returned from abroad: "When I returned to my country, all the levels were lower than I had achieved." These factors impacted their motivation to learn and ultimately led to their cessation.

The third element of Dornyei's theory (2009), the 'L2 learning experience', was present for all participants and explains why, despite creating an ideal L2 self or an ought-to L2 self in the initial stage of learning, it could not be maintained due to an inappropriate 'L2 learning experience.' Some initially found the similarities between languages interesting and helpful; however, when advancing, they faced difficulties in various skills, such as writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. One participant expressed her belief that the language she selected as her third language (L3) was not as popular as English, making it challenging to continue learning due to limited resources and lack of native speakers. Out of the two individuals who enrolled in L3 courses, one expressed dissatisfaction with the learning style, as it primarily focused on listening. For example, P5 stated, "The pronunciation was challenging for me, and the learning style did not suit me because I am a visual learner, and in the class, it was all about listening." Meanwhile, the other participant (P6) felt that the teacher's non-native language proficiency hindered her learning process, as well as the lack of native speakers to practice with. There were no schools or places to teach the language, and there were no other native teachers available. These problems prevented the participants from advancing in L3, and their motivation was low at this stage because most of them were learning autonomously, so it was self-learning. Learning a language that is not spoken in their country led them to stop learning. According to Dornyei's (2009), the L2 motivational self-system, the ought-to L2 self, and the learning experience are essential when people learn a foreign language. For most of the participants, their ought-to L2 self was lower since they did not learn to achieve a particular goal or for an obligation, and their learning experience was inflexible because most of the participants were learning the language by themselves.

Self-learning alone is insufficient, as learners often lack direction when learning a foreign language. People must speak and practice a foreign language, but if it's not popular or used in their daily lives, they may stop learning it. The participants mentioned various platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Google Translate, which highlighted how the internet played a crucial role in aiding the participants during their L3 learning process, as they relied heavily on the internet and technology.

Table 2. Data analysis based on Dörnyei's (2009) and Weiner's (1972) Attribution Theory

Participant	Motivation to Learn a Third Language	Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System	Motivation During Learning	Attributions for Success/ Failure	Weiner's Attribution Dimensions
1	Enjoys the language, finds it entertaining, & believes might be useful for future work.	Ideal L2 Self (Personal Interest)	Enjoyed challenge of complex structures & personal achievement	Success attributed to personal effort & perseverance	Internal, Unstable (changeable), Controllable (effort-driven)
2	All colleagues at work speak Spanish, so felt the need to learn.	Ideal L2 Self (Professional Interaction)	Similarities between Arabic & Spanish grammar.	Grammar difficulties attributed to task difficulty. Stopped due to lack of time.	External, Stable (inherent task difficulty), Uncontrollable
3	Interested in fashion & sounds of the language. Similar to English.	Ideal L2 Self (Personal Enjoyment)	Motivation from memorizing vocabulary.	Difficulty attributed to lack of support & resources (no teacher, no one to practice with).	External, Unstable (resource-based), Uncontrollable
4	Exposed to songs, communicate with neighbors, & curiosity to learn.	Ideal L2 Self (Social Interactions)	Motivation from watching movies & wanting to learn simple words.	Attribute difficulty to lack of structured learning.	External, Unstable, Uncontrollable
5	It was a (elective) course at college (external influence).	Ideal L2 Self (Educational interest)	Pride in learning a third language.	Success attributed to personal pride & effort. Learning difficulty due to misalignment of teaching style.	Internal, Stable (style preference), Controllable (personal adaptation)
6	Needed to learn due to living abroad with spouse.	Ought-to L2 Self (Context Need)	Motivation/ need to communicate with people Perceived similarities to Arabic.	Problems attributed to lack of quality resources & native speakers.	External, Stable, Uncontrollable (teacher quality & lack of native speakers)

6. Discussion

This study aimed to understand why Saudi MA students learn a third language and why they then stop learning it. The data showed that participants chose romance languages as their L3s most frequently due to factors such as language distance, transfer, prior experience, and learning strategies, as well as their high interest and motivation levels. As Sanz (2000) noted, a learner's past experiences can influence their ability to acquire a third language and foster a positive attitude toward learning a new language. For example, two participants chose to learn Spanish because its culture is similar to their Arabic culture, and there are similarities between it and Arabic and English in terms of grammar and vocabulary. In general, their motivations aligned with Hromova's (2019) findings, which indicate that modern students seek to broaden their knowledge (self-development), enhance their communication skills (opportunities), and integrate into the international community (necessity); however, in this study participants' motivations for learning L3 were relatively ambiguous. Alnofaei's (2017, p. 252) study findings reveal that "participants were geographically distant from the foreign countries" whose language they chose to learn, with only one individual residing overseas for a duration exceeding 6 months. However, the internet and popular social networks such as Snapchat, YouTube, and Facebook enable Saudis to engage with people from other countries. This demonstrates that each learner develops their own unique approach to learning a foreign language independently. Rivers (1996) showed that most of the college students who were learning L3 showed

self-directed learning behaviors, such as creating flashcards for vocabulary, tables for conjugation, wall charts for related vocabulary, and purchasing and sharing target language videos through unofficial channels. Another finding of this study revealed that participants had positive attitudes towards learning L3, which aligns with Dornyei's (2009) L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS). They demonstrated a strong desire to learn but struggled to sustain this motivation due to the 'L2 learning experience' element. While they had an 'ideal L2 self', the 'ought-to L2 self' varied among the participants or was absent altogether. The participants' time constraints during learning prevented them from exerting sufficient effort. Kim's (2009) study showed that the students' sole focus on employment prevented them from internalizing the ought-to L2 self and creating an ideal L2 self. According to Subekti's (2018) study, the 'ideal L2 self' and the 'L2 learning experience' do not have relationships with learning achievement, and even the 'ought-to L2 self' correlated negatively with learning achievements, so the L2 motivational system did not predict success well. Wang and Liu's (2017) study showed that learners' motivation to learn a third language changes over time, where their "ideal L3 selves" first went up and then down, while their "ought-to L3 selves" consistently went down over two years. This suggests that ongoing language experiences shape learners' motivational trajectories, which are fluid, as evident with the participants in this study, as they stopped learning L3 altogether.

Weiner (1972) found that casual achievement attribution influences behavior and motivation, dividing reasons into temporary and permanent when humans assign blame and find justifications for not learning a new language. Most of the reasons for discontinuing learning L3 in this study were temporary, stemming from feelings of not having enough time to learn, lack of a foreign language teacher, and their dual roles as EFL teachers. There could be potential solutions to these temporary reasons; however, for the participant who, upon starting, perceived no benefit from learning her chosen L3, this reason is permanent, as it is ingrained in her mindset and could not be altered. Globalization has brought people together through technology, and social media played a significant role during the participants' learning of a third language. Social networks like Instagram, YouTube, and various language applications have aided them in their initial L3 journey. Similar to Khan's (2016) study, two of the major obstacles facing these MA students were the lack of clear objectives, which can lead to confusion and ineffective learning experiences, and teacher-related barriers, where they lacked proper training or professional development. More importantly, students felt they lacked opportunities to practice their chosen L3, despite the availability of social media platforms and online provisions to do so. Finally, the most important implication for this study is what Alnofaei (2017, p. 253) argues: "[c]ontinuing education units in HE institutions can encourage out-of-class foreign language learning by providing students with language labs equipped with modern technologies, so students can learn languages of their choice during their free time in a collaborative environment."

7. Limitations

The present study's limited scope clearly precludes drawing broad conclusions about the reasons Saudi PG university students discontinue their third language learning. Additionally, participants were MA in TESOL students, who were fluent in both Arabic and English, and not undergraduate students; UG students, who were learning English as a university requirement, and thus might have shown different motivational profiles. More importantly, the students' reported motivation may not have translated into actual behaviors demonstrating motivated learning. This could be attributed to the limitations of using a self-reporting tool that was unable to accurately predict their performance. Ultimately, the information given was based on past events and may have downplayed any actual distinctions if recent graduates were examined. Further investigations should examine with a larger sample size and both genders, the reasons behind Saudi L3 learning outside of formal education and why it is unsustainable, as well as compare gender differences, if any.

8. Conclusions

To sum up, this research aimed to identify why Saudi MA learners stop learning a third language. Based on the qualitative analysis of this study, we examined the attribution theory of Weiner (1972) and Dornyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System. At the beginning, the learners' motivation emerged from their ideal L2 self, demonstrating a strong desire to learn and a positive attitude towards learning. However, over time, this motivation diminished due to time constraints and a lack of practice opportunities. According to the attribution theory, most of the reasons were temporary, with lack of time being the most significant factor. It's also crucial to acknowledge the significant role social media has played in assisting learners in their third language learning journey. The current study clearly represents only a small part of the reasons associated with ceasing to learn a third language; research in this area is still in its infancy, but it is already showing promise. Building curricula for a multilingual Saudi Arabia is a pressing task, given the growing interest in language study. Finally, research in this domain should focus on the evolving characteristics of multilingual competence and its impact on cognitive, social, and educational outcomes, which underscores the need to explore the interplay and mutual influence of adult learners'

multiple languages over time (Cenoz, 2017).

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Authors contributions

Najwan Sebai was responsible for study design and data collection as well as the theoretical framework. Dr Zilal Meccawy drafted the manuscript and revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions

- Q1: What was the third language that you tried to learn?
- Q2: What motivated you to learn a third language? Why this L3?
- Q3: What sustained you during learning L3?
- Q4: How did you learn your L3?
- Q5: Why did you stop learning L3?
- Q6: Did you face any problems during learning L3?

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