

Investigating the Impact of (Extra) Linguistic Variables on EFL Learners Oral Expression Effectiveness: Master Students at Ibn KHALDOUN University-Tiaret

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Abstract

The present, twofold descriptive-interpretive study purports itself to explore the impact of some linguistic and extra-linguistic variables on Algerian EFL learners' conversational interactions in oral expression classes. It seeks to disclose the possible influence of the demographic variables in oral expression performance. Differently couched, the aim of this research is to investigate to what extent these differences may negatively affect students' engagement in classroom interactions. To attain these objectives, the mixed method of research, i.e., qualitative and quantitative was adopted. In fact, a self-designed questionnaire was randomly administered to 30 Master 1 students, and semistructured interview was conducted with 4 teachers at the department of English at IbnKhaloudun University-Tiaret. The findings revealed that EFL students' reticence during oral expression sessions is mainly due to threefold reasons, viz., psychological emotions, linguistic deficiencies and stereotypical assumptions. The first is mainly related to anxiety, the fear of making mistakes, classmates' negative attitudes and reactions generate students' reluctance towards an effective commitment during EFL oral expression classes. As far as the second reason is concerned, the deficiencies in phonological, syntactic and morphological aspects of the target language preclude EFL students' active participation in classroom interactions. The third reason has to do with some blatant stereotypical representations, based on age, gender and social status, that have generated negative attitudes. All in all, the highlighted causes towards oral expression sessions remain as a serious pitfall in front of the materialization of the ultimate objective of communicative approach. Hence, teachers' awareness of the aforementioned hurdles and an effective support on their parts are deemed to be urgent and quite necessary to palliate these serious behavioral patterns.

Keywords: Social variable, classroom interaction, psychological emotions, linguistic deficiencies, stereotypical assumptions, speaking skills

Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in the development of human sociability since it is the major means to communicate effectively in everyday situations. The 20th century witnessed a shift in focus from teaching methodologies to the learners' instructional materials restricting the teachers' role to a facilitator, who, au fond, represents the fulcrum of education. A great number of learners around the world are strongly motivated to learn English for different purposes. At least English puts learners in touch with more people around the world than any other language, yet, at the same time, learners should be aware that it requires a great deal of efforts to master it, and they may begrudge that effort. Once progress is made, learners feel the pride in their achievements, and savor the communicative power they have at their disposal. For the sake of an effective communication in English, English Language Learners need to master the four inextricable language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in order to achieve a high level of proficiency in sending and receiving the target language in its oral or written forms. Effective

communication is the ultimate objective of any language teaching. The focus is mainly to put on students' appropriate communication via understandable messages. Thus, the approach focuses principally on interactions as both a means and ultimate objective. Assisted by teachers who should play the role of facilitators, assisting learners with frameworks, patterns and rules, students are thus supposed to develop their communicative competence. Yet, some EFL students tend to encounter difficulties in speaking and writing as productive skills and they consider them as the main skills that should be improved. Subsequently, our research endeavors to shed light on the opaque hurdles which preclude students' effective commitment in oral expression classes. In other words, it explores from psychological and educational vantage viewpoints the students' deliberate reticence towards oral classes participation. In wide brief, our study is first and foremost both students- and teachers-oriented in perspective.

Background of the Study

Despite its effort-demanding, learning a foreign language remains envied by a large population around the world. Algerian EFL learners are compelled to learn foreign languages in general, and English, in particular, if they want to be communicatively competent and able to bridge the gap with others. With its new status, i.e., global, English can offer to its speakers the possibility to communicate and interact easily with people in all countries of the world. Besides, the mastery of what is entitled as 'global language', learners will have easy access to huge amounts of scientific documents and other sources.

Thus and from this perspective, Algerian learners should strive to acquire English language and gain proficiency. The latter cannot be fully achieved without the mastery of the four skills, especially the productive ones, i.e., writing and speaking. Yet, researches in the field have pointed out the learners' shortcomings at the oral expression. It is acknowledged that language learning success relies principally on classroom interaction. In fact, this interaction does not require only learners' physical presence but their mental one too.

Although researchers have highlighted classroom interaction benefits in EFL classes as fostering knowledge exchange, creating some sort of sense of belonging among the students and promoting language use and development, learners' reticence and refutation still persist. Thus, the pertinent question is: What are the linguistic and extra-linguistic variables that affect classroom communication?

Educationalists are keen to learn more about the causes of this phenomenon so as to devise appropriate remedies that will aid in the development of successful communication. EFL students' ultimate goal, both within and outside the classroom, is to communicate. Classroom contact has a significant impact on the development of a learner's communicative ability. Several elements, however, can influence negatively interaction. We have viewed necessary to investigate the impact of following variables, including gender, social status and age on students' involvements in oral interactive activities.

I. Theoretical Foundation

The current section aims to check if the subjects variables such as age, gender and social status impact on classroom interaction. It is frequently acknowledged that foreign language learning process might be strongly influenced by such variables.

1.1 Linguistic Variables

Language learning relies on a set of components that linguists enumerate as follows: phonology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics, and pragmatics. These aforementioned components are intertwined and interdependent because the defect in any of them can influence negatively productive and receptive skills.

1.1.1 The Phonological Deficiency

Phonology is defined as the study of speech structure within a language, covering both basic speech unit patterns and established pronunciation standards. Therefore, linguists, EFL teachers, and translators are required to care for phonetic and phonological errors to eschew any possible misunderstandings. These mistakes can be the source of misapprehension by interfering with speech perception. This is especially true when two languages clash and a high-quality translation is required, taking into account the intercultural distinctiveness of a particular linguistic culture.

1.1.2 The Grammatical Deficiency

Being the backbone of any language, grammar is defined by Crystal (1988) "as the business of taking a language to pieces to see how it works." (p.6). Indeed, using poor grammar can result in meaningless sentences and a muddled message, which can lead to a communication partner's misinterpretation. Accurate grammar makes it easier for others to grasp what you're saying and can make the communication process more enjoyable. EFL learners' lack of mastery of syntactic rules leads systematically to errors which can distort the meaning for the recipients. Among these errors, we dare to mention the following: errors based on linguistic category, errors based on surface strategy taxonomy (omission, addition, misformation and misordering), errors based on comparative taxonomy (developmental errors, intra-language errors and ambiguous errors) and errors based on communicative effect taxonomy (global and local errors).

1.1.3 Lexical Deficiency

It is acknowledged that lexical wealth represent an essential factor for EFL learners' oral communication proficiency. Undoubtedly, vocabulary growth is an important measure/ indicator of EFL learners of the learning progress in all language skills. The use of wide vocabulary abundance creates a strong link between speaking ability and active vocabulary knowledge. As a result, we can better understand why vocabulary is still seen as a major barrier to EFL learners' proficiency in speaking in EFL classes. It is recognized by both instructors and students that the shortage of lexical items stands as an important

hurdle that prevents them from interacting easily and competently.

Foreign language learners with limited vocabulary, according to August, Carlo, Dressler and Snow (2005) take longer to learn new vocabulary items, are less capable of interpreting the text and are less engaged in conversation with their peers. As a result, such students are more likely to perform poorly on language acquisition examinations and are on the verge of being labeled as learning disabled.

1.2 The Extra-linguistic Variables

Extra-linguistic variables remain as hindrances that preclude EFL learners' effective learning. In other words, non-native speakers are generally negatively influenced by several variables such as demographic, social and psychological.

1.2.1 Learner Age and Classroom Interaction

Mixed- or multi- age classes might be exploited positively to enhance learners' achievements if flexible cooperative learning is focused on. The subjects' experience, knows, know-how-to-do and know-how-to-be can benefit the learners learning. Yet, what characterizes young learners as regards learning facility and flexibility?

1.2.1.1 Young Learner Characteristics

The term 'young learner' refers to people who are between the ages of three and fifteen. At various ages, children may display a variety of mental and social features. Young learners, according to Wong and Nunan (2011), are unique and very active by nature, although they grow up in different sociocultural contexts. When it comes to learning their native language or foreign languages from their environment, they are at the same evolution level.

Referring to Piaget's theory (1936, as cited in Cherry. K. 2020), learning progresses through four distinct stages: *sensory-motor*, *pre-operational*, *concrete-operational*, and *formal operational*. Before they improve their knowledge to make and produce meaningful sentences and paragraphs in and outside the classroom, young learners begin engaging with objects and adopting new terms. In such situations, the presence of a teacher and parental supervision/accompaniment is required.

1.2.1.2 Young Learner Cognitive and Mental Capacities

Cognitive ability is the mental action or process of gaining knowledge and understanding through experience, thought, and the senses

(Oxford Dictionary, 2022). Referring to learning, cognitive aptitude is intimately linked to the brain mechanisms of people of various ages. Many psychologists believe that young learners are a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) with no prior experience or knowledge. Regardless of their inability to develop or comprehend abstract concepts and complicated ideas, they can learn and accept new things quickly. Young learners are capable and active agents with fresh minds to assist them in memorizing a large amount of material more effectively than adult learners. Parents should nevertheless provide young learners with appropriate support and guidance. Also, teachers should always assist and involve students in relevant tasks even at school in order to provide effective learning scaffolding.

1.2.1.3 Adult Learner Characteristics

Adult Learners: Who Are They? Adulthood is defined as the period between the ages of 20 and 40. Throughout the course of their life, adult learners undergo a variety of stages connected to their readiness, physical, cognitive, and psychological progress. Adults begin to be aware of their actions and make independent decisions in several life domains at this time. Goal-oriented, adults learn according to their requirements and wants in any specialized sector such as L2/FL learning environment. Additionally, adult learners in the classroom may have constructed a bulk of knowledge according to diverse perspectives and contexts, which can therefore lead to challenging debates.

1.2.1.4 Adult Learner Cognitive and Mental Abilities

Many linguists such as Harmer (2007) have thrown light on how adults' cognitive growth influences their learning progress. Due to schematic knowledge, life experience, and intelligible input, adult learners are naturally grown enough to pick what exactly meets their expectations. Furthermore, teachers should consider adult learners' abilities to apply their knowledge effectively, as students may critique the teacher's methods in the classroom during teaching/learning sessions.

1.2.2 Gender Differences and (Classroom) Interaction

Language and gender as a discipline has been a research issue of some interest within sociolinguistics since the birth and development of the feminist movement in America in the 1960s. The focus has evolved away from language form, such as, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation and toward gender differences in conversational techniques, discourse style, and other areas of research. Sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and even psychologists detect gender differences in

everyday communication and strive to uncover hidden answers from various angles.

It has been generally assumed that gender affects the process of student-student interaction in the classroom. Males and females have different styles of interacting and that is because of their different use of syntax, morphology, pronunciation and punctuation. Therefore, women and men develop different communicative competences. According to Verdi, A. F & Wheelan, S. A (1992) Women are claimed to be more tentative, and this is related to the fact that they are keen on using more hedges to express certainty. They are also more refined in talk, and they use less coarse. However, men are seen as more confident than women which enables them to dominate and monopolize the conversation. They are also keen to use vulgar language. In mixedsex conversation, men interrupt and overlap the talk. Consequently women fall silent for they are less confident than men.

It is recognized that gender differences can impact classroom interaction. As regards research in the field, it has been previously found that students' gender has no effect on classroom participation (Boersma 1981; Crawford 1990; Gray, 1990). Other researchers, on the other hand, have found that males participate at a higher rate than females (Brooks 1982; Cornelius & Constantinople 1990; MacLeod & Crawford 1990). Brooks (1982) linked males' higher levels of participation to teachers' gender, implying that males in female-taught classrooms participate more than females. Sternglanz & Lyberger-Ficek (1977) and Pearson & West (1994) have found that in male-taught classes, male students are more likely to dominate debate. On the contrary, some researchers (e.g., Auster and MacRone, 1994) have claimed that instructor's gender is not a significant influential factor as regards students' participation. Fassinger (1995) concluded that although teacher gender had no effect on male students' participation, female students were more likely to participate in classes taught by female teachers. In fact, gender differences has been tackled by many researchers in 20th century from different angles, yet, what is worthy to mention is that their competence and brain structure are twofold distinctive from each other. In ongoing subsections will be shed much more the light on males' and females' competence and their brain structure.

1.2.2.1 Gender Difference in Competence

There is a dearth of research that specifically addresses gender issues in determining competences. Gender inequalities in management, on the other hand, have been extensively studied. Harlan & Weiss (1982) conducted an evaluation of the research findings and came to the following conclusions:

1-Women's self-confidence, dominance, and need for achievement may be found to be lower in some studies. However, these findings are based on samples of managerial students, and when education and organizational level are adjusted for, there is usually no difference between male and female managers.

2-In terms of motivation to manage, there are no differences between males and females, although women managing in a predominantly male atmosphere demonstrated lower motivation and self-esteem than male managers. In a company where women made up 19% of the management, there were no gender inequalities (Ibid).

3- According to research, women managers, as opposed to men managers, must tread a fine line between appearing masculine and feminine.

4- Numerous studies comparing males and females in their leadership roles have discovered few differences.

As a result of gender difference studies, we should not expect any major disparities in the competences possessed by men and women. Indeed, according to Cahoon (1991), gender inequalities may be due to sex stereotypes rather than genuine differences in individual performance. However, research on sex stereotyping in management reveals that there may be significant disparities in the perceived likelihood of women displaying the skills required in managerial jobs.

1.2.2. 2 Males and Females' Function and Brain Structure

For a long time, scientists have been interested in the form and function of male and female brains. It should come as no surprise that males and females think in quite different ways. On a biochemical basis, male brains are stronger between the front and rear sections, but female brains are intimately connected throughout the left and right hemispheres. Owing to the fact that females use both sides of their brain, they can transmit swiftly information between the right and left hemispheres than males. Males, on the other hand, exclusively employ their left side to finish tasks and come up with new ideas. Females' feelings, on the emotional level, are more inclined to react to worries stated through emotions than males' feelings relying on reasons to decipher issues. They show difficulty to understand emotions innately.

1.2.3 The Impact of Social Status on Classroom Interaction

It is also acknowledged that the social status can impact students' interaction, especially during

oral expression sessions. According to Kidneigh, J. C & Lundberg, H. W(1958): “social status is the comparative amount of prestige, deference or respect accorded to person who has been assigned different roles in group or community” (pp.57–61). Human differences are the source of social division. Stereotyping is a result of the latter, which can be seen in social class, cultural and regional stereotypes. According to research, high-status members typically dominate group interactions, and this is evident in classroom interactions as well.

1.2.4 The Impact of Psychological Factors on Classroom Interaction

Many studies have been conducted to unveil the relationship between some psychological variables and EFL learners’ effective/ ineffective learning, especially in oral production sessions. Among these psychological features, we elicit the following ones: *anxiety, self-esteem and motivation*.

1.2.4.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is acknowledged to have a negative influence on students’ willingness to take part in classroom interaction. In such anxious states, EFL students show reluctance towards any classroom participation fearing other classmates’ judgmental opinions and evaluation. In this vein, Ehrman (1996) affirms that any person secures his emotional stability and self-respect in multifarious ways, one of which he refers to is *defense mechanism*. Therefore, students’ unwillingness to take part in discussion and reluctant attitude towards classroom activities, particularly those oral ones, may be regarded as possible defense strategies that the anxious students use to maintain their emotional balance.

1.2.4.2 Foreign Language Students’ Lack of Self-Esteem

The lack of self-esteem is also considered as a stressful variable that leads to unsuccessful foreign language learning. Being acknowledged as a fulcrum factor, self-esteem is a catalytic element for any language learning. In this vein, Khodadad, (2003, as cited in Hayti, 2008) state: “no language learning activities will be carried out successfully without self-confidence”(p.60). Referring to this quotation, it is quite evident that the degree of self-esteem plays a pivotal role in students’ learning effectiveness. That’s to say, without self-esteem/ confidence, foreign language learning cannot materialize. In fact, the more students gain self-esteem/ confidence, the more they learn and feel comfortable during oral speaking skills.

1.2.4.3. Foreign Language Students’ Lack of Motivation

EFL students’ motivation is also determinant factor as regards foreign language learning. It is the propeller/ key factor that insights students to be effective class participants. Thus, it is the main psychological factor that influences students’ attitude toward foreign language learning. Among the clarifications around the importance of motivation in educational system, we refer to Dorney (2009) who states that: “the successful learner has high motivation and are autonomous to learn from his/her mistakes.” (p.117)

By contrast, students’ lack of motivation is categorized as a challenging issue in EFL classes. In such demotivating circumstances, students are unwilling to be engaged in classroom activities leading to weak achievements. This alarming situation is generally caused by topic choice, classroom environment and teacher-student relationship/ rapport.

1.3 Teachers’ Teaching Techniques

Generally speaking, the teachers’ role, regarding what they select to present and how they proceed while teaching, is a crucial factor to set up the suitable environment for learning; either motivating or demotivating. In fact, EFL teachers play an important part in the teaching/learning process. The teacher, according to Valette & Allen (1997, as cited in Quist, 2002), sets the tone for learning activities. Because teaching entails communicating, EFL teachers should be highly skilled in all language skills, especially in oral. Additionally, EFL teachers should be highly skilled in the target language in order to make insightful decisions about the dispensed subject and the instruction method.

On the other hand, Rababah (2005) asserts that teacher training programs have been judged to be ineffective in changing instructors’ attitudes since teachers have a limited number of courses via which they are required to cover both receptive and productive skills. Thus, they seem to prioritize grammar and reading at the detriment of speaking and listening.

II. The Practical Aspect

It is acknowledged that every scientific research must follow certain procedures to ensure reliable and valid data. Thus, the reliance on one single method is insufficient to confirm the accuracy of the data and to provide a better understanding of the research issue. Hence, the methodology implemented to conduct the current inquiry is based on mixed methods

As stated above, the implemented approach is dual-focused descriptive-interpretive. The choice of this investigative method is dictated to the nature of the study, responding to the

objectives of our research, which are fundamentally meant to explore and explain the underlying impact of both linguistic and extra-linguistic variables on students' conversational interaction.

2.1. Population and Sampling

The choice of a manageable subset of the whole population of MA students was imposed by the large number of students at the department of English. In fact, this survey has followed probability sampling that is mainly set up on a random selection, where every subject in the population is given a chance to be selected. The objective behind following this process is to minimize partiality and to maximize objectivity and reliability. Whereof, for the present case study, 30 MA students have been randomly selected from Master 2 cohort; 19 females and 11 males who are aged between 23 and 28 years old. The sample represents half of the Didactics specialty. We have selected this sample on the basis of the background, knowledge and experience the students share together; this would probably enable us to recognize the nature of the relationship between them, how the latter is affected by several factors and how it is reflected in their interaction inside the classroom. For the sake of qualitative data, 4 teachers have been interviewed, gauging their awareness of (extra) linguistic variables and their impacts on students' oral performance.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

For the sake of methodological viewpoint, research tools utilized in any survey are not subjected to the principle of randomization. Various elements are taken into account when intending to embark on a study. In this vein, Dörnyei (2011) believes that the backbone of any research is the instruments that are used in gathering the data. Thus, it requires different resources of data collection. In this study, we followed twofold methodology that relies on two data sources, i.e., qualitative and quantitative. The aim of these two instruments is to assure the validity of information and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research outcomes.

2.2.1. Questionnaire Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, the collected data are to be displayed into tables for the purpose to analyze, interpret and generate appropriate results.

Respondents' Age and Gender

It is worth noting that the majority of the surveyed population of the MA students is composed of females (63.5%-n=19), representing two thirds. In fact, this distribution corresponds to the socio-demographic data published by the Ministry of National Education (cf. report of the Ministry Education of Algeria-Department of the Pedagogical Organisation). A study was drawn up by the Ministry of National Education revealing that at the level of the secondary education, the literary streams are chosen by the girl-students. That explains the rise of women in the sector of education. It is generally acknowledged that females outnumber males and this disparity is due to females' interest in studying languages more than males who are more likely attracted, as a general stereotypical assumption, in studying hard sciences.

Referring to the above percentages, it can be noticed that the surveyed sample is composed of a variety of age ranges. Those who are aged 26 years old and more are students who may be in-service middle or secondary school teachers, motivated by MA studies pursuing. Yet, this respondents' age heterogeneity can be an influencing factor which may hinder students oral performance during interaction sessions.

Item 3: Do you feel anxious whenever you interact in oral expression course?

Options	students	Percentage
Yes	20	67%
No	10	33%
Total	30	100%

Table.3. Learners' Anxiety in Oral Session

The 3 question-item is meant to inquire about students' psychological state during oral expression sessions. The numerical data generated from the question show that nearly two third of the respondents feel anxious. Only one-third of them reports that they do not feel so.

It is obvious that anxious learners would purposefully eschew engaging in classroom communicative activities they fear the most. They show this by being uninterested, absent-minded and bored. Being in front of such situation, teachers would be careful before imputing learners' poor performance exclusively to lack of motivation and laziness. Teachers are not to be blamed for such judgmental opinions towards learners' behaviors. In fact, they have neither sufficient time nor are they experts or therapists to deal appropriately with such critical cases. However, the use of some techniques could to some extent mitigate anxiety severity.

Item 4: Which problem do you encounter while interacting in the classroom?

Options	students	Percentage
Fearing mistakes making	14	47%
Fearing criticism	0	00%

Out of shyness	12	40%
Total	26/30	100%

Table 04: Students' Interaction Problems

The question-item is asked for the sake of elucidating the factors behind learners' disengagement from classroom interactions. Among the targeted sample, nearly half of them (47%) attests that they fear mistakes making. Besides, 40% confirm that they feel shy during oral sessions. Learners' reluctance to take part in classroom oral interactions is a problem commonly encountered in foreign language classrooms.

Yet, the causes behind such reluctance are multifarious. Undoubtedly, shyness affects learners' participation. According to McCroskey (1992), shyness is a behavior that could be the result of any one or a combination of the following factors:

social introversion, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, lacking confidence in subject matter, and/or communication apprehension. Fearing errors making (phonological, grammatical and shortage of vocabulary) is often cited as being another cause of learners' perceived reticence and passiveness. This psychological negative barrier leads to panicking due to fearing mistakes committing in front of their classmates. It may be seen by the rest of the classmates as an index of incompetence. All these causes and others make reticent learners lose self-confidence, and may make speaking in front of the whole class a potential risky business in many learners' eyes.

Item 5: During the activities that require group work, do you prefer working with?

Options	students	Percentage
Yourpeers	23	76%
Olderstudents	06	20%
Youngerstudents	01	4%
Total	30	100%

Table 5: Students' Age Effect on Classroom Interaction

The above question is worded so in order to see if the classroom interactions are age-biased. In fact, most of the respondents (76%) approve the work with peers. 20% prefer working with older classmates. Only 4% of the surveyed students accept the work with younger students.

Multi-age classrooms can be the source of a positive influence when it comes to pair and group work. To work collaboratively with older students, whose coolness and appeal will always be far greater than younger ones; will be interesting, exciting and more motivating for younger ones. Pairing students together is one of the more effective ways to mentor younger students that can enhance their partnership and language learning. Yet, the success in such task implies that both

younger and older students discover one another, and not only merely see the first ones as 'little kids' and the second ones as 'outmoded' persons.

The disapproval of mixing with younger or older students can deprive the disapprovers from benefiting from certain diversities with regard to experience, knowledge sharing and social skills development. In fact, benefits exist for both younger and older students. Younger students in multi-age classrooms have a natural source of peers with more experience and maybe more knowledge, enabling the younger ones to benefit from these peers to support cognitive and social learning. Having opportunities to converse and work cooperatively with each other allows the enhancement of the speaking skills.

Item 6: Which students more frequently ask questions and make comments in class?

Options	students	Percentage
Male students	05	17%
Female students	16	53%
Both of them equally	9	30%
Total	30	100%

Table 6: Students' Participation according to Gender

This question-item seeks to disclose gender prevailing dominance in classroom interactions. The yielded data demonstrate that female students (53%) frequently ask questions and comment in class. The male students (17%) participate less frequently than females. 30% of the respondents

report that participation is equally shared between females and males. The scrutiny of the above collected data indicates that females are the demographic group most likely to participate in the classroom.

Item 7: When dealing with activities that require group work, you prefer to work with _____?

options	students	Percentage
Male students	07	23.5%
Female students	16	53%
Both of them equally	07	23.5%
Total	30	100%

Table 7: Students' Preferred Gender in Group Dynamics

The aim behind the above question-item is to unearth the respondents' gender-bias preference when it comes to collaborative work. The numerical data reveal that more than the half of the respondents (53%) prefers working with females. Whereas the rest of them are shared between males (23.5%) and both genders equally (23.5%).

The respondents' perception in relation to collaborative work in either mixed- or single-gender grouping differs hugely. This disparity in perception may mainly be based on a variety of socio-cultural and religious factors. In fact, several attempts have been made to analyze the effects of gender grouping on students' group performance, yet findings to have been varied. To cite a sample of these research studies, we refer to Stephenson (1994) who conducted a survey on mixed- and single gender groupings and concluded that in the first one (mixedgender grouping) students are more socially-oriented than the second grouping. However, in the second (homogeneous-gender grouping) students produced higher achievements.

However, those opponents to this vision argue that in mixed-gender groupings, students'

knowledge elaboration processes are more inclined to diverge from each other, which should be considered as a significant outcome (Ding, Bosker&Harskamp 2011). The results of gender grouping are contradictory. Yet, the effects of gender-grouping are particularly strong from the learning attitude perspective. In the light of these findings, it is advisable to implement mixed-gender groupings for its effectiveness in improving students' oral performance and attitudes. It is also recommended that additional surveys especially longitudinal observations are necessary to determine their effective impact on interactional sessions.

To conclude, it would be worthy to highlight that the gender-related stigma and stereotypes still have a powerful impact on female-male students' interactions in the Algerian universities. A good example is the sitting plan: male students sit with their peers and like female students. Furthermore, it has been frequently observed that rows are dominated by either sex or males are alternately seated. This policy seems to be deeply anchored in the local culture.

Item 8: What are the obstacles that prevent students from interacting with the opposite gender in the classroom?

options	students	Percentage
misunderstanding	10	33%
shyness	20	66,66%
Religious boundaries	15	50%
Social class differences	03	10%

Table 8: Students' Problem with the Opposite Gender

For the sake of unveiling the respondents' reticence towards working with opposite gender, the above question was asked. The respondents' motives behind such attitude reveal that 66.66% of them bind this to shyness. Yet, 33% of them stipulate that this is due to misunderstanding. The rest of the respondents are shared between religious boundaries and social class differences, representing 50% and 10%.

The respondents' reticence is mainly justified in accordance to stereotypical perceptions which actually prevail in the Algerian context. The learning community contexts are generally influenced by religious boundaries, social class differences and other psychological emotions. The latter, being decisive components in learners' attitudes and behaviors, can preclude students' speaking skills proficiency. Triandis (1995) advocates that the fact "*human beings are ethnocentric which reflects the truth that we all grow in a specific culture and learn to believe that the standards, principles, perspectives, that we acquire from our culture, are the way we look at the world.*" (P :5). Thus, each learner carries the specific characteristics of the cultural, religious and social norms from the immediate environment he grew up in that guide his behavior as well as the way he understands his surroundings.

Item 9: What kind of social problems affect students' interaction in the classroom?

options	students	Percentage
Family issues	08	27%
Financial aspects	15	50%
Cultural differences	07	23%
ethnicity	00	00%

Table 9: Social Problems Affecting Students' Interaction

To collect more insightful and informed data as regards boundaries precluding respondents' interaction in oral expression sessions, the above question, enquiring about family, financial, cultural and ethnic issues was asked. The table shows that half of the respondents (50%) believe that financial aspects affect students' interactions. Besides, 23% of them think cultural discrepancies are at the origin of such effects. 27% of the surveyed sample estimates that family issues are likely to affect learners' interactions. It is worthy to mention that ethnicity, at least for the surveyed sample, has no impact on EFL students' classroom oral interaction.

By and large, students' learning cannot be isolated from what they undergo in the extra – university environment. All the above and other factors can influence negatively students' learning process, in general, and the interactive one, in particular. The impact of the stereotypical representations plays an important deleterious role on learners' behavior and attitudes.

Item 10: In your opinion, what is the appropriate solution in order to enhance interaction in oral expression class?

Out of the total number of the surveyed students, only twenty (20) answered the open-ended question item. Some of the respondents advanced that they need to be motivated in the classroom and want to have the opportunity to select tasks and projects which cater for their learning styles. Some others think that teachers should give more time to think over an issue and freedom to feel comfortable in answering and interacting. Another issue is raised by some of the respondents, relating to teacher's behavior as well as the way he deals with the topic. Moreover, they insist on the necessity for teachers to vary the activities and teaching methods, and encourage interaction among students by equally sharing roles and turns among most of the students. They also suggest that the topics for debate and discussion should be chosen in collaboration with students so as to ensure their motivation and commitment to speak. Few respondents propose that teachers in charge of the module of oral expression should be well-versed and trained in dealing with such important skill. Finally, one or two of them propose that any class interaction should be semi-guided at least at the beginning of the session so as to motivate students, especially those who struggle and face serious deficiencies relating the target language, viz., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and others relating to psychological emotions such as lack of confidence, anxiety, self-esteem, fearing mistake making, and also teachers' or classmates' evaluation. All in all, this panoply of suggestions shows that the way oral expression module is dealt with is in inadequate compatibility with expectations of the respondents. Besides equipping students with the linguistic competence, teachers are expected to provide the favorable opportunities

allowing them to practice them in life-like situations. According to the respondents, sufficient margin should be allocated to practice in language classes.

2.2.2. Interview Analysis

A: Being in Charge of the Module and its Weekly Session Frequency

As regards the teaching of the oral expression module, the interviewees attest they have already been in charge of this module for many years. They confirm that they taught it once a week, which, according to them, remains insufficient to enhance students speaking skill proficiency. It is worthy to highlight that for some of the interviewees one session a week is sufficient since the skill can be reinforced through other modules.

B: Students' Speaking Skill Assessment

With regard to the assessment of the students' speaking skill proficiency, they unanimously evaluate it as being average. Asked about the reasons behind such modest proficiency, they report that the students show a high level of hesitation which limits their commitment and willingness towards an effective participation.

C: Classroom Interaction Dominance

Enquiring about the type of the interaction which prevails during those classroom sessions, the interviewees confirm that the teacher-students type is the most dominating, i.e., teacher led. For them, students do interact better with their teacher for he pays more attention and devotes more focus to the speakers. Yet, according to them, in case of oral presentation and debates, students interact much more in peers because these situations afford a less tense environment where no authority is implied to any participants. Students genuinely learn a great deal through explaining their ideas to others and by taking an effective part in activities via which they can learn from their peers. Yet, one interviewee estimates that students interact better with each other, because they feel no objection towards being criticized.

In fact, pairing reinforces students learning by instructing each other. Pair work makes students feel more comfortable and open when interacting. While working, students share a similar discourse, allowing for greater understanding. Peer learning should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants. They reciprocally develop skills in organizing and planning learning activities, working collaboratively with each other, giving and receiving feedback and evaluating their own learning.

D: Impediments to Successful Students' Interaction

Investigating the impediments precluding students' interactions, the interviewees agreed that psychological hindrances such as shyness and anxiety may be considered as the main cause to hamper students' commitment in classroom interactions, besides, other deficiencies related to poor pronunciation, syntactic errors and lack of vocabulary, preventing students from interacting freely. All these increase EFL students' lack of self-esteem, confidence and willingness.

E: Gender-Biased Classroom Interactions

With regard to gender classroom interaction hegemony, interviewees are parted into two different viewpoints. Three of them report that females dominate classroom interaction, whereas two of them claim that both males and females participate equally in classroom interactions.

F: Mixed-Gender Grouping & Refutation

The interviewees' answers are shared between refusal and acceptance. Some EFL students refuse to work with the opposite gender out of embarrassment as regards females' dominance of the interaction, whereas others see no problem to work with the opposite gender. For the causes which instigate such refusal, among the five interviewees, two argue that shyness prevents students from interacting with the opposite gender. However, the rest of the interviewees (3) think that mispronunciation can be at the origin of such rejection of cooperation with opposite gender in pair and group work.

G: Extra Influential Variables

The interviewees unanimously agree that cultural differences stand as a major boundary impacting on students' successful interaction in the classroom.

H: Possible Solutions and suggestions

Three interviewees suggest that oral expression enhancement needs: better classroom, time and space management through designing activities suiting different learning styles, offering students learning opportunities to choose their topics and ways of learning, and not imposing things on them. Group dynamics: varying the ways classroom tasks are conducted; individual, pair and group work. As well as designing 100% communicative activities that promotes fluency and self-confidence. The two other interviewees suggest that students need to regularly listen to authentic documents in the target language, to do a lot of extensive reading, practice oral public presentations, dialogues, debates, discussion, to

develop their creative minds. They also need to devote much time to oral expression sessions and getting in contact with native speakers to improve their speaking skill, besides the creation of competitive contests for students to deliver speeches, discuss issues and argument choices in front a panel of evaluators.

To respond to the suggested hypotheses, we came to the fact that: The difference of age affects the students' interaction in OE classroom; EFL students do not feel comfortable to interact with younger or older students in group dynamics. Besides, gender influences students' participation in OE classroom owing to the misunderstanding and shyness among male and female students. However, they still enjoy working in mixed-gender groups in group-dynamics activities. As regards social aspects and cultural differences, the latter can prevent students from interaction with each other confidently.

Conclusion

The current study aims at scrutinizing closely to what extent speaking skills can be influenced by both linguistic and extra-linguistic variables. Based on the findings, several suggestions can be provided for the sake of the EFL students' speaking skills development. Teachers need to reconsider the way teaching the speaking skills is actually performed. To attain the ultimate competence, i.e., students' oral speaking proficiency, producing excellent English communicators, the oral speaking sessions should be heavily devoted to practice. Besides, meaningful opportunities should be provided for students to communicate in real-life situations so that they can develop their abilities for oral communication. Differently couched, teachers in charge of the oral expression module need to afford appropriate classroom healthy atmosphere enabling students to voice out their viewpoints and interact freely. Doing so, students' motivation and self-esteem can be increased on the one hand and anxiety and shyness can be mitigated, on the other one. The attainment of such psychological emotions reduction relies definitely on teachers' appropriate management of speaking skill sessions. Thus, the classroom activities should be diversified to cater for learners' learning needs, styles and preferences. Cooperative and collaborative work, involving all students regardless of the gender, age, social status, should be suitably selected, adroitly planned and scrupulously implemented so as to help students overcome flimsy boundaries. The enhancement of students' speaking skill proficiency can be reached if the appropriate strategies are followed.

Besides focusing on the students' linguistic competence enhancement, much more heed should be devoted to EFL students' affective aspects and

particularly motivation, self-esteem, fear and anxiety to increase their speaking skill proficiency.

Similarly, the instructors are supposed to set up a friendly relationship among the students, which ensures their mutual respect, sharing and caring, and collaboration. The instilment of such key human qualities leads necessarily to the socialization of the EFL class, thus weeding out those boundaries. The following recommendations may help EFL teachers and learners overcome the hindrances precluding the attainment of the speaking skill proficiency:

- Teachers and learners should learn how to respect each other mutually;
- Teachers are compelled to know their students, their preferences and needs;
- They should also strive to enhance learners' self-esteem and confidence;

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