

## **Oral Presentation vs. Free Discussion: Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Speaking Proficiency and Perception**

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**Abstract:** Speaking is a significant skill that many foreign language learners are trying to master. In this study, the effectiveness of two different speaking activities, i.e. oral presentation vs. free discussion, was investigated from quantitative and qualitative points of view. To achieve this purpose, 44 intermediate learners from a language institute in Tehran participated in the study. Half of the participants experienced oral presentation while the other half (22 in two other classes) experienced free discussion for eight sessions. The two activities were exchanged between the two groups after the end of the quantitative phase of the study for eight more sessions. The results of an independent samples t-test performed on the scores of the speaking section of a sample Preliminary English Test (PET, 2012) after the first phase of the study (the first 8 sessions) indicated that the learners who experienced oral presentation significantly outperformed the learners who experienced free discussion though both activities proved to be significantly useful. Furthermore, the results of the interview with 10 participants from each activity through purposeful sampling, after the second phase of the study (the second 8 sessions) through thematic analysis indicated that both free discussion and oral presentation activities had some merits and demerits. Based on the results it can be advisable to include the two activities as complementary.

**KeyWords:** Free Discussion, Oral presentation, Language Learners Perception, Speaking Language Proficiency

### **1. Introduction**

Among the different English language skills, the speaking skill has the most prominent and significant position. Achieving oral proficiency is clearly one of the main interests and

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dreams of many English language learners. They believe having the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language and regard their speaking proficiency improvement as their success in language acquisition (Richards, 2008; Ur, 1996).

However, speaking in English as a foreign language is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon and providing a concise definition for it is very hard (Bygate, 2009; Thornbury & Slade, 2006). The difficulties and problems in managing speaking skill are due to different factors. There is never the chance of revising and editing the output since it always takes place in real time; in addition, it has unpredictable and transient features (Bailey, 2006; Bygate, 2009). Shumin (2002) refers to the lack of sufficient exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers as the major source of difficulty in speaking skill mastery.

It is clear that this lack of interaction and exposure to authentic oral communication in the foreign language contexts has overwhelmingly increased the importance of communicative and appropriate activities in the classrooms (Shumin, 2002). There are many researchers (Nunan, 1989; Thornbury, 2005; Ur, 1996) who highlight the significant role of effective oral communication activities in the classrooms. According to Dornyei and Thurrell (1994), many of the problems and difficulties in the conversation classrooms are the result of the lack of appropriate syllabus and activities in the classroom.

In the process of curricular and activities planning and designing, different learners factors and their individual differences especially their language proficiency and their perception have important roles, and the activity designers, teachers, and the learners can benefit from being aware of the.. In fact, the more the learners perspectives are paid attention to, the more opportunities for language improvement and achievement will be provided (Barkhuizen, 1998; Gentry, Gable, & Rizza, 2002). However, unfortunately, evaluation of classroom activities from the students' views is not much dealt with (Wada & Okan, 2000; Gentry et al., 2002).

Among all the different activities which can be effective in spoken language, discussion and oral presentation can specifically target aspects of speaking skill (Thornbury, 2005). Oral presentation and discussion are two different types of seminar that participating in them is one of the most problematic and difficult issues for EFL learners (Jordan, 1997). Looking at these two different activities more meticulously, it can be concluded that they have some features such as different types of learners' interaction, competition to take the floor, turns, and spontaneous talks (Padilha & Carletta, 2002; Ur, 1981, 1996) that sometimes may bring

the possibility of considering them as two activities which are at the opposite ends of a continuum.

Based on these features, oral presentation and free discussion may have different effects on the learners' speaking proficiency, especially regarding the perception of the learners. This study investigated the effects of these two activities on the speaking proficiency of the learners; moreover, it explored the EFL learners' perceptions of each of these two activities qualitatively.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Speaking Proficiency

Two important features of speaking proficiency are accuracy and fluency. Whether the priority should be given to fluency or accuracy has always attracted second language teachers' and learners' attention (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). Fluency refers to the easy connection of different speech elements. In fluent speech, the words are linked smoothly, rapidly, and without hesitations, and the pronunciation and the paralinguistic elements such as stress and intonation patterns are used appropriately and correctly (Hughes, 2002; Thornbury, 2000). However, accuracy refers to the correct and acceptable use of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Harmer, 2001).

As a result, appropriate and effective activities for oral communication improvement are integral and crucial components of speaking classes. Communicative and suitable activities which are organized and designed properly can provide a supportive and effective environment for language learning through providing a proper relationship among the learners as well as between the learners and the teacher; furthermore, they reduce the learners' anxiety and stress and consequently improve their achievement and success directly (Oradee, 2012). According to Thornbury (2005), among different activities, discussion and oral presentation specifically focus on dimensions of speaking skill.

### 2.2. Oral Presentation

Oral presentation is a learner-centered activity which is mainly implemented in the classroom for the purpose of improving the learners' speaking proficiency (King, 2000; Miles, 1998). Al-Issa and Al-Babbain (2000) assert that an important feature of the EFL classroom in different parts of the world today is oral presentations. Oral presentation is a learner-centered activity which is mainly implemented in the classroom for the purpose of improving the learners' speaking proficiency (King, 2000; Miles, 1998). They can be referred

to as beneficial tools to make the learners prepared for their future careers and real life speaking (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; Nakamura, 2002; Thornbury, 2005); however, even from the most confident learners point of view, presenting a talk to the public may be a source of anxiety and stress. It can be a bothering and fearful activity and reduces the learners self-esteem (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; Dryden, 2003; King, 2002; Webster, 2002). Giving oral presentation is a complex activity, especially for the foreign language learners. It requires a wide range of sociolinguistic, cognitive, field, and linguistic knowledge (Adams, 2004; Morita, 2000; Yu & Cadman, 2009).

In spite of the fact that oral presentation may be difficult and demanding for both the learners and teachers, it can be very beneficial for intermediate, upper intermediate, and higher level learners (Lee & Park, 2008; Meloni & Thompson, 1980). It integrates all the different language skills, activates the meaningful oral language, and facilitates the complex process of speaking mastery. Oral presentation involves the learners cooperation, responsibility, autonomy, and decision making which are so limited in teacher-centered classrooms and improves an independent and dynamic atmosphere in the classrooms (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; King, 2002).

To show the role of oral presentation in language learning, Choi, Joh, and Lee (2008) conducted a study which indicated that the development of discourse competence, learners confidence, linguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and the whole proficiency in the language resulted from the preparation for weekly presentations.

In another study, Otsu and Hefferen (2008) investigated Japanese learners opinions about the most important and effective aspects of oral presentation. The elements which were shown to affect the view of learners about the effective oral presentations were: language accuracy, speech clarity, quality of voice, and right connection and interaction with the audience. Otsu and Hefferen (2008) concluded that the teachers should inform the learners about the importance and effects of these elements on the oral presentations and remind them of the importance of their practicing.

The results of Lee and Park's study revealed that most of the participants saw oral presentations as interesting activities that led to learn new vocabulary and expressions in English. They preferred classes with oral presentations to the completely teacher lecturer ones.

Furthermore, Miles (2009) investigated the purpose of the learners for attending oral presentation classes. The results indicated that their main purpose was to improve their oral

proficiency, to obtain confidence in speech, and to challenge themselves to talk more. Interestingly, the teachers had the same language purposes as the learners.

According to Soureshjani and Ghanbri (2012), oral presentations provide a move from teacher-centeredness toward learner-centeredness. In fact, it is the learners who play the main role in the classrooms during the oral presentations.

### 2.3. Discussion

Discussion is one of the most efficient and beneficial ways of practicing oral communications freely with the major purpose of cooperation and relationship improvement among the learners. Whenever learners talk in the classroom and use the language individually, purposefully, and creatively, they are participating in a discussion (Ur, 1981).

Dunbar (1996, cited in Fay, Garrod, & Carletta, 2000) highlights the importance of discussion and claims that it is through discussion that the most important decisions are made. According to Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985), there are four different kinds of discussion based on the teachers' amount of control. The first type is *recitation* which is totally structured, arranged, and completely controlled by the teachers. *Guided discussion* is less structured in comparison to recitation, and *reflective discussion*, in which the participants have reflective and critical thinking, is the least structured one. Finally, it is in *small group discussion* that the learners have the most autonomy and responsibility. According to Ur (1981), the most advantageous and successful types of discussions are those that lead to the most possible amount of learners' participation. They are lively, interesting, and appealing with interesting topics and have both a challenging and success-oriented nature.

Fay et al. (2000) refer to group discussions as unstructured conversation made of different numbers of participants. Depending on the purpose of discussions, different group sizes are appropriate. Small groups are more advantageous when all the learners' opinions are important and have an influential role; however, if the aim of discussions is to inform all the learners about a particular opinion, the large groups are more preferable.

In addition to group size, topic is an important and effective issue in the progress of the discussions. Certainly, if the participants have some knowledge about the topic, they can handle the language better (Zuengler, 1993). It is recommended that the topics and materials be tangible, i.e. close to the life of the learners. In this case, they will help the learners to use and activate their background information and experiences appropriately (Ur, 1996). According to Jamshidnejad (2010), lack of a safe topic for discussion can be an obstacle in

L2 speaking. He mentions that unfamiliarity with the topic is harmful for both speakers and listeners. He recommends free topic discussions which will be beneficial for the learners. However, Hatch (1978) believes that although at the beginning the learners are only comfortable with known topics, they can gradually go beyond this boundary through some practice. In fact, all the learners need to become familiar with different topics in order to be successful speakers.

Considering discussion as an activity, Oradee (2012) conducted a study on the effects of three different communicative activities, i.e. discussion, problem-solving, and role-playing on the learners' oral proficiency and their perception of these three activities. Forty-nine students at a secondary school in Thailand took part in this study. They were categorized in small groups which according to the researcher increased their self-confidence, enjoyment, self-monitoring, support, help, and consequently, the participation among the learners and, on the other hand, decreased their fear of making mistakes while speaking. The results of his study indicated that these activities were effective in oral proficiency improvement, and the learners had positive attitudes towards them.

The results of another study conducted by Katchen (1995) about group discussions revealed that since one student or one group was not the focus of the teacher's attention for a long time in a discussion activity, the pressure to speak was not high; however, this kind of activity required spontaneous speaking so that those who were brave enough spoke, while others spoke little or remained silent.

Clearly, the significant role of both discussion and oral presentation activities (Thornbury, 2005) requires the teacher's attention to the learners' perception of the two activities (Gentry et al., 2002). Moreover, these two focused activities, i.e. oral presentation and free discussion, which are two problematic and difficult activities and seem to have a lot of opposite features (Furieux et al., 1991, cited in Jordan, 1997; Thornbury, 2005), are not analyzed comparatively which is the purpose of this study.

#### **2.4. The Language Learners' Perception of Different Activities**

The language learners' perception has a very prominent and significant role in language learning and teaching process and learners' achievement (Williams & Burden, 1997). The groundwork for inquiry and investigation of learners' perceptions was mostly laid in the 1970s and 1980s (Wesely, 2012). There are two significantly different types of learners' perception: their perception of themselves and their perception of the learning situation. The former type of perception encompasses how the learners make sense of themselves and their

own learning, whereas the latter type can be defined as how the students experience different aspects of the classroom such as different activities (Brown, 2009; Liskin-Gasparro, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1997). It is worth mentioning that most researchers believe that these two types of perceptions are totally interwoven.

According to Schlz 999,,, , while owinions alone do not necessarily re.lect the actual cognitive processes that go.on in.language acuuisition, ,e rceptions do influence reality ... 349). Obviously, the more we are aware of the learners' perception, the ,e tter our chances are to imvrove the conditions of language learning and use. The learners' view toward fiffereent activities and curriculum will provide valuable and beneficial information for the researchers an. euucational planners. They can use this information in order to imvrove the learners' motivation and achievements and the educational system in general (Gentry et al., 2002; Hawkey, 2006).

Nunan (1988a, 1988b) and Kumaravadivelu (1991) refer to the discrepancies between teachers' and learners' perception. According to Eslami-rasekh and Valizadeh (2004), the teachers should always consider the learners' perception and preferences in order to promote a more inclusive climate that would enhance learning.

This stddy aimed to focus on the learners' perception toward t.o fiffereent specific activities, i.e. oral presentation vs. free discussion, in the qualitative phase of the study; in addition to the quantitative phase which deals with the effects of the activities on the learners' speaking proficiency.

### 3. Research Questions

This study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference in the speaking proficiency of the Iranian EFL intermediate learners who practice discussion and those who practice oral presentation?
2. How do Iranian EFL learners perceive discussion versus oral presentation as two different kinds of class activities?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Forty-four intermediate female Iranian foreign language learners from four different intact classes in one of the branches of Kish Language Institute in Tehran participated in this study. In order to have an equal number of participants in each of the experimental and the

comparison group, two of these classes, consisting of 22 learners (one with 12 and the other with 10 learners) were considered as the comparison group (dealing with free discussion) and the other two classes, including 11 and 11 learners, were considered as the experimental group of the study (dealing with oral presentation).

#### 4.2. Instrumentation

In order to conduct the present study, the speaking section of a sample Preliminary English Test (PET) (2012) and a semi-structured perception interview were implemented for the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study, respectively.

To measure the foreign language learners oral proficiency before and after experiencing the two different focused class activities, a speaking sample of the Preliminary English Test (PET) (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2012) was utilized as both pre- and post-test in the quantitative phase of the study. The pre-test was administered with the purpose of both ensuring the homogeneity of the learners and measuring their speaking proficiency before the treatment, and the post-test was administered in order to measure the effects of the two activities. In this study, the reliability of the speaking part of the sample test was estimated through test-retest. The reliability correlation coefficient of the test-retest was estimated using Cronbach's alpha and turned out to be 0.85, which was acceptable from a statistical point of view (Larson-Hall, 2010).

To investigate the second research question, i.e. a qualitative analysis of the Iranian EFL learners' perception of oral presentation vs. discussion, a semi-structured interview was conducted, which according to Dornyei (2007), offers a compromise between the structured and unstructured interviews. Despite the fact that there are some prepared guiding questions in this popular kind of interview, the whole format of the interviews is flexible, open-ended, and not rigid.

To carry out this part of the study, a purposeful sampling was used. Creswell (2012) states that in purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon ... and the major criterion for their selection is the participants' potentiality of providing rich information.

The approach of conducting these interviews was one-on-one in which the participants were interviewed individually. This approach of interviews is popular but time-consuming (Creswell, 2012). It is worth mentioning that for the purpose of achieving proper data, all the interviews were conducted in Persian (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and they were recorded and transcribed meticulously by the researcher for the further analysis.



### 4.3. Procedure

As the first phase of conducting the quantitative part of the study, four intact classes with 44 learners at the intermediate level based on the criteria of the institute were selected. Two of the classes including 11 and 11 students were selected as the experimental group to deal with oral presentation, and the other two classes with 12 and 10 students were assigned as the comparison group of the study to deal with free discussion.

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the two groups and their intermediate proficiency level, the speaking part of a sample Preliminary English Test (2012) was conducted. The results of an independent samples t-test indicated that all the participants were homogenous. It is worth mentioning that the scores of the speaking part of PET (2012) were also acting as the pre-test scores which indicated the learners' oral proficiency at the beginning and before the treatment.

The pre-test was scored twice. Firstly, it was scored by the one of the researchers and her colleague who was also present during the test session. The former acted as the interlocutor and managed the interaction by asking questions and setting up the tasks and scored based on the global assessment scale, while the latter acted as an assessor and did not get involved in the conversation and scored based on the analytical assessment scale. The analytical scale covers grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication, and each part has five points, whereas the holistic scale covers the global achievement with five points, which makes the total grade of 25 for speaking part. Secondly, it was scored by two other experienced teachers who had been given the recorded and transcribed conversations. They followed the Cambridge assessment rubrics (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2012) and the same process as the researcher and her colleague. One of them scored holistically (from five points) and the other scored analytically (from 20 points). Ultimately, after checking the inter-rater reliability of the scores, the average of the two sets of scores was considered as the learners' pre-test score.

Throughout the term, the learners of both the experimental and the comparison groups studied the *Total English Intermediate* (Clare & Wilson, 2013) which was assigned by the institute for the intermediate level. The book includes 10 units which should be taught through five semesters, i.e. intermediate 1- intermediate 5. Each semester lasts for about one month and a half (21 sessions), and each session takes about 90 minutes. The 44 participants of the study were at intermediate level 1, and the first two units of the book were taught to them. Throughout these two units which were about friends and media, different sections

dealing with reading, writing, and listening skills were covered by their teacher based on the syllabus. It is worth remarking that for the purpose of this study, the teacher gave the responsibility of dealing with speaking skill mostly to the researcher.

For the purpose of this study, the participants in the experimental group experienced the oral presentation activity, while the participants in the comparison group experienced the free discussion activity in the last 30 minutes of each first eight sessions. The two activities were conducted by the researcher without their teacher presence. The teacher mostly tried to keep the procedure of both classes as it was supposed to. In other words, in the oral presentation group, based on the number of the participants and the number of the sessions to be held, one and sometimes two participants were assigned to present a lecture, based on a topic selected (Appendix A) for the next session. After presenting the lecture, she was asked some questions either by the teacher or the audience. In the free discussion group, the same topic but its parallel form suitable for discussion rather than for presentation was discussed (Appendix B). It is worth mentioning that the topics of the both activities, i.e. oral presentations and free discussions, were similar, and they were pre-selected and fixed for the next session by the researcher (they were not impromptu). In the process of topic selection, the researcher consulted with some teachers having the experience of teaching at the intermediate level for more than five years and chose topics which were more suitable for this level of language proficiency. In addition, she took the nature of oral presentation and free discussion activities into consideration and chose the topics which were suitable for both of the activities (Appendix A & B).

In the next phase, in order to become aware of the effect of the treatment (use of free discussion vs. oral presentation) after eight sessions, the speaking part of the same sample Preliminary English Test (2012) was utilized as the post-test. It is worth mentioning that all the stages of pre-test scoring were exactly followed in the process of post-test scoring; it was scored both holistically and analytically twice and after checking the inter-rater reliability of the scores, the average of the two sets of scores was considered as their post-test score.

To investigate the second research question, i.e. how the learners perceive oral presentation vs. free discussion activities, the two activities were exchanged between the groups after the end of the quantitative part of the study for eight more sessions. Finally, after the treatment of the qualitative part and all the participants experiencing of the both activities, from among those who were more eager and preferred each activity, based on their oral comments and degree of participation in each activity during the 16 sessions, 10 in each

were selected purposefully to be interviewed based on the criterion of providing rich information.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the 20 learners. Following the analytical stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytic process of the present study was conducted through thematic analysis and the following phases: at first to understand the data completely, the whole audio recorded interviews with the learners were transcribed meticulously. Then the transcription was read and reviewed several times, and all the parts that were relevant and referable to the learners' perception of the two activities (oral presentation vs. free discussion) were underlined and highlighted. In the next step, the interesting and important features of data were coded systematically, and the initial codes were generated. Afterwards, the codes were collocated to potential themes. Later, all the themes were reviewed and checked whether they worked in relation to the whole data set. Ultimately, all the themes were defined and named, and the production of the report, including relating back the final analysis to the literature and research question, was followed.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Results and Discussion of Research Question 1

To investigate the probability of any significant difference in the speaking proficiency of the participants who practiced free discussion, and those who practiced oral presentation an independent samples t-test was applied to post-test scores of the experimental and the comparison groups. To ensure the homogeneity of the learners, one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted. The results revealed normal distribution for both the experimental ( $Z = .596$ ,  $p = .870$ ) and the comparison group ( $Z = .786$ ,  $p = .568$ ). The descriptive statistics of these speaking pre-test scores are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Pre-test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Comparison Group (Free Discussion/ FD)	22	17.00	22.00	19.2727	1.41192
Experimental Group (Oral Presentation/ OP)	22	17.00	21.50	19.3864	1.25292

As shown in the descriptive statistics, the mean score of the experimental group is higher than the comparison group. Therefore, an independent samples t-test was conducted to explore the degree of the difference. Levene test revealed equality of the variances [ $F = 0.164$ ;  $p = 0.687$ ] and the results indicated that there is no significant differences between the scores of the comparison and the experimental groups [ $t(42) = 0.282$ ;  $p = 0.779$ ]; therefore, it was concluded that both groups were homogeneous regarding their speaking proficiency before starting the treatment.

To compare the speaking performance of the learners after the treatment another One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted. The results revealed normal distribution for both the experimental ( $Z = 0.650$ ;  $p = 0.792$ ) and the comparison group ( $Z = 0.506$ ;  $p = 0.960$ ). The descriptive statistics of these speaking post-test scores are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Post-test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Comparison Group (Free Discussion/ FD)	22	18.00	22.00	20.0000	1.17514
Experimental Group (Oral Presentation/ OP)	22	19.50	22.50	21.4091	.85407
Valid N (listwise)	22				

As indicated in Table 2, the mean of the post-test scores of the experimental group is higher than the mean score of the comparison group. To check whether this difference is significant or not, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Levene test shows equal variances ( $F = 1.415$ ,  $p = 0.241$ ) and the results of the t-test [ $t(42) = -4.550$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ] reveals that the experimental group (dealing with oral presentation) outperformed the comparison group (dealing with the free discussion) significantly.

It is worth mentioning that though the oral presentation group outperformed the free discussion group significantly, the descriptive statistics (Table 3) shows improvement in both groups comparing before and after treatment.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest and Posttest in Two Groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Free	pretest	19.2727	22	1.41192	.30102
Discussion	posttet	20.0000	22	1.17514	.25054
Oral	pretest	19.3864	22	1.25292	.26712
resentation	posttest	21.4091	22	.85407	.18209

To see if this difference was significant or not, two paired samples t-tests were conducted. The results showed a significant difference between pretest and posttest in discussion group [ $t(21) = -6.750$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ] as well as the oral presentation group [ $t(21) = -9.912$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ].

Comparing the results of this study with the relevant ones conducted before, one can say that it partially supports the prior research conducted by Jing (2009) who investigated the effect of oral presentation on EFL learners speaking skill, in which the results indicated that oral presentation improved the learners speaking proficiency. Furthermore, it supports the results of other studies by Lee and Park (2008) and Meloni and Thompson (1980) who indicated the positive effects of oral presentation and report on the English language learners English and academic skills. However, the result of this study is contradictory with what King (2002) believes about the oral presentations. He believes that sometimes the language skill will not improve with the help of oral presentation activity because of the learners problems with this activity.

There are many different researchers (King, 2002; Webster, 2000) who refer to the advantages of oral presentation activity. King (2002) and Meloni and Thompson (1980) believe that structured and organized oral presentations will be so advantageous for EFL learners in their career and their different school courses. The results of this study also confirms their idea with the only difference that both activities, i.e., oral presentation and free discussion can be beneficial for speaking skill though the former is stronger and more influential than the latter. Hence, in the context of Iran as an EFL context where there is not much opportunity for the language learners out of class to practice speaking, either of these activities can be used as a chance for practicing oral communication. Of course, depending on the specificity of any context, either of them can be given priority.

## 5.2. Results and Discussion of Research Question 2

The second research question of the study dealt with the learners perception of the two focused activities, i.e. oral presentation vs. free discussion. The merits of oral presentation

and demerits of free discussion from the viewpoint of the 10 learners who liked and preferred oral presentation rather than free discussion activity and the merits of free discussion and demerits of oral presentation from the viewpoint of the 10 learners who liked and preferred free discussion activity are presented in the following table:

**Table 4.** Themes in terms of Oral Presentation and Free Discussion: Merits and Demerits

	<b>Oral Presentation</b>	<b>Free Discussion</b>
<b>Merits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>.. Improving the learners language proficiency</li> <li>.. Promoting the learners presentation skills</li> <li>3. Providing an even chance of participation for all the learners</li> <li>4. Not being interrupted while you are speaking</li> <li>5. Acting like a beneficial catalyst with the obligatory nature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improving the learners language proficiency</li> <li>2. Being a stress-free activity</li> <li>.. Enhancing the learners creative, innovative, and systematic thinking</li> <li>4. Promoting interaction, cooperation, and friendship among the learners</li> <li>5. Being an interesting and enjoyable activity</li> </ul>
<b>Demerits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Being a stressful activity for the learners</li> <li>2. Being a boring activity for the audiences</li> <li>3. Having a distractive nature</li> <li>4. Being a difficult and demanding activity for the learners due to the controlling role of the teacher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Allowing the learners to keep silent</li> <li>2. Lacking an even chance of participation for the learners</li> <li>3. Difficulty in turn taking and initiation for the shy learners</li> <li>4. Lacking a fixed topic</li> <li>5. Being worried about receiving others negative feedback</li> </ul>

The advantages and merits of *oral presentation* from the viewpoint of the 10 learners who preferred this activity generated five themes. Most of the interviewees in this group referred to the effective role of this activity in the improvement of the language, specially speaking proficiency. Some of them stated since they were the teachers and their classmates center of attention for a specific time in the oral presentations, they tried to be well-prepared for the presentation and do researches on various issues through surfing the net, and reading

books, which they believed were so helpful in the improvement of their language proficiency. In relation to this, Al-Issa and Al-Qubtan (2010) point out presentations encourage and promote learning through research and discovery. Many researchers (King, 2002; Miles, 2009; Webster, 2002) confirm the effective role of oral presentation activity in the language proficiency of the learners. This confirms the results of the study conducted by Gu and Reynolds (2013) who indicated that extensive speaking activities such as monologues enhance the quality of learners' positive attitude, and perception of speaking.

In addition to the beneficial role of oral presentation in the improvement of the language ability, especially the speaking proficiency, some of the interviewees believed oral presentation was effective in the improvement of the presentation skills since they practiced standard delivery skills to convince the teacher and the audiences. They believed being skillful in presentation was a required skill in different arrays of education and career. Noticeably, oral presentation can be referred to as an advantageous medium to make the learners prepared for their future careers and real life speaking (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010; Nakamura, 2002; Thornbury, 2005). However, the learners valued and focused on the effectiveness of oral presentation on the improvement of their language proficiency rather than presentation skills, which confirms the results of the study conducted by Miles (2009) who indicated students considerably perceived presentation classes as an opportunity to improve their English proficiency rather than learn how to give presentations.

According to many interviewees, one of the most advantageous characteristics of oral presentation was providing an equal chance of participation for all the learners. They stated in free discussion activity, the talkative and high self-confident learners were the learners and the teacher's center of attention, and they always won the turns and did not pass the floor to others. Many of the learners, especially the shy ones (they referred to their shyness), had no or very little speaking opportunity which decreased their self-confidence; however, in oral presentation classes, all the learners had an equal chance and approximately equal time for speaking. These results lead support to the prior study conducted by Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) about the EFL learners' perception of anxiety, in which the researchers concluded that the participation of the learners should be considered and controlled more carefully so as not to make a few shine and let others take care of themselves. Addressing to a particular group might kill the willingness of others. The teacher should feel the pulse of the classroom when delivering turns (p. 156). According to Ur (1996), the class activities that lead to the same opportunity and chance of speaking and participation for all the learners are the most appropriate activities.

There were some interviewees who stated their language, general self-concept, and self-confidence were developed after having the same chance of participating and experiencing the speech in oral presentations. This is similar to what Liu and Littlewood (1997) found out in their study. They discovered that the more the learners practiced and had opportunity to speak in foreign language, the more they felt confident about their oral proficiency and had positive attitudes and self-perception of competence. However, it is against what King (2002) believes. According to him, public speaking sometimes undermines students' confidence.

Moreover, some interviewees referred to having the same and adequate time and floor to speak and not being interrupted by others before the termination of their speech as a considerable, important, positive feature of oral presentation activities.

There were many interviewees who referred to the obligatory nature of oral presentation activity and the catalyst and pushing role of the teacher in this activity. These interviewees believed that this obligatory nature was beneficial for the shy learners. It is worth mentioning that many interviewees referred to their shyness and low self-confidence. They emphasized the importance and benefits of having the activities which had a kind of obligatory nature in which the turns were delivered and fixed by the teacher, and it was the teacher who called the learners and asked them to initiate. They mentioned considering their shyness, they needed a push in order to make them participate in the activities; otherwise, they could not. These results of the study support the research by Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013), in which most of the learners believed that the teachers should sometimes push the learners.

In spite of the fact that some interviewees referred to the main and controlling role of the teacher in oral presentation activity, Al-Issa and Al-Qubtan (2010) refer to oral presentation as a learner-centered activity. Furthermore, some interviewees who referred to their shyness in their interview mentioned that they had lost their motivation before experiencing the oral presentation activities in the class. They said oral presentation activity with its obligatory nature encouraged them to make more attempts and study which obviously had positive effects on their language and speaking improvement. Ushioda (2001) asserts that one of the most important and successful motivational routes for the language learners is the learners' positive experience. It seems that the oral presentation activity helped them have the positive experience.

Some interviewees mentioned in spite of the fact that making the learners may be anxiety-provoking, especially as they had to perform in front of the class, this anxiety was



normal, beneficial, and facilitating which would assist them to be able to cope with the tension of public speech that they may experience in different situations and improve their self-confidence. As Dornyei (2005) asserts, anxiety does not necessarily inhibit performance but in some cases can actually promote it.

On the other hand, these interviewees referred to the disadvantages of free discussion. Some of them stated the voluntary nature of free discussion let the learners remain silent which hindered their making attempts to be prepared to speak in class; consequently, their language and speaking proficiency would not improve. According to Liu and Littlewood (2007), students' lack of experience in speaking English is especially serious because frequency of practice opportunities alone seems vital to their confidence and proficiency (p. 376). They declare that free discussion, specifically small group discussions, let the learners hide themselves in the group and completely remain silent. However, we should take into consideration that many of the learners are used to the teacher-centered classes and activities that they have experienced a lot in the past.

In addition, most of the interviewees believed that free discussion lacked an even chance of participation for the learners which led to the shining of a limited number of the learners who were mostly talkative and high self-confident. Katchen (1995) declares discussion activity requires spontaneous speaking; therefore, those who are brave enough speak, while others speak little or remain silent. According to Liu and Littlewood (1997), the educational systems that do not provide the learners with adequate opportunities to practice and speak English and have at the same time socialized them into adopting passive roles, will have negative effects on the learners' speaking proficiency.

Some of the shy interviewees (they had referred to their shyness) referred to the turn-taking as the most difficult part of the free discussion activity. They said they were not adequately self-confident to take turns and start talking without being pushed by the teacher, especially in the case that most of the high self-confident and talkative learners were their tough competitors. Clearly, giving any kinds of feedback was difficult for the shy learners.

The shy learners referred to their unwillingness to speak, their passiveness, and lack of participation or very limited and little participation during the free discussion activity in spite of their beliefs in their acceptable speaking and language proficiency. Dornyei (2005) believes that there is a further layer of debilitating factors between having the competence to communicate and putting this competence into practice ... that is why there are many people who avoid participation or even entering communicative situations in spite of their

high communicative competence.

These confirm the results of the study conducted by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002) who indicated that different factors mainly communication anxiety and perceived communication competence were the predictors of the learners' willingness to communicate. Therefore, it seems that shyness and lack of self-confidence, which some learners were suffering from based on their talks and the researcher's observation, had negative effects on the learners' willingness to participate in discussion. However, this is against what Ur (1981) believes about discussions. He believes it is easier for the shy learners to speak and express themselves in a small group discussion rather than to the teacher.

The possibility of change in the free discussion topic was another problem posed by some of the participants. Free discussion had an arguable nature, and its topic could change by a learner's comment or question and as a result the learners had to speak spontaneously. Ortega (2005) declares having extra time for pre-planning has various benefits. It brings the possibility of collecting and digesting one's thoughts, identifying language problems ahead of time, engaging in lexical searches, and finding helpful and appropriate vocabularies which cannot be followed in free discussion when the trend of the discussion is changed.

Moreover, some shy interviewees mentioned that they were very sensitive about receiving negative feedbacks. They were worried about the rejection of their ideas, and it was the source of their silence. Liu and Littlewood (1997) believe if this feedback is done with great sensitivity to students' self-esteem in a trusting and supportive environment, it should enhance their confidence and proficiency rather than inhibit their desire to speak English (p. 380).

The other 10 interviewees who liked free discussion more, had their own justifications for preferring it to oral presentation. Some of the interviewees stated since they had more chance of speaking in free discussion activities, and they could speak freely after a simple turn taking, their language proficiency was improved. As Ur (1981) asserts, discussion is one of the best and most beneficial ways of practicing oral communication freely in the EFL contexts.

Furthermore, most of the interviewees asserted they felt totally relaxed in free discussion since they could speak voluntarily while sitting in their seats. In fact discussion is an activity which provides a low-risk environment. Clearly, it is a learner-centered activity with the voluntary nature that fills the gap between the learner and the teacher on one hand, and the learner and peers on the other hand.

There were some interviewees who referred to free discussion as the activity which triggered and improved their creative, critical, innovative, and systematic thinking. It helped

the learners be able to contradict or support others' views and to express and defend their opinions with logic. As Pally (2000) claims these critical thinking activities including questioning and discussing are widely needed and used in different academic and professional settings.

In addition, many of the interviewees believed that the free discussion activity provided a more supportive learning environment and a high level of interaction among the learners. They could be familiar with their classmates' opinions. Enhancing interaction, cooperation, and friendship among the learners are the very points mentioned by Ur (1981) as the main aims of free discussion.

Many of the interviewees referred to free discussion as an interesting and enjoyable activity. They said they had a lot of fun during this activity. According to Ur (1981), free discussion is one of the most appealing, enjoyable, and motivating activities.

On the other hand, the very participants referred to the disadvantages of oral presentation. Many of them believed oral presentation was a stressful, anxiety provoking, and face-threatening activity, especially for the shy and low self-confident learners. According to the shy interviewees, they were always worried about making mistakes, losing face, and failing in front of the teacher and their classmates. King (2002) also believes that oral presentation can be a source of extreme anxiety and a face-threatening activity.

Moreover, most of the interviewees said that they felt bored to listen to mostly memorized and monotonous speech. It seemed that the main or even the only audience who was paying attention to the presentations was the teacher. Some participants in Yu and Cammans 999999 study also thought that it was only the teacher who listened and cared about their presentations. Yu and Cadman (2009) emphasize the importance of a coherent speaker-audience relationship and audience engagement in oral presentation. King (2002) asserts reciting from passages coded down from references makes the presentation sound like a machine-like, and un- ( ) ) ) ) ) ) )

Besides, there were some interviewees who referred to the difficulty of being the center of attention for a specific time. They said this feature of oral presentation caused them to focus on themselves rather than concentrating on their speech. Daly (1991) argues about the difficulty of stage and its fright and states being self-focused might result in a lower concentration on the audience, speech, and the surrounding.

Ultimately, some of the interviewees mentioned that they felt a hierarchical distance between the teacher and themselves in oral presentation activity. They mentioned that they

felt the controlling role of the teacher. However, this is against what King (2002) believes about oral presentations. He states oral presentation is a learner-centered activity in which the teacher has the role of a facilitator of learning rather than a controller.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to shed some lights on the effects of oral presentation vs. free discussion on the EFL intermediate learners speaking proficiency; moreover, it explored the EFL learners' perceptions of these two activities. The results of the first research question indicated the significant superiority of oral presentation to free discussion activity; however, both free discussion and oral presentation activities could affect and improve the speaking proficiency. Furthermore, the result of the second research question indicated that both of the activities had some merits and demerits from the learners' point of view. Hence, since we usually deal with learners who have different personalities in the same class, it can be recommended to include both activities as complementary in classrooms though either one may not be to the favor of some of the students. In this way, using one compensates for the shortcomings of the other. Elaborating the objectives of including each activity can help the learners to be more cooperative in class activities.

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## Appendix

### Free discussion and Oral presentation Topics

Items A and B were the topics of oral presentations and free discussions respectively.

#### Failure and success

- A. Can you think of any famous people who encountered failure before success?
- B. Do you think failures can contribute to a person's success?

#### Music

- A. Talk about your favorite genre of music.
- B. What is your favorite genre of music? What do you think about the role of music in our life?

#### Fortune-telling

- A. Talk about a form of fortune-telling.
- B. What is your opinion about fortune-telling? Is it superstition? Support your idea.

#### Films

- A. What film genres are not suitable for kids? Why?
- B. Do you think children should be prohibited from watching certain film genres?

#### Books

- A. Talk about the best book you read in your childhood. Do you think it was suitable for your age?
- B. Do you think children should be prohibited from reading certain books?

#### Mixed vs. single sex university

- A. Did you or your children experience a mixed or a single sex university (classes)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a mixed or a single sex university?
- B. Do you prefer a mixed or a single sex university? Why?

#### Exam Stress

- A. Describe the most stressful exam you have ever taken. Were you able to control your stress? If yes how?
- B. In your opinion, how can we reduce the stress of exam?

#### Punishment

- A. Have you ever been punished in your childhood? Was it fair? Is it effective to use punishment for children?
- B. Do you think a child should receive punishment?

**Travel**

- A. What makes a trip stressful? Have you ever experienced one? If yes describe it.
- B. Can traveling be stressful? In your opinion, how can we reduce the stress of traveling?

**Teacher-centeredness vs. learner-centeredness**

- A. What is the difference between Teacher-centeredness and learner-centeredness?
- B. In your opinion, which one is more helpful - teacher-centeredness or learner-centeredness? Why?

**Happiness**

- A. Describe the happiest day of your life.
- B. What is your idea of a happy life?

**The characteristics of a good teacher**

- A. Describe your best teacher at school?
- B. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good teacher?

**Anger**

- A. Describe a day that you were totally angry. Could you control your anger? How?
- B. In your opinion, what are the effective ways of controlling anger?

**Regrets**

- A. What is the biggest regret in your life? Did you try to overcome it? How?
- B. How do you think we can overcome serious regrets?

**Friends**

- A. Describe your best friend.
- B. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good friend?

**Competition**

- A. Have you ever competed in your life? Was it helpful or harmful to you?
- B. In your opinion, are competitions helpful or harmful to us? Why?