



# Gender-Oriented Scrutiny of Persian EFL Language Learners' Attitudes towards an Effective Oral Presentation

Hamid Reza Hashemi  
Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper was in fact an attempt to investigate the point that if there is any gender-oriented differences between the Persian EFL language learners with regard to the factors influencing an oral presentation. To be more detailed, the study tried to shed light on first, what factors do the language learners think are most important for delivering an effective oral presentation. And second, if there is any significant difference between the male and female language learners in terms of their attitudes on the issue. To fulfill the purpose, 150 male and female EFL Persian language learners from Ahwaz universities were purposefully selected and required to fill in the developed questionnaire. The findings of the study indicated a significant difference between the male and females' attitudes on the factors leading to a telling oral presentation. The study contributes significantly to the delivery of more effective oral presentations.

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## Introduction

It is a platitude that the main function of a language is to get something like a need, request, etc. done. Likewise, language in academic contexts including classrooms may require learners to use a specific language for the same purposes. For instance, they may be asked to convey their meaning by different ways of using language like having a lecture, or having a small conversation or even having an oral presentation. Delivering an effective oral presentation is an art depending upon several factors like absorbing the attention of the audience, and meticulous planning. Moreover, learning a foreign or second language is often, to many people, regarded as the ability of learners to speak the language accurately and fluently in different contexts and also to be able to communicate their ideas clearly to other individuals who speak the same language. Consequently, knowing a language is usually equated with speaking that language.

In addition, especially at higher levels, oral presentation is one of the most basic prerequisites for many language courses or subject matters that are presented via the medium of L2. Many studies, then, in the arena of teaching and learning L2 have focused on the oral performance of students in foreign or second language classrooms (Yu, 2003; Volle, 2005; Flewelling and Snider, 2005 etc.) and the factors affecting oral presentations (for example, Dryden *et al.*, 2003; Consolo, 2006; and Oliver, 2002). In keeping with the above-cited statements, it is axiomatic that giving an effective oral presentation is one of the basic requirements in language classrooms. Many factors might influence learners' oral presentations, among which one can refer to oral proficiency, performance conditions, interaction with the addressees (Dryden *et al.*, 2003), performance conditions (Elder *et al.*, 2002), self-perceived competence and desire to communicate (Xu, 2006), and individual differences in working memory capacity (Payne & Ross, 2005).

Further, different factors such as, oral proficiency, performance conditions, and interaction with the addressee may contribute to an effective oral presentation. Dryden *et al.* (2003),

for example, believes that the content of subject area to be presented, appropriate use of visual and technical aids, English proficiency of the presenter, lack of experience or confidence in presenting to a group can affect oral presentations. Levels of language, learners and learning situation may also correlate with oral participation of learners. Xu (2006) found that self-perceived competence and desire to communicate had a higher correlation with oral participation of teacher trainees.

Elder *et al.* (2002) investigated the characteristics and the conditions under which the performance is taking place. They suggested that performance conditions influence perceptions of task difficulty by learners. They used cognitive complexity framework proposed by Skehan (1998 cited in Elder *et al.*, 2002). Skehan suggested that three different factors lead to task difficulty:

- I. code complexity: incorporating both linguistic complexity/variety and vocabulary load/variety;
- II. cognitive complexity: involving cognitive processing factors such as information type and organizational structure as well as the
- III. familiarity of task topic discourse and genre; and communicative stress: referring to the logistics of task performance e.g., time pressure, nature of the prompt and number of participants (p. 349).

One of the most important issues to be considered is the level of students' proficiency and its relation with successful implementation of oral assessment. Miller and Ng (1994) in an experiment asked Chinese ESL tertiary level students on a speaking skills proficiency course to develop and administer an oral language test to their peers. They found that under some circumstances, students with a high proficiency level are able to assess reasonably each other's oral performance.

### Back ground to the study

The ability to speak a foreign or second language (L2) fluently and to understand it clearly in different contexts is perhaps the most important goal for many language learners. Therefore, the most representation of knowing a language is the

capability to speak it perfectly. In addition, oral presentations provide valuable opportunity to the students to practice their skills in an environment which resemble authentic situations. Students find a chance to represent their knowledge and to convey the needed information and to make contact with the audience. In addition, other students find an opportunity to evaluate oral performance of their peers and to engage themselves in the learning process (Dryden *et al.*, 2003). However, using presentations as a form of assessment has some disadvantages. For instance, students may feel stress when they are presenting information to audience, knowing that at the same time they are going to be evaluated by other students.

Proficiency level of language learners is a significant factor for efficient presentations. Peng (2009) for example examined college students' attitudes towards and possible language proficiency differences in peer assessment in an EFL context and compared correlations between teacher and peer scores. The results of the study suggested that in addition to teachers, both high- and low-intermediate students responded positively to peer assessment. However, the high-intermediate students' scores did show a high correspondence with the teacher's than the low-intermediate students' scores. Furthermore, the teachers worried about extensively using peer assessment in English curricula due to time limitations and class size.

One of the other factors influencing an oral presentation is the context of situation. Oliver (2002) assessed oral proficiency of ESL teacher trainees in different discourse domains. She used three categories of constructs for assessing oral proficiency, i.e. accuracy and fluency, classroom language, and nonverbal communication. Based on the findings of the study, she suggested that the oral proficiency of ESL teacher trainees was more satisfactory in some discourse domains, e.g. casual conversation, than in others, e.g. formal teaching.

Interactive speaking activities can also improve students' oral presentations. In a study done by Georgina and Sesma (2008), it was found that the oral production of adult EFL students of intermediate level improved significantly, using interactive speaking activities that incorporate learning strategies, strategy training, a careful selection of the speaking activities, and in a suitable environment. They believe that these interactive speaking activities can reduce students' fear to speak. Furthermore, in this intervention program, students' lack of vocabulary was compensated by teaching them the needed vocabulary before each activity, the use of synonyms, putting new words into a context and others strategies to enable students to communicate with each other.

The critical role of stress should not be ignored. King (2002) believes that the main problems that lead to students' oral presentation failures are speech anxiety and limited presentation skills. Therefore, in order to reduce students' fear of oral presentations, teachers show aware them that speech anxiety is absolutely normal. In addition, talking about speech anxiety will assist students to feel that they are not alone. In order to overcome speech anxiety King (2002) give some suggestions, including emphasizing the difference between spoken English and written English, explaining the purpose of visual aids, helping students to overcome the fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors, and developing students' summarizing and outlining skills.

Furthermore, various criteria may be used to evaluate oral presentations, among them one can refer to "pronunciation, stress, and intonation; fluency; coherence/cohesion; grammatical accuracy; grammatical range; lexical range; register; lexical

accuracy; interactive ability; content; language functions; delivery (rate of speech, fluency of speech, volume, register); awareness of nonverbal communication, and body language" (Langan, *et al.* 2005, p.15). Evaluation of oral presentations should include not only verbal elements but also nonverbal elements. Since most of the meanings are expressed through nonverbal cues (such as eye contact, voice use, hand movements, head movements, and body mobility). Cakir (n.d.) examined teacher trainees' nonverbal cues, gazing, and look-away behaviors. The results of the study showed that the students displayed various effectiveness levels in employing nonverbal cues. Only 15% of presenters did not show any look-away behavior, whereas the majority of students looked away in different directions and focal point during their presentations.

Training programs can also affect learners' self-assessment and peer-assessment (SA/PA). Lim (2007) employed a task-based learner training program to foster learners' meta-linguistic strategies and assist them in understanding their peers' feedback by using two oral performance tasks. She employed several techniques such as multi-method approach, questionnaires, and pre-and-post-interviews to determine usefulness of learner training for both learners and tutors. Lim (2007) found that the learners were able to assess their performances more accurately with repeated practice. In addition, peer assessment is shown to improve students' learning. White (2009) conducted a case study on peer assessment to determine students' reactions about a student-centered assessment procedure, and whether they find it useful in promoting effective learning. Thirty percent of students' final grades of a Public Speaking course in Japan were determined by peer assessment scores of oral presentations. She found that students had a positive feeling about peer assessment and this procedure enhanced students learning.

Moreover, oral presentations by learners may be assessed differently from teacher's evaluation of students' oral performance. Freeman (1995) compared assessments of oral presentation skills by groups of peers and teachers and found that the two populations were different in the marks awarded. Moreover, it is very helpful to explore students' views of which aspects of oral presentations will become the most effective criteria of peer assessment activities. Therefore, the instructors' evaluation role in oral presentations can be different. In a classroom setting, the criteria for assessment are usually established by the teacher, who also has the responsibility of judging students' presentation performances. So instructors need to become more cognizant of the principles and methods of peer evaluation in oral presentation. Fujita (2001) also examined peer, instructor, and self assessments of speeches and found that the correlations between instructor and peer ratings were high, while those between self - and instructor- rating and peer-self were medium. She also reported that receiving feedback from their peers improved students' speeches and that the students had positive attitudes toward peer assessment. Nakamura (2002) also investigated the reliability of peer assessment in classrooms and concluded that peer evaluation motivated students to improve their presentation. Even he mentioned EFL students, especially in business fields, should be aware of the impact of competent presentation skills in English.

All in all, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the Persian EFL language learners' perspectives with regard to delivering an effective oral presentation; and more importantly, to determine if there is any difference between Persian male and female language learners in terms of their attitudes or not. To

put clearly, the current study specifically addressed the following research questions:

- 1-What are Persian EFL language learners' attitudes towards factors affecting an effective oral presentation?
- 2-Is there any significant difference between Persian male and female EFL language learners in terms of their attitudes?

By regarding all the above-recounted studies, it can be easily noticed that no study, to the best of the author's knowledge, has specifically dealt with the male and female differences in their attitudes towards effective oral presentations. The significance of this study may be more manifested by noting that in EFL contexts especially in Iran no such a study has ever been fulfilled.

## Method

### Participants

Altogether 150 Persian EFL language learners took part in the study. They, 75 male and 75 female, were selected on the basis of non-probability judgment sampling procedure from Ahwaz University, Iran. The main reason of the author for selecting the same number of male and female participants was that since the study intended to make a comparison on the male and female learners, by choosing equal numbers, the gained results would be more reliable. The participants ranged from 24 to 38 in age and all were M.A students. The reason for selecting students studying at graduate level was that the majority of the courses offered in graduate program in Iran require students to give oral presentations in the classrooms. This requirement is not observed for those students studying EFL courses at undergraduate level. In addition, undergraduate students have not yet developed the skills needed for delivering oral presentations.

### Instruments

In order to gather the required data, a 30-item questionnaire developed by the author of the study and was distributed among the participants (See appendix 1). The questionnaire, which was in the Likert format, consisted of two main parts: the first part was related to the learners' biographical information. The second part incorporated the items of the questionnaire. The questionnaire items included a wide range of issues like eye-contact, voice, English proficiency, originality of the content, clarity, PowerPoint, body language, and time management. Finally, the reliability of the instrument was estimated using Cronbach alpha and turned out to be 0.74. As to its reliability, the questionnaire was examined and confirmed by some of related professors from the above-noted universities. By the way, in order to categorize the questionnaire items, factor analysis was run. Its results would be presented in the result section of the study.

### Data collection

After developing the questionnaire, it was distributed among the participants. All the participants were given enough time for responding the items.

### Data analysis

Finally, having collected the required data and in order to analyze them, SPSS statistical package version 16 in general and two frequency analysis and a t-test in particular were run. In other words, as to the first research question of the study which seeks the attitudes of language learners chi-square was run and for the second research question concerning with the effect of gender on the learners' responses a t-test was run.

### Results

The results of the study are now presented in this section. Firstly, a factor analysis was run and the 30 items of the

questionnaire was reduced to 8 general factors. These factors include *body language, manner of presentation, the speakers' style of presentation, the presenter's feedback, voice quality, transfer of the message, using other resources when presenting, and details of presentation* (See Table 2, below).

**Table 2. The results of factor analysis**

Factors	Related Items
F1	Body language
F2	Manner of presentation
F3	The speakers' style of presentation
F4	Presenter's feedback
F5	Voice quality
F6	Transfer of the message
F7	Using other resources when presenting
F8	Details of presentation

As to the frequency of the responses of the male participants, table 3 can show everything clearly. The table indicates that the male language learners believe that factors 8 (Details of presentation), 5 (Voice quality), and 4 (Presenter's feedback) are the most important factors for presenting an effective oral presentation. In reverse, factors 1 (Body language) and 7 (Using other resources when presenting) are the least significant factors.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics of frequencies for males**

	Fac1	Fac2	Fac3	Fac4	Fac5	Fac6	Fac7	Fac8
N Valid	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.72	2.22	2.32	2.61	2.89	2.41	1.73	3.33

Table 4 presents the same results of table 3 but for the female language learners of the study. The table shows that in terms of female language learners, the most important factors for delivering an important oral presentation are factors 4 (Presenter's feedback), 3 (The speakers' style of presentation), and also factor 6 (Transfer of the message). They also believed that the least effective factors are factors 7 (Using other resources when presenting) and 8 (Details of presentation).

**Table 4. Descriptive statistics of frequencies for the females**

	Fac1	Fac2	Fac3	Fac4	Fac5	Fac6	Fac7	Fac8
N Valid	75	75	75	75	75	75	75	75
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2.31	2.18	2.93	3.28	2.36	2.90	1.69	1.71

Now, in order to determine whether the gender of language learners has had any role in their responses or not, the results of the t-test, that is, table 5 are presented. As it is conspicuous from this table, the reported Sig. value is .04. Since this number is smaller than the normal P value (.05), it can be inferred that there is a significant difference between the male and female language learners' responses in terms of their gender. In other words, the results of the table show that gender has an effective role in the attitudes of language learners towards factors affecting an oral presentation.

Now in order to see the differences more accurately, table 6 is presented which reveals that male language learners possess more consistency in their attitudes towards the study issue than that of female language learners. This inference was drawn by considering the mean value of the two groups reported in the table.

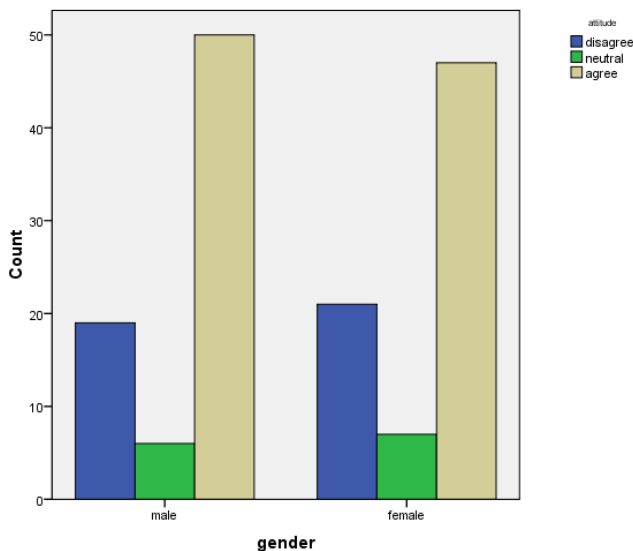
**Table 5. Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
attitude	Equal variances assumed	.302	.03	.22	148	.04	.06	.14	-.21	.35
	Equal variances not assumed			.23	147.91	.04	.06	.14	-.21	.35

**Table 6. Group Statistics**

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
attitude male	75	2.41	.87	.10
female	75	2.34	.89	.10

Figure 1 can show the above-cited information more vividly. As it is evident from the figure, male language learners present more consistency in terms of their attitudes about the factors which may affect an oral presentation.

**Figure 1. Gender and Attitude**

### Discussion and conclusion

Having presented the gained results in the preceding section, this part of the study, addressing the research questions already mentioned, discusses the findings of the study and makes a comparison between this study results and the previously-fulfilled ones. In the end the final remarks are also brought in.

What are Persian EFL language learners' attitudes towards an effective oral presentation?

The first research question of the study concerns with the over-all attitude of language learners towards the factors influencing an oral presentation. As it was already recounted, as to the male language learners, they believed that the three most important factors which lead to an efficient oral presentation are details of presentation, voice quality, and also the presenter's

feedback respectively. In contrast, factors like body language and the use of other resources while presenting are among the least significant factors. Female language learners the presenter's feedback, their style of presentation, and also their ability to transfer the message are the three most important factors for delivering an oral presentation effectively. They also mentioned that the two least seminal factors are using other resources while presenting and the degree of details of presentation.

As to the other studies dealing with the same issue, most of the studies have cited different factors affecting oral presentations of language learners. As an example, Dryden et al. (2003) concluded that the content of subject area to be presented, appropriate use of visual and technical aids, English proficiency of the presenter, lack of experience or confidence in presenting to a group are among the most seminal causes. They then added that some other factors including levels of language, learners and learning situation may also be associated with the quality of oral participation of learners. In another study, Xu (2006) asserted that self-perceived competence and craving to communicate may have a higher correlation with oral participation of teacher trainees.

Peng (2009) also did a study and finally, like the above-mentioned Dryden's study, concluded that Proficiency level of language learners is one of the most significant factors of an efficient presentations. Peng (2009) examining college students' attitudes towards and possible language proficiency differences in peer assessment in an EFL context and comparing correlations between teacher and peer scores, suggested that in addition to teachers, both high- and low-intermediate students responded positively to peer assessment. Peng further noted however that the high-intermediate students' scores did show a high correspondence with the teacher's than the low-intermediate students' scores. Furthermore, the teachers worried about extensively using peer assessment in English curricula due to time limitations and class size.

Stress, which has been dealt with almost in all of the studies concerning with the same issue, should not be ignored. King (2002) as an example pointed out that the main problems that lead to students' oral presentation failures are speech anxiety and limited presentation skills. In order to overcome speech anxiety King (2002) then proposed some suggestions, including emphasizing the difference between spoken English and written English, explaining the purpose of visual aids, helping students to overcome the fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors, and developing students' summarizing and outlying skills.

Is there any significant difference between Persian male and female EFL language learners in terms of their attitudes?

Regarding the second research question of the study which addresses the existence or lack of existence of any gender-oriented significant difference of language learners on the characteristics of an effective oral presentation, the study revealed that there is a significant difference in this regard between the male and female language learners. This finding was also implied in the first research question. It was said that male and female language learners mentioned different factors influencing oral presentations. Good or bad, the author of the study couldn't spot any other study dealing with the male and female differences with regard to this issue so that he could make a comparison between the present one and them.

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**Appendix 1. Questionnaire**

In The Name of God

Student of..... English                      Age.....  
 Average of last semester.....                      Sex.....

1. Presentation topics should be interesting to the audience.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
2. Smiling is not good while giving a presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
3. A presentation should be given in an organized way.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
4. Glancing at a transcript is not good while giving a presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
5. Using signal words such as "First" and "Second" are important when giving a presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
6. Using PowerPoint is not necessary when giving a presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
7. Speakers should avoid using difficult terms when giving a presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
8. Speakers should just speak about whatever they want even if the audience does not understand it.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
9. Good presentations include detailed examples and reasons.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
10. I don't mind if I find grammatical errors in a PowerPoint presentation.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
11. Speakers should pay attention to the audience's response while they speak.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
12. A PowerPoint presentation does not have to include statistical data when speakers mention numerical information.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
13. Speakers should argue their own ideas or possible solutions in their talk.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
14. A good PowerPoint presentation includes pictures and photographs.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
15. Speakers don't have to speak fluent English.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
16. Oral presentations should be given in informal language (as opposed to a formal, written style of language).  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree
17. Speakers should stick to the objectives of the presentation without confusing the audience.  
 1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
 5) Strongly disagree

18. Speakers don't have to finish the presentation within an allotted time.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

19. Speakers don't have to act cheerfully when speaking.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

20. Speakers should make eye-contact with the audience.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

21. Speakers don't have to outline the presentation objectives to the audience.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

22. The size of the letters in a PowerPoint presentation should be easy to read.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

23. A presentation should be given in a clear voice.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

24. The speaker should use some body language while speaking.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

25. A presentation should be given in a very loud voice.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

26. Speakers should pay attention to the speed of the speech.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

27. Speakers should speak with confidence.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

28. I don't mind grammatical mistakes in a presentation as long as the message is clearly delivered to the audience.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

29. A presentation should be delivered with correct pronunciation.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree

30. Speakers don't have to speak loudly.

1) Strongly agree    2) agree    3) undecided    4) disagree  
5) Strongly disagree