EFL Majors Perceptions of their Oral Performance Development in an English Language and Translation Programme

Abstract:

The current study sought to explore the perceptions of EFL majors' oral performance development in an English Language and Translation Programme (henceforth EL & T Programme). Participants of the study comprised 35 Level One students studying the Listening & Speaking 1 Course. Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through administering a questionnaire, running interviews and conducting classroom observation schemes. The findings of the study indicated that although students perceived the value of using the target language during their classroom interaction, they did not spontaneously interact using it. Furthermore, the presence of the teacher in the classroom, for them, was compelling. More importantly, fear of making mistakes was perceived as a factor that inhibited students' engagement in classroom interactions. The study concluded with a number of conclusions, pedagogical implication and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: students' perceptions, oral performance, fluency, speaking skills.

I. Introduction and background

Students' speaking in class has been kept on to attract discussion among educators due to its importance as one of the four macro skills compelling for effective communication in any language, particularly in an EFL setting. Because of this significant role, educators such as (Bailey, 2005; Goh, 2007;Talandis& Stout, 2014) detailed how to enhance the development of oral performance by means of syllabus design, principles of teaching, types of tasks and materials, and speaking assessment. They, along with others, emphasised on the sociocultural influence on active learner participation in class. Particular attention has also been paid to students' lack of confidence in speaking and native English teachers' (NET) frustration when encountering prolonged silence in EFL classrooms, not knowing what it means, why it occurs, or how to respond to.

Developing oral communication skills in EFL context is a tangible difficulty faced by teachers and students at all levels in most of the

institutions. The college of Science and Arts in Oklat Al-Sokoor of Qassim University, the context of the study, is a typical EFL context that offers a bachelor degree in English Language and Translation. *Listening and Speaking 1 is* a course offered to students at the second semester to those who are enrolled in the programme after passing an intensive course offered in their first semester in the college. It is one of four listening and speaking courses that aims at improving students' oral communication and listening skills and to help them develop oral abilities to communicate fluently in different contexts. However, and instead of the continuous talk with students in the target language to achieve such goals, most of tutors and students resort to talk in L1 to facilitate understanding as they think.

This research study focused on observing, analysing and understanding the development of oral performance skills of students from the English Language and Translation (EL&T) Program, specifically those students from the *Listening & Speaking 1 course.* Much emphasis has been placed on understanding students' perceptions regarding their oral performance development while studying such a course. The study also attempted to understand how this course facilitates their oral performance development throughout the different activities provided in the course book or by the lecturer and the different aspects that influenced their participation and interaction in class.

II.   Literature review

Developing students' oral performance demands classroom activities that allow them to exchange ideas with each other, express their opinions, and develop learning strategies and communication skills for successful negotiation (Karfa, 2007).Students' silence or lack of interaction in classis widely perceived as a serious problem. As Cotter (2007) explains, training in oral skills which lets students communicate and interact in a meaningful and fruitful form, (e.g. exchanging information, negotiating meaning, supporting ideas, facing oral defenses) is a way to motivate them to perceive the foreign language as a tool for social interaction. Thus teachers should constantly have in mind the objectives of providing students with oral activities in class and that students need stimuli to practice communication actively in the course addressing their needs. Mita et al (2006) reported in their study regarding oral communication that, after providing students with different oral activities in their speaking course,

students discovered the importance of both grammatical and strategic competence; stimuli or attractors for encouraging them to develop their oral performance. It means that, students become aware of their own development as they learn English oral skills. They also added that by making presentations instead of having casual conversations, the learners experienced less anxiety and had more confidence in talking to foreign students. So, having a 'real audience' inside the classroom provides a value on students in their own learning process, since students could notice differences in accent and vocabulary use compared with native speakers which might increase their inspiring levels for advancement. This clarifies the complexity of such behaviour and the necessity of recognising its facets. The dynamic system theory (DST) is useful in making this out because it offers great flexibility. It provides an over-arching conceptual framework through which to view entrenched speaking behaviour at individual, classroom, institutional, and societal levels, while at the same time not precluding the use of other theoretical approaches to explain such speaking episodes.

Originating from a branch of mathematics and well established in the natural and social sciences (de Bot *et al.* 2007), DST has only recently come to the fore as an exciting theoretical framework within the field of applied linguistics. Led by Larsen-Freeman (1997) with her seminal work on chaos theory and SLA, an increasing number of researchers (e.g. de Bot *et al.* 2005; Ellis 2007; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008; Geert 2008; Dörnyei 2009) have begun to look to DST and the closely related strand of complexity theory as a move away from traditional linear, cause–effect explanations of language production, and language learner behaviour. A DST framework reflects the complexity of real life in that it recognizes that human behaviour is continuously influenced by multiple, interrelated factors which constantly change over time.

Applying this notion of complexity to oral performance allows us to conceptualise this process as being a dynamic construct which is determined by an array of competing forces. The dynamic nature of this performance is reflected well in MacIntyre's (2007) belief that the decision to speak is a volitional process requiring "the coordination of a set of driving and restraining forces that may operate with or without the speaker's explicit awareness" (p 24). Put into the parlance of DST, these forces are known as attractors. Oral performance is such an inherently ambiguous and

varied phenomenon that its study necessitates the flexible, interdisciplinary approach which DST allows.

Payne & Whitney (2002) pointed out that there are several factors that affect the initiative of students when taking part of oral tasks inside the classroom. Some of them could be inner factors like students' previous experiences; while some others can be external such as the environment created by teachers in the class. Students' knowledge about these factors and their mistakes in communication is thus indispensable.

Besides, It is well known that all individuals need social interaction to promote communication and express their ideas and feelings freely. This should be the way in which English as a foreign language would be taught to those people who want to interact in this language. In this way, the major purpose of any teacher is to give students ample techniques for their fluency development. But this process is a hard work that takes longtime to be successful for mounting such skills; mainly oral proficiency. Forero (2005) found out this worthwhile in academic language in general. He said:

> Although social conversational skills are important, they are not sufficient for classroom-based academic learning. Yet, it is easy to overlook the fact that academic language can still be challenging and adversely affect the student's academic performance even though s/he is fluent in everyday conversations. In fact, a young person who is fluent in English on the playground is likely to require four to six years to acquire the level of proficiency needed for successful academic learning (p. 13).

Park & Lee (2005) were of the same opinion. They examined the relationships between second language learners' anxiety, self-confidence and speaking performance. The participants of their study were one hundred and thirty two Korean college students who enrolled the English conversation classes. Using a questionnaire and observation sheets, the results of their study indicated that students were resorting to use L1 in class rather than talking in the target language and that that learners' anxiety level was negatively related to their oral performance.

Jianing (2007) reported similar results in her study. She explains that many English students believe that if they make mistakes or fail to find appropriate words to express themselves, they will lose

face. To protect themselves from being laughed at, they are reluctant to speak English. So there is the vicious circle: the less they speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are afraid of speaking. Foreign language learners tend to lose interest in what they learn if they find they make little progress. Additionally, fear of making errors and losing respect are some of the factors that influenced university students' willingness in participating in classroom oral communication (p.1).

On the same route, Astuti (2013)tried to find out the factors that influence the lack of speaking performance of200 Indonesian students competent in Grammar and vocabulary. By using a questionnaire, the major finding of this study was that 43% of respondents confess that they feel shy, and 53% unconfident and nervous to speaking English. Moreover, the lack of motivation and the demotivating academic context were additional reasons identified by the participants.

Finally, Tuan & Mai (2015) tried to list the factors that influenced speaking performance of 203 high school students and ten teachers in Taiwan. By means of a questionnaire and class observations, they found out that there are five factors influencing students' speaking performance: performance conditions, affective variables, listening ability or linguistic ability, topical knowledge and feedback during speaking activities.

Students' perceptions

Student perceptions may encompass a wide array of factors related to their FL experiences, including opinions about teachers, views of instructional activities and approaches, and expressions of satisfaction with their progress in the classroom. Some of these factors have received extensive study in the L2 literature (anxiety, attitudes, and beliefs), whereas others have received relatively little attention (desired level of success in L2 proficiency, attributions of success or failure)(Tse, 2000).

Kung & Chuo (2002), for instance, investigated the potential role of ESL/EFL websites as a means to supplement in-class instruction. They evaluated a program in which forty-nine students enrolled in a high-beginner EFL class were introduced to five websites and instructed to use them for a homework assignment and for self-study. Data collected revealed that despite some difficulties encountered, students had overall positive

perceptions to using the teacher-selected websites in their learning of English. The students found that learning English through ESL/EFL websites was interesting and that the teaching strategies used by the teachers were effective and necessary. A follow-up study was conducted a year later after the initial study and the results supported the original findings.

In another discipline, writing, Ismail (2011) conducted a study to investigate students' perceptions about their development in an academic writing course and writing in general. A total of 64 female students from an ESP program participated in the study. The general design of the study was quantitative and qualitative in nature as a questionnaire and a focus-group interview were implemented for data collection. A combination of quantitative and qualitative procedures was employed to analyse the data. The overall results demonstrated the students' positive views towards the Academic Writing Course (AWC) in particular and ESL writing in general. The major findings demonstrated students' awareness of their needs and ESL writing requirements.

Sanchez-Hernandez, Gallardo-Vazquez,& Martinez-Azua (2014) conducted a study with the purpose of determining students' opinion on their proficiency in one or more foreign languages, and the importance they attribute to their foreign language competence. A qualitative and quantitative approach conducted at the University of Extremadura in Spain was used to triangulate the data resulting from three quite different procedures: promoting the participating students' awareness of the issue through a seminar on the importance of mastering other languages and their relevance for graduate employability; inquiring into the students' impressions when receiving an English class with a focus group; and a questionnaire on their opinions about the importance of proficiency in foreign languages. The findings of the study revealed how teaching in English in European universities could bring real opportunities for the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Furthermore, the development of foreign languages competences have to be a priority line of innovation in higher education in order to build a more meaningful relationship between education institutions and the European project.

The perceptions reported above, along with others, have important theoretical, pedagogical, and programmatic implications. From a theoretical perspective, certain attitudes and

beliefs derived from student perceptions can have a profound impact on the learner's affective state. This affective disposition has been hypothesised to play a central role in the processes of language acquisition (MacIntyre& Gardner, 1991; Young, 1991). Pedagogically, student opinions and attitudes toward specific classroom activities or teacher-student interactions can empower them to take serious decisions on how best to modify and employ various techniques and methods in the classroom (Ibrahim, 2013). Programmatic decisions are also linked to student perceptions, in that attributions of success and failure and the level of success students want to attain, may determine the popularity of courses in a FL programme especially when credit hours are applied in the institution (Dupuy&Krashen, 1998). It is useful, then, to examine the different aspects of perceptions to show their theoretical, pedagogical and pragmatic implications and to place the current study in broader contexts of current research.

III.   The problem of the study

In the setting of an EL & Tprogramme, the development of effective oral communication skills is especially noteworthy necessity since students need not only to be able to perform accurately, fluently, and spontaneously in any situation, but as future professionals, they will be in charge of communicating with others and helping them to develop their own communicative ability. In addition, students' dynamic role, attitude, participation and motivation, are vital in this process. Without their active involvement in class activities, oral communication and fluency-focused skills cannot be properly developed, especially because the classroom is, in many occasions, the only environment in which they have opportunities to communicate orally using the target language.

IV.   The aims of the study

Based on the aforementioned problem, this study aimed at understanding the student's perceptions and opinions about the development of their oral performance development in order to get insights into the kind of activities and motivating factors that may contribute to strengthening their commitment to the subject.

V.   Research questions:

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL students perceive their oral performance development as they participate in the *Listening &Speaking 1*course?

2. What factors do participants report as influencing their participation in oral performance activities inside the classroom?

3. What are EFL students' perceived strengths and weaknesses in communicating orally in English?

VI.   Research methodology

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the research, a mixed method research design was selected as the main drive of the study was to explore and understand students' perceptions about their oral performance development in class after studying the course *Listening and Speaking 1.* This type of research is meant to help the researcher to understand how people feel and why they feel as they do and as Merriam (2009) succinctly signals this out stating: "The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (p. 6). In such a case, the researcher is seeking to both discover and understand an event or a process; the perceptions and points of views of the learners regarding their oral performance development and the factors that might influence them.

-   Participants

The research was administered to35Level one EL &T Programme students. All of them were males due to the policy of segregation between males and females in the educational system in KSA. They had mixed language abilities but share a basic level of understanding the English language. This was clear in their scores in the Intensive course programme they had to pass before enrolling in the EL&T Programme. In the study, the researcher played a dual role as a principal teacher and researcher during the entire process of research.

- **Instruments**

Three tools were used to collect data throughout the different phases of the study to triangulate the results obtained, namely questionnaire, interviews and observations (see appendices 1 & 2).The researcher was, as Rossman& Rallis (1998) underscored, "a part of the process, continually making choices, testing assumptions and reshaping questions" (p.5). The interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim very carefully.

The three data elicitation techniques used for the current study tackled students' perceptions regarding the following issues:

1. Students' ability to communicate

   - ideas easily with almost no mistakes in grammar or in pronunciation

   - with decrease in the use of mental translation (the use of L1, attitude towards the use of English in class)

   - at a reasonable rate of speech characteristics

2. Students' participation and interaction in class

3. The factors that influence students' oral performance; and

4. Students' strengths and weaknesses in oral performance.

A five point Likert Scale questionnaire was designed to gauge students' perceptions regarding their oral performance development throughout the course. Consequently, it was conducted twice. The first was in (week 3) before the actual teaching of the course; whereas the second administration was in (week 16) by the end of the course. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire content, a standard criterion for the development of valid and reliable questionnaires followed by Brown (2001) and Dornyei(2003), was selected by reviewing the relevant literature.Moreover, in order to keep respondents' attention and check their truthfulness in answering the statements, some items were randomly mixed with others and some others were written negatively (items 10& 11)to avoid a fixed pattern of marking the rating scale. Finally, these items were submitted to four experienced experts for more scrutiny, and based on their suggestions, the final version was prepared for administration on the participants of the study. It included 17 items distributed on five cores to elicit students' overall perceptions about their oral performance, namely, students' ability to understand and express

ideas clearly (items 3,7,8,13,14,15,16,17); pronunciation efficiency (items 2,5,6); classroom participation and interaction (items 9,10,12); the use of L1 (items 4,11), and grammar mistakes (item 1). For reliability, the overall Cronbach's alpha was calculated and the result was .83 which shows that this questionnaire was reliable.

In addition to the questionnaire, 8 sessions of class observation were conducted by the researcher. To this end, the observation checklist was already available and was taken from Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997. The purpose of administering this checklist is twofold. First, it was used to help the researcher give feedback to the students throughout the course concerning their oral performance and the different aspects that need improvement. Second, it was utilised to provide the researcher with the necessary information pertaining to students' oral performance progress to verify the information provided by the students in the questionnaire. This gave the researcher better understanding of the situation presented in class and students' reaction towards the teaching and learning process. The checklist comprised four dimensions; voice control, body language, content of oral presentation, and effectiveness. At the end of the checklist, students were asked to determine three areas that need improvement from their point of view.

As for the interviews, they took the form of open ended questions that tackled questions about students' perceptions and understanding of their oral development, the aspects of weaknesses and strengths in their performance and the factors that led to that. Eight students agreed to be interviewed and for ethical issues, a special number was allocated for each one. Interviews took place at the end of the course to give students the opportunity to form a full account about the whole situation. Questions were in English but students were allowed to use the language they like to express their ideas freely and not to allow language barriers to interfere. Moreover, they were analysed and coded according to the major topics of the study. Relevant perceptions were then grouped together and finally used as supplementary sources to support the interpretation, comparison and triangulation of data.

VII. Findings

As mentioned earlier, three tools were used for data collection to accomplish the purpose of the study. The data obtained was analysed in accordance with the study questions that can be grouped under five major themes, namely, 1) *Students' perceptions of their oral performance development; 2) students' perceptions of their classroom participation and interaction; 3)patterns of classroom participation and interaction; 4)factors affecting students' oral performance and 5) perceived Strengths and weaknesses of students' oral performance.* Findings will be presented based on these themes.

1. Students' perceptions of their oral performance development

To start with the questionnaire, SPSS v. 21 was used to calculate the frequencies and percentages of students' responses on its items.

Table 1
Frequencies and Percentages of some aspects
of students' oral performance

Cores	Performance rate	Week 3		Week 16	
		Frequencies	Percentages	Frequencies	Percentages
The ability to understand and express ideas clearly	Hardly able to	13	37	6	17.1
	Usually able to	12	34	6	17.1
	Always able to	10	28	23	65
Pronunciation efficiency	Hardly ever cable of	9	25.7	6	17.1
	Usually able to	8	22.8	4	11.4
	Always able to	18	51.4	25	71.4
Classroom Participation and interaction	Hardly ever cable of	11	31.4	4	11.4
	Sometimes able to	10	28.5	5	14.2
	Always able to	14	40	26	74.2
The use of L1	Always	18	51.4	7	20
	Usually	11	31.4	5	14.2
	Hardly	6	17.1	23	65.7
Grammar mistakes	Many	17	48.5	4	11.4
	Little	11	31.4	7	20
	No	7	20	24	68.5

In relation to students' ability to understand and express ideas clearly, there was a great improvement of students' self-perception. As Table 1 shows, there was a decrease in the number of students who considered themselves as hardly ever capable of expressing ideas clearly (37% at the beginning of the semester against 17.1% at the end of the semester). A remarkable increase can be observed in the number of students who considered themselves as usually able to understand and express ideas clearly (65%).

The data analysis also indicated that students' pronunciation efficiency has improved since 71.4% reported having enhanced in their pronunciation performance by the end of the course. This was a remarkable improvement compared with the same category at the beginning of the course since there was a significant number of students who self-rated themselves as hardly ever capable of good pronunciation at the beginning of the semester; (25.7%).

High level of perception is also reported by students by the end of the course on their self-assessment of oral performance regarding grammatical mistakes. 88.5% of students reported that they make little or no grammatical mistakes while communicating orally in class while 11.4% said they make many grammatical mistakes. This was not the case before conducting the course since 48.5% of students reported committing many grammatical mistakes and 31.4% said they make little mistakes.

As a means of substantiating the data obtained from the questionnaire and presented above, and for the purpose of triangulation, classroom observation was used at the beginning and by the end the course to observe four dimensions of students' oral performance: voice control, body language, content, and effectiveness (see appendix 2). Paired sample *t*-test was used to compare students' mean scores at the beginning and by the end of the course.

Table 2

Paired Sample t Test of the Dimensions of Students' Oral Development

		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. at the.05level (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	observation at the beginning and final	22.74	8.565	1.4478	25.685	-19.800	15.7	34	.000*

Based on the results of *t*-test presented in Table 2, statistical significant differences can be detected between students mean scores of students at the beginning of the course and their mean scores at the end in favour of the final administration. This confirms the pattern of data obtained from the questionnaire in which students self-reported to have developed their oral performance.

2. *Students' perceptions of their participation and interaction in class*

The questionnaire analysis revealed that by the end of the course, students perceived a difference in the level of classroom interaction and participation. They highlighted that they participated and interacted more often in class than before. As Table 1 illustrates, at the beginning of the course, 34% of the participants declared they hardly interacted in class, while 31.4% stated that they always did so. But by the end of the course, students underscored that they perceived a proliferation of the level of classroom interaction; the majority of students (74.2%) reported an improvement in the level of participating in classroom interactions.

The participants also reported that they perceived themselves as more able and fluent than before; they were more able to use the target language and less dependent upon the L1. This was evident in their response to the items of the questionnaire which showed that 2/3 of the participants (65.7%) reported using English in classroom interaction than using their mother tongue. This was

not the case before attending the course since 82.8 % reported frequent use of L1.

The results reported above dealt with two major dimensions that encompass five variables. An interesting theme emerged from the data analysis that encouraged the researcher to explore whether these variables are monotonically correlated; if the variables tend to change together, but not necessarily at a constant rate. Using SPSS, the Spearman correlation coefficient was computed to achieve this purpose. As table 3 indicates, the results revealed that each variable correlates perfectly with itself, as evidenced by the coefficients of +1.00.

Understanding and expressing ideas clearly in class correlates strongly with pronunciation efficiency and grammatical accuracy (*rho* = +.616, +.648). A moderate correlation exists between expressing ideas and both the use of L1 and classroom participation and interaction dimensions (*rho* = +.540, +.539). Moreover, pronunciation efficiency correlates strongly with all variables except with grammatical accuracy where the correlation was moderate (*rho* = .453). Finally, classroom participation and interaction had moderate correlation with the variable expressing ideas (*rho* = .540), and strong correlation with all other variables.

The fact that all of these correlation coefficients have positive values indicated that increases in one variable corresponded to increases in the other which is an indication of strong correlation.

Table 3

Correlations between the Different Dimensions
of Students' Oral Performance

			Understanding and expressing ideas	Pronunciation efficiency	Classroom participation and interaction	The use of L1	Grammar mistakes
Spearman's rho	Understanding and expressing ideas	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.616**	.540**	.539**	.648**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.001	.001	.000
		N	35	35	35	35	35
	Pronunciation efficiency	Correlation Coefficient	.616**	1.000	.698**	.677**	.453**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.006
		N	35	35	35	35	35
	Classroom participation and interaction	Correlation Coefficient	.540**	.698**	1.000	.853**	.641**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.	.000	.000
		N	35	35	35	35	35
	The use of L1	Correlation Coefficient	.539**	.677**	.853**	1.000	.654**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.000	.	.000
		N	35	35	35	35	35
	Grammar mistakes	Correlation Coefficient	.648**	.453**	.641**	.654**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.006	.000	.000	.
		N	35	35	35	35	35

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3. Patterns of classroom participation and interaction

The data gathered in the observation sessions yielded some thought-provoking insights about the patterns of classroom participation and interaction. The following section would report on the findings observed:

- ***The teacher as the main prompter of interaction in class***

The eight observations carried out provided valuable information about the different interactional activities that students engaged in during the classroom. The example below illustrates the tendency in which the teacher was the main prompter of interaction in the classroom since he proposed the different activities or topics to work on. Students just waited for the teacher to organize the classroom interaction; they never initiated the interaction. They were all the time reactive to the teacher's questions and did not take the initiative to engage in spontaneous interaction among themselves or with the teacher. The following excerpt is an example of how interaction took place:

In observation Session 4, Activity 1: '(reading) the teacher started the class by asking students several questions about an article on "Public and Private Lives". Students had read the article in groups in a previous class. Students had to argue their points of view according to the article. In small groups, students had to defend their opinions about private and public lives and their policies. The teacher divided the groups in two minor groups, the ones who defended public lives and the ones who defended private lives. The purpose of this division was to promote different types of interaction among students; debating, arguing, agreeing, giving opinions and ideas, criticizing, analyzing, etc. the teacher started asking questions to the groups. It was evident throughout this session that the interaction among students was low since they only interacted with the teacher in the first part of the activity by answering questions that teacher made to them while the rest of the group remained in silence. Few of them volunteered to participate on their own. (In some cases everybody wanted to respond to the teacher's questions). Even though, it was remarkable that students participated more when they were exposed to small groups instead of the whole class or just the teacher.

- ***L1 as the main language of interaction in class***

It was observed that most of the time, especially sessions 2, 3, 4 and 7, students did not carry out the tasks and activities in the target language. Although the teacher constantly encouraged them to use English inside the classroom, they preferred to talk in Arabic rather than using English especially when the interaction

was among themselves. In session 3, for instance, it was the time for students to read an article about "Famous People" and then started a discussion to answer a number of open ended questions. Most of them were talking in Arabic and they barely resorted to English. Later on, this feature decreased to a noticeable degree and the majority of students resorted only to Arabic when they were unable to find the right word in English. Student 2 commented on this saying:

> "Yes it was difficult for me to speak in English in front of all my friends. I felt words escaping from my mind and also why should I?………..later on, it was OK for me as I am used to that".

Student 8 expressed this differently. He said:

> "My tongue was twisted to speak. Although I keep thousands of vocabulary items, but when I need them I cannot find them…….yes this changed later because I said to myself I have to, otherwise, I will be in the back cart".

- *Interaction Best Promoted through Small Group Activities*

It could be also observed that (this was based on what tool; the questionnaire or the observation) the classroom participation and interaction among students were more frequent when the teacher arranged the students in small groups (five students maximum). It seemed that students felt less stressed and more confident when they used the target language in small groups. One could notice that they were more willing to get engaged in classroom interactions where they practised the skills of turn taking, interruptions, clarifications, and even jumping to complete each other's ideas.

An example of such an interaction is the one occurred in session 4 where students were consolidating arguments about public and private lives and policy. They had to argue their points of view and defend their opinions about the policy and public and private lives. The teacher chose one member from each group in order to argue and defend the group's ideas about the topic they discussed. The rest of the groups started asking questions to the members of the other groups who had to defend their opinions about public and private lives. High level of anxiety could be observed when students had to speak to the public rather than to their minor groups.

- *Debates and Discussion as the most Engaging Activities for Students' Participation*

Different types of activities were presented to students during teaching; vocabulary contests and quizzes, monologues or group oral presentations, debates, discussions, short prepared dialogues, etc. but stating and defending ideas was the activity they liked most. When they were asked to verbalize and express their opinions about the type of life they like most, public life or private life, they were very enthusiastic to defend their choice and commenced on debating with each other about this hot topic. Students seemed to find it easier to engage in oral participation when the activities involved debating controversial issues among themselves. In this way they perceive they are giving ideas and sharing opinions in a meaningful way.

Data from the interview also provided valuable information about how the students perceived debates and discussion activities in class. The following is an extract from the interview:

Question 4. Participant 3.

> '…when we are debating and we are all speaking and participating that is important, that's interesting and that is what the class is for… if there is an issue or a topic that is interesting… they will participate and I will do the same.'

In this extract, participant number 2 confirmed that debating and doing discussion activities were very motivating for him since students were talking and sharing ideas and making oral production naturally. The participant is aware of developing a higher participation in this kind of activity. Student 5 was of the same opinion but from a different angle. He said:

> *'I think that, when the teacher starts the class with [the] game, with… crosswords, with newspapers in English, [that] topics are [that] students were more motivated'.*

Student 5 perceived the type of activities that the teacher brought to the class as influential in motivating students to participate in class. Authentic activities that were of interest to students allowed them to be more engaged and enthusiastic. This authenticity aspect is more clarified in the next point.

- *Socio-political issues as the most motivating topics for interaction*

The data obtained from the observation sheets revealed that students liked to interact among themselves when the topics presented were new or fascinating for them. Some topics that were discussed in class were culture awareness raising activities, important and famous places and people, private and public lives, politics and social issues, etc. These kinds of topics gave the students the opportunity to think about their likes and dislikes, and about their previous knowledge they might have about the topic involved. Three topics were of great interest for them and the teacher dealt with them prudently. They were ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Storm of Resolve and the late King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz. There were great debates about such topics and students were very excited to express and defend their opinions in front of others.

Data from the interview also confirmed how talking about these socio-political issues increased students' motivation inside class. The following are some extracts taken from the interview which illustrated students' perception about this finding:

> Participant 2'I especially like political issues, political topics, and, mmm..things that have to do with our surrounding, with social issues'.

> Participant 3. '… when you want to talk about the famous people you feel very interested because you want a… eh… when you talk about the famous people that you like, you feel very good, because is one of the things that you enjoy'.

The information obtained from the observations and interviews gives a clear view of the situation presented in these findings. Some students stated they considered more interesting to talk about familiar and current topics that could have some background information about. In this way, they seemed to feel more confident and comfortable talking in class about topics they really like and enjoy. At the same time, this gave them the chance to express their ideas freely and try to debate with others about their credibility.

4. Factors affecting students' oral performance

The findings in this section were derived from the interviews conducted with eight students from the course participants. The purpose of the interviews was to explore students' perceptions related to their interaction and the factors that affect their classroom participation. In-class and out-of-class factors were reported to influence their interaction in class.

- Students' awareness of the importance of classroom participation

The data collected from participants showed that the majority of them were aware of the importance of improving speaking skills and the problems they had in oral communication. They felt the compulsion of developing essential abilities in order to have a better performance in their oral production, thus they saw participation in the conversation classes as the real chance for them to practise their English language and at the same time to correct the mistakes they might make. Student 8 stated this clearly saying:

> "…in the listening and speaking class…. it doesn't matter the topic because one has to talk, you need to talk… I like to talk with everybody… because you can correct the mistakes, hearing the partners, the teacher, it doesn't matter, I just want to participate and develop my speaking more".

Student 4 stated it differently. He said:

> "we have to develop our listening and speaking skills, both, because we have to get a high grade in the course and also we're going to be teachers and all those things that we are seeing will help us to manage ourselves in order to teach.'

Student 1 thought he had a different opinion, but in fact he was voicing the same train of thought. He said:

> "I don't think the grade is [not] important for me, I participate because I want… eh… the grade is… I don't know, is a motivation but is not important, that's because I want to learn".

- *Students' confidence*

Building up confidence in speaking to an audience was mainly reported as an in-class factor that strengthened speaking performance. The tasks based on current and hot topics helped participants to prepare for speaking, and once each speaking task was well-prepared, this preparation became an effective strategy to reduce the anxiety level, and thus maximize speaking confidence. However, lack of confidence was a negative factor that demotivated some participants to take part in classroom interactions (participants 3, 5, 7 and 8).

- *Listening to English materials*

Other out-of-class factors that enhanced participants' speaking included frequent listening to English materials, such as listening to music, watching movies, listening to the radio, watching television programs, and accessing multimedia websites. Student 2 confirmed this saying: "I love to watch movies in English and listen to music and songs. This helped me enhance my pronunciation and listening skills".

- *Fear of losing face in front of other classmates or their teacher*

As a negative factor that hindered students from taking part in classroom interactions, participants 3, 5, and7 reported that they were unwilling to participate in class activities because they were afraid of making mistakes when trying to express their ideas or give presentation in front of their classmates.

5. *Strengths and weaknesses of students' oral performance*

It was also essential to find out whether students perceive their strengths and weaknesses or not and the reasons for that. Strengths of oral performance found in this study included a wide array of real world topics, when a broad range of vocabulary was employed; building up confidence to talk and minimizing anxiety, and little development of some features such as grammar or pronunciation. Freedom of topic selection or familiar and interesting political topics encouraged the participants to feel comfortable and motivated them to speak, and definitely maximizing speaking confidence. The wide range of vocabulary relating to the selected topics automatically increased and activated the EFL learners' English lexicon; "I now can use

vocabulary items that are very new to me and related to the current events" student 4 said. However, pronunciation, especially word stress, final sounds such as /z/ and /s/, students' misuse of some vocabulary and grammatical structure, especially in tense, seemed to be common weaknesses in students' oral performance that needed more attention. This was clear in their flow of speech.

VIII. Discussion

The current study sought to understand students' perceptions of their oral performance development during studying the *Listening & Speaking 1* course. Qualitative and quantitative data has been obtained through administering three instruments; a questionnaire, observation sheets and open ended interviews to answer the three research questions. In the following section discussion of the data will be presented with reference to the research questions and the previous related studies. .

The results of the study revealed that students perceived the improvement of their oral performance after attending the Listening & Speaking 1 course. Participants reported feeling that the different factors related to oral communicative abilities, like pronunciation, vocabulary, ability to express andunderstand ideas, grammar and a decrease of mental translation, etc. were enhanced by participating in class activities. This perception of improvement means they recognised that their needs were fulfilled and their self-image increased positively since they felt they could have a good use of their speaking skills. Venditi and Bahruth (1987) explain this finding better since they state that students' difficulties in their speaking skills are a direct result of their beliefs that they cannot think or perform accurately. They also state that students who have difficulty in school have often learned to perceive themselves as incapable of performing or thinking correctly. This finding is in line with those presented by Karfa (2007) and Mita, et al. (2006).

As it was shown in the findings, at the end of the course the majority of the students reported feeling they interacted and participated more frequently with their classmates in class activities. However, it must be acknowledged that one of the participants affirmed that his interaction in class had decreased. Curiously, this same participant reported in his answers to the interview questions that he felt little improvement in his abilities to understand vocabulary and express ideas. This could be

explained by a misunderstanding of the questions, a contradiction of the responses, or maybe this participant's interaction and participation could have been affected by his perception of little progress or maybe self-exigency. This is confirmed by the results obtained in this study that the small group activities is better for students to perform rather than large groups.

It seems that this student has placed himself in the vicious circle as called by Jianing (2007). In that circle, foreign language learners tend to lose interest in what they learn if they find they make little progress, or they will lose face in front of their classmates. In consequence, students tend to participate and interact less in class. Forero (2005) also explains that it is easy to overlook the fact that academic language can still be challenging and adversely affect students' academic performance even though s/he is fluent in everyday conversations. So, it could be said that although this participant reported he did not feel improved his understanding of vocabulary and expression of ideas, still this student had improvement in their communicative skills since he acquired new knowledge every day.

The type of interaction offered by the teacher in the class was another reason for enhancing students' oral performance and increasing their willingness to participate. It could be noticed, as illustrated in the findings, that the activities that seemed to motivate students participation was debates and discussion activities about different social and political topics. To facilitate oral skills development, students were motivated to talk about topics such as famous people or places, likes and dislikes according to their free-time activities, politics and social issues, private and public lives, their tribal history, etc. In this way, students were encouraged and allowed to talk about themselves, or their culture and ethnicity to promote conversation and confidence when talking in front of others.

DST of Larsen-Freeman (1997),provides a useful theoretical framework from which to interpret the oral performance development reported in this study because it acknowledges that human behaviour is constantly shaped by numerous, interconnected variables. Such variables were expressed by the participants themselves or observed and interpreted by the researcher. Consequently, we can recognise oral performance as a phenomenon emerging through a number of routes, termed attractors in DST, which exert an influence at a variety of

different individual, classroom, institutional, and societal levels. Indeed, this study's data did not count all attractors, however, it suggests these attractors to be powerful within the observed university L2 classroom.

One more point to discuss is the idea of using Arabic in class rather than English. These results are consistent with those reached by Park & Lee (2005) and Hashemi & Sabet (2013). It seems that students did not recognise the necessity of using the target language in class rather than resorting to L1. This is quite linked to the level of anxiety they had, and the fear of losing face in front of other colleagues because students quite recognised the aim of the subject and the usefulness of taking advantage of the activities to develop their oral skills. It seems they need the constant pressure of the teacher to keep in track on the activities and also on the use of the target language.

IX.   Conclusion and implications

The current study has quantitatively and qualitatively examined students' perceptions of their oral performance development and the reasons for that. Although students acknowledged the impact that active participation in class activities has in the development of their oral skills, the study also revealed that their spontaneous participation in the class was not as it should be. Even though they readily answered the teacher's questions and their participation increased in general, they did not take control of the discussions and debates and left on the teacher to manage the task of starting and directing the interaction in the class. Pedagogically, this points out the necessity of developing students' autonomy and self-responsibility for their own learning. Teachers should help their students to become empowered in the classroom so they feel confident to participate spontaneously and start oral interactions on their own so that they maximise the practice of oral language in the class instead of being reduced to wait for the teacher to include them in the activities.

It has also been shown that there are topics and types of activities that seem more attractive to students than others and consequently are more likely to engage their participation. Previous assessment of students' interests and needs when planning for the class is a programmatic implication of this study then. Giving students the opportunities of choosing topics and types of activities would probably make them feel more involved

and empowered in the class, which in turn will lead to more participation. Teachers should orient students in their selection so that they have freedom enough to satisfy their individual interests to choose variety of themes that allow them to acquire a wide range of vocabulary.

This study also uncovered that grouping of students for class activities influenced students' participation in oral activities since it helped overcoming shyness and lack of confidence that some students were suffering from. This kind of arrangement should be maximised for conversation classes because low English proficiency students feel more capable of participating in class when they are exposed to small groups in which they feel confident to speak,.

Besides, anxiety and fear of losing face were identified by students as the most influential factors that reduced their participation. Consequently, teachers should increase their efforts to make of the classroom a safe and comfortable setting where tolerance is prevailing and where the error is seen as a proof of ongoing development. Consequently, participants feel encouraged to try their hypothesis about language and take risks to communicate.

Finally, by considering such aspects that influenced students' oral performance and the perceptions of foreign language study held by this representative group, the programmatic implication is fulfilled. It is hoped that they can be of use to educators, syllabus designers and policy makers on designing courses for EFL learners. Indeed a better understanding of these students' evolving beliefs and concerns can inform and subsequently improve the teaching-learning process through the development of timely meaningful and responsive language learning environment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Assessing students' perceptions of their oral performance in class

No	Items	5	4	3	2	1
1.	I have the ability to express my ideas clearly with no mistakes in grammar					
2.	My pronunciation is up to the standard level					
3.	I do not have any problems in communicating my ideas to the recipients					
4.	I always resort to my native language while talking in English					
5.	My speech rate and the pauses I make while talking is reasonable					
6.	I always try hard to minimize the pauses I make while talking					
7.	I always have enough vocabulary to express myself					
8.	My vocabulary repertoire is enough for me to understand others					
9.	I interact in class with others					
10.	My participation in class with my colleagues is decreasing					
11.	I feel depressed while talking in English with others					
12.	I feel confidence while talking in class in front of my colleagues					
13.	I listen to English materials outside the class					

14.	I practice my English with other people outside the classroom					
15.	I like to watch movies in English than in Arabic to improve my English					
16.	When I see a native speaker of English, I go and talk with him					
17.	I do not find any difficulty talking in English in front of others.					

Appendix 2: Observation Sheet

(Adapted from Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997, p. 15)

Observation Sheet

Student ID Number: _____ **Date:** ___ / ___ / ___

Speaker's **Name:** _____

Title/Topic **of** **Speech:** _____

Use the following five-point scale: 5 (very good), 4 (good), 3 (okay),2 (so so), and 1 (needs work).

  I.   **Voice Control**

  • **Projection**
     5   4   3   2   1

  • **Pace**
     5   4   3   2   1

  • **Intonation**
              5   4   3   2   1

  • **Diction**
              5   4   3   2   1

 II.   **Body Language**

  • **Posture**
              5   4   3   2   1

  • **Eye Contact**
              5   4   3   2   1

  • **Gesture**   5   4   3   2   1

III. **Content of Oral Presentation**

- **Introduction**   5   4   3   2   1
- **Body**   5   4   3   2   1
- **Conclusion**   5   4   3   2   1

IV. **Effectiveness**

- **Language Use**   5   4   3   2   1
- **Vocabulary**   5   4   3   2   1
- **Purpose**   5   4   3   2   1

Total : [_____/65]

Three Goals for Improvement:

……………………………………………………………………
……………