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## Understanding Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of English Speaking Difficulties: An Investigation of Gender Effect

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**Abstract:** In comparison with the other language skills, the speaking skill has been subject to a lower amount of empirical research documenting learners' and teachers' experience of learning and teaching speaking English as a foreign language (EFL). Scarce research studies exist in spite of the fact that speaking competence in a foreign language context is an intimidating task for a large number of language learners. The present study provides the results of a questionnaire survey of the English speaking difficulties perceived by Iranian EFL learners and teachers. Moreover, their perspectives are considered according to their gender. Based on numerous theoretical perspectives, the speaking problems were analyzed with regard to linguistic problems, negative emotions and opportunities to speak English. Results of statistical analyses with 40 learners and 20 teachers of a language institute showed significant differences in the difficulty sources, leading to important implications for EFL classes.

**Keywords:** Speaking skill, difficulty perceptions, teachers, learners, gender

### 1. Introduction

The capacity to speak English as a second or foreign language well is an essential objective for most learners (Kawai, 2008). Richards and Renandya (2002) assert that an enormous number of the world's language learners attempt to learn English to create capability in

speaking. On the other hand, creating the capability to speak in a second or foreign language is commonly recognized as an overwhelming activity for most language learners. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) contend that in a few ways speaking can be recognized as the most troublesome ability to learn as it necessitates command of speech production sub-skills such as vocabulary recall and decision on linguistic patterns, also sociocultural ability. The challenge is additionally intensified in a circumstance in which learners have rather restricted access to the target language both inside and outside the classroom (Pawlak, Waniek-Klimczak, & Majer 2011). Horwitz (2008) further argues that speaking is the part of second or foreign language learning regularly connected with anxiety. Such language anxiety is definitely not restricted to learners. It is regularly reported in the English teaching literature that non-native teachers of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) might likewise be nervous about speaking and may keep away from conversational exercises and communicative teaching approaches (Li 1998; Littlewood 2007). As Horwitz (2008) points out, second language acquisition theories have recommended quite different clarifications for oral language improvement. Despite the fact that the psychometric, ethnographic and discourse analysis studies have uncovered very much about the nature of language speaking recently, scholars have observed that there has been no paradigm change in practices in the teaching and learning of speaking abilities, and the best ways to teach speaking abilities remains the focal point of methodological controversies. At the same time, compared with reading, writing and listening, there has been a scarcity of empirical information recording learners' perceptions and experiences of speaking ESL or EFL in distinctive learning situations (Gan 2013). This paper provides details regarding the findings of an inventory of the English speaking challenges experienced by Iranian EFL language learners consisting of males and females. The research is focused around the assumption that the information obtained from this study will give insights to help advancement of EFL speaking skills.

## **2. Review of the Related Literature**

Various approaches have been considered in investigating the reasons behind learners' difficulties in second or foreign language

speaking, with a view to informing learning and teaching of speaking skills. Studies conducted by researchers have identified low language proficiency as a major factor in Asian students' reticence during class discussions. The results show that classroom cooperation is a complicated issue affected by numerous variables that result from linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, pedagogical, and emotional factors. In some Asian nations, being calm in class, listening painstakingly, and taking exact notes are viewed as attributes of a good learner (Lee 2009). Lee additionally expressed that learners viewed their language learning to be insufficient for taking part in class discussions specified by fast and interactional nature. Despite the fact that they comprehend the subject being talked about and being appropriately prepared for the topics by reading materials previously, they neglected to engage in class discussions because of their perceived need to translate back and forth between their mother tongue and English and their inability to pick the turn to join the discussion in right moment. When they were finally ready to speak on a topic, the discussion had already moved on. Most students complain their lack of English proficiency is the most critical factor influencing their discussion participation in classroom (Lee 2009).

But language scholars believe that speaking a language involves more than simply knowing the linguistic components of the message, and developing language skills requires more than grammatical comprehension and vocabulary memorization (Chastain 1988). Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules (Richard & Renandya 2002).

Studies in Asia have shown that differences in age and gender can also influence oral classroom participation of students. Female students are more active than male students in group discussions and younger students seem to be more attentive than older students and feel freer to talk than male students (Lee 2009). Students all emphasize that their classrooms are too large to have discussions because of a large number of students they have; few get opportunities to talk. In addition, most students think of their teacher as being more knowledgeable than their peers, with the responsibility to explain all details of the subject. What

the students have to do in class is to listen to their teacher and take notes for further study on their own (Lee 2009).

Conversation is not haphazard and coincidental and it is not accomplished by subjective independent contributions; instead, participants concertedly accomplish a social order in their conversation (Eliss & Barkhuizan 2005). Speaking requires students to activate their linguistic knowledge, along with general knowledge of the world (Chastain 1988). Since most EFL learners learn the target language in their own culture, practice is available only in classroom. Therefore, a key factor in L2 development is the opportunity given to learners to speak in language promoting interaction (Richard & Renandya 2002).

Number of students in class can have a great influence in speaking participation of students; larger class size produces smaller rates of participation. Students have fewer opportunities to ask questions or make comments in a large class than they would in a small class. Students are encouraged when the instructor walks around the room. They feel as though he or she is seeking a response specifically from them and that this interaction is less formal than when the instructor is in front of the class. This perceived informality makes the instructor a far more accessible figure in the view of the study participants. Close physical proximity with the instructor greatly encourages asking of questions and the subsequent clarification of course material (Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin 2003; Howard & Henney, 1998; Loftin, Davis, & Hartin 2010).

In sum, in-class speaking activities can be fairly stressful practices for the students. Reasons for this fear might be attributed to the anxiety about being “over-exposed” in front of others, fear of making mistakes which may threaten the students’ self-esteem or harsh methods of the instructor for correcting errors (Occhipinti 2009).

There are various empirical researches that examined concerns and problems that ESL/EFL learners encounter, and willingness to communicate, while taking part in oral classroom tasks (e.g., Cao 2011; Ferris 1998; Ferris & Tagg 1996; Kim 2006; Kobayashi 2003; Yang 2010). These studies, however, have to a great extent concentrated on

international learners in an English-dominant scholastic and societal context. Evans and Green's (2007) study explored the language related issues that the freshmen learners experienced while adapting to an English-medium learning environment at a college in Hong Kong. Likewise, a significant contribution is made by Liu and Jackson (2008) who analyzed anxiety in undergraduate non-English majors in English speaking classrooms in a college placed in Beijing in China. The results of Liu and Jackson's study show that anxiety appears to be a serious problem during oral English lessons; however, advanced level learners prove to be more certain when talking in class. According to their findings, Liu and Jackson propose that anxiety-provoking reasons and successful approaches need to be investigated to help learners diminish uneasiness levels to accomplish target language fluency, which is the end objective of classroom instruction and learning.

As important recent contributions, one can note Gan's (2013) and Baleghizadeh and Nasrollahi Shahri's (2014) studies into teachers' and learners' conceptions of speaking difficulties and the reasons behind this issue. Gan (2013) compared the speaking difficulties of two Chinese populations, namely tertiary learners from China and mainland Hong Kong. Based on several theoretical perspectives, the participants' speaking difficulties were interpreted with respect to "linguistic deficiency, oral language processes conversational and academic speaking skills, affective influence as well as affordance of opportunities to use English for spoken communication in the students' learning contexts" (p. 244). The results of this study illuminated that the large number of participants had to cope with insufficient language knowledge, negative influence and self-evaluations, silence, lack of observing the made progress, and feelings of not having confidence altogether contribute to their demotivation. Results further indicated that regardless of the two groups' distinct social, educational and institutional contexts, they showed similar types and range of speaking difficulties. Baleghizadeh and Nasrollahi Shahri (2014) examined three Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning the English speaking skill. Results revealed that teachers' classroom activities are related to their individual and personal experiences.

Aside from the significance of speaking in English as a foreign language (EFL) context, the fact that the present study is conducted in Iran, where there has been few if any studies on speaking difficulties, makes it of specific interest. Furthermore, the study attempts to add to the international scope of the journal by shedding light on the context of Iran, therefore leading to comprehensive comparisons with similar studies carried out in other contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to find answer to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the speaking difficulty perception of male and female language teachers?
2. Is there any significant difference between the speaking difficulty perception of male and female language learners?

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1. Participants***

40 students from a language institute and 20 language teachers from the institute participated in this survey study. Among the learner participants, 20 were males, and 20 were females. The age of the learners ranged from 19 to 23 years. They were all advanced level learners of English, whose level of proficiency was determined according to the placement tests of the institute and the teacher's judgment. The learners were broadly representative of Iranian EFL learners in that they were mainly mother-tongue speakers of Persian and had completed a three-year course of English studies. Among the teacher participants, 10 were males and 10 were females. The age of the teachers ranged from 22 to 30 years. All the teachers had English language teaching experience of more than 5 years and were considered as experienced teachers.

#### ***3.2. Instrument***

The survey questionnaire that was specifically developed for the present study comprised 27 items on a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from agree (1), not sure (2), to disagree (3) (see Appendix A). Composing the questionnaire items was accomplished with respect to several theoretical assumptions on second language speaking in the literature (e.g., Bygate 2008; Cummins 2000; Levitt 1989; Norton and

Toohey 2001; Skehan 2001; Tsui 2001). The items were also influenced by recent research on academic speaking (e.g. Evans and Green 2007; Ferris 1998; Kim 2006). As a result, the 27 items in the questionnaire were classified into three subscales: (1) linguistic problems, (2) learners' negative emotions, and (3) availability of speaking opportunities. The same questionnaire was administered to teacher and learner participants. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 language learners in the same level of proficiency and same language institute. After minor changes suggested by the psychometric tests of construct validity and reliability (see Appendix B), the survey was finalized for the main data collection procedure.

### **3.3. Procedure**

The questionnaire was administered to participants individually; they were asked to complete the questionnaire with 27 items about the reasons behind their deficiency in speaking ability and what the reasons of the difficulty of EFL in speaking ability are. The questionnaire was dispersed to learners by their English teachers in ordinary class time. Before circulation of the questionnaire, the learners were likewise informed that they would have enough time to consider the inquiries in the inventory and complete it. It should be mentioned that the survey was unknown so that learners could not be distinguished from the results, and they were likewise ascertained that their answers would not influence their status in their English courses. The same questionnaire was also administered to 20 teachers in the same institute to obtain insight about their perceptions of speaking difficulty too.

The obtained data were examined utilizing SPSS to get insights about the extent to which the English talking challenges were experienced by the learners and teachers in the three areas specified previously.

## **4. Results**

The descriptive statistics for the differences in the perception of speaking difficulties across the male and female learners are reported in table 1.

Table 1.

*Descriptive Statistics for Learners' Perception of Speaking Difficulties across Gender*

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
female	20	1.6439	.78134	.03356
male	20	1.6042	.74158	.03243

Table 2.

*T-test Results for Learners' Perception of Speaking Difficulties across Gender*

learners		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
	Equal variances assumed	3.450	.064	.850	1063	.396	.03970	.04671	-.05195	.13136
	Equal variances not assumed									
				.851	1.0633	.395	.03970	.04667	-.05187	.13128

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is  $p=0.064$ , which means that the variances for the two groups (males and females) are *the same*. The results of the t-test shows that there is not a significant difference in the perception of speaking difficulties by the male and female learners and the first null hypothesis is not rejected ( $t(1063) = 0.850$ ,  $p = 0.396$ ). This means that the female and male participants differed in their use of articles. Figure 1 was depicted to exhibit the results more schematically. Confirmed by the results of figure 1 too, the results show nuance difference between male and female learners in three reasons of speaking problems. However, it

should be noted that, both genders perceived 'linguistic problems' as the major cause of speaking challenges they face in English classroom.

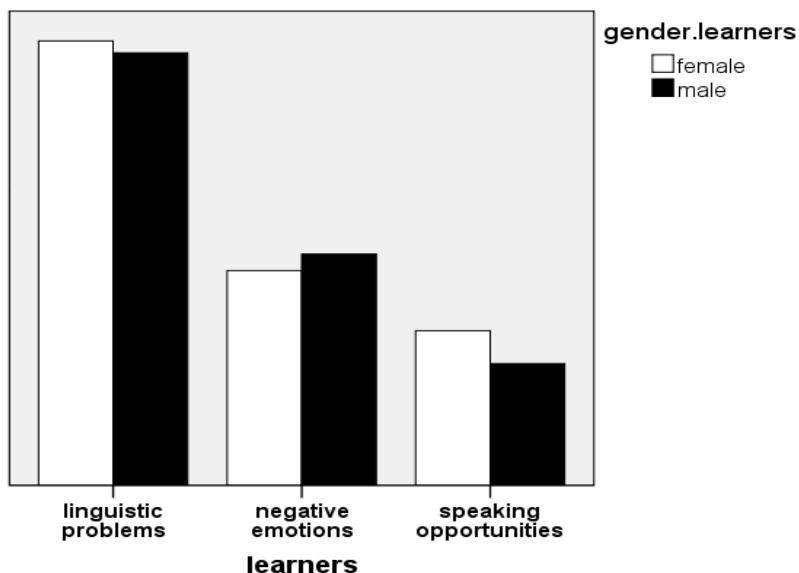


Figure 1. Male and female learners' perceptions of speaking difficulties

In order to find an answer to the second research question of the present study, first the descriptive statistics have been conducted, results of which are reported in table 3.

Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics for Teachers' Perception of Speaking Difficulties across Gender*

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
teachers	female	277	1.7834	.86184	.05178
	male	273	1.6447	.73897	.04472

Table 4.  
*T-test Results for Teachers' Perception of Speaking Difficulties across Gender*

teachers		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
	Equal variances assumed	18.701	.000	2.025	548	.043	.13870	.06850	.00415	.27326
	Equal variances not assumed			2.027	5.3772	.043	.13870	.06842	.00429	.27311

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is  $p = 0.000$ , which means that the variances for the two groups (males and females) are *not* the same. The results of the t-test shows that there is a significant difference in the perception of speaking difficulties by the male and female teachers and the first null hypothesis is rejected ( $t(5.377) = 2.027$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ). This means that the female and male teacher participants differed significantly in their perceptions of speaking difficulties. Figure 2 shows the differences more schematically. According to this figure, both genders have identified the linguistic skills as the major cause of their speaking difficulty. Moreover, male teachers identified the lack of speaking opportunities provided for learners as the major reason of speaking skill problems, while the female teachers referred to the significant role of negative emotions in the creation of speaking inabilities in classrooms.

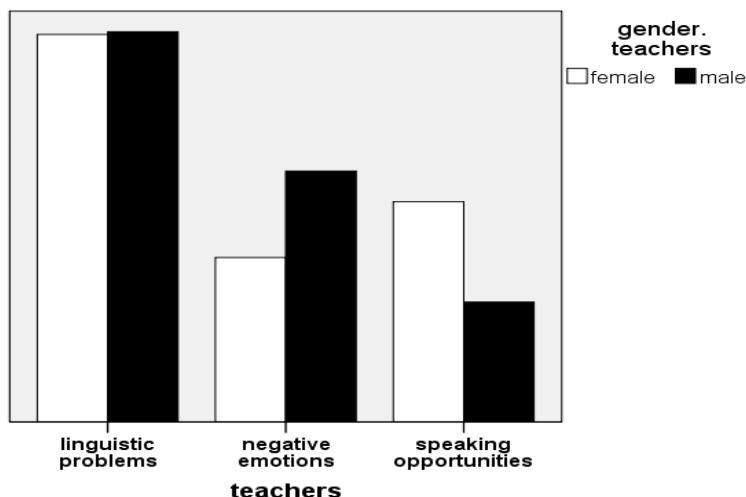


Figure 2. Male and female teachers' perceptions of speaking difficulties

## 5. Conclusion

This study enlightens our understanding of the English speaking challenges experienced by language learners in Iranian context. Drawing on different theoretical assumptions, the learners' apparent problems are divided to language inadequacy, affective impacts, and provision of opportunities to use English for communication in the learning context. The analyses of data reveal that although male and female language learners did not differ in their speaking difficulty perceptions, they both considered linguistic deficiency as the most important cause of their speaking challenges. Teachers of the present study, too, regarded linguistic problems as the major reason of learners' demotivation in investment of effort for speaking. In fact, linguistic problems concern acquisition of the lexico-grammatical and phonetic information, i.e., the ordinary language base which oral language use is based on (Bygate 2008). Littlewood (2004) additionally portrays two primary sorts of prior language knowledge that second language learners can use when they face a problem in understanding or producing the language with native speaker; the first is their knowledge of their native language, and the second is the information they already know about the second language. When there is absence of promptly accessible linguistic sources in their target language, speakers may need

to think in their first language and decipher the first language resources into the target language, which typically prompts stops, repairs and disfluencies. Therefore, linguistic problems (i.e., syntactic, lexical and phonological) would bring about language use that is non-familiar and/or contains mistakes, which itself can be the real cause of learners' speaking anxiety and communication fear. Such negative impacts may further deprive learners of the practice that they have to enhance their speaking abilities (Gan 2013).

Clearly, current English language teaching at schools and tertiary level in Iran has not been successful in helping the language earners overcome their linguistic problems. These deficiencies lead to further problems when learners attempt to improve their language in private language institutes, even if they become advanced level learners, given the range of speaking difficulties reported in the present study. In helping learners to develop sufficient learning of the language components, it is vital to comprehend that acquired learning gets to be automatic through steps of practice, use and feedback (Dekeyser 2007). For instance, research has uncovered that grammar can be best acquired subconsciously after learners have encountered repeated experiences with linguistic structures and with chances to utilize them (Larsen-Freeman & Decarrico 2010). Henceforth, grammar learning can be improved by involving learners in communicative activities where it is important to apply specific syntactic structures to accomplish the task. In the same way, learning of vocabulary is a natural and iterative procedure, and vocabulary is learned best through exposure to language use. At the level of phonological component, conscious attention can be given to phonetically troublesome words regarding the fact that the external indication of speech is sound, and that numerous EFL or ESL learners frequently encounter challenges recognizing sounds in English that are absent in their first language.

Results of the present research also indicated the male and female teachers' difference in their perceptions of 'negative emotions' and 'speaking opportunities' issues, with males identifying the former and the females pinpointing the latter as main reasons of Iranian learners speaking problems. The affordance of chances to speak English is based on the assumption that second or foreign language learning obliges

managed contact with the new language. The Conversation Theories specifically assume that individuals figure out how to speak another language by taking part in interactions utilizing that language (Horwitz 2008). ESL/EFL learners along these lines need opportunities for oral communication. Put another way, they need successive chances for using language, or comprehensible output (Swain 2005) since such opportunities can empower them to get input from their interlocutor(s) about the degree to which their language can be comprehended, their refinement of their language information and the increase in their confidence in their English language capacity. The data highlight the fact that Iranian language learners need chances to utilize conversational and oral academic English. The issue is further exacerbated by the way that currently the difference between the significance of conversational and oral academic languages is not well seen in language instruction fields in Iran. For instance, learners' learning is judged fundamentally through their performance in composed assignments (Evans & Green 2007); a few learners participate in an English-medium class without saying an expression in English so long as they accept they have comprehended what is taught. Therefore, amongst the most pressing issues that face English language learning is that learners need to create a strong consciousness that just through practice in sociocultural interaction, and just through taking part in classroom exchanges, would they be able to create the information of conversational English (e.g., what to discuss and how to speak with target language users), academic discussions specifically, and obtain the registers of academic language expected to comprehend classroom talk (Gan 2013). According to Gan, "to equip students with the language needed in oral academic interactions, both ESL/EFL and content-area teachers may need to provide systematic scaffolding and instruction to deal with structurally more complex sentences and more subject-specific new vocabulary" (245).

Language and communication are essential procedures in which social interaction is shaped. Unequal conversational forms are indicative of more serious power variations between males and females. One study by Zimmerman and West (1975) concluded that in same-gender pair interactions, overlap and intrusion are similarly distributed

between the two partners, and intrusions are clustered – that is, just a few sets did the majority of the interfering. For inverse gender pairs, males interfere with a great deal more, and interferences are significantly more generally disseminated – that is, most men did it (Zimmerman & West 1975). Gender contrasts in conversations are not constant, notwithstanding, and are identified with the conditions and context of the speech (Zimmerman & West 1975). Gendered issues of discourse and turn-taking must be perceived as being indicative of the societies in which they occur (Scherzer 1987) and language teachers need to be careful about the equality of turn-taking in their classrooms.

As the last source of speaking problems identified by male and female teachers, negative emotions can be a very determining factor in learners' keeping of silent. Many studies have shown that men and women talk differently. And numerous studies have demonstrated that women are more likely than men to be emotional (Goldshmidt & Weller 2000; Gottman & Levenson 1992). There is a belief in the literature that learning and communicating a target language can be anxiety-provoking, and anxiety is regularly related with speaking the target language (Horwitz 2008). Horwitz notes that numerous learners feel moderately to strongly restless about language learning, and that learners with larger amounts of anxiety have a tendency to lower levels of performance in their language classes. With regard to gender difference, the majority of studies indicate females' more talk compared to males. James and Drakich's (1993) critical review found that some studies discovered that in some contexts females talk more than males. As a result, males might be more reluctant to break into the speech stream and may feel more anxiety and stress. Therefore, based on the results of the present study, teachers can encourage and motivate their male learners to take part more actively in the classroom.

In conclusion, variables such as speaking opportunities, emotional factors, and linguistic proficiency all impact language decisions and would be expected to have an effect on gender contrasts in language conversations. Yet, regardless of the significance of these variables, the real finding is the overriding criticalness of the "primary impact" – gender on speaking.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

Dear Participants,

The following questionnaire is part of a research project that investigates your speaking skill experience in the classroom. Your valuable opinions and answers will be appreciated.

Questions	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
1. Time in class to improve speaking ability is Limited.	15	3	2
2. There are different exercises given for speaking ability in class.	6	7	7
3. Younger students are more active than older students.	4	9	7
4. Students information about the topic being discussed is short for speaking.	10	7	3
5. Interest in Topic is an important factor to increase students speaking.	19	1	0
6. Students language knowledge is important in speaking.	18	2	0
7. Speaking in front of classmates and teacher worries students.	5	7	8
8. Anxiety or fear of making mistake makes students silent.	14	3	3
9. Some students are afraid of teacher.	4	7	9
10. Lack of motivation in learners makes them silent in speaking participation.	9	8	3
11. Students personality factors (shyness, silence....) influence their speaking participation.	17	2	1
12. Lack of home preparation decreases class speaking participation.	11	7	2
13. Classmate comments on student's speech and questions influence their speaking.	15	4	1
14. Students use their own language out of class not second language.	11	7	2
15. Larger class size produces small rate of participations.	9	8	3

16. Some students are afraid of peer correction in group discussion.	8	7	5
17. Students feel free in small group conversation than big.	14	3	3
18. Group work is important to increase students talking time.	3	13	4
19. Some teachers scold students for speaking incorrectly.	4	8	8
20. Providing friendly environment by teacher is important factor to improve speaking.	17	3	0
21. Teacher responsibility in providing speaking materials is vital to improve speaking.	12	8	0
22. Teachers speak most of the class time	16	3	1
23. Teacher gives little time for class discussion.	15	3	2
24. Eye contact and body language of the instructor is important encouragers or discouragers of speaking participation.	15	4	1
25. Students are encouraged when the instructor walks around the room. They feel as though he or she is seeking a response.	11	9	0
26. Some teachers overlook conducting speaking activities in class.	7	9	4
27. Teacher is responsible for poor speaking because he has language knowledge and skills.	18	1	1

**Thanks for sharing your ideas!**

## Appendix B

### Reliability and Validity Results

Table 4.5.

*Reliability Statistics of Questionnaire*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.860	27

Table 4.6.

*Factor Analysis of Questionnaire*

	Component		
	1	2	3
x1	.964		
x2	.964		
x3	.932		
x4			-.819
x5	.932		
x6	.911		
x7			
x8	.842		
x9	.869		
x10	.875		
x11			
x12	.633	-.476	
x13	.908		
x14			-.757
x15		.847	
x16		.965	
x17		.633	-.422
x18		.944	
x19		.463	
x20		.825	
x21		.859	
x22		.585	
x23			.857
x24			.794
x25			.823
x26	-.461	-.541	
x27	.761		

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
a. Rotation converged in 12 iterations.