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**Department of English**

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**GENDER DIFFERENCES EFFECTS ON THE EFL LEARNERS**  
**SPEAKING SKILLS:**

*Case of Group Tasks Contribution at the Department of English,  
University of Khenchela*

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February 2019



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University of Khenchela*

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## **Declaration**

**I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation is entirely the result of my investigation, and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers. I am duly informed that any person practicing plagiarism will be subject to disciplinary sanctions issued by University authorities under the rules and regulations in force.**

**Date: February 2019**

**Singed: Mrs. Asma Kacha**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my:

Dear parents for their devotion to my education;

Dear husband for his help and encouragement;

Lovely son;

Brother and sisters for their endless support;

Grandparents for their precious prayers;

In-laws for their encouragement and care especially my sister in-law and closest  
friend Amina.

## **Abstract**

Gender is a socially and a culturally acquired category affecting the individual's behaviours as well as his way of thinking. The gender differences are clearly experienced, especially in the classroom setting, since male and female learners co-exist in the same setting and share the same learning tasks and instructions. This differentiation may affect the input provided by the teacher and the output produced by the learners. The present research, then, attempts to investigate the effect of these gender disparities on learning. More particularly, it aims at studying the effects of gender on group work tasks in speaking sessions wherein the exploratory talk is followed. In other words, it explores if the existing gender differences are aligned with the principles of the exploratory talk, and thus, points out which group arrangement is more appropriate to enhance the Algerian students' group interactional performances and outcomes in general as well as the frequency and the quality of their contributions in particular. This leads us to hypothesise that mixed-gender group arrangements have positive effects on learning and that learners would contribute, perform and share more when they are grouped with opposite gender partners. In an attempt to validate this hypothesis, we focused on a mixed research methodology giving importance to pre-questionnaires, pre-observation and observation variations to collect our prior data. The data collected confirm that learners are more motivated and have better and more varied contributions when they are grouped with mixed-gender partners, thus, they score lower when they work with same gender partners. Although some gender differences may have some negative effects in some points of the task, yet; they enrich and boost the learning process in group work tasks.

**Key words:** gender differences, the speaking skill, group work tasks, quality/frequency of contributions, collaboration, Exploratory Talk, EFL students.

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## **List of Initialisms and Acronyms**

A:	Agreeableness.
AAUW:	American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
ASKe:	Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange.
BCIT:	British Columbia Institute of Technology.
C:	Conscientiousness.
CLT:	Communicative language teaching.
E:	Extraversion.
FFM:	Five Factor Model.
FFG:	Female single-gender groups.
FFMG:	Mixed-gender group in which females outnumber males.
FL:	Foreign Language.
FTA:	Face Threatening Act.
MFG:	Mixed-gender groups with equal numbers of males and females.
MMFG:	Mixed-gender group in which males outnumber females.
MMG:	Male single-gender groups.
N:	Neuroticism.
NEO:	Neuroticism-Extraversion-Openness
NEO-PI-R:	NEO Personality Inventory Revised
O:	Openness to Experience
S-GG:	Single-gender group
SL:	Second Language
SPRinG	Social Pedagogic Research into Grouping
SRI:	Sex Role Inventory
TL:	Target Language

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# Introduction

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In twentieth century, the educational system mainly in primary, intermediate and college levels separated girls from boys because of some cultural or religious reasons. In this context, Knight (as cited in Bosire et al., 2008) stated boys' education was given 'greater importance' than that of girls. Although there was a gradual spread of girls' education, they were taught separately from boys resulting in a dominance of single-sex schools.

By the coming of co-education, most countries-and Algeria is not an exception- embraced the system as an alternative for single- gender schools so as to give equal opportunities for education for both males and females. Thus, girls and boys co-exist in the same educational setting though much research argue that gender segregation is universal and, taken for granted; learners themselves -from childhood- drive gender segregation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginnet, 2003). After the emergence of the communicative language teaching in 1970's, learners were encouraged to be more communicative and interactive forgetting about their differences as social backgrounds and gender stereotypes (Akkas & Coker, 2016). Consequently, the topics of gender and talk became deeply searched as separate and related concepts.

Gender is considered as an influential social factor that can have an effect on achievements and learning. Consequently, teachers should take into account gender differences when they design the different class tasks because they need to arrange their students especially when group or pair work are provided.

Group work activity is an appropriate way to increase the amount of learners' practices in the classroom (speaking sessions). As pointed out by many researchers like Doff (1998); the idea of pair and group work is to improve mainly the listening and the speaking skills requiring learners to exchange information with each other. Interestingly, grouping is one way to give more realistic practices in the speaking and the listening skills at the same time through creating a sound classroom ambiance. This arrangement can be formed in single-gender (female single-sex or male single-sex) groups or mixed-gender (female-male) groups. In the present study, the main concern is to focus on gender in group work because it is one of the factors that directly affect language learning (Takeda & Homberg, 2014).

Since learners in communicative classrooms are encouraged to interact and use the language to express and exchange ideas (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), learners from opposite gender are required to work collaboratively and interact freely without referring to the stereotypes, especially during the speaking session wherein the exploratory talk classroom atmosphere is followed and encouraged. However, a number of contradictory research studies delve deeper into the notion of mixed- and single-gender groups, but no agreement has been suggested.

### **1. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

A considerable amount of research had been carried out on the impact of gender differences in second and foreign language learning to find out possible effects on learners' outcomes in the speaking sessions. In fact, no exact agreement on these effects and the extent to which they influence interactions and learning is provided. There is rather a contradiction in results. Some researchers (Riordan; Cipriani-Sklar as cited in Wilson et al., 2013) argue that single-gender grouping is better and more efficient since girls' self-concept and confidence in cognitive domains are found in female-only environment. Additionally, Milliken and Martins; Robbins and Fredendall (as cited in Takeda & Homberg, 2014) respectively state that "diversity in observable attributes such as race, ethnic background, nationality, gender and age prevents smooth group integration in team work process", and that "homogeneity (in terms of gender) is positively related to team success and motivation" (p. 08). However, other research studies find out that mixed-gender environment is more appropriate and fruitful arguing that learning groups work best when varied characteristics (achievements, experiences, gender mix, ethnic and linguistic mix and so on) are taken into account, and that mixed gender groups help in promoting diversity and gender equality (Stewart, 2014), and positively affect worker morale as well (Jehn et al., 1999).

Regarding the learning practices and behaviours during the in-class group work tasks which show that second year students at the University of Khenchela prefer single-gender arrangements as well as the two opposing research studies stated above, we have been faced with different research questions:

- Are gender differences in group work speaking process within the class a myth or a reality?
- To what degree are gender differences apparent in higher education?
- Do these gender disparities affect the amount and quality of contributions in speaking in group work interactions wherein the exploratory talk is followed?

According to the aforementioned researches, it is difficult to decide which type of grouping arrangement learners require for active interaction, understanding and performance in the speaking task (exploratory talk). This concern orients us towards choosing the type of group arrangement and providing answers to the following sub-questions:

- Which type of grouping is more appropriate to match the exploratory talk principles?

## **2. Hypothesis**

On the basis of the previous research studies and from the current research pre-observation, we could come out with the fact that males are more dominant and assertive when they interact with opposite gender partners. Besides, they use more cognitive processes and share more rational ideas; unlike women who are more emotional and polite. This, in turn, causes different educational experiences and affects the amount as well as the quality of outcomes in group work classroom tasks. This leads us to hypothesise that mixed-gender groups have positive effects on learning. Hence, when learners are grouped with mixed-gender partners, they would contribute, perform and share more than when they are with same gender partners. Testing this research hypothesis will provide answers mainly to the third and the fourth research questions.

## **3. Aim of the Study**

The present study has been an attempt to investigate the effect of gender on the learning process. More specifically, it has aimed at discovering if gender differences (mainly males' assertiveness, dominance, interruptions, arguing, rational way of thinking and females' politeness, gossiping and emotional way of thinking) affect the students' learning within the exploratory talk atmosphere; i.e. whether these existing

differences have been aligned with the principles of the exploratory talk, and which group arrangement (mixed-gender or single gender) have been more appropriate to enhance the second year students' (University of Khenchela) contributions and outcomes while interacting during group work tasks.

In order to know this, we have worked towards confirming one of the research studies previously pointed out. Consequently, teachers may take the advantage of arranging their learners in the way it is more beneficial; an arrangement that can bring out the best of their students. Moreover, they may contribute to improve their learning.

#### **4. The Research Methods**

Undoubtedly, the hypothesis set by the researcher would be validated or refuted in a scientific and systematic way. Thus, data have been collected for the research through a mixed method approach; quantitative data gathered through questionnaires, and qualitative data gathered through the researcher's classroom observation. This has helped to obtain a variety of opinions and triangulate the data gathered to ensure more trustworthiness. In addition to this, findings from different methods have been complementary; data gathered from the quantitative method of the questionnaires will be supported by qualitative data got from an observation.

#### **5. The Operational Definitions**

##### **5.1 Gender**

In the present study, gender is considered as a social, a cultural and a psychological category rather than a biological difference between males and females. This was also clearly suggested by Shapiro (as cited in Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 22):

Sex and gender serve a useful analytic purpose in contrasting a set of biological facts with a set of cultural facts. I would use the term "sex" only when I was speaking of biological differences between males and females and use "gender" whenever I was referring to the social, cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed upon these biological differences. Gender designates a set of categories to which we can give the same label crosslinguistically or crossculturally because they have some connection to sex differences.

## **5.2 The Speaking Skill**

Speaking can be determined as the productive aural/oral skill that “consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning” (Nunan, 1999, p. 48). In other words, it generates building and sharing meaning that requires not merely the learner to know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence); but to understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language too (sociolinguistic competence).

## **5.3 Group Work Task**

Cooperative learning, through group work activities, is to get learners work together in small groups using the TL in order to achieve the same task objectives. As elaborated by Johnson et al. (1991), group work is the use of in-class small groups through which students work together to reach shared goals and to promote their own and others’ potential.

## **6. Structure of the Study**

The present study comprises four chapters. The first chapter is divided into two parts. The first one is related to different views as the core of the relevant literature regarding the speaking skill and the importance of developing it in the target language learning. Then, we demonstrate the way teachers should vary the speaking sessions’ practices so as to avoid monotony and boredom. At this level, the researcher has suggested group work as an appropriate type of activities for the enhancement of the learning process in the second part of the same chapter.

The second chapter then provides relevant studies related to an important aspect teachers have to consider while grouping learners: ‘gender’. First, we have cleared up the ambiguity between sex and gender. Then, we have determined gender differences seen from different perspectives, mainly how these differences affect males’ and females’ personalities and behavioural performances. Finally, we have ended up with relating the notion of gender with the educational context and language teaching and learning in particular.

In the third chapter, the research process of investigation has been explained. The researcher have elaborated detailed clarifications about the choice of the target

population and the sample group, the method conducted and the different instruments used to answer the research questions and to verify its hypothesis.

In chapter four, then, the researcher reaches the step of reporting, interpreting and analysing the previously collected data. As far as the questionnaires are concerned, the researcher has tried to outline, report, interpret and analyse the data from the informants' answers (teachers and learners). As a second step, a classroom observation is designed and implemented. This process has been divided into two phases: a pre-observation and an in-class observation. The researcher has described the activities during which the learners under study have been observed. After that, data are reported to draw conclusions that could ultimately be a basis to overgeneralise the findings on the whole target population.

Finally, we have tried to conclude the research process and to propose some pedagogical implications for teachers of English as a foreign language. These implications would help them to enhance the quality of learning in general, and to decide how to arrange students in group work tasks during the speaking skill. Then, the researcher has demonstrated some limitations that hindered the quality of the research findings and highlighted some suggestions for EFL students to further investigate the current topic. Then, we have ended up with providing answers to the research questions.

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# **Chapter One: Relevant Research on the Speaking Skill and Group Work**

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## **Introduction**

Among the four language skills, speaking is generally considered as the most important and the most difficult skill to be learnt. According to the studies reviewed, the speaking skill is of paramount significance because it generates all language knowledge, and that all language learners are more concerned to speak and to write the language than to read it. In this context, Lestari (2016) states that “mastering languages means mastering them both in spoken and in written forms. However, verbal language, or speaking, seems to decide more whether or not someone masters the language. Therefore, speaking skills in language learning are very crucial since they become one of the determinant factors” (p. 01). To confirm this point of view, Richards (2008) says that “learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency.” (p. 19). This importance is further argued by Burkart and Sheppard (2004) who argue that learning a language is measured by the learner’s ability to perform orally. Moreover, the speaking skill is the most difficult since speaking occurs in ‘real time’ and requires the speaker to be clear and well-understood with less, and sometimes no, opportunities to revise or edit. Usually the person you are talking to is waiting for you to speak in that very moment and you cannot edit and revise what you wish to say as you can if you are writing Burkart and Sheppard (ibid).

Focusing on the classroom, speaking is taught through different ways as the teacher varies the activities, the materials and the aids to be used. Among the suggestions that the teacher may rely on during the speaking sessions is to provide opportunities for students to speak using group or pair work activities with limited teacher’s talk (Bailey & Nunan, 2004). These types of classroom tasks are necessary to maximise the learners’ amount of talk and minimise the teacher’s (Ur, 1996).

## **Part One: Studies in the Speaking Skill**

In communicative language teaching context, learners are encouraged to use the language and to share authentic language interactions. In this context, Berns (2010) emphasises that “the essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication”

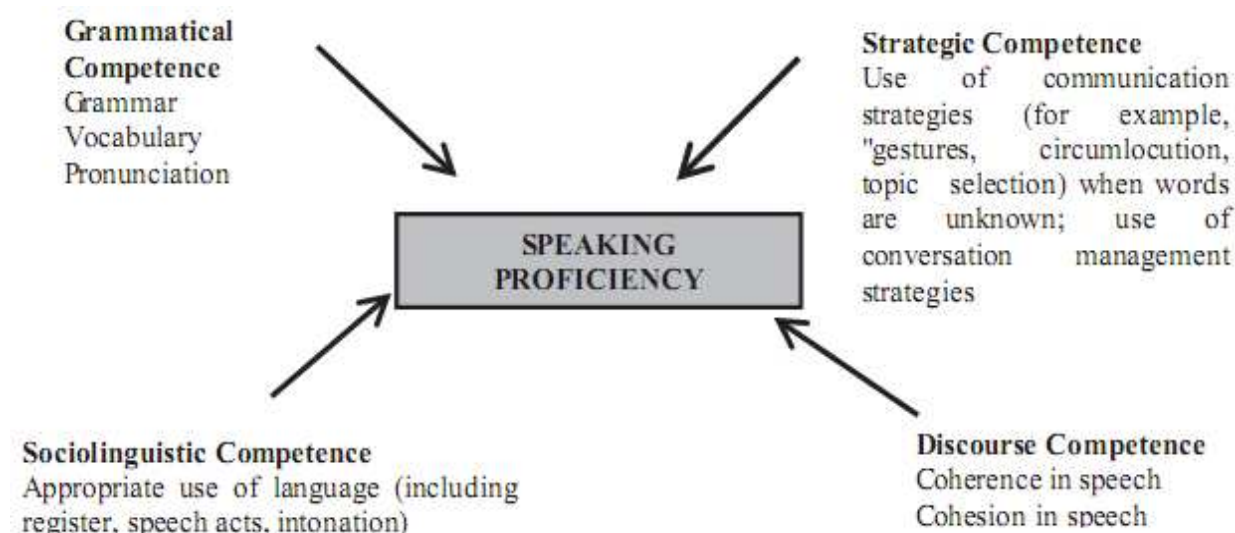
(p. 254). In order to reach such an engagement, teachers are called to orient classroom talk and highlight its importance during the speaking sessions.

### **1. Definition of the Speaking Skill**

In language teaching/ learning, researchers usually afford the same importance as to the writing skill because of the language that learners tend to generate. Both skills are productive, as opposed to listening and reading which are considered as receptive. Besides, they focus on the channel which refers to the way the message is delivered. Then, speaking can be determined as the productive aural/oral skill that “consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning” (Nunan, 1999, p. 48). In other words, it generates building and sharing meaning that requires not merely the learner to know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence); but to understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language too (sociolinguistic competence).

### **2. Speaking and Pronunciation**

Despite the fact that many approaches to language teaching used the oral communication in the target language such as the direct method and the audio-lingual approach, speaking was restricted to pronunciation only (McCarthy and O’Keeffe as cited in Berns, 2010). Significantly, many people, particularly EFL University students, still overvalue pronunciation in speaking the target language because they are aware of its irregularity and feel challenged by its difficulty. However, this does not ensure good speaking proficiency and does not mean that they speak the language because they may pronounce an utterance perfectly, but it may be meaningless or used in wrong contexts. Hence, speaking needs predominantly to be meaningful and then to be well pronounced (Griffiths, 2008). Moreover, Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p. 154) point out the skills underpinning the speaking competences in figure 1. It implies that speaking includes multiple competences. It cannot be mastered unless the learner of TL develops the skills underpinning it.



**Figure 1:** Skills Included in the Speaking Skill (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

### 3. Speaking and Writing

Speaking should also involve natural/life-like use of language. Here again, the differences between speaking and writing are underlined. These differences are summarized as follows in Table 1.

<b>Speaking</b>	<b>Writing</b>
Auditory	Visual
Temporary; immediate reception	Permanent; delayed reception
Prosody; intonation, rhythm, stress	Punctuation
Immediate feedback	Delayed feedback
Planning and editing limited by channel	Unlimited planning, editing, revision

**Table 1:** The Difference between Speaking and Writing (Lier, 1995).

According to Lier (1995), these differences give justify why people who learn a foreign language basically from textbooks tend to be “bookish”; i. e. their language is not natural, unlike learning it from what others say. The latter involves natural/life-like language use. Obviously, Algerian students’ oral performance abilities vary according to the context and the source of learning. Generally, their performances sound bookish and unnatural because of the insufficient exposure to the native-like speaking performances. Consequently, their speech lacks some important elements of the speaking skill like prosody, intonation, rhythm, stress and so on. Yet, other elements are present in the speaking sessions like immediate reception and feedback as well as

turn taking. In this research, we shall spotlight turn taking as far as the males' interruptions are concerned.

#### **4. Purpose of the Speaking Skill**

In a substantial part of literature related to teaching the speaking skill, many researchers like Sadeghi and Richards (2015) agree on the fact that speaking can be transactional or interactional as far as its purpose is concerned. On the one hand, transactional discourse is predictable and involves speaking for specific purposes; the person uses the target language to get something done. In this regard, Nunan (1989) argues that the language used to serve this purpose is 'message oriented' rather than 'listener oriented'; it is used to convey a message or to ask for something to be done or said. An example to illustrate is phoning to ask for a taxi or for hotel booking. On the other hand, interactional discourse is unpredictable and involves communicating for social purposes. The person uses the target language to 'establish' or to 'maintain' social relationships (Nunan, 1989). In other words, it is used for conversational and interpersonal purposes. Examples to illustrate are greetings and friends conversations.

Considering the purposes stated above, some studies in the field, including Kingen (2000), try to combine them through listing an extensive set of categories including:

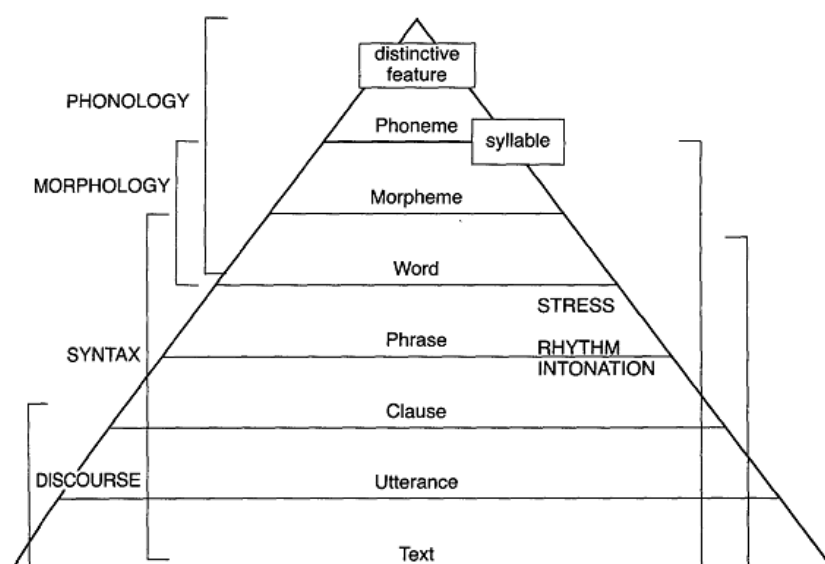
- a. **Personal:** expressing opinions, emotions, beliefs...etc.
- b. **Descriptive:** describing people, objects, or places.
- c. **Narrative:** telling stories or giving events in a chronological order.
- d. **Instructive:** giving instructions/ directions.
- e. **Questioning:** asking questions for specific information.
- f. **Comparative:** comparing two people, objects, places, ideas for judgments.
- g. **Imaginative:** expressing imaginative events, people, objects, places...etc.
- h. **Predicting:** anticipating possible future events.
- i. **Interpretive:** making hypothetical studies and exploring meaning...etc.
- j. **Persuasive:** arguing in order to change someone's point of view or behaviour.
- k. **Explanatory:** clarifying and supporting ideas.
- l. **Informative:** conveying messages and sharing information with others.

As it has been previously explained, these categories gather both purposes; transactional and interactional. They serve as language functions the speaker may use depending on the context and on what the speaker wants to say.

## 5. Teaching the Speaking Skill

Speaking is an extremely important part of second and foreign language learning and teaching. Despite this importance, teaching speaking was undervalued and English language teachers used to teach speaking through repeating words, phrases, sentences, memorising vocabulary, forms, rules and dialogues in the TL. They provided learners with separate language elements to put them together in order to communicate and convey meaning. Consequently, this behavioural process requires students to recite and memorise far from real and authentic language use (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

During the late twentieth century, new ideas to learning a foreign language emerged because requirements shifted the goal of teaching speaking to improve students' communicative skills. This paved the way to the emergence of the communicative language teaching approach wherein learners were required to use the language in real situations and communicative interactions. Their learning was largely based on their peers' performances and productions (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).



**Figure 2:** Interaction in the Language Curriculum (Lier, 1996).

As it is illustrated in figure 2, these productions may expand from the phonological/morphological to syntax and discourse levels depending on the learner's level of the oral proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced).

Since this study investigates post-intermediate/pre-advanced levels of learners' speaking performances (2<sup>nd</sup> year students at the University of Khenchela, Department of English), learners belong to the pyramid's basis. Thus, the researcher (playing the role of the teacher) designs the lessons and communicative tasks according to that level. In addition to this, she takes into consideration some characteristics or factors that may ensure successful speaking activities and tasks.

## **6. Principles of Teaching the Speaking Skill**

To emphasise the previously stated characteristics, Bailey and Nunan (2004) suggest a set of principles that a teacher should hold so as to make the communicative tasks successful. These principles include:

**Awareness of the difference between foreign and second language learning contexts:** the context of the target language use decides the amount of exposure to that language. Obviously, FL exposure is more limited and restricted to classroom context than SL's. This should be considered by the teacher since it impacts the students' language use and usage too.

**Giving students practices to develop both fluency and accuracy:** the teacher gives variety of tasks as far as the language use and usage are concerned. Besides, he/she should accept that errors are natural part of learning the language. The research at hand focuses mainly on the language use based on the research hypothesis. Yet, the researcher may provide feedback related to the language usage and correctness.

**Providing opportunities for students to speak using group or pair work activities with limited teacher's talk:** since the learners' exposure to the target language is generally limited, group and pair work activities are appropriate classroom activities that maximise the learners talk and minimise the teacher's. Ur (2009) argues that this type of activities "increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class" (p. 121). Thus, we have chosen group work to vary

the classroom tasks and provide equal contribution opportunities for interactive and silent students as well.

**Planning speaking tasks that involve negotiation for meaning:** in this type of tasks, learners interact for the sake of communicating meaning and making themselves understood. It involves checking for understanding, clarifying, explaining, confirming and so on.

**Designing classroom tasks that gather guidance and practice in both transactional and interactional speaking:** since students need to know how to use the language for both transactional and interactional purposes as well as the different functions that might be exhibited in different contexts, the researcher has designed different tasks serving these purposes and functions.

## **7. Types of Activities in the Speaking Session**

Teachers have a variety of classroom activities that might be used to increase the learners' participation, attract their attention and raise their interest in the classroom tasks. To this concern, scholars have proposed lists of classroom tasks that teachers may use. In this regard, Harmer (2010, p. 129) suggests the following:

**Information gap activity:** it is a helpful activity in which individual students know different pieces of information that others do not. Learners are asked to share and exchange these ideas and information so as to complete the task.

**Telling stories:** students spend a lot of time telling stories using their mother tongue, but they need also to narrate using the target language. In this regard, the teacher may give learners topics or pictures which represent famous stories. Here learners may tell that story through describing these pictures.

**Role plays/meeting and greeting:** in this type of activities, learners are given particular roles in the target language to act out real life situations. For example, they may role-play a social occasion where they meet and greet people.

**Surveys:** surveys are used in language classrooms in order to enable students to interview each other. Learners may also design questionnaires: ask questions about people's eating habits, for instance.

**Students' presentations:** students are asked to give talks as individuals or as groups. They are given enough time to prepare an oral presentation about a specific topic. The

other students are given a sort of listening task since they are going to give feedback about their peers' oral performances, topics, ideas and so on.

**Balloon debate:** students imagine themselves they are in a damaged basket of a balloon which is losing air. Just one of them can stay and survive, and others have to jump out of it. Individual students representing famous characters (Napoleon, Gandhi, Cleopatra, etc) or professions (teacher, doctor, lawyer, etc) have to argue why they should be allowed to stay in the balloon and survive.

Other types of activities may be used, indeed. Activities may be in form of games, jigsaw, picture storytelling, etc. The teacher's choice is always related to the learners' interests, learning objectives, context of learning/teaching, and level of difficulty. In fact, some of these activities have been adapted to the current research context like the 'balloon debate' or adopted like 'in-class storytelling and anecdotes'.

### **8. Characteristics of a Successful Speaking Activity**

As it has been stated earlier, speaking is a complex and a difficult skill to learn. Yet, we can ensure the success of the speaking activities thanks to four key characteristics as highlighted in Ur (1996, 120):

**Learners talk a lot:** although it seems obvious; yet, we notice that classroom talk is often filled with long periods of teacher's talk or pauses because learners may lack the linguistic competence or simply they lose interest to contribute in class interactions.

**Participation is even:** classroom contributions and performances should not be limited to a specific group of students; all members of the classroom should be given opportunities to speak and participate in different tasks regardless their school achievements or gender. In this regard, we highlight class equity especially 'gender equity' to receive right education and achieve shared knowledge.

**Motivation is high:** the teacher raises the learners' motivation and hooks their attention through designing varied and interesting tasks. The learners, then, would contribute and be more involved because they are interested in the topic or they simply want to achieve the task objective.

**The language is of an acceptable level:** this point is related to the learners' language use. It should be relevant, comprehensible, and shows an acceptable proficiency level. Consequently, we have chosen second year University students who belong to post-

intermediate and pre-advanced levels of the language proficiency. They are supposed to interact and produce the language with less linguistic deficiency.

In short, the researcher's role (playing the role of the teacher in this study) is to keep students speak the target language with little interference to orient, to give some instructions on the discussion skills. She also bases the classroom task on the level of proficiency the learners are supposed to perform with very careful choice of the task's topic so as to stimulate the learners' interest and raise their motivation. Moreover, she reckons the different aspects of speaking to avoid possible problems and hindrances.

### **9. Aspects of the Speaking Skill**

There are aspects which characterise the speaking skill: problems solving and challenges to students to understand and learn requiring from teachers to design the classroom tasks and instructions appropriate to such situations.

**Speaking is face to face:** Most conversations take place face to face where participants or interlocutors are present. In relation to this, Hinkel (2006) emphasises that face-to-face interaction represents the 'foundational aspects' of teaching and learning. It allows speakers to get immediate feedback not only on the learners' understanding extent and agreement but on showing sympathy as well (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001). Importantly, communication through speaking requires facial expressions, gestures and even body movements depending on the interlocutors' gender and the cultural background. As far as gender is concerned, men and women engage in different style and rules of communication and for different purposes. When women interact, for example, they show sympathy, avoid Face Threatening Acts, more polite, caring and responsive than man (Tannen, 1990). Furthermore, the extent of these gender differences is culturally based; in some cultures these disparities are emphasised and in some others they are minimised (Ekert as cited in Bucholtz, 2004).

**Speaking is interactive:** people take turn in conversations interactively like a wheel turning smoothly (Bygate, 1998). Besides, turn taking is normally an unconscious part of any conversation which is handled and signaled differently in different cultures and by different genders. For instance, men tend to be more interruptive, more dominant and more assertive than women. In mixed-gender interactions, turn taking is generally dominated by males.

**Speaking happens in real time:** During conversations, the production of speech in real time imposes big pressures on the speaker. On the one hand, the participants' responses and reaction are unplanned and spontaneous (Foster et al., 2000). These time constraints influence the speaker's ability to organise his message, and to control the language being used. On the other hand, speech productions may begin with false or unclear starts; i. e. speakers may feel the need to change or clarify what have been said. Moreover, speakers may forget what they want to say or things they have already said before. So, they may miss ideas or repeat themselves (Miller, 2001).

### **10. Teachers' Role during the Speaking Activities**

Teachers may get involved with their students during a speaking task since learners generally appreciate and are motivated when they see their teachers participating in the classroom communicative tasks. They may share a role play, play games or simply discuss. In fact, the teacher's participation is not wrong provided that the teacher does not dominate the classroom talk (Harmer, 2007). Harmer also suggests that the teacher may need to intervene, sympathetically and sensitively, to stop or to reorient the learners when the activity is not going 'smoothly' or when the discussion begins to 'dry up'.

Although the previously stated directives and activities enhance the learning outcomes in the speaking session, some problems may occur threatening the learners' interaction and motivation.

### **11. Problems with the Speaking Activities**

Ur (2009) investigates possible challenges that learners may face in the speaking sessions:

**Inhibition:** In the classroom, learners generally feel shy and inhibited when trying to say things in TL. They worry about the fact that their language is not totally correct with many pauses and hesitations, or afraid of putting themselves under the spotlight. To confirm this idea Ur (ibid) states that "unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or

simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts” (p. 121). This is mainly apparent in female communication because they are more polite and submissive.

**Nothing to say:** sometimes learners are not inhibited to talk and to participate orally, but they do not feel the need to express themselves or they have no ideas to share with their peers may be because the discussed topic is not interesting for them or the tasks are not varied.

**Low or uneven participation:** in large groups, for example, learners have little talking time and sometimes no chance to speak and share their ideas. This is mainly due to some learners’ dominance and assertiveness, particularly males, during the classroom task.

**Mother-tongue use:** generally learners belonging to the same class, the majority-if not all of them- share the same mother tongue. So they use that language since it seems unnatural to use a foreign language with their peers.

## **12. Types of Talk in the Language Classroom**

In fact, all the proposed classroom activities may share a common type of talk. Talk can be classified into three main types depending on its objective and the classroom ambiance it creates. According to Mercer and Hodgkinson (2008), there are three ways of talking and thinking. The first way of talking is the disputational. As its name suggests, it is characterised by disagreement and individualised decision-making. In the disputational talk:

- There is a lot of disagreement and everyone just makes their own decisions.
- There are few attempts to pool resources, or to offer constructive criticism.
- There are often a lot of interactions of the 'Yes it is! - No it's not!' kind.
- The atmosphere is competitive rather than co-operative.

The second way of talk is Cumulative. In this type, speakers build up positively but uncritically; they accept and agree with what others have said. Partners use talk to construct and share ‘common knowledge’ by accumulation. Cumulative talk is also characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations of others’ ideas without carefully evaluating them.

The last one is exploratory talk in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. This type of talk holds the following principles:

- Everyone listens actively.
- People ask questions.
- People share relevant information.
- Ideas may be challenged.
- Reasons are given for challenges.
- Contributions build on what has gone before.
- Everyone is encouraged to contribute.
- Ideas and opinions treated with respect.
- There is an atmosphere of trust.
- There is a sense of shared purpose.
- The group seeks agreement for joint decisions.

In this research, the investigation is carried out in an Exploratory Talk classroom atmosphere. The researcher has chosen this type of talk rather than the others because all its principles are encouraged in the competency based approach which is supposed to be followed in the Algerian classroom context. The research tasks have been designed in accordance to three principles only because of time constraints.

### **Part two: Studies in Group Work Tasks**

Today, societies require people to be creative and critical in the way they think, flexible towards others' opinions, effective in problematic situations, make appropriate decisions, and communicate their ideas openly. Hence, researchers in the field of education emphasise the importance of introducing group work activities to the classroom and argue that syllabi and curricula should not only give learners information and knowledge, but also socialise and prepare them for future real life experiences. Importantly, group work activities provide learners with 'the know how to be' in social contexts (Damon, 1984).

As it has been mentioned before, among the principles teachers should bear in mind especially during the speaking session is to give students opportunities to participate and speak using pair and group work activities (Bailey & Nunan, 2004). We, therefore, spot the light on group work activities in the classroom only.

## **1. Definition of Group Work Activities**

In-class cooperative learning through group work activities is to get learners work together in small groups using the TL in order to achieve the same task objectives. As elaborated by Johnson et al. (1991), group work is the use of in-class small groups through which students work together to reach shared goals and to promote their own and others' potential. Johnson and Johnson (as cited in Lee, 2005) similarly state that:

Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups such that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. In cooperative learning situations, there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainments; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals if and only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goals (p. 117).

Additionally, the group work task is explained from different angles since many elements might be overemphasised by different researchers like internal, external motivation, learning development, social or cognitive processing building up different theoretical perspectives (Robert et al., 2003).

## **2. Major Theoretical Perspectives**

Students generally develop their understanding, enhance their learning as well as promote social relationships while working in groups. To gain cooperative learning, four major perspectives have been emphasised by different researchers (Robert et al., 2003); motivational, social cohesion, developmental, and cognitive perspectives.

### **2.1. Motivational Perspectives**

Under this perspective, researchers believe that task motivation is the most important element of learning while students are working in groups and that learning is attained only if the group is successfully motivated-internally or externally. In this regard, Robert et al. (2003) say that "motivational perspectives on cooperative learning presume that task motivation is the most important part of the process and hold that the other processes are driven by motivation." (179).

### **2.2. Social Cohesion Perspective**

This perspective is, more or less, similar to the motivational one since both perspectives basically value motivation. In the motivational perspective, learners

encourage their peers to participate and collaborate because of its benefits for them only. However, in the social cohesion perspective, learners help each other because they care about the group. Consequently, students engage in the task and help their group-mates to work for mutual success.

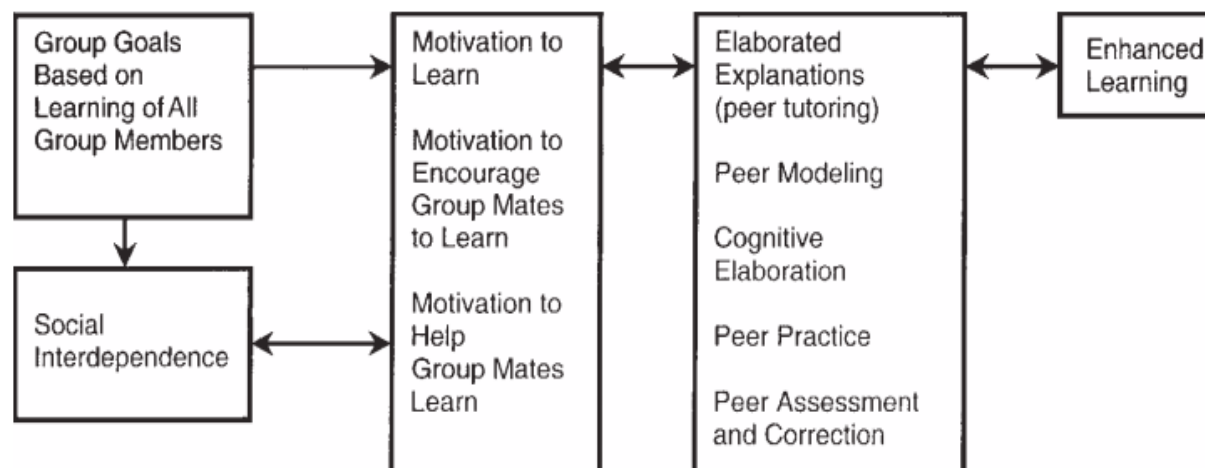
### **2.3. Developmental Perspective**

Some researchers suggest that interaction in groups increases learning because students learn from each other and complete simultaneously the information gaps. Moreover, scholars make reference to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development which refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In other words, group work bridges the gap between what learners actually know and what they should ultimately achieve. This gap is necessarily filled by the teacher's guidance or peers collaboration. In this regard, Reynolds and Miller (2003) argue that "collaborative activity promotes growth because children of similar ages are likely to be operating within one another's proximal zones of development, modeling in the collaborative group behaviors that are more advanced than those that they could perform as individuals" (p. 182).

### **2.4. Cognitive Perspectives**

Supporters of this perspective find out that learning in groups encourages the cognitive processing through reasoning, explaining logically and convincing, for instance, without giving importance neither to the group members motivation nor to their social cohesion.

However, Damon (1984) believes that the perspectives stated above can be considered as complementary rather than contradictory since group work interaction needs different components like motivation, interpersonal relationships, cognitive elaborations and so on. These components are interrelated and complementary. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between those components.



**Figure 3:** Functional Relationships among the Major Interaction Components of Group Learning (Reynolds & Miller, 2003).

Damon (1984) also integrates these perspectives on peer collaboration to suggest a ‘conceptual foundation for a peer-based plan of education’ in group work. He points out that peers motivate one another to abandon misconceptions and search for better solutions through mutual feedback and debate. Additionally, group interaction can introduce learners to the process of generating ideas, provide a forum for discovery learning and can encourage creative thinking. The experience of peer communication through group work can also help to master social processes such as participation, argumentation, and cognitive processes, such as verification and criticism.

Other researchers (Payne et al., 2004; Allen, 2012) relate learning in group work mainly to the cultural aspects attributed to its members. Hence, group work affects and is affected by the group members. It helps them to form separate and small communities with their own identity and which are supposed to be responsible during the task (Allen, 2012). They also learn about different backgrounds and cultural beliefs from the materials provided to them or from their peers (Payne et al., 2004). Additionally, the task itself might be influenced by the shared culture between the members of the group. For example, individualist/collectivist and masculine/feminine points of view may affect the learning process and its outcomes while working in groups. In the individualist cultures, the individual’s needs and wishes predominates the group’s, whereas in collectivist cultures the group’s needs and wishes prevail. In masculine culture, people value assertiveness and dominance (case of the students at

the University of Khenchela). In feminine cultures, however, people value nurturing and caring for people (Triandis, 2001; Sinha, 2014).

In the present investigation, the researcher tries to design the research tasks and arranges the informants taking into consideration all the elements being emphasised under the previously mentioned perspectives. They need to be motivated by the tasks as they should be varied and interesting. Moreover, they have to value cooperation and team work to reach shared objectives (e. g. joint decision making), to complete information gaps and to develop cognitive abilities as well.

### **3. The Importance of Group Work**

The combination of the elements underpinning group work perspectives justify its importance and the advantages it provides for teachers and learners alike. In fact, it proves to be an appropriate classroom alternative that teachers may rely on in order to enhance the students' understanding and language level of proficiency and to avoid classroom monotony as well. Researchers as Davis (1993) value group work stating that students learn properly when they are actively involved in the process. He further states that collaborative learning helps students to learn actively and effectively. Slavin (1995) also explains that learners gain from cooperative work self-esteem; they better their self-image and realise that they are valued. Self-esteem increases as members of the group feel valued by their group-mates and because they feel that they are achieving academically.

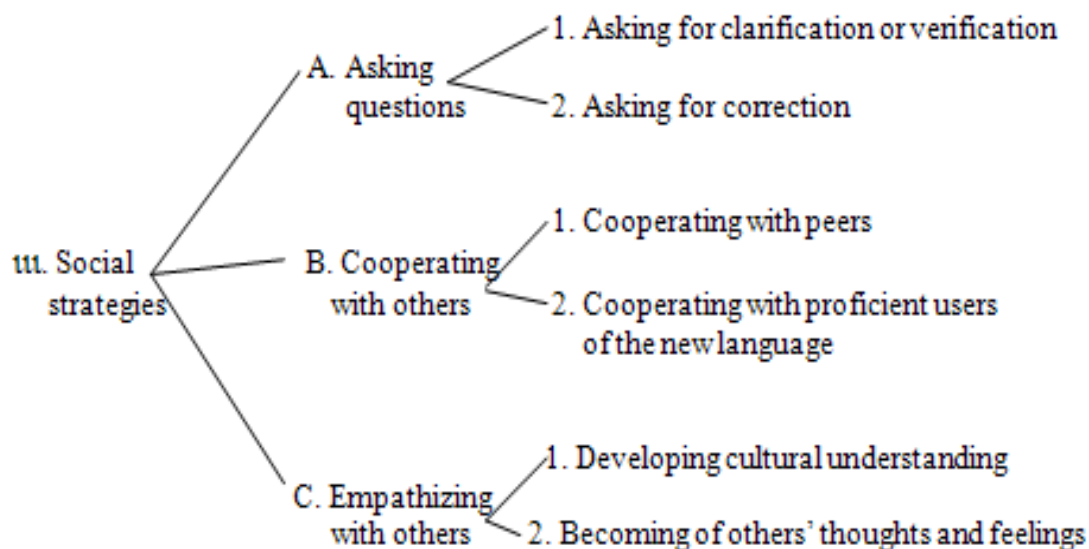
### **4. Advantages of Group Work**

#### **4.1. For Students**

To further emphasise its importance, Burke (2011) highlights a set of group work advantages for learner of the target language. He states that:

**a.** Groups have more information than a single individual: groups are composed of, at least, three students who may have different information, background knowledge and learning experiences. Obviously, sharing this knowledge and experiences will consequently better learning. Furthermore, it maximises the individual's opportunities to engage in oral performances.

- b.** Groups stimulate creativity: learners are encouraged thanks to their group-mates to think creatively and use their imagination as well as critical thinking as they work in small groups.
- c.** People remember group discussions better: students learn, retain and remember knowledge discussed in groups better than when the same piece of information is given to them otherwise. Thus, learning in group work emphasises comprehension and memorisation.
- d.** Decisions that students make yield greater satisfaction: learners who are engaged in groups for problem solving or decision making situations are more satisfied with their participation in the activity than those who are not involved. They also realise that these decisions are reached without the teacher's help; learners are more independent while working in groups.
- e.** Students gain a better understanding of themselves: group work activities help participants to form a clear self-image, to get a more accurate picture of how others see them, and to develop positive attitudes towards learning/peers through the feedback they receive from their peers or teacher.
- f.** Team work is highly valued by employers: team work, interpersonal and social interaction skills are among the most important skills that employers sought after university graduates.
- g.** Group work promotes the process of socialisation: cooperating with peers is a social strategy through which learners get used to expressing their ideas and points of view in front of people. They learn how to deal with people while interacting and communicating with them; social skills are being developed as illustrated in figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Social Strategies (Oxford, 1990).

#### **4.2. For Teachers**

Findings shown in SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Grouping) study (Blatchford et al. 2005) determine some benefits for teachers using collaborative group work activities. This type of activities can help them to:

- Enhance their own professional skills and confidence in adapting group work strategies for different purposes and tasks.
- Shift the emphasis from teacher-centered to more pupil-centered learning by enabling pupils to work in small groups to reach common goal.
- Empower learners to engage in peer teaching, learning and assessment to show what they know, understand and can do, and identify what they have yet to learn in a 'low risk' situation.
- Devote more time to reflect on and think strategically about their teaching once learners are able to demonstrate increased effectiveness and autonomy in group work situations and require less teacher intervention,.
- Promote improved teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships.
- Celebrate collaborative efforts with pupils.

#### **5. Difficulties of Classroom Group Work**

Group work advantages are unquestionable; yet it not an easy classroom alternative neither for teachers nor for learners. Many teachers, indeed, are unwilling to use such type of classroom activities. On the one hand, group work activities require

a lot of skills to be successfully implemented and some teachers may lack confidence and experience, or do not want to risk losing discipline and control over challenging classes/pupils (for example trouble-making students and large classes). On the other hand, some groups may suffer from ‘*group dissonance*’ because of the lack of motivation, strong leadership, or conflicts between the group members (Burke, 2011). Besides, learners may use L1 because they do not know how to express themselves or simply because they feel embarrassed to use the target language.

*Group dissonance*: It can be defined as the lack of harmony between the group members because of their personal disputes, lack of strong leadership or simply because members are not motivated to work. A better way to decrease this dissonance is, first, to keep the group small and avoid breaking it up even when it seems falling apart. Second, teachers are required to design activities which raise the learners’ motivation to the maximum possible as well as to set clear objectives that learners are asked to attain. Third, the teacher asks students to make ‘plan of action’ (Surgenor, 2010; Burke, 2011) in which they assign responsibilities among the group members. For example, they chose the group’s spokesman and someone to take notes. Hence, these tactics are considered by the researcher during the pre-observation and the observation phases so as to provide the necessary conditions for successful group work task.

Despite of the difficulties that might be encountered in an EFL in-class group work, researchers still believe that group work activities have so much to offer and that teachers should be prepared to help students learn through it. In this respect, Stewart (2014) states “it is important that teachers be prepared to ‘let go’ and develop the confidence to try out more process oriented learning such as collaborative group work” (p. 05).

## **6. Strategies to Enhance Collaborative Group Work**

Teachers may rely on different options and orient their learners to work collaboratively through different ways in order to break the monotony and ensure a good classroom atmosphere. Learners, in groups, may be involved in information gap and jigsaw activities, predicting, brainstorming, games, group discussions and so on. These activities increase the students participation and maximise the opportunities of

learners' talk. In addition to these options, other strategies for successful collaborative work are highlighted by Stewart (2014):

**Provide pupils with clear structures to work together as a group:** some activities require the learners to work in groups from the beginning till the end like group brainstorming and games, while some other activities may involve learners in a gradual built up toward group collaboration. Using this strategy, learners are encouraged to first come up with their own ideas, then share them with a partner and finally with a group.

**Establish and constantly reinforce clear ground rules and procedures so that pupils know how best to communicate and relate to each other in a situation of mutual trust and respect:** in this type of strategies, the teacher gives learners tactics of successful collaborative group work throughout the activity. They help learners to establish what makes a good activity and spot out what hinders their cooperative learning. They may even praise and give positive feedback to reinforce the learners' desirable behaviours and skills.

**Support the language of group work by providing language frameworks:** teachers may help students to use the language through giving them some hints about the discussed topic, giving suggestions, inviting/giving opinion, challenging, etc. these strategies are used in order to scaffold their learning, to help them build up structure as well as to improve the quality of their talk.

**Take account of class dynamics and the nature of the group task when setting up groups:** many factors have a great impact on class dynamics such as the learners' abilities, skills, experiences, backgrounds, gender, etc. These factors are to be taken into account while designing or giving an activity. Some activities, indeed, require mixed group division to promote diversity and equality. Sometimes teachers need to form groups in random division so as to encourage learners work with new and unusual partners. Some other times they need to form friendship groups to promote sharing and confidence building.

**Have clearly defined tasks:** teachers give clear instructions and description of the task, choose attainable objectives, emphasise the importance of the positive cooperation and determine timescales.

**Allocate roles or invite pupils to select/rotate a role:** the teacher is the one to decide whether to allocate roles by himself or to give learners freedom to choose their positions in the group. However, giving them such freedom leads them to repeatedly choose safe and comfortable positions. Hence, teachers should suggest ‘role rotation’ in order to encourage learners to experience all the roles in group work

**Observe pupils, monitor interaction and intervene as needed during the collaborative activity:** the teacher keeps observing and orienting learners when necessary. He intervenes, for example, when learners lack motivation, when they are not cooperating or when they do not manage their time well, etc.

**Provide closure to the group activity:** it is important to give enough time to draw the group work activity to a conclusion. This is beneficial for learners to make them value cooperative work and give them opportunities to show the fruit of their collaboration.

## **7. Characteristics of a Successful Group Work**

A large part of the literature review (Johnson, 1990; Beebe & Masterson, 2003; Cooper, 1990; Connery, 1988; as cited in Burke, 2011; Csernica et al. 2002) points out that many characteristics and tips are considered while teachers group their learners to work, share and accomplish a shared goal. These tips include:

**Group size:** all researchers have agreed on the fact that in-class small groups are more effective than large ones since they increase the learners’ opportunities to participate in the task. Harmer (2010) says that “small groups provoke greater involvement” (p. 165). Being small is a point of disagreement among researchers. Some of them (Davis, 1993) believe that groups of four to five students work best. Some others as Csernica et al. (2002) argue that groups of three to four are more adequate. In this piece of research, we shall choose mediating alternative and work on groups of four.

**Group composition:** as it has been mentioned before, the teacher is the one to determine the group composition. He may divide groups randomly to maximise heterogeneity and diversity in the group or consider some attributes for division such as proficiency level, strengths and weaknesses, gender, social backgrounds, ability, behaviour, personality and so on. Teachers may also permit learners to self-select their partners. Once again, this could be more negative than positive since learners generally choose their friends and roommates (Kutnick as cited in Blatchford et al., 2001). In the

present study, the researcher focuses on group composition as far as gender division is concerned. Related to this point, two different groupings may occur: single-gender groups vs. mixed-gender groups.

- Single-gender groups (also matched-gender groups): groups that are composed of one gender; male-male groups or female-female groups.
- Mixed-gender groups: groups that are composed of different sexes; male-female groups.

**Teacher's monitoring and support:** the teacher's presence is vital to monitor and orient students during group work activities. He may even be more engaged to contribute in the task provided that his talk is to be limited in order to give more opportunities for learners talk.

**Learning Task:** the task's level of difficulty should be respected; it should be neither too easy nor too difficult. Undoubtedly, learners get bored if the task is too easy, and give up if it is too difficult and challenging. Moreover, the task should be complex enough and motivating to raise engagement with enough time to be allocated. Then devote early opportunities as icebreakers (Lehfeltdt, nd)

**Curriculum Area:** instructors are able to determine topics and themes that need cooperative group work activities. This gives them an idea about how to group, how to monitor, and how to evaluate. Johnson et al. (1991) say that group work activities should be integral and directly related to the course objectives; i. e. activities complement course objectives.

## **8. Evaluation and Assessment of Group Work Activities**

When learners are given an activity, the teacher plays different roles; sometimes as a teacher, as an instructor, and some other times as an evaluator/assessor. The evaluation and the assessment procedures are not an easy task. The teacher should have a clear idea about how to evaluate/assess and what to evaluate/assess; the final product, the process or both. This is directly related to the learning objectives set by the instructor.

Although the terms evaluation and assessment are usually used interchangeably, researchers (Angelo & Cross, 1993) have determined some points to differentiate the two classroom practices. Assessment is a part of on-going learning and focuses on how

learning proceeds in order to underline strengths and weaknesses for improvement and learning progress. Whereas evaluation generally focuses on final outcome to check what have been learnt so far. These differentiations have been summarized in the table below:

<b>Dimension of Difference</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
<b>Content:</b> timing, primary purpose	<i>Formative:</i> ongoing, to improve learning	<i>Summative:</i> final, to gauge quality
<b>Orientation:</b> focus of measurement	<i>Process-oriented:</i> how learning is going	<i>Product-oriented:</i> what's been learned
<b>Findings:</b> uses thereof	<i>Diagnostic:</i> identify areas for improvement	<i>Judgmental:</i> arrive at an overall grade/score

**Table 2:** The Difference between Assessment and Evaluation (Angelo & Cross, 1993)

Additionally, the teacher should decide about who is supposed to assess the activity; the teacher himself, the group members or both (ASKe –Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange-, 2017). In this context, three main types of assessment have been under research: self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher assessment. In self-assessment, students are involved in the process of making judgments about their achievements and learning outcomes in different tasks. This helps individual students reflect on their work, understand their needs and determine their weaknesses too, and then, communicate these judgments with their peers leading to peer-assessment. Peer-assessment is the process of assessing each other's contributions and the group members' provision of constructive feedback. Teacher assessment, thus, is the class monitoring and feedback provision by the teacher himself (Race, 1998; Wride, 2017). In fact, this order of assessing students (self-assessment, peer-assessment and then teacher assessment) is more convenient in EFL classroom (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Wride, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Nobody denies the complexity of the productive skills, particularly the speaking skill. Yet, it is very important in EFL learning since it covers all the language knowledge. Moreover, EFL learners are more required to use the language orally in different interactions and authentic performances. It is the means through which learners can convey meaning and communicate their ideas with their teacher and classmates.

In order to increase the learners' performances and oral contributions in the speaking sessions, teachers have different alternatives to vary the class tasks and activities. Group work task, then, is greatly suggested to enhance the frequency of the learners' contributions and to better the quality of the learning outcome. At this level, different aspects are considered like the group number, ability, gender, etc. In the current investigation, the researcher has explored the notion of gender and its effect on learning.

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## **Chapter Two: Studies in Gender**

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## **Introduction**

Other concerns may face EFL teachers while grouping their students in the speaking sessions like learners' abilities, cultural and social backgrounds, achievements, skills, gender and so on. These factors affect the in-group interactions and performances. Consequently, they should be considered and carefully distributed within groups. In this regard, Stewart (2014) points out:

As factors such as pupil experience, ability/disability, communication skills, age, gender and cultural background can all impact on group dynamics and the intended outcomes of the group task, it is important to weigh these up when considering group composition. This will help get the right mix for the task and nip any potential areas of conflict in the bud before they are allowed to surface, interfere with pupil learning and impact on the potential success or failure of the collaborative task.

In the current research, we shall focus on one factor affecting group work tasks; gender and its disparities experienced in classrooms. These disparities have a remarkable impact on the teacher's input as well as the students' output, and it proves to be an important topic to be investigated.

### **1. The importance of gender**

Gender is a vital element in our lives. It is noticed in every detail of our behaviours, conversations, and performances at home, in the different institutions, shops and so on. It is embedded in our actions which seem natural and almost unnoticed. Sunderland (2000) says that gender is "something not always apparent, but always present" (p. 203). Most people usually ignore and do not pay attention to it. However, the notion of gender is significantly made in a never-ending process beginning even before birth; starting from the moment someone begins to wonder if it is a boy or a girl to the birth announcement if it is a 'he' or a 'she', to the late gendered adult performances (McConnel-Ginnet et al., 1980). All in all, boys and girls learn to be different from their early existence in life.

The field of education is not an exception. Gender differences are clearly experienced at schools since boys and girls co-exist in the same classroom setting and share the same learning tasks. This differentiation may affect the input they receive

(the teacher uses different material and different topics of interest, for example) and the output they share (for example the frequency and quality of learners' contributions). Petruskevich (1997, p. 16) points out that "the issues of gender and education have been recognized as important areas of study in relation to equality and equity". Thus, it becomes a necessity to explore the field of gender studies in education so as to enhance boys and girls contributions alike and better their learning. Significantly, we are interested in gender as an important variable affecting learning, particularly, in group work tasks.

Actually, saying the word 'gender' may lead people to think of using it interchangeably with the word 'sex'. So, an important point to start with is to define the word gender and understand the difference and the relationship between the two terms.

## **2. Gender vs. Sex**

In linguistics, researchers have established a clear distinction between the words gender and sex despite the fact that sometimes they may overlap. The American Psychological Association (APA as cited in Hacker et al., 2009) "recommends that 'sex' may be misinterpreted as sexual activity and encourages researchers to use the term 'gender'"(p. 227). Researchers, thus, agree on the idea that sex is a biological category whereas gender is a cultural, social and linguistic category. Shapiro (as cited in Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 22) points out the idea:

Sex and gender serve a useful analytic purpose in contrasting a set of biological facts with a set of cultural facts. I would use the term "sex" only when I was speaking of biological differences between males and females and use "gender" whenever I was referring to the social, cultural, psychological constructs that are imposed upon these biological differences. Gender designates a set of categories to which we can give the same label crosslinguistically or crossculturally because they have some connection to sex differences.

Ellis (1994) also supports the idea that gender is often used to mean not merely the biological dichotomy of sex (male or female) but also their social roles (i.e., gender).

This distinction is further defined in terms of nature and nurture dichotomy; sex is considered as the biological natural category that the person is born with whereas gender is the sociolinguistic category the person acquires as Simone de Beauvoir's (as cited in Robson & Stockwell, 2005, p. 2) suggests "women are not born, they are made", and undoubtedly the same is applicable for men. West and Zimmerman (1987) emphasise this point of view stating that "gender is not something we are born with, but something that we have, we do and we perform" (p.10). Interestingly, this reaction is clearly supported by Eckert's and MacConnel-Ginet's (2003) example of the small boy imitating his father when he swaggers and sticks out his chest and a young girl putting her mother's high heeled shoes, putting makeup on her face and minces around the room. They believed that these children would not necessarily swagger and mince in their adulthood, but their childhood performances would undoubtedly be exhibited in their adult male and female behaviours. Hence, sex is a biological categorization related to reproductive features, and gender is the social elaboration of biological sex; gender builds on biological sex.

Moreover, gender is not naturally based on sex; rather, it is something to be acquired, performed and embraced. Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet (2003) point out that "If gender flowed naturally from sex, one might expect the world to sit back and simply allow the baby to become male or female. But in fact, sex determination sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering, as the child becomes, and learns how to be, male or female." (p. 16).

### **3. Gender Differences**

A multitude of research studies get more profoundly in the field of gender, as one of the most noticed individual differences (illustrated in figure 5) in order to determine and explain the differences that may occur between males and females in relation to behaviour, personality traits, language use and so on.



**Figure 5:** Individual Differences (Slavin, 2006, p. 99).

Although these differences are overgeneralised to all communities and cultures, they may vary in extent and magnitude. Consequently, in some cultures, gender differences may be exaggerated and overemphasised. In other cultures, they may be covered and diminished. Obviously, men and women belonging to traditional cultures (e.g. Pakistan, Nigeria, Algeria) emphasise gender differences while men and women in modern cultures (e. g. the Netherlands, Finland) minimise them (Eckert as cited in Bucholtz, 2004).

### **3.1. Gender Differences and Biological Findings**

Many research studies have increasingly tackled gender differences from a biological angle since biological differences determine gender categorisation. Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet (2003) suggest that “hormonal levels, brain activity patterns, and even brain anatomy can be a result of different activity as well as a cause” (p. 12). As a result, numerous neurological and hormonal differences in the brains of both males and females have been highlighted (Legato, 2005; Tyre, 2005 as cited in Griffiths, 2008); (McConnel-Ginnet et al., 1980); (Berenbaum; 1999).

- a. Women have more nerve cells in the left half of the brain where language is centered, and have a richer connection between the two sides of the brain.

- b. Women seem to use more of their brains to listen and to speak. This is clearly noticed during the research observation especially in female-female groups as the frequency of interruption is lower and gossiping is higher.
- c. Women activate more areas in the brain than men do. This gives them more communicative abilities.
- d. Girls have 'language centres' that mature earlier than that of boys.
- e. Higher levels of testosterone lead men to be more aggressive than women, and left-brain dominance leads men to be more rational. This is also exhibited in male-male and male-female arrangements since boys generally quarrel in single-gender groups; yet, they use logical thinking and reasoning.
- f. The relative lack of brain lateralisation leads women to be more emotional and this explains the emotional-based way of thinking as opposed to males' rational reasoning in performing the tasks designed by the researcher.
- g. Women's corpus callosum, the link between the two brain hemispheres, is relatively larger than men's which results to greater integration between the two hemispheres.
- h. Sex differences in androgens during early development affect interests, activities, and aggression.

Accordingly, we may conclude that gender differences are dealt with in different investigations. They tend to be related to biological predispositions as far as hormonal, endocrinal activity and genitalia are concerned. Nevertheless, the biological facts alone do not characterise and explain why men and women are different. Eckert and McConell-Ginet (2003) point out that:

To whatever extent gender may be related to biology, it does not flow naturally and directly from our bodies. The individual's chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics do not determine occupation, gait, or use of color terminology....If gender flowed naturally from sex, one might expect the world to sit back and simply allow the baby to become male or female. But in fact, sex determination sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering, as the child becomes, and learns how to be, male or female (p. 13-16).

This point of view explains the existence and significance of other investigations studying sex-linked differences from behavioural and psychological angles.

### **3.2. Gender Differences and Behaviour**

Men and women do not behave in the same way if we compare their reactions in different contexts. Some of those reactions might be alike when males and females deal with same-gender partners. Nonetheless, they considerably diverge when they belong to mixed-gender partnership as remarked during the observation phase: for example males are more interruptive and dominant and females are more polite when grouped with opposite gender partners. The present research mainly focuses on these differences as far as mixed-gender groups are concerned. We shall spot light on three main gender differences (assertiveness politeness and interruption) which are greatly searched by many researchers in the field of gender studies like Lakoff (1975), Holmes (1995); Brown and Levinson (1987); McConnel-Ginnet et al. (1980).

#### **3.2.1. Assertiveness**

As opposed to tentativeness, assertiveness is considered Eskin (2003) as “an important social skill which promotes personal well-being” (p.07). In other words, assertiveness refers to expressing feelings, emotions, desires, beliefs and ideas directly and openly without hesitations or restrictions. Moreover, Bucholtz (2004) reports from Lakoff’s (1975) research that assertiveness is an important gender-linked difference found in men’s speech. She argues that men are more assertive than women; indeed, women do not express themselves as openly and forcefully as men. Regarding this point of view, Carli (1990) elaborates “assertive speech is one domain of power denied to women, but available to men. That is, because women are relatively powerless and marginal compared with men; they are presumably not given the opportunity to express themselves as forcefully and directly as men are” (p. 942). This tentativeness is shown in women’s less powerful speech which is manifested in their tendency to swear less, speak more politely, and use more tag questions, intensifiers, and hedges. During the research observation, then, females’ tentativeness as well as males’ assertiveness were clearly noticed which result less frequent female contribution especially in mixed-gender grouping.

### **3.2.2. Politeness**

One of the most significant studies devoted to identifying differences in speech are detected in the area of politeness. Holmes (1995) differentiates women's speech from men's as being more polite. More precisely, Lakoff and Ide (2005) relate politeness to the idea of being polite, courteous, civil, mannerly, and genteel. They define it as "the consideration for others and the adherence to conventional standards expected of a well-bred person" (p. 04). A polite person, then, have concern for people interacting with him/her. Holmes (1995) gives a more detailed definition stating that "politeness will be used to refer to behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour" (p. 112).

Politeness can be shown in various ways; linguistically and non-linguistically or a variety of both. Linguistic politeness is related to verbal communication; i. e. the spoken language, whereas the non-linguistic politeness is concerned with non-verbal communication including gestures, facial expressions; i.e. body language (Bucholtz, 2004).

To these facts, two main theories concerning whether women are more polite than men, have been discussed by Lakoff (1975); Holmes (1995); Brown and Levinson (1987); politeness and face, and politeness and gender.

#### ***Politeness and Face***

This theoretical finding is developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) who adapt, from Goffman (1967), the term 'face'. Face refers to the image the hearer or the listener wants to obtain and maintain during the course of conversation. This theory holds the belief that individuals are aware of the face of people they talk to during interactions and that politeness in this case is measured by the amount of 'verbal work' to decrease or eliminate Face Threatening Acts (FTAs).

In relation to this theory, members of the same interactional group are supposed to avoid FTAs. They can do so through different ways so as to be polite. However, when the FTA is unavoidable, the speaker can decrease the threat by respecting the hearer's face; positive or negative face that determines the hearer's need to be free,

independent, and not restricted by the speaker. A great variety of examples have been given to illustrate politeness and FTA's avoidance including Cutting's (2002, p. 47):

- a) I couldn't borrow \$30, could I, if you don't need it right now?
- b) Could I borrow \$30?
- c) Gee, these bags are heavy – I wish I had another pair of hands.

'A' is said to be more polite than 'b'. It avoids imposing and threatening the hearer making the question easier to be rejected through the use of the expression 'if you don't need it right now'. In this example, the hearer finds it much easier to refuse the speaker's request. However, 'b' is more direct and said to be less polite than its preceding. Example 'c' is given to illustrate indirect FTA avoidance. The speaker might say 'I wish I had another pair of hands' instead of suggesting, warning or asking for help. It sounds to the hearer that 'assistance is needed' without risking to threaten his face.

### ***Politeness and Gender***

Supporters of this theory, as Lakoff (1975), claim that young girls are taught to have lady-like speech and behaviour, while boys are not discouraged or treated harshly like girls when they use 'rough talk', rude and vulgar words. This would probably result in what Lakoff (ibid) calls 'genderlect'. In addition, tag questions are frequently used in women's talk so as to give choice, do not force agreement and acceptance of the hearer, and consequently, sound more polite.

### **3.2.3. Interruption**

Regarding this area of research, Zimmerman and West (1975) distinguish between interruption and overlap. They point out that an overlap takes place when a second speaker begins speaking before the first finishes because he thinks that the first speaker is about to finish his talk. He might be mistaken for a transition-relevant place for example during the final syllable of what could be a complete sentence. Then, an overlap anticipates a new turn. An interruption violates turn-taking conventions, particularly by occurring at other than those transition-relevant places.

In short, overlap is a supportive strategy during conversational exchange whereas interruption is violating the speaker's right to get the floor and dominate the

conversation. In relation to gender differences, literature review justify the observed findings; while men interrupt more, women overlap and support other's ideas (Tannen, 1989).

In fact, other than these three highly gendered differences (assertiveness, politeness and interruption), researchers come up with a set of gender-linked differentiations including the following:

- While men are hierarchical, women are egalitarian (Tannen, 1990).
- While women are cooperative and supportive, men are competitive and dominant (Kiesling, 1997).
- Generally women do not tell jokes, especially in public, unlike men who have a more sense of humour (Bucholtz, 2004).
- In mixed-gender settings, women speak much less than men; women are silenced (James & Drakich, 1993; as cited in Nevalainen, 2002), and their ability to gain the floor is much less than men's (Zimmerman & West, 1975).
- Women are generally assumed to be less competent than men (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977), and their use of tentative language further reduces their perceived competence (Bradley, 1981).
- The woman is generally seen as a caretaker, passive bystander, and as physically and emotionally weak. However, men are still expected to be strong, aggressive, and emotionless providers (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007).

### **3.3. Gender Differences in Personality Traits**

Other gender differences are determined by the NEO-PI-R (1990). It is a revised version of Costa and McCrae's (1978) NEO Personality Inventory which is created to assess adult men' and women's six dimensions under the big five personality traits; extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. The following table summarises the big five and the sub-dimensions they assess:

Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness to experience	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Anxiety	Warmth	Fantasy	Trust	Competence
Hostility	Gregariousness	Aesthetics	Straightforwardness	Order
Depression	Assertiveness	Feelings	Altruism	Dutifulness
Self-consciousness	Activity	Actions	Compliance	Achievement
Impulsiveness	Excitement	Ideas	Modesty	Striving
	Seeking			Self-Discipline
Vulnerability to Stress	Positive Emotion	Values	Tendermindedness	Deliberation

**Table 3:** Costa and McCrae’s Big Five Model (1990).

Costa et al. (2001) have determined gender differences as far as the Five-Factor Model (FFM) is concerned. They state that “The NEO-PI-R is an operationalisation of the Five-Factor Model (FFM), which structures specific traits in terms of five broad factors to summarise known gender differences in terms of the FFM” (p. 322). In this model, gender differences are associated to:

### 3.3.1. Neuroticism (N)

It is the broad area under which negative emotions like anxiety, anger, depression, shame, and other distressing emotions are studied. Gender differences on traits related to (N) have been reported with women scoring higher than men (Lynn & Martin, 1997; as cited in Costa et al., 2001). Research studies bear out the fact that women scored higher in anxiety (Feingold, 1994); in symptoms of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987) and lower in measures of self-esteem and anger (Costa et al., 2001).

### 3.3.2. Interpersonal Traits

According to Costa et al. (2001), Bem’s (1974) Sex Role Inventory (SRI) is an important approach to the study of gender differences which includes ‘orthogonal scales’ to measure dominance and love as far as masculinity and femininity are respectively concerned. Dominance and love have been discussed under the dimension of extraversion (E) and agreeableness (A); i. e. (E) combines dominance and love, and

(A) combines submission and love. There is no doubt, then, that women score higher in (A) since they are submissive, more loving, kind, and maintainers of social harmony while men score higher in (E). Nonetheless, other research studies confirm the fact that women score higher in (E) and men score higher in (A) in relation to assertiveness and warmth. In other words, men are said to be more assertive and women are warmer. As a result, one can deduce that gender differences related to (A) and (E) would be found in specific facets.

### **3.3.3. Openness to Experience (O)**

Researchers (Feingold, 1994; Weisberg et al., 2011) find that women' and men's cognitive styles definitely diverge. Men tend to be guided by reason, whereas women are guided by emotions. Obviously, these two facets are found in the table drawn above under (O) dimension with women scoring higher in openness to aesthetic and feeling; however, men are intellectually oriented, scoring higher in openness to ideas. Additionally, women's sensitiveness to emotions has been pointed out by Miller et al. (1989). He states that women show more facial expressions and are able to decode non-verbal signals more than men and that negative feelings included in (N) are attributed to their great emotional sensitivity.

### **3.3.4. Conscientiousness (C)**

Conscientiousness is related to the notions of self-discipline, organisation, the control of impulses, and competence. It is said that women score slightly higher than men in some facets of (C) like organisation, dutifulness, and self-discipline; whereas men often score higher in competence (Feingold, 1994).

These gender differences confirmed in different research studies have been remarked during the research pre-observation and observation too. This urges us to favour mixed-gender group arrangements. Although these disparities may have some negative effects on the frequency and quality of the students contributions; yet, we believe that this variety maintains equilibrium in behaviours, contributions and learning outcomes (e. g. equilibrium between males' rational and females' emotional thinking, females' organisation and males' competence and so on).

### **3.4. Gender Differences Related to Speech Activities**

During interactions and verbal communication, expressing one's ideas and points of view depends on the ability to participate in the speech activities that take place in these interactions. Then, people may engage in speech activities such as: gossiping, arguing, fighting, and joking and so on. Here again lies the idea of gender differences as recognised by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003); Carli (1990). They find out that men and women generally differ in selecting the speech activities they engage in during verbal exchange and interactions. In the investigation at hand, we focused on some gendered speech activities that might have a negative impact on single-gender groups mainly.

For instance, women tend to gossip more than men do. Consequently, this speech activity has a negative effect on female groups more than males'. In fact gossiping, in the field of gender studies, is dealt with from two different angles. Cameron et al. (1988) define it as "talk among women about absent others by no means, always implies a focus on making absent others look bad" (p. 100). In other words, gossiping is a speech activity, generally attributed to women. It refers to talking about absent people's bad things to encourage others create and develop negative attitudes towards them. However, Coates and Cameron (1988) view it as a usual and informal talk among close female friends would it be positive or negative, evaluating activities of present or absent parties. In spite of these opposed definitions, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) consider both interpretations as female-related speech activities.

Another example of a highly gendered speech activity is arguing. Its meaning may differ but, in general, it is a "statement of the pros and cons of a proposition; discussion, debate (esp. contentious); a verbal dispute, a quarrel", Tannen (as cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginnet, 2003). Despite the fact that 'quarrel' occurs in this definition aside with argument, they definitely have 'different flavours' as suggested by McConnell-Ginnet et al. (1980). Wierzbicka (1987) goes further in comparing both quarrelling and arguing. He says that quarreling has a more personal orientation, whereas arguing is essentially focused on the subject matter. Accordingly, "quarrelling

involves a struggle of wills and a display of tempers” (p. 138). However, argumentation involves convictions, strong arguments, and intellectual skill.

### 3.5. Differences in Language Use

Lakoff’s (1975) study investigates gender differences in terms of language use. She notices several disparities in men’s and women’s talk as far as the choice and frequency of words, the use of certain structures in specific situations, and intonation. An example of lexical differences, given by Lakoff and Ide (2005), is to imagine a man and a woman looking at the same wall painted in a pinkish shade of purple. The woman may say ‘the wall is mauve’. Obviously, no one would pay attention to the word she uses ‘mauve’. However, if a man says the same sentence ‘the wall is mauve’, one might think that he is ‘imitating a woman sarcastically, a homosexual, or an interior decorator’. Thus, she confirms that women use more precise discriminations (like beige, mauve, ecru, aquamarine, lavender) in naming colours than men.

Another difference that could be highlighted is the use of particles. Men and women use of particles is exemplified in the following pair of sentences suggested by Lakoff too:

- Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
- Damn it, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

Most people, in fact, would agree that the first sentence is said by a woman and the second one is said by a man. This also makes a hint to women’s polite language and men’s less polite choice of words.

Other differences are found elsewhere in vocabulary mainly the use of what Lakoff calls ‘empty adjectives’. She believes that some of these adjectives are neutral to the sex of the speaker; either men or women may use them. But another set seems, in its figurative use, to be largely confined to women’s speech. Representative lists of both types are below:

Neutral

great

terrific

Women only

adorable

charming

cool	sweet
neat	lovely
	divine

**Example:** a. What a *terrific* idea! (adjective of neutral use).

b. What a *divine* idea! (adjective used by women only).

Moreover, women's speech is usually characterised by the use of tag questions, intensifiers and hedges. Firstly, tag questions refer to declarative statements that are followed by a question concerning the statement. For instance, "*the door is open, isn't it?*" Lakoff also emphasises the idea that using tag questions inevitably makes the statement sounds less confident and less assertive. Secondly, intensifiers are adverbs used to provide emphasis such as 'so' and 'very', for example "she looks *so* pretty". She considers them to be weaker and less powerful than more absolute superlatives. Third, hedges are adverbs or adverb phrases like 'sort of, perhaps, and maybe, probably' that weaken the strength of a statement and make it uncertain. They soften the meaning of words and phrases so that they do not sound too direct, for example: "*maybe* we should talk to him about the issue" (less direct than: we should talk to him about the issue), "could you *just* post this letter for me?" (Lakoff, 1975). In the present investigation, indeed, a number of these differences related to the language use have been noted down. For instance, females used hedges, intensifiers and tag questions more frequently than males did during the tasks.

Performing those differences leads to the creation of what is called 'genderlect' which refers to the register used by a specific gender category. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defines it as "the speech of men and women and by extension to such varieties as a homosexual register in communities where such varieties exist or are recognised" (p. 220). Robson and Stockwell (2005, p. 02) go further stating that the repeated use of features related to a particular gender category identifies the genderlect for example the repetition of the following features builds up 'women genderlect' or 'feminine genderlect':

- Over-hesitancy, including pausing, stuttering, 'um-ing and ah-ing', and uncompleted sentences.

- Non-assertiveness, including the avoidance or hedging of phrases, and the use of a rising intonation that invites agreement and support.
- Self-reference in subject matter, and a tendency to personalise by using first person pronouns, inclusive and intimate ‘we’, and possessives.
- Avoidance of swearing and other taboo forms.
- Super-politeness and high degree of (sure, yep, mmm), positive and supportive words.
- Non-interruption (especially of men) in conversation.

#### 4. Grammatical Gender

Gender is performed and reinforced by the language through its gendered morphology. Although it is more implicit in some languages like English; it is clearly noticed in some others like Arabic and French. Eckert and McConnel-Ginnet (2003) have suggested a set of examples illustrating the existence of gender at the language morphological level.

##### Example 01

In Arabic, we use separate pronominal and verb forms in the second-person singular and plural, and in the third-person singular, dual, and plural, depending on whether a human addressee or subject is male or female (p. 65).

Male	Female
katabta ‘you (masc. sg.) have written’/wrote	katabti ‘you (fem. sg.) have written’/wrote
katabtum ‘you (masc. pl.) have written’/wrote	katabtunna ‘you (fem. pl.) have written’/wrote
kataba ‘he has written’/wrote	katabat ‘she has written’/wrote
kataba: ‘they two (masc.) have written’/wrote	katabata: ‘they two (fem.) have written’/wrote
katabu: ‘they (masc. pl.) have written’/wrote	katabna ‘they (fem. pl.) have written’/wrote

**Table 4:** Grammatical Gender at the Morphological Level (e. g. Arabic and English) (Eckert & McConnel-Ginnet, 2003).

##### Example 02

Unlike English, nouns in French are classified as feminine and masculine. This categorisation is clearly shown grammatically:

Regardez *la* maison. *Elle* est grande  $\implies$  Look at the house. It is big.

Regardez *le* camion. *Il* est grand  $\implies$  Look at the truck. It is big.

‘Maison’ is a feminine word and ‘camion’ is masculine. This explains the use of the feminine and masculine articles (*la* maison and *le* camion) and the gendered personal pronouns *elle* and *il*, respectively.

### **5. Gender Differences through Human Developmental Stages (Preschooling)**

Despite the fact that very few biological differences exist between men and women, many other behavioural disparities emerge through time. These disparities are acquired from the surroundings and reinforced by adults from very early years of childhood. Indeed, messages about gender are implicitly sent by adults through different treatment in order to help babies learn how to be a gentleman and how to be a woman. In fact, the process of learning and differentiation in experience continue throughout adolescence into adulthood. Baxter (as cited in Slavin, 2006) notes that:

Male and female babies have traditionally been treated differently from the time they are born. The wrapping of the infant in either a pink or a blue blanket symbolises the variations in experience that typically greet the child from birth onward. In early studies, adults described boy or girl babies wrapped in blue blankets as being more active than the same babies wrapped in pink. Other masculine traits were also ascribed to those wrapped in blue (p. 119).

Very young children are not aware of those distinctions although gender bias can be clearly noticed from the moment of birth. Accordingly, they start realising them at around the age of three or four (Griffiths, 2008). Later, children become more aware as they get socialised at schools. Significantly, male and female infants cry the same amount, but boys considerably lessen the amount of crying as they get older mainly due to the surrounding’s different treatment as well as the process of schooling (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974).

### **6. Gender and Education**

Schools help in the reinforcement of gender differences and contribute to them. This has been agreed on as being called gender bias in educational setting. Anderman and Anderman (2009) find out that “gender bias occurs when people make

assumptions regarding behaviors, abilities or preferences of others based upon their gender. Because there are strong gender role stereotypes for masculinity and femininity, students who do not match them can encounter problems with teachers and with their peers (p. 425).

As girls and boys start schooling, they become more aware of the biological as well as the socio-cultural differences they exist between them. Besides, they receive different treatments from their teachers inside the classroom. This, in return, deepens the gap and diverges the way of thinking of both males and females. Research, then, confirms that teacher-student and student-student classroom interactions are highly gendered and this has been reflected in the research teachers' questionnaire too. Some of the gendered classroom practices include the following:

- Teachers unintentionally exhibit gender bias in classroom in three principal ways: reinforcing gender stereotypes, maintaining sex separation, and treating males and females differently as students (Grossman & Grossman, 1994).
- Males dominate group work and discussions and they tend to monopolise teacher attention (both positive and negative) (Lee, 2005).
- Men and women may learn differently and women generally relate their success to luck or effort, while men attribute success to ability (Fennema, 1990).
- Problem solving is highly achieved by men than women (Casey, 2001).
- Boys naturally exhibit boisterous, unruly behavior, are academically able, rational, and socially uncommunicative, whereas girls are quiet, polite, and studious (Anderman & Anderman, 2009).

The more this gender biasing is limited, the better classroom ambiance we supply. Importantly, Slavin (2006) suggests three main principles for teachers to reduce gender bias. Firstly, teachers are required to avoid stereotypes; they should not treat students according to their gender since students generally limit their reactions and behavioural performances to what teachers expect from them. In group work activities, for example, the teacher should not always think of boys to be leaders and girls to be dependent members. Secondly, he is invited to promote integration through having boys and girls work together and cooperate in order to do tasks and realise

project works (this what has been embraced in this study; mixed-gender cooperative work)). Last but not least, they should be careful in giving the floor, opportunities to participate, responsibilities and roles in collaborative work, and feedback to their students. In this regard, the notion of ‘equity’ has occurred. It refers to fairness and equilibrium between males and females in the classroom. This idea has emerged in parallel with the emergence of the women’s movements in 1970’s.

Equality and equity, according to the AAUW (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation) (1998a), differ in the sense that “equality sets up a comparison between males and females and asks the question: Are they receiving the same education? Gender equity poses a different question for the classroom dynamic: Do students receive the right education to achieve a shared standard of excellence?” (p. 261). To paraphrase, equality is to receive the same input, whereas equity is receiving the appropriate input so as to reach and result at the same outcomes. Reynolds and Miller (2003) also explain that “gender equity asserts that males and females do not need the same things to achieve shared outcomes. Gender equity is not sameness or equality; it is equity of outcomes, equal access to achievement and opportunity. Hence, equitable education addresses the needs of girls and boys rather than questions whether each receives the same thing” (p. 261). Therefore, we suggest different topics for discussions and tried to design variety of tasks fulfilling this condition; targeting the needs of our students.

## **Conclusion**

So much so, speaking is hard to teach and harder to learn. It requires awareness of its difficulty and complexity by both teachers and learners. This urges them to look and search for ways and tips that can better and enhance the classroom talk. Among these ways, researchers suggest to use a variety of classroom activities like group work tasks and encourage learners to work cooperatively with members of their groups to enrich ideas and promote peer-learning. For them, working in small groups provides an appropriate TL exposure and provokes members to participate more than when they work individually or in pairs. These groups could be divided according to learners’ abilities (high achievers, low achievers), social backgrounds, age (for example those

who repeated the year are older, and thus, they are grouped together), gender (single-gender or mixed-gender groups), etc. All these matters may influence the task achievement and orient the members' participations. Gender is an extremely important and influential factor when grouping learners though gender-linked disparities are taken for granted and their influence is usually ignored by teachers. It is an important factor that decides about many of the students' actions and reactions.

Learners are raised with the idea that boys and girls are different. As a result, their class behaviours are strictly gender-linked. Additionally, teachers unintentionally bias while dealing with their learners; they treat their learners according to the gender category they belong to. For example, they give boys more opportunities to participate than girls, they may give girls less waiting-time to share their ideas than boys, or they may simply consider that boys are always leaders in group work tasks. This treatment reinforces gender differences since boys become more and more dominant and girls become more and more submissive aside with other distinctions in behaviour. In the present research, then, we attempt to study these distinctions so as to figure out the extent to which they influence the students' frequency and quality of contributions and ultimately decide which type of grouping is more appropriate to enhance in-class group work.

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# Chapter Three: Research Design and Procedure

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## **Introduction**

After reporting relevant studies in the field of research dealing with different concepts and theoretical perspectives, the chapter at hand provides more insights to the research fieldwork discussion about the methodology, methods and procedures used to answer the research questions and test its hypothesis. This chapter, then, attempts to describe and explain the research process of investigation and the procedure the researcher followed either to validate or to refute the hypothesis.

Since the research is a planned, a systematic and a scientific piece of work, it should be provided with an appropriate research design. Importantly, the requirements should be prepared beforehand. The researcher needs to determine the hypothesis variables; i. e. she should define the variables interfering in her study and which can be experimentally manipulated, observed and tested. These variables, then, should be related to a specific target population on which findings will be generalized and a sample group representing it. The researcher also should opt for the materials to use in order to conduct the methods that serve the research. These materials should be relevant to the research and fits the learners' level of proficiency.

### **1. Target Population**

Before giving more details about the method used, it is required to determine the targeted population sample. According to Marczyk et al. (2005), the term population refers to the individuals who are of interest to the researcher and the field of research. Accordingly, these individuals belong to the same type. Through an experiment, the researcher worked with one part of the population; but in fact, the expressed research purpose and the findings have enabled us to generalize the issues to the whole population. The choice for these participants has not been done at a random scale. It is factual related to the researcher's hypothesis and the aims of the study.

In the present research, then, we attempted to generalize our findings on the second year students at the University of Khenchela. The targeted students, according to the structured higher education syllabus have not only reached the same level of difficulty, but have been exposed to the same input and asked to realise the same

output as well. This category of learners is selected because of two main reasons: linguistic/ language proficiency and psychological characteristics.

The first advantage is that second year university students are supposed to have reached an acceptable language proficiency level. They are expected to develop a post/upper intermediate level that will help in conducting the experiment with much less linguistic obstacles. Higher level of language proficiency (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year Master) is not suitable for our observation. At this level, students are supposed to develop advanced and more elaborated speaking skills. Hence, they do not need to have speaking/oral expression sessions as a separate module. Therefore, in this study, we needed to investigate and observe variables during the speaking sessions maintaining that these actions could not be unless the population representing the corpus of the research was the most adequate one.

The second advantage is that second year university students are more psychologically comfortable in the sense that they are more or less accustomed to work in groups whether in mixed- or single-gender arrangements and become less reluctant to working with opposite gender partners.

## **2. The Sample Group**

The sample group has been selected from the target population since the researcher could not work on the whole population because of the massive number. Accordingly, Marczyk et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of choosing a ‘representative group’ which shows the general characteristics of the whole population of interest; It is not practical to work with every member of the target population taking into account different factors like time and energy to be devoted to list just these. Consequently, if something is applicable to the sample group, it will be so to the whole population.

Members of the group sample were randomly chosen so as to ensure that participants were not biased. They had to belong to the same group and from the department since the investigative study occurred during the planned Oral Expression Class (according to their time table). So much so, the researcher worked with two groups of 40 students (nearly one fifth of the population as suggested by researchers)

so as to get a close equal number of boys and girls. They have not been informed that they have been subject to an investigation to avoid any possible biasing; this has been the following step of the undertaking procedure. Furthermore, the researcher has planned the observation in makeup sessions' type since the number of students in each group was not sufficient to carry out the observation and girls outnumber boys in separate groups; a significant unbalanced sampling. Moreover, on the basis of getting helpful instructions, the students have been informed that makeup sessions were necessary to catch up with the missing sessions during the periods of strike. In addition to this, the two questionnaires administered to teachers and students are given to ten (10) teacher and ninety (90) students, respectively.

### **3. Overview of the Method**

This research, as aforementioned, aims at investigating the effect of students' gender differences on the frequency and the quality of their contributions in group work tasks in which the exploratory talk principles are followed. To do so, we have been through a mixed method approach which "focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single range of investigation. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone." (Creswell, 2011). The purpose of conducting this method can be summarised in the following table:

	Quantitative	Qualitative
<b>General framework</b>	Seek to confirm hypotheses about phenomena  Instruments use more rigid style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questions  Use highly structured methods such as questionnaires, surveys, and structured observation	Seek to explore phenomena  Instruments use more flexible, iterative style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questions  Use semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation
<b>Analytical objectives</b>	To quantify variation  To predict causal relationships  To describe characteristics of a population	To describe variation  To describe and explain relationships  To describe individual experiences  To describe group norms
<b>Question format</b>	Closed-ended	Open-ended
<b>Data format</b>	Numerical (obtained by assigning numerical values to responses)	Textual (obtained from audiotapes, videotapes, and field notes)
<b>Flexibility in study design</b>	Study design is stable from beginning to end  Participant responses do not influence or determine how and which questions researchers ask next  Study design is subject to statistical assumptions and conditions	Some aspects of the study are flexible (for example, the addition, exclusion, or wording of particular interview questions)  Participant responses affect how and which questions researchers ask next  Study design is iterative, that is, data collection and research questions are adjusted according to what is learned

**Table 5:** Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Approaches (Mack, et al., 2011).

The research at hand then, gathered and equally prioritised all of the independent forms of data because they complemented and enhanced each other in order to answer the research questions. Therefore, data collection, interpretation and analysis were done in a convergent parallel design. As a matter of fact, initial data from the questionnaires' results were not enough; yet, they should be further explained and elaborated. This variety of opinions would triangulate the data gathered, and therefore, ensure more trustworthiness. We also believed that these complementary methods would serve the purpose of the research and answer its questions.

#### **4. Data collection instruments**

The research questions and objectives generally determine the method and the tools used to investigate a particular topic. Moreover, the researcher might also be interested in obtaining data that allow him/her to discover the linguistic identities, learning styles and strategies, attitudes towards the language and other aspects not merely language-related but also essential to studying a language (Canals, 2017) (e.g. gender differences, personality traits, etc.). The present study has involved three major tools of investigation: the questionnaires (quantitative method), the observation (qualitative method) and the tasks provided to students (qualitative method).

##### **4.1. The Questionnaires**

The first method used to fulfill the research aim is the questionnaire: one was administered to teachers and the other one to students at the University of Khenchela. The benefit of using this instrument was to allow the researcher to get a larger number of participants and opinions presented in numbers. Although they might not be enough to validate or refute the hypothesis, they would be interpreted into useful pieces of information.

While elaborating these questionnaires, many considerations were emphasized like the number of questions, their relevance to the field and the research topic and statement, and how they were organized and ranked, in addition to the ethical spirit of the researcher. Besides, they were accompanied with another qualitative tool of investigation so as to maximize the coverage of the collected data and their interpretations.

The two questionnaires in the present work were designed to gather information about the actual classroom circumstances, and they attempted to provide information about the overall learning/teaching situations. The first one reported the learners' preferences and degree of awareness in EFL learning especially in the speaking sessions. In addition, the researcher checked the learners' inclinations and suggestions that could enhance/hinder their learning in group work tasks. She also tried to check the learners' awareness, willingness and reluctance towards some classroom actions. The second questionnaire was administered to teachers. It provided the researcher with

valuable data about the teaching practices mainly in the speaking sessions when group work tasks were designed. These pieces of information served as a support to the researcher's assumption, and provided a basis that further confirmed the points being observed later during the pre-observation as well as the observation phases.

#### 4.1.1 The students' questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into three sections according to the point discussed. The first section included six questions about the target language skills and the learners' preferences and reactions.

##### Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Learners' Reactions.

The first section covered six questions related to the learners' awareness and preferences as far as the four language skills were concerned. It was organized to get from the most general (the four language skills in general) to the most specific (the speaking skill and the suggestions to improve its learning and performance), thus, localize areas of familiarity, strengths and weaknesses too.

1. Which of the following skills is difficult for you? Please, classify them according to their level of difficulty.

---

	Very easy	Easy	Difficulty	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

---

In this question, the researcher asked the participants to classify the four language skills in the table above which included the four language skill (the left side) and the different levels of difficulty (the top of the table). They are requested to put a cross by the given answer.

The objective of this question was to discover the students' awareness about the level of difficulty of the different language skills, particularly speaking (already highlighted in the first chapter). In fact, we expected that a large number of students would recognise the difficulty of the productive skills mainly. This paved the way to explore the learners' fears, unwillingness and points of retreating.

#### Questions Two and Three

2. What is the language skill you prefer most?

- a. Listening.
- b. Speaking.
- c. Reading.
- d. Writing.

3. Justify your choice.

The second question focused rather on the learners' preference of the different language skills. Participants were asked to choose *ONE* language skill that they prefer most; whereas, the third one underlined the reason behind their choice.

The objective of the second question was to know whether or not the difficulty of the speaking skill made the informants unwilling to learn the skill and to interact in the different tasks. In either case, the researcher should consider the informants' answers since any rejection and unwillingness to learning the speaking skill could possibly represent an obstacle for learning and for the investigation as well.

In question three, the researcher required from the students to determine the reasons and objectives of learning a specific skill. This would probably help them to discover and focus on their deficiencies in that skill.

#### Question Four

4. What are the difficulties that you usually face in the speaking sessions?

Question four specified more the field of research through narrowing down its scope. The researcher had chosen one language skill: speaking. In this question, the researcher looked for the difficulties the students generally face in the speaking sessions. The main objective was to get data about their strengths and weaknesses in

order to design the speaking tasks, remedial work, and the icebreaking activities as well.

Question Five:

5. Do you think that the speaking skill is: (put a cross by the most appropriate answer).
- a. Extremely important in TL learning.
  - b. Important in TL learning.
  - c. Not really important in TL learning.

In this question, the informants are required to give their opinions about how much the speaking skill is important in TL learning. Interestingly, literature review confirms that being aware of the importance of the productive skills, particularly speaking, may considerably increase and push up the effort and the studiousness of the learner in that skill. Additionally, the researcher wanted to detect the learners' awareness about the importance of speaking in order to help him choose the input and design the tasks.

Question Six

6. What are the suggestions that teachers may consider in order to make the speaking session as successful as possible?

The informants were requested to put forth suggestions for EFL teachers to consider in the speaking sessions. These suggestions, again, might help the researcher to adapt the learning situations, classroom action, interactions and tasks to the students' interests and preference; and therefore, hook the learners' attention and involvement. In addition to this, we believed that this question would smoothly switch the point of interest to the second section because group work task (discussed in section two) is of a paramount significance in the speaking sessions (discussed in section one). Furthermore, the informants were expected to suggest the in-class group arrangement as a beneficial classroom action, and hence, would pave the way to explore the following section.

Section Two: Class Management and types of work.

The second section also included six questions related to the students' preferences and awareness about classroom management, types of in-class work in general, and grouping in particular. The questions were as follows:

Question One

7. Classify the following activities according to your preferences: (use numbers in front of each alternative 1, 2, 3).
- a. Individual work activities.
  - b. Pair work activities.
  - c. Group work activities.

In this question, the researcher was interested to know the learners' preferences about the types of class arrangement during the speaking sessions. This would definitely confirm the data of the pre-observation phase because the researcher would give the students freedom to choose their partners during the pre-observation phase tasks. Thus, these preferences would be exhibited in the class tasks too. This would ultimately help to form a basis on which the observation would be conducted.

Question Two

8. Justify your choice.

The researcher was interested to know the reason why the informants preferred one type of class arrangement than another. Knowing these reasons would help the researcher to decide about the necessary skills and tactics to convey and implicitly teach during the pre-observation.

Question Three and Four

9. In case of group work activities, do you like:
- a. To be grouped by the teacher? Or
  - b. Choosing your partners?

10. Justify your answer.

Our main interest was to know about the learners' preferences about the in-group arrangement; i.e. did they prefer to be grouped by the teacher or choose their group partners by themselves? Why? During the pre-observation phase tasks, the researcher

would give freedom to the students choose their partners. However, the researcher would group them during the observation phase tasks. Therefore, knowing the informants' preferences would help the researcher act and react to the students' behaviours, performances and in-group interactions.

#### Question Five and Six

11. If the teacher is the one who groups the students, what is **the aspect** that he/she should **mostly** consider while grouping? (put a cross in front of the aspect that you choose):

- a. Gender of the learners in the group (males, females).
- b. Abilities of the learners (high achievers, low achievers).
- c. Origins of the learners (social, cultural, regional).
- d. Personalities of the learners (extroverts, introverts, etc).
- e. None.

If you have chosen 'e', suggest others

The researcher planned to arrange the groups during the observation phase herself. It was then necessary to know the learners' views about the aspect that should be mostly considered while dividing the group members in the speaking sessions. In addition, the researcher would detect whether gender was overemphasised by the students; and thus, would introduce the third point of interest in the undertaking.

#### Section Three Gender Differences and Classroom Work in the Speaking Session

The third section included five questions. These questions discussed mainly the students' awareness about the aspect of gender and the effect of gender differences on the learning process. The questions were as follows:

#### Question One and Two

12. If gender is to be regarded, what type of arrangement do you think is more beneficial to better learning?

- a. Mixed-gender groups (groups containing males and females) or
- b. Single-gender groups (female-female and male-male groups).

13. Give possible reasons.

The researcher was interested to know the type of group work arrangement that students prefer and the reason behind their choice. Through their answers, she would detect any possible reluctance towards working with opposite gender partners, and this would obviously be the outset of the observation.

Question Three and Four

14. Do you think that the type of gender grouping (single-gender/mixed-gender) affects learning? (Put a tick by your choice).

a. Yes.

b. No.

15. Is this effect:

a. Positive or

b. Negative.

The informants were asked to say whether the types of grouping would affect learning and whether the effect would be positive or negative on EFL learning in general and on the speaking skill in particular. This would help the researcher to discover the reasons of the students' unwillingness to work in mixed-gender groups. As a result, she would determine the needed tasks and skills.

Question Five

16. Why do you they think they affect learning?

This question explored the learners' points of view about the two different types of gender grouping and their effect on the learning process. Like its preceding, the fifth question would orient the researcher to act and react in the different learning or problematic situations (e.g. the teacher's reaction towards certain learners' behaviours during the tasks), as it would also guide her to teach and design the different input and learning tasks. In addition to this, knowing these pieces of information would help in conducting both the pre-observation and the observation phases, and thus, help in answering the research questions as well as confirming/refuting the hypothesis.

**4.1.2 The Teachers' questionnaire**

The teachers' questionnaire comprised sixteen questions. Importantly, it was divided into three sections depending on the three points of interest highlighted in this

research. These sections would mainly discuss certain attitudes, actions and reactions done by EFL teachers (University of Khenchela) during the group work tasks in the speaking sessions. Additionally, it would serve as a continuation to the current learning situation deduced from the learners' questionnaire findings and would reinforce the research assumptions as well.

Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Teachers' Reactions

The first section involved five questions related to the teachers' reactions in the TL skills in general and the speaking skill in particular. As mentioned before, the section funnelled the pieces of information to discuss different related points until it reached the following point of interest in the undertaking (the second section).

Question One

1. As a teacher, which of the following skills you find difficult to teach. Classify them according to their level of difficulty.

---

	Very easy	Easy	Difficulty	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

---

As obviously requested from the students, the researcher asked the participants to classify the four language skills in the table above which included the four language skill (the left side) and the different levels of difficulty (the top of the table). Respondents were asked to put an order to the four language skills' level of difficulty.

As stated in the research literature, speaking is not an easy skill to teach especially when learners are uninterested, unenthusiastic, or simply low performers because of the linguistic or the psychological reasons. The objective of this question, then, was to discuss the teachers' reactions and to confirm the points elaborated in

chapter one. Moreover, knowing the teaching situation would help in setting the final pedagogical implications.

#### Question Two

2. What are the characteristics that make the speaking session successful?

The question focused on the different characteristics which would make the speaking session as successful as possible. The main objective was to figure out if teachers generally consider the criteria of a successful speaking session to consolidate and combine the usual teaching situation (data from the questionnaire) with how the research findings would be implemented. In other words, the overgeneralised data from the questionnaire findings would form a basis to demonstrate how the research findings would be implemented.

#### Question Three and Four

3. What is/are the problem/s that mostly challenge/s your speaking sessions?
  - a. The learners' level of language proficiency.
  - b. The learners' inhibitions.
  - c. The mother tongue use among learners.
  - d. The lack of motivation and the low participation.
  - e. The shortage of ideas in specific topics.
  - f. Others.
4. If you are faced with other problems, please state them.

Through these two questions, the researcher sought to know the teachers' most frequently faced challenges and problems in the speaking sessions. Significantly, featuring these obstacles would hopefully help in finding resolutions to ameliorate learning and to increase interactions and oral performances; knowing the problem would definitely help in eliciting its solution.

#### Question Five

5. Teachers usually use a variety of classroom activities in the speaking session (e. g. storytelling and jigsaw); please, give some examples of speaking activities you have already provided your students with.

Teachers were requested to indicate the classroom activities they usually provided their students with. This would show up the actual teaching practices so as to establish a generalised premise that would eventually be encouraged or deterred.

### Section Two: Classroom Management and Types of Grouping

The same sequenced organization in the student's questionnaire and the research process was followed in the teachers' questionnaire as well. The second section comprised six questions associated with the teachers' preferences of either type of grouping and classroom management in group work tasks during the speaking sessions. The questions were as follows:

#### Question One and Two

6. In the speaking sessions, do you prefer to arrange your students:
  - a. In groups?
  - b. In pairs?
  - c. Individuals?
7. Please, justify your answer.

The first two questions required the informants to pick up the type of grouping they preferred during the speaking sessions classroom work and the reasons behind their choice. Notably, data from this question would be compared with data from the same question in the students' questionnaire. Therefore, findings would be emphasised or disapproved by the end of the investigation procedure.

#### Questions Three and Four

8. If you use group work tasks, do you prefer:
  - a. Small groups (not more than five members per group)? Or
  - b. Large groups (more than five members per group)?
9. Please, justify your answer.

At this level, the informants were requested to choose the group composition they thought was more appropriate for learning. The objective of these two questions was to

know if the teachers could generally manage group work tasks and if they were able to cope with the group composition they believed was more beneficial.

### Questions Five and Six

10. These groups are generally arranged by:

- a. The teacher himself. Or
- b. The students.

11. Justify your answer.

The researcher needed to know whether groups were generally arranged by the teachers or by the students and obviously the reasons behind this decision. The objective of these two questions was to compare both the teachers' and the students' reactions towards the same enquiry. Exploring the current teaching and learning practices would give more reasons for carrying out the observation phase. Its findings then would support or dismiss those practices and classroom reactions. Furthermore, this question helped in making the switch to the subsequent point of discussion (section three).

### Section Three: Gender and Classroom Work

Section three of the teachers' questionnaire included five questions. Certainly, these questions were related to the third point discussed in this study which investigated gender and its effects. The questions were as follows:

#### Question One

12. In case your students choose their partners, do they generally prefer:

- a. Single-gender partners?
- b. Mixed-gender partners? Or
- c. Friends regardless their gender?

In fact, this question was also asked to students. The researcher wanted to know the type of grouping (in relation to gender) the students basically prefer in group work tasks. Data from this question would absolutely confirm its corresponding in the students' questionnaire. Hence, this would give sight about the learners' willingness or reluctance towards working with opposite gender partners. Moreover, it would

stimulate the researcher to emphasise willingness and discourage reluctance in order to conduct the observation in appropriate conditions and eventually get reliable results.

#### Questions Two and Three

13. Which type of group arrangement enhances the learners contributions:
- a. Single-gender groups? Or
  - b. Mixed-gender groups?

14. Please, explain.

The respondents were asked to say which group arrangement enhanced their learners' contributions and outcomes. This would be compared to the students' responses, the pre-observation phase data and the researcher's assumption. Finally, it would be either encouraged or discouraged by the final research findings.

#### Questions Four and Five

15. If you arrange your students in single-gender groups, do you give equal opportunities to learners' participations from opposite gender groups?
- a. Yes.
  - b. No.

16. Please, explain.

This question required the informants to determine whether or not they gave equal opportunities to all learners' participations from opposite gender groups. Their answers would definitely reveal either equality or equity in their classrooms. Again, this would help the researcher to conclude the general teaching situation (practices and reactions) investigated in the undertaking.

### **4.2 The Pre-Observation**

Despite the fact that the group work task seems easy to be used and applied in the speaking sessions, most researchers have confirmed its complexity for both teachers and learners. Inevitably, many aspects should be taken into account before the teacher decides to carry out his lesson or part of it using group work activities. Some of these points could be summarised under size matters (large, small groups, exact number of group members), composition (ability grouping, gender consideration), and objective of the task (by the end of the task, learners will be able to...), etc. In addition to these,

learners must be acquainted enough with several skills and tactics used to promote collaboration and better their outcomes as a group. In the undertaking, the pre-observation tasks importantly emphasised these skills including listening to others without interrupting their flow of thought, exchanging and respecting ideas as well as rationally challenging them. Besides, students should be thoughtful about the group decision making process: identifying the problem, considering possible choices, gathering information, considering advantages and disadvantages, making decisions, and finally evaluating it. Actually, these tactics and skills should be taught implicitly through time throughout the different tasks given to students from the beginning of the year. In short, group work was a complex task that required teachers'/learners' awareness and needed preparation and planning so as to increase its efficiency, and enhance collaborative learning.

Consequently, the researcher, as she played the role of the teacher, needed to carry out some group work activities in different sessions and related to different topics during a three-month period. This step was a necessary part of the research to make sure all learners were aware of the skills mentioned previously, and that they shared more or less the same knowledge about how group work was supposed to proceed. Furthermore, these pre-observational tasks as proposed by Lehfeltdt (nd) served as icebreakers in the sense that students got accustomed to working in opposite gender partnership; to minimise male's and female's apprehension. In addition to this, they got accustomed to the teacher's closeness to each group separately.

In the very first tasks, the researcher gave students freedom to group themselves as she asked them to choose their partners. She noticed, then, that most learners were grouped in single-gender groups since all of them selected same-gender partners. Most of these group compositions were according to friendship groupings, which confirmed to a large extent the questionnaires' findings. This type of grouping might be beneficial in some activities but they might also be an obstacle towards presenting a lesson or doing an activity: friends often gathered to tell stories and gossip instead of performing tasks. Consequently, the researcher decided to group the students by herself (mixed-gender group arrangement) so as to avoid the behavioural troubles and

to reduce their apprehension to work with opposite-sex partners too. During the pre-observation phase also, she kept walking around; sometimes in the front, at the back, between the groups or even involved with group members in order to get them used to her presence and her movement around them. So, they became more comfortable while doing the task.

### 4.3 The Observation

Then, we reached the qualitative method. Along this research, an observation was conducted. It was an efficient research process that provided the researcher with real-life data occurring in natural setting. In this account, the researcher took necessary information, particularly about non-verbal behaviour, from what was actually taking place without relying on second hand data. These observations could focus either on *facts* like numbers of students in classes, numbers of students visiting libraries, etc, on *events* like the amount of teacher/student talk, the amount of collaborative work, etc, or on *behaviours* and qualities like observing the teacher's friendliness or the learners' aggressiveness (Cohen, et. all. 2007, p. 396, 397).

In this research, the observation was indispensable for the validity and the authenticity of the findings. Accordingly, the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this work was either validated or refuted after conducting the observation phase in a six-month period within the classroom borders. During this period, the researcher played the role of the teacher and observed both *events* and *behaviours*. On the one hand, she took notes in relation to the events occurring while the task was being done as far as the amount and the frequency of the students' contributions were concerned; on the other hand, the researcher shed light on their behaviours while interacting, particularly males dominance, assertiveness and rational/emotional thinking as well as females gossiping and politeness.

At this level, thirty two learners (32) from the sample group (40) were randomly grouped; we did not look at their educational achievements and English proficiency level. Then, they were further divided as the following table suggests:

<b>Total number</b>	<b>40</b>									
	<b>32</b>							<b>08</b>		
<b>Group arrangements</b>	<b>Observed and reported</b>							<b>Observed but not reported</b>		
	<b>Group ‘A’</b>				<b>Group ‘B’</b>				<b>Group ‘C’</b>	
	<b>Single-gender groups</b>				<b>Mixed-gender groups</b>				<b>Single-gender groups</b>	
	MM-Gs		FF-Gs		Males		Females outnumber		FF-G	FF-G
MM-G	MM-G	FF-G	FF-G	MMF-G	MMF-G	FFM-G	FFM-G			

**Table 6:** Group Work Arrangement during the Observation Phase.

As illustrated in table six, the remaining eight female students were grouped into single-gender groups too. They were observed without reporting data related to their interactional behaviours since we needed equal number of groups and equal number of males and females to elevate reliability and validity of the observation.

During the Oral Expression class, teachers largely encouraged the ‘Exploratory Talk atmosphere wherein a set of conditions were respected. These conditions considerably helped in promoting both the teachers’ and the students’ quality of talk and interactions (Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008). In this study, the researcher focused merely on only three conditions investigated during six months Oral Expression sessions. Each couple of months was devoted to observe events and behaviours under one specific condition including the following:

- The group seeks agreement for joint decisions.
- Every one listens actively.
- Ideas may be challenged and logical reasons are given for challenges.

Different groups were given the same group work tasks in the first two months keeping the same group division. These tasks were supposed to meet one of the previously stated conditions. At this level, the researcher (playing the role of the teacher) explained the instructions and gave the students time to work, to share and to contribute as members of the same group. Along this period of time, she kept observing the participants’ behaviours while discussing about the task with focus on the presence of politeness, arguing, gossiping, dominance, assertiveness and rational/emotional thinking exhibited by both sexes (males and females). Then, each group was asked to share with the whole sample what they were discussing about.

Here again, the researcher observed the students if they contributed and took part as active participants. In other words, she investigated if the gender differences stated above hindered students' learning as a group and prevented them from reaching the first condition.

In the second and third couples of months, the second and the third Exploratory Talk' conditions were considered, respectively. During these sessions also, the researcher kept the same group and sub-group arrangements but gave different tasks that served to investigate the two other Exploratory Talk' conditions; mainly two group work activities were mostly considered in each observation period.

#### **4.4 Tasks**

In this research, the tasks have been in a form of group work activities. Group work is an important activity that teachers may use in the speaking class in order to maximize and enrich the learners' interactions since the target language exposure and exchange is very limited, most of the time absent outside the classroom. Researchers argue that this type of activities greatly increases and elaborates the amount and the quality of talk in a limited period of time and decreases the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the whole class. Additionally, group work activities are of much importance in creating and maintaining the exploratory talk ambiance. Some of these tasks, in fact, have been either adapted or adopted from researchers' suggestions (e. g. the balloon debate by Harmer) and on line resources (decision making activities), and some others have been designed by the researcher herself (storytelling and problematic situations).

##### **4.4.1. Observing the Learners in the First Two Months**

As it has been stated before, the researcher's observation is divided into three parts during the six-month period. During the first two months, two different decision making group work tasks were used in separate sessions for the sake of observing behaviours. In this respect, the researcher highlighted any possible male dominant, assertive, interruptive behaviours and rational reasoning and female emotional ideas and polite reactions when they discussed to reach joint decisions. At this level, the

researcher reported and focused mainly on two tasks only taking into, bearing in mind that the two other tasks showed the same data and reached the same results.

#### **4.4.1.1 Task One**

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** considering gender.

**Duration:** 30 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional discourse. It may include personal, descriptive, predicting, persuasive, explanatory functions.

**The main objective:** Students develop joint decision making skills as they follow the process:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Considering your choices
3. Gathering information
4. Considering advantages & disadvantages
5. Making your decision
6. Evaluating your decision

#### **Description**

Each group of students was given an envelope with the steps of the decision making process clipped apart inside. Groups had to put the slips in the correct order of the decision making process as a reinforcement of what they had learned in the pre-observation period. While the learners were working, the teacher (the researcher) walked around and checked the order of steps until they reached the right order:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Considering your choices
3. Gathering information
4. Considering advantages & disadvantages
5. Making your decision
6. Evaluating your decision

After that, they were given the material to be used.

**The material:** Dani's Story

Dani is on a weight loss plan to lose 30 lbs. She has been trying really hard to eat healthy food and watch her fat and calories intake. So far, she's been successful and seen results. She's been invited to a party where there are a lot of unhealthy food choices. She isn't so sure that she'll be able to resist the temptation to eat these foods. She really wants to be social but her friends don't understand how difficult this is. Dani doesn't want to be a food snob but she doesn't want to blow her diet either. This would really mess up her progress so far. After all, healthy eating and exercising has not been easy, nor has the will power she's developed. Her friends are really putting the pressure on her.

<http://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/The-Decision-Making-Process-500775>

**Instruction:** What should Dani do? Work through the problem by putting the decision making process into action. But before, you need to agree on the following comprehension points:

1. What is the problem?
2. What are Dani's values?
3. What were her goals?
4. What circumstances do we need to consider? (success/failure of weight loss/ will power?, feelings).

At this level, students discussed and took notes at the same time in order to step up. Then, the teacher passed out a 'choice card' to each group of students. This card included a comprehensive list of alternatives that Dani might decide to do under her friends' pressure to eat unhealthy food. As a group, learners should put themselves in Dani's shoes and choose for her the decision they agreed to be mostly appropriate. After that, they were asked to cooperate so as to demonstrate and discuss advantages and disadvantages of the selected action.

**The choice card:** Dani may:

- Say 'No thanks', eat nothing, stay strong.
- It's only one time, what damage could it do?
- Say 'maybe later I'll eat...not hungry right now'.
- Say YES, but only eat little portions of healthy foods and nibble.

- Say YES, eat whatever looks good.
- Storm out of party telling friends if they really cared they wouldn't pressure and they would be more understanding.
- Say yes to the food and run 5 miles on the treadmill before bed.
- Eat any food you want tonight but skip all meals the next day.
- Tell friends you already ate (even if you haven't).
- Make a big scene to let everyone know you're on a diet.
- Eat and then take diet pills to reverse the effects of eating.
- Fill plate full of food to make it look like you are eating, but flush it down the toilet.
- Ask your friend upfront if you can bring anything to the party (then you'll know there will be something you can eat).

Other options can be added and discussed by students.

Next, learners were required to discard options that were unsafe, illegal, or far to be chosen and decided about the options that were worth exploring. Finally, they needed to evaluate the decision they had taken as a group through guiding them with questions in order to reach together the following conclusion: decisions you make now will affect you later.

**The guiding questions:**

- Where could her decision lead?
- Could others be affected? Who? How?
- How would her reputation or character be affected?
- How would her friends view her choice?

During this activity, the teacher guided the students while they were going through the decision making process and discussion. Sometimes she stayed at the back watching the overall behaviors of the groups, and some others she walked around to be closer and more exposed to the students' interactions. Meanwhile, she took necessary notes about the previously mentioned learners' behaviors under the working conditions they had provided as a group (the learners and the teacher together provided the appropriate working conditions; exploratory talk atmosphere). In this activity, the

researcher (playing the role of the teachers) focused mainly on male's dominance in the amount of talk and in decision making and on female's polite responses and FTAs avoidance.

#### **4.4.1.2. Task Two**

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** according to gender

**Duration:** almost 20 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional. It may include personal, descriptive, predictive, persuasive and/or explanatory functions.

**The main purpose:** Students should get together as a group and participate in a group decision-making process.

#### **Description:**

The teacher asked the students to make a group decision concerning a critical and imaginary situation. The situation was as follows:

“You are a surgeon at a well-known hospital. The hospital committee and you must take a very important decision. Seven patients need heart transplant and there is only one heart donor. All the patients are physically able to receive that heart; all of them have compatible tissue and blood typing. As a group, which patient would you choose to transplant the heart to?”

#### **The Waiting Patient List :**

- 50 year old male: a scientist, important research studies, unmarried.
- 12 year old female: orphan, poor, and blind.
- 35 year old male: from different origins, doctor, at the height of his career, 2 children.
- 80 year old female: have severe diabetes and blood pressure, 4 married children, 10 grandchildren.
- 30 year old female: married, 6 months pregnant.
- 40 year old male: Imam, married, 4 young children.
- 19 year old female: shopkeeper, secondary school dropout, supports/cares for a brother who is severely disabled.

After discussing the alternatives and taking a decision about who should receive the heart among the seven patients, each group shared the decision they had taken, stated the reason and evaluated it with the whole class. The teacher guided each group separately asking its members the following:

- 1) What was your decision?
- 2) How did you reach your decision?
- 3) What decision-making method did you use (consensus, voting.)?
- 4) How was your decision influenced by your values? Attitudes? Prejudices?
- 5) Who provided leadership in your group?
- 6) How were disagreements and conflicts handled?

After accomplishing the task, members of the different groups were required to share with the whole class what they had decided on. And the teacher's role remained static at taking notes in relation to the hypothesis set at the beginning of the research. These notes were observations focusing on gender differences underlined before and their effects during the small group discussions as well as the large group sharing. The researcher also observed whether these differences helped the group members achieve the task's objective.

#### **4.4.2 Observing the Learners in the Second Two Months**

In the second two months, four different group work tasks were used in separate sessions in order to observe gender differences (dominance, assertiveness, rational thinking and politeness) not to check their effect on reaching joint decisions, but rather to observe the same set of gender-linked behaviours while expressing feelings and emotions. The researcher checked whether they affected the students' interactions. In this regard, the researcher highlighted possible effects of gender differences to make sure if the second exploratory talk' classroom condition was respected accordingly to "every one listens actively". At this level too, data from two group work tasks only were reported because the four tasks ended with the same results.

##### **4.4.2.1 Task One**

Students were given a group work activity in a form of game to break the class routine and monotony. We strongly believe that games are a useful type of activities in

the speaking session as they can be played in the classroom as a large group, in pairs or in small groups.

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** considering gender.

**Duration:** 20 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional. It may include personal, descriptive, informative, questioning and/or comparative.

**The main objective:** learners should develop the habit of listening to others and respect what they say without interrupting them. They must listen actively with less frequency of interruptions.

**Description:** Students were given slips of papers picturing faces. Each face showed up specific mood or emotional situation. Then, individual learners in each group were instructed to choose randomly a slip of paper, and tell a story/anecdote in relation to the mood or emotion expressed on the face in the paper. Learners could also express their feelings and emotions towards a person, a place, an object as far as the pictured face is concerned.

While students were actively working on the task, the teacher observed the participants to detect whether they listened to their peers attentively, or kept interrupting them; the focus was mainly on male's interruption and female's politeness and their effect in fulfilling the second condition of the exploratory talk.

#### **4.4.2.2 Task Two**

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** considering gender.

**Duration:** 24 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional. It may include personal, descriptive, questioning,

**The main objective:** learners should listen actively with less interruption frequency.

**Description:** in each group, one learner was required to start telling a story which was not known (created by group members) to his mates. Then, each and every time a member of the group continued telling his peers part of it, the others kept listening and

predicting what would come next in order to take turn in narrating the story's events until time allocated was over (three minutes for each short story). Then, another student in each group started again another created story, and the others still kept listening and predicting to add events until the second three minutes finished. The same was done every three minutes till the end of the instruction. After that, group members were asked to summarize and link their four stories' events in front of the whole class so as to get a more complex set of events and a more complete story.

In this activity, the teacher observed and checked whether gender differences (politeness and interruptions) affected learners' interactional behaviors, particularly listening to others when they produced and performed the language orally. The focus was on listening or interrupting the mates' storytelling by each group member.

#### **4.4.3 Observing the Learners in the Third Two of Months**

In the third two months, four different group work tasks were used in separate sessions in order to observe gender differences (dominance, assertiveness, rational thinking and politeness, gossiping, arguing) in challenging and persuading process. The researcher checked whether these disparities affected the learners' interactions. More specifically, she tried to find out if males' logical reasoning and rational thinking as opposed to females' emotional inclination affected the quality of interactions, and if they enabled or prevented the group from reaching the lastly chosen exploratory talk classroom conditions which was "ideas may be challenged and logical reasons are given for challenges."

##### **4.4.3.1 Task One**

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** considering gender.

**Duration:** 15 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional. It may include personal, descriptive, comparative, persuasive, informative and/or explanatory.

**The main objective:** learners should develop their persuasive skills and use of logical and rational reasoning to support and idea.

**Description:** The teacher gave the students the balloon debate (explained in chapter one, part one). Students imagined themselves they were in a damaged basket of a balloon which was losing air. Only one of them could stay and survive, and others had to jump out. Individual students representing famous characters and influential figures in society (e. g. Napoleon, Gandhi, Cleopatra), or needed professions (e. g. teacher, doctor, lawyer) had to argue why they should be allowed to stay in the balloon and survive.

#### **4.4.3.2 Task Two**

**Group size:** 04 students per group.

**Group composition:** considering gender.

**Duration:** 20 minutes.

**The general purpose of speaking:** interactional. It may include personal, descriptive, comparative, persuasive, informative and/or explanatory.

**The main objective:** learners develop their persuasive skills and use of logical and rational reasoning to support and idea.

**Description:** The teacher gave different problematic situations and asked students to think of the situations provided and try to find out persuasive reasons to convince others about their points of view. The situations included:

##### **Situation 01**

“Your friend lost interest in school and her grades are suffering. As a result, she will be repeating the year. She decided to quit and work as a waitress to support herself. She says that she does not need to go to school.”

Compose a logical argument to convince her stay in school showing the benefits she can make.

##### **Situation 02**

“Your father was considering a job in Oran. If he takes the job, this means that your family had to relocate soon. For you, this means adapting to a new town, a new school, and new friends. Your parents solicited you in making decision about the situation.”

Compose logical arguments to support either moving or staying where you are.

### **Situation 03**

“Someone has stolen a precious object from a down town shop. After interrogating the shopkeeper, he declared that you were in the shop during the moment of theft and the accusation was directed towards you.”

Imagine yourself being interrogated by police officers. Find out convincing arguments with proofs to claim your innocence.

### **Situation 04**

“You are an employee in a new cosmetics’ brand company. Your job is to convince people to buy and try your products.”

Give possible arguments to make people appreciate and buy the products.

During these activities, the teacher observed if there were possible effects of the gender differences underlined above on the process of challenging ideas and reasoning.

### **Conclusion**

Before collecting, interpreting and analyzing the research data, the researcher needed to indicate and discuss the methodology, methods and procedures used to answer the research questions and test its hypothesis. In this chapter, we attempted to describe and explain the research process of investigation and the procedure the researcher followed either to validate or to refute the hypothesis.

The researcher started with specifying the target population and the sample group with whom the research process would be conducted. Then, she determined and elaborated the method embraced and the instruments used for data collection. Finally, the researcher gave a detailed description of the different tasks designed for the research purposes.

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# Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Interpretation

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## Introduction

After providing a necessary literature review to support the research assumptions and giving clear insight of the methods, procedures, instruments and tasks, we could finally reach the research finding, interpretations and analysis as well. This chapter, then, goes into a detailed exposition of the results reported from the different tools of investigation. In addition to this, different interpretations and data analysis are provided in order to get logical and reliable implications.

## 1. Findings of the Questionnaires

### 1.1. The Learners' Questionnaire

As it had been mentioned before, the questionnaire was administered to ninety (90) second year students at the University of Khenchela. They had been kindly asked to participate in filling the questionnaire anonymously so as to make them feel free and more comfortable when they answered the different questions. Besides, they had been informed that their answers were going to be treated confidentially and strictly used for the present research purposes.

The questionnaire encompassed seventeen (17) questions. These questions were divided into sections depending on the field of questioning and comprised various types like multiple choice questions, scale and questions requiring full answers. Through this questionnaire, we attempted to construct a basis on which we get engaged in the observation.

### **Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Learners' Reactions**

**Q 01:** Which of the following skills is difficult for you? Please classify them according to their level of difficulty provided.

	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

**Table 7:** The Learners' difficulty level of the four language skills.

According to the first question, our informants' answers were very similar and marked nearly the same point of view. All of them (90 students/100%) stated that both productive skills (speaking and writing) were very difficult. However, they disagreed on the level of difficulty of the receptive skills. Their answers varied between 'difficult' and 'very difficult' concerning the listening skill and between 'very easy' and 'easy' concerning the reading skill. These results revealed that all learners were aware of the level of difficulty of the different language skills, especially the productive skills (speaking and writing).

We believe that productive skills, particularly speaking, are difficult to learn and to teach too. Speaking is the ability to communicate orally and making oneself understood by the listener. EFL learners often find difficulties to gain such a privilege because of many reasons like the limited time of language exposure; time of the learners' interactional performances is restricted to the classroom borders. In addition to this, this classroom exposure is sometimes doubted and questioned because learners do not get the TL input from native speakers. Consequently, some aspects of their speaking skills may be wrong (e.g. final 'ed' pronunciation is often mispronounced by some teachers). This wrong or inappropriate exposure may be internalised in learners' and challenge their will to produce comprehensible and meaningful language.

**Q 02:** What is the language skill you prefer most?

- a. Listening.
- b. Speaking.
- c. Reading.
- d. Writing.

---

Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
03 (3.33%)	65 (72.22%)	00 (0%)	22 (24.44%)

---

**Table 8:** The learners' Preferences Concerning the Language Skills.

**Q 03:** justify your choice.

The table above shows that the majority of learners under study (65/72.22 %) preferred the speaking skill. Most of them justified their choice saying that they felt

satisfied while practicing the target language (TL) orally, and that they could not know the language without being able to speak it. A few of them (22 students/ 24.5 %) preferred writing saying that it was more formal and that ideas flowed more when they were writing. Only three respondents (3.33 %) have chosen listening. It was, for them, the first step towards learning the TL.

This implies that speaking is highly appreciated by learners although they have agreed on its difficulty. This might be due to the variety of tasks and topics of discussions the learners were provided with. In this regard, the speaking session was more appreciated by students when they performed different tasks like pair and group work activities with a variety of materials, interesting topics and presented through different teaching aids like audio/audiovisuals.

**Q 04:** What are the difficulties that you usually face in speaking sessions?

Here again, the learners' answers were very similar. Almost all of them believed that their speaking proficiency was affected by inhibitions due to shyness; when they spoke in front of their classmates they showed some hesitation. Also, they said that speaking in front of an audience disturbed the accuracy and correctness of the language they used. Additionally, they stated that their participations might be limited because of time or dominance of some participants. These results suggest that the most affecting challenges facing learners in the speaking session are not related to the language itself but to the classroom ambiance the teacher as well as the learners create; i. e. the students are more extrinsically than intrinsically affected when they perform and interact.

**Q 05:** Do you think that the speaking skill is:

- a. Extremely important in TL learning.
- b. Important in TL learning.
- c. Not really important in TL learning.

Extremely important in TL learning	Important in TL learning	Not really important in TL learning
77 (85.55 %)	13 (14.44 %)	00 (0%)

**Table 9:** The Importance of the Speaking Skill.

Although the learners’ points of view varied in the degree of importance, they believed that speaking was vital to learn the target language. While the majority (77/85.55 %) noted that it was ‘extremely important’, only thirteen (13/14.44 %) said that it was ‘important’ and no one doubted or denied its importance. For this great majority, learning the language meant, primarily, being able to use it orally and evaluating its proficiency was more frequently related to these oral performances. Then, it is worth mentioning that learners are definitely aware of the extent the speaking skill is essential in EFL learning.

**Q 06:** What are the suggestions that teachers may consider in order to make the speaking session as successful as possible?

- Use different materials	- Encourage unwilling students to participate	- Use variety of topics
- Use audiovisual aids	- Give all learners equal opportunities to participate	- Choose topics of interest
	- Encourage students to listen to each other	- Use variety of activities like games and role plays in groups and pairs
90	83	67

**Table 10:** The Learners’ Suggestions for Teachers of the Speaking Skill.

Interestingly, their responses were again so much similar. All of them proposed that teachers should use a variety of materials and media (audio/audio-visuals, pictures, etc). A great number (67), also, confirmed that they would work better and be more motivated if the topics of activities and discussions were chosen according to

their interests, and that the variety of activities in speaking (game in groups, role plays in pairs, etc) hooked their attention and raised their interest. Another big number of students (83) wanted their teachers to encourage unwilling and introvert students to contribute, and to provide equal opportunities for all class members. In addition, they greatly valued listening to other speakers because they largely learnt from their teachers and other peers' contributions as well. As a result, it is interesting to note down that the questionnaire respondents are thoughtful of how the oral expression class could be beneficial and efficient. They proposed valuable alternatives that we consider in the present investigation like using variety of activities (e. g. use of group work) and encouraging learners to listen to each other for mutual sharing and disciplined interactions.

**Section Two: Class Management and Types of Work**

**Q 07:** Classify the following activities according to your preferences.

- a. Individual work activities.
- b. Pair work activities.
- c. Group work activities.

**Q 08:** Justify your answer.

a-b-c	a-c-b	b-a-c	b-c-a	c-a-b	c-b-a
15	00	00	29	02	44
15 students choosing 'a' first (16.66 %)		29 students choosing 'b' first (32.22 %)		46 students choosing 'c' first (51.11 %)	

**Table 11:** The Learners' Classroom Arrangements Preferences.

In relation to the participants' answers, we noticed that they were divided into three broad categories. Most learners (46/51.11%) preferred working in groups in the oral expression class. They believed that interactions got richer when they were numerous and that different members meant different ideas and more opportunities to widen the fields of discussions. Moreover, working in groups could help them to be closer and set strong human relationships with their peers as it could promote sharing and socialisation. The second broad category gathered supporters of pair work. They

represented 32.22 % of the whole number of respondents. Although pair work promoted sharing and socialisation like the group work did, learners who prioritised it argued that working alone decreased their creativity and working in groups created a mess of ideas and that talkative and interruptive members limited other participants' contributions. Last but not least, the third category generated fifteen students (15) representing only 16.66% of the total number. All of them gave much more importance to the individual work. They reckoned that they got confused by other members' ideas, especially when ideas were imposed. Consequently, they felt that their ideas and points of view went unnoticed.

These data reveal that learners generally prefer group work activities, and they consider them as an efficient way to enrich learning and make the speaking session practical and beneficial. Additionally, they show definite awareness of the advantages and profits they may get while working in groups.

**Q 09:** In case of group work activities, do you like:

- a. Being grouped by the teacher? or
- b. Choosing your partners?

**Q 10:** justify your answer.

---

Teacher's division of groups	Learners' division of groups
30 (33.33 %)	60 (66.66 %)

---

**Table 12:** The Learners' Preferences of the Type of Grouping.

The table above shows clearly that the majority of the participants (60/66.66%) preferred to choose their partners. They wanted to work with either their friends to feel more comfortable or with peers who they thought were more helpful and competent to better the quality of their work. A smaller number of students (30/33.33%) preferred the teacher to choose their partners for them. This category of respondents confirmed that they did not care about who were their partners since all of them might provide a sort of help. The results in the table above make us conclude that most learners are less motivated to working with peers chosen by the teacher and that they involve in tasks in which they feel more familiar with group partners.

**Q 11:** If the teacher is the one who groups the students, what is the aspect that he/she should **mostly** consider while grouping? (Put a cross by the aspect chosen).

- a. Gender of the learners in the group (males, females).
- b. Abilities of the learners (high achievers, low achievers).
- c. Origins of the learners (social, cultural, regional).
- d. Personalities of the learners (extroverts, introverts).
- e. None

**Q 12:** If you have chosen ‘e’, suggest other aspects.

Gender	Abilities	Origins	Personalities	None of them (friendship grouping)
36	30	00	00	24
40 %	33.33 %	00 %	00 %	26.66 %

**Table 13:** The Considered Aspects in Group Work Arrangement.

The learners’ answers considerably diverged between considering gender (36/40%), abilities (30/33.33%), and friendship grouping (24/26.66%) when the teacher divided them to do group work tasks. The percentages under the different aspects were very close; no great majority preference. Yet, a larger number (36/40%) was recorded in gender column; gender differences were emphasised by students. We believe that the majority of students’ choice (gender) is mainly due to their apprehension and reluctance to work with opposite-gender partners. Maybe they feel shy and uncomfortable to speak and contribute in the class work. Consequently, they prefer working with same gender group members to avoid any possible contact or confrontation.

**Section Three: Gender Differences and Classroom Work in the Speaking Session**

**Q 13:** If gender is to be regarded, what type of arrangement do you think is more beneficial to better learning? Put a cross by your choice.

- a. Mixed-gender groups (groups containing males and females). Or
- b. Single-gender groups (female-female and male-male groups).

Mixed-gender groups	Single-gender groups
35 (38.88 %)	55 (61.11 %)

**Table 14:** The Students Group Division Preference According to Gender.

**Q 14:** give reasons.

	I feel shy and uncomfortable	Different ways of thinking	struggle and misunderstanding (stereotypes)
	08	26	21
N° S-	14.54 %	47.27 %	38.18 %
total N°(90)	8.88 %	28.88 %	23.33 %

**Table 15:** Reasons of Choosing Same-Gender Partners.

Data from the two last questions (Q 13 and Q 14) showed that learners were more motivated to work in single-gender than in mixed-gender groups. Thirty five (35/38.88%) students selected to work with opposite sex mates. When examining their answers, we concluded that different gender, for them, meant different ways of thinking and great variation of ideas and suggestions. A larger number of our respondents (55/61.11%) pointed at working with same gender partners. While some of them (08/8.88%) related their choice to shyness, being uncomfortable and lack of self-confidence, others (26/28.88 %) linked it to the fact that males and females did not have the same way of thinking. Therefore, this might create difficulties in reaching the task objectives. Some others (21/23.33 %), however, believed that opposite gender partnership directly led to struggles, misunderstandings and stereotypical attitudes.

The difference in the students' points of view is, according to us, attributed to the social and the cultural background they have as well as the in-class gender bias and reinforcement. In our society (regional borders), children have been raised with principles that separate men and women in different contexts and under different circumstances. As a result, they unconsciously develop the idea that men and women

should always be separated. When it comes to school, teachers' biasing and inequity further reinforce and widen this gap.

**Q 15:** Do you think that mixed-gender type of grouping affects learning?

- a. Yes.
- b. No.

**Q 16:** Is this effect:

- a. Positive or
- b. Negative.

Yes	No	Positive effect	Negative effect
90 (100 %)	00 (00 %)	35 (38.88 %)	55 (61.11 %)

**Table 16:** The Effect of Gender on Learning.

**Q 17:** Why do you they think they affect learning?

Single-gender groups: .....

Mixed-gender groups: .....

All learners (90/100 %) did not deny the fact that gender was influential in the oral expression class. Thirty five (35/38.88 %) suggested that mixed-gender arrangement had positive effects. They believed that variation in learners brought up variation in leaning. However, fifty five (55/61.11 %) of our respondents thought that mixed-gender groups had negative effects and that single-gender groups positively impacted learning, in the sense that same-gender members had more common ways of thinking with different ideas and very few prejudices and stereotyped thoughts . This, in return, decreased the violent struggles and increased understanding. In addition, other answers confirmed that some opposite gender group mates showed immature reactions as interruptions and dominant behaviours. Similarly, we think that these diverse justifications were based on the environment and the school orientations towards either gender equity or inequity

**Summary of the Questionnaire Findings**

Data gathered enabled us to state that most second year students at the University of Khenchela preferred single-gender type of grouping. They felt more motivated to

work with same-gender partners and believed that this type of grouping was more helpful in achieving the task objectives. This may lead us to conclude that single-gender groups are better than mixed-gender groups in the speaking sessions. The present results, in fact, refute the assumed hypothesis which suggests that mixed-gender groups have positive effects on learning. In other words, when learners are grouped with mixed-gender partners, they would contribute, perform and share more than when they are with same gender partners. Thus, the research methodology, based on the observation the work at hand adopted, enables us to ensure the validity of these findings and to know which type of grouping is more beneficial to boost the students' contributions in group work tasks.

### 1.2. The Teachers' Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to ten (10) teachers at the University of Khenchela, department of English. They were aware of the procedure and kindly asked to fill in the questionnaire anonymously so as to make them more comfortable when answering the different questions. Besides, they were informed that their answers were going to be treated confidentially and purposefully used for the research.

The questionnaire encompassed sixteen (16) questions. It was divided into sections depending on the field of questioning, and comprised different types of questions. Through this questionnaire, we attempted to determine the teachers' actions and reactions during the speaking sessions, and therefore, constructed a basis on which we engaged in the observation.

#### **Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Teachers' reactions**

1. As a teacher, which of the following skills do you find difficult to teach?

Classify them according to their level of difficulty.

---

	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

---

**Table 17:** The Level of Difficulty of the Different Language Skills.

Surprisingly, our respondents' answers about the language skills' level of difficulty were very similar. Although their answers diverged concerning the receptive skills (listening and reading), all of them (100%, 10 respondents) agreed that the productive skills were very difficult to teach. We believed that this might be interpreted in relation to the learners' level of the language proficiency and involvement in the different tasks. In other words, the learners' modest linguistic and cultural competencies caused inhibitions and hindered the teaching and the learning processes. In addition, less motivated members lessened the quality and the frequency of the class contributions. Another reason that might intervene is the learners' limited use and exposure to the TL. This created many obstacles and difficulties for learners to use the language in oral or written performances, and thus, affected the teaching strategies, techniques and time devoted to the different activities.

2. What are the characteristics that make the speaking session successful?

Here again, all teachers agreed on two key characteristics that enhanced learning during the speaking session. They stated that teachers should provide their learners with interesting and varied types of activities and that learner-centered speaking classroom atmosphere was strongly needed. We believed that these suggested characteristics helped the teachers raise motivation and students' involvement. Additionally, it increased the learners' time of talk and participation in comparison to the teacher's and lowered the errors that might occur in the speaking session.

3. What is/are the problem/s that mostly challenge/s your speaking sessions?

- a. The learners' level of language proficiency.
- b. The learners' inhibitions.
- c. The mother tongue use among learners.
- d. The lack of motivation and the low participation.
- e. The shortage of ideas in specific topics.
- f. Others.

4. If you have been faced with other problems, please state them.

The respondents' answers in question three were similar too. They agreed on the fact that all the suggested obstacles were confronted in the speaking session. All of the

stated problems relatively occurred in their classrooms. They also said that the unavailability of some teaching aids and equipments hindered the process of teaching.

Though we could not generalise these problems to all the classrooms and all the students, they negatively affect teaching and learning shortening the TL exposure, the frequency and even the quality of the in-class oral performances and contributions.

5. Teachers usually use a variety of classroom activities in the speaking session (e. g. storytelling and jigsaw); please, give some examples of speaking activities you have provided your students with.

According to this question, most of the activities used by the respondents during the speaking sessions were common. They provided their students with a variety of classroom tasks like jigsaw, problematic situations, storytelling, role plays, oral performances and so on. This variation might help them attract the learners' attention and interest, and therefore, raise motivation and participation in the classroom.

### **Section Two: Classroom Management and Types of Grouping**

6. In the speaking sessions, which arrangement do you think is more beneficial?
  - a. Groups?
  - b. Pairs?
  - c. Individuals? Or
  - d. Equally important?
7. Justify your answer.

	Groups	Pairs	Individuals	Equally important
Theoretical belief	All of them are used			10/ 100%
Actual performance	Cooperative work avoidance 00/ 0%		04/ 40%	06/ 60%

**Table 18:** The Teachers' Opinions about the Different In-Class Arrangements.

According to question six, all the respondents believed that all these class arrangements were practically beneficial and equally important in the speaking skill depending on the type of activity and the time allocation. However, the actual teaching/learning situation might prevent them from using cooperative learning, particularly in groups. Six informants (06) believed that all these arrangements should

be used to break the classroom routine and raise motivation. Whereas four of them (04) stated that they sometimes avoided cooperative learning either because of the whole class size or the overall class behaviour. This category of teachers thought that group work tasks in large classes and with troublesome students was difficult to be managed and controlled. This implied that cooperative learning was used by some teachers because it broke the class monotony and increased participation; whereas it was not favoured by others either because of internal or external reasons; i. e. the teachers' inability to control and manage (internal) or the learners' large number (external).

8. If you use group work tasks, do you prefer:
  - a. Small groups (not more than five members per group)? Or
  - b. Large groups (more than five members per group)?
9. Justify your answer.

Small groups	Large groups
08/ 80%	02/ 20%

**Table 19:** the Teachers' Preference of Group Size.

Most teachers (08, 80%) preferred dividing their students into small groups (not more than five). They believed that a small number of students per group enabled more participation and amount of talk to the individual members. Additionally, learners' inhibitions could be substantially limited by the in-group motivation when the group members are very few.

Only two teachers (02, 20%) favoured dividing their students into large groups (more than five). They thought that a larger number of students per group enriched the in-group discussions and varied its contributions, and that shy students and low achievers were not forced to participate in all the tasks.

This revealed that both group divisions could be applicable during the speaking tasks depending on the teacher's objectives. However, the first one tended to be more appropriate in fulfilling the overall group work task purposes. In other words, the group members' involvement and participations which were mostly manifested in

small groups were recommended to better the quality of the group work task in the speaking session.

10. These groups are generally arranged by:

- a. The teacher himself? Or
- b. The students?

11. Justify your answer.

The teachers' Arrangement	The Students' Arrangement
03/30%	07/ 70%

**Table 20:** In-Class Group Arrangement.

Seventy percent (70 %) of the questioned teachers gave more freedom to students choose their partners in group work tasks during the speaking sessions. They thought that students' group arrangements gave group members more confidence and comfort, and therefore, brought up richer ideas, more varied contributions, and less inhibited behaviours. Nevertheless, only thirty percent (30 %) of our informants preferred the teacher's group division. This category of teachers believed that the more students' arrangements were allowed, the more troublesome and unmanageable behaviours occurred.

We believed that this divergence in the teachers' opinions was mainly controlled by the overall class behaviour. In other words, learners' arrangement was definitely constructive, but it could cause chaotic classroom atmosphere too. We thought that this would depend on the learners' reactions towards cooperative work, their acceptance to other classmates as group partners, and their will in achieving the task objectives.

**Section Three: Gender and Classroom Work**

12. In case your students choose their partners, do they generally prefer:

- a. Single-gender partners?
- b. Mixed-gender partners? Or
- c. Friends regardless their gender?

Single-gender partners	Mixed-gender partners	Friends regardless their gender
05/ 50%	00/ 0%	05% 50%

**Table 21:** The Students’ Group Members’ Choice.

An equal percentage of the informants’ answers diverged between ‘single-gender partner’ preference and ‘friendship grouping’ when their students were given freedom to choose their group-mates. In other words, five teachers (05, 50%) believed that their students usually preferred single-gender members as partners of the group work task, and the other remaining five respondents (05, 50%) thought that their students generally chose their friends to share the group work task with. No one was reported in mixed-gender partner preference.

This implies that University students in Khenchela (the English Department) usually prefer single-gender partners when they are given group work tasks unless they form friendship grouping regardless to their gender. In fact, these data are not surprising because they clearly confirm the students’ questionnaire findings reported in questions twelve and fourteen (the students’ questionnaire: Q 12/ Q 14).

13. Which type of group arrangement enhances the learners contributions:

- a. Single-gender groups? Or
- b. Mixed-gender groups?

14. Please, explain.

Single-gender groups	Mixed-gender groups
06/ 60%	04/ 40%

**Table 22:** The Type of Group Arrangement Enhancing the Learners’ Contributions.

Data from these two questions show that most of the respondents (06/ 60%) generally chose single-gender group arrangement to enhance the learners’ contributions. They thought that this type of grouping encouraged their students to share and participate in the class tasks because they felt more comfortable with the same gender group members. We believe that this category of teachers prioritised this type of group division so as to avoid in-group gender stereotypes. However, only four of the respondents thought that mixed-gender division was more efficient to raise the

class cooperative work and in-group participation. For them, the in-group variation brought up varied contributions, richer ideas and more covered tasks.

15. If you arrange your students in single-gender groups, do you give equal opportunities to learners' participations from opposite gender groups?
- a. Yes.
  - b. No.
16. Please, explain.

Yes	No
05 (50%)	05 (50%)

**Table 23:** The Teachers' Floor Giving Opportunities.

The F above illustrates the numbers and the percentages of the teachers' floor giving to the different genders belonging to different single-gender groups. Five respondents (50%) said that they generally gave equal opportunities for their students regardless their gender and the task they were involved in. All of them explained this choice referring to the teachers' obligation in treating their students equally with no preference or biasing. The other half of the questionnaire participants did not necessarily give equal floor opportunities to different genders from different single-gender groups. They noted that some students needed more attention, especially some male members, because of the behavioural, the motivational or the language level of proficiency reasons. Therefore, they needed more support and focus to help them overcome these limitations.

Both explanations seem to be correct and feasible, but teachers are invited to think again of the floor distribution to maximise the students' chances of learning. In this regard, equity without gender biasing is their best choice.

### Summary of the Questionnaire Findings

At first, the teachers' answers agreed with and supported what had been reported from different literature (variety of activities, characteristics of speaking, obstacles usually confronted by teachers in the speaking session and so on) and what had been determined during the pre-observation of the research at hand (group and topic variation, group size). In contrast, data gathered from the teachers' questionnaire

enabled us to confirm the learners' answers. An important number of teachers at the University of Khenchela preferred to arrange their students in single-gender type of grouping. They thought that this type of group division kept students at the same University more motivated and higher task achievers since they did not feel shy or inhibited by other opposite gender group members. Here again, the teachers' questionnaire findings refuted the assumed hypothesis which suggested that mixed-gender groups have positive effects on learning, and when learners were grouped with mixed-gender partners, they would contribute, perform and share more than when they were with same gender partners. Thus, a qualitative method of investigation is strongly needed to ensure the validity of these findings or the preset hypothesis in order to know which type of grouping is more beneficial to boost the students' contributions in group work tasks.

## **2. Findings of the Observation**

From the observation we have conducted during a six-month period, the researcher could highlight a number of remarks. These observations mainly focused on gender differences and the frequency of their occurrence to confirm the existence of these disparities in the classroom context. In order to show this frequency, observation schedules were provided. The top of the schedule showed the different gender disparities emphasised during the observation, the numbers given in the left side referred to the periods during group interactions (e. g. 30 minutes/5 minutes= 6 periods), while the ticks represented the existence of the behaviour being observed during that period.

### **2.1. The Researcher's Observation Findings in the First Two Months**

#### **2.1.1. Task One:** The decision making process about Dani.

In task one, the researcher's focus was chiefly on the learners' joint decision-making; i. e. she pointed out if the learners' behaviours helped or hindered in joint decision making process as shown in table 24. The first five minutes (16 % of the task) were given to students to discuss about the decision making process and order the points given to them (period one). Then, they tackled the questions related to the given text in five minutes time (= one periods; period two). This period represented 16% of

the task too. After that, they were required to discuss the ‘choice card’ to end up with a more adequate choice for Dani in ten minutes (periods three and four represent 32% of the task). Finally, they were having a ten minutes guided interaction with a set of questions as an evaluation to the decisions they made in the two last periods (the last 32% of the task). These results are summed up as follows:

- First instruction: ~16%.
- Second instruction: ~16%.
- Third instruction: ~32%.
- Fourth instruction: ~32%.

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1		✓		✓		✓		
	MMG2		✓		✓		✓		
	FFG1				✓		✓		
	FFG2		✓		✓		✓		
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	MFG2	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	MFG3		✓		✓		✓		
	MFG4	✓	✓		✓		✓		
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓				
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1				✓		✓		✓
	FFG2						✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG2				✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFFG4	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
3	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1	✓					✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MMFG3		✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MFFG4	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
4	MMG1	✓	✓	✓		✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1							✓	✓
	FFG2		✓				✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	MFFG4	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
5	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓				
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
	FFG2							✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	MMFG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	MFFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
6	MMG1		✓	✓	✓				
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
	FFG1				✓			✓	✓
	FFG2		✓			✓	✓		✓
	MF1	✓	✓		✓				
	MFG2	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓

**Table 24:** The Researcher’s Observed Gender Differences in the First Task of the Two First Couple of Months.

In addition to these observations, the researcher has noted down the findings’ percentage of achieving the task objective by each group:

Percentages	MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
<b>(16%) First instruction</b>	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
<b>(16%)Second instruction</b>	achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
<b>(32%)Third instruction</b>	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	partly achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
<b>(32%)Fourth instruction</b>	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	Partly achieved
<b>Total percentage of achievement</b>	32%	16%	46%	16%	100%	100%	100%	64%

**Table 25:** The Percentage of the Learners’ Achievement of the First Task Objective in the First Couple of Months.

In the first period, some behaviours were almost absent regarding interruptions, dominance, quarreling, and emotional thinking. This was mainly due to the nature of the instruction itself which was considered as a warm up to boost the students’ memories and to introduce the task. Yet, reasoning and assertiveness were greatly observed since the task required the learners to think logically of the order given. Consequently, politeness was greatly shown and all groups have reached the total percentage of the period (16%).

In the second period, five minutes time allocated, the researcher noticed that the number of male interruptions, assertiveness, and dominance increased. This increase was related to the nature of the instruction itself which required argumentation. So, boys started their attempts to control and dominate the overall group discussions and ideas. Females’ emotional thinking, also, starts to be on picture, especially at the end of the second instruction (what circumstances should we consider: success/failure of weight loss, will power, feelings, etc?). Additionally, female gossiping occurred in the female-female groups as they started to deviate from the objective of the task. At this level, all groups achieved the total rate of the instruction (16%), except for the second male-male group and the second female-female group. On the one hand, boys in MMG 2 interacted in a dominant way leading to quarrels. Consequently, this prevented them from achieving the objective of the second instruction. On the other hand, girls in FFG 2 started to gossip. Though it was not so frequent, it affected the realisation of that part of the task (see table 25).

During the third and fourth periods, related to the same instruction, all single-gender groups had not finished, and members of these groups asked for extra time to finish the assigned task. Concerning male-male groups, interruptions, assertive and dominant behaviours greatly occurred since most of the members wanted to impose their points of view. As the debate grew up, males started to quarrel and their voices rose up. Obviously, these struggles wasted much of their time resulting inappropriate time management and low task achievement as shown in table 25. Concerning the female-female groups, members went beyond time limits because of gossiping. Meanwhile, it was so much restricted in mixed-gender groups, mainly by male's interruptions. In return, males' quarrels did not emerge because of female politeness. In other words, boys interrupted female gossiping and female politeness softened the general atmosphere of the interaction. Surprisingly, nearly the same data were reported from the fifth and the sixth periods which were related to the same instruction too.

In short, the observations being taken into consideration implied that mixed-gender groups scored higher in joint decision-making than single-gender groups. In fact, male interruptions limited female gossiping, and female politeness reduced male quarreling. In addition to this, female emotional thinking completed male rational reasoning. Consequently, at least two exploratory talk principles emerged in this type of grouping.

**2.1.2. Task Two:** Making a group decision about a critical and an imaginary situation (the surgeon and the patient list).

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	MMG2	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	FFG1						✓		✓
	FFG2		✓	✓			✓		✓
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG3		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG4	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1				✓		✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓				✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG2				✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFFG4	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
3	MMG1	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1	✓					✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG2	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	MMFG3		✓		✓		✓		
	MFFG4	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
4	MMG1		✓	✓	✓				
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	FFG1		✓						✓
	FFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MFG1		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MFFG4	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓

**Table 26:** The Researchers’ Observed Gender Differences in the Second Task of the First Couple of Months.

Table 26 shows the frequency of the previously stated gender differences in the second group work activity. It focuses, also, on whether joint-decisions are made and whether these differences impact its realisation as a main objective of the task. The first instruction’s time allocation was fifteen minutes which represents more than 70% of the total task period (three periods of five minutes). The fourth period of the group work was devoted to whole-class sharing wherein the students talked over the decisions they made as a medical committee. During this period, learners were guided with some questions for five minutes (represents 25%).

- Instruction one: 75%.
- Instruction two: 25%.

In addition to these observations, the researcher noted down the findings' percentage of achieving the task's objective by each group:

Percentages		MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
Period 01	The same instruction (=75%)	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Period 02									
Period 03									
Period 04 (class sharing)= 25%		Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	Partly achieved
Total percentage achieving the task purpose		35%	35%	35%	35%	100%	100%	100%	75%

**Table 27:** The Percentage of the Learners' Achievements in the Second Task of the First Couple of Months.

During the first three periods, male dominance in mixed-gender groups remarkably diminished because females were able to gain more frequent contributions as they started to take turns more frequently and more politely. As a result, interruptions got down and learners became more willing to listen to each other in mixed-gender groups. Besides, males' more rational reasoning and females' more emotional thinking were much complementary. However, members in single-gender type of grouping took extreme orientations. Male-male groups sounded higher because of quarrels; each member wanted to dominate and assert his points of view resulting in-group struggles and unachieved task, table 27. Gossiping in female-female groups existed resulting to a deviation from the task's objective to an inadequate time management.

Obviously, during the fourth period of the task (the last five minutes), male quarrels and female gossip prevented them from achieving the task objective in single-gender groups. Members in mixed-gender groups, however, were able to reach an adequate time management, thus, achieve the task's objective (see Table 27).

## 2.2. The Researcher's Observation Findings in the Second Two Months

**2.2.1. Task One:** telling a story/anecdote in relation to the mood or emotion expressed on faces.

In this task, the researcher observed if the second exploratory talk principle was obtained under the gender differences highlighted earlier. To paraphrase, she tried to

find out if gender differences had some effect/s on reaching the second exploratory talk principle which was “participants listen actively”. The observation in this task was divided into four periods. Each period was five minutes (25%); each group member was required to talk after choosing a slip of paper. Other group members normally listened to their group-mate expressing ideas and emotions as far as the drawn face was concerned. When the first member finished, another one selected a face and spoke during five minutes maximum until all students were able enough to contribute.

- Instruction: Student one: 25%.  
                   Student two: 25%.  
                   Student two: 25%.  
                   Student two: 25%.

Table 28 shows the frequency of occurrence of the gender differences being observed:

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	FFG1						✓		✓
	FFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MFG1		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓				✓		✓
	MFG3		✓				✓		✓
	MFG4		✓		✓		✓		✓
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
	MMG2	✓	✓						
	FFG1				✓		✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓				✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MMFG3		✓				✓		✓
	MFFG4		✓				✓		✓
3	MMG1	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓		✓			
	FFG1						✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓		✓
	MFG1	✓	✓				✓		✓
	MFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MMFG3		✓				✓		✓
	MFFG4		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
4	MMG1		✓	✓					
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1							✓	✓
	FFG2						✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓				✓		✓
	MFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MMFG3			✓	✓		✓		
	MFFG4		✓				✓		✓

**Table 28:** The Researcher’s Observed Gender Differences in the First Task of the Second Couple of Months.

Additionally, table 29 indicates if the second exploratory talk principle was achieved in single- as well as mixed-gender groups.

Percentages	MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
Student 01 (25%)	achieved	Not achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Student 02 (25%)	Not achieved	achieved	Not achieved	Partly achieved	achieved	Not achieved	achieved	achieved
Student 03 (25%)	Partly achieved	Not achieved	achieved	Not achieved	Not achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Student 04 (25%)	Not achieved	not achieved	Not achieved	not achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Total percentage of achievement	25%	25%	25%	25%	75%	75%	100%	100%

**Table 29:** The Percentage of the Learners’ Achievement in the First Task of the Second Couple of Months.

All the periods showed a decrease in the amount of rational thinking in all groups because the topics of the interactional performances of group members are more emotionally- than rationally-oriented. The overall number of interruptions and dominance dramatically diminished particularly in mixed-gender groups and female-female groups. Contrastively, male-male group’ members were still interrupting in the mere temptation to dominate the number of contributions and resulting struggles (around 25% of the task objective is achieved as shown in table 29). In addition, gossiping remained at its height in female-female groups resulting a waste of time and a deviation from the task’s purpose (around 25% of the task objective is achieved). However, mixed-gender groups revealed greater understanding and more active listening through reducing the number of interruptions and individual members’ dominance, and a large FTAs avoidance. So, the task’s purpose was greatly achieved (between 75% and 100% as illustrated in table 29).

To sum up, listening to others was so much respected in mixed-gender groups; all members actively contributed with opposite sex mates despite their differences. In this task, wherein listening to each other is more emphasised and encouraged, males exhibited more understanding and less interruptions with females but not with other males. As a result, struggles remained in male-male groups, and thus, the exploratory talk principle was more occurring in mixed-gender groups.

### **2.2.2. Task Two: Storytelling.**

The focus during this task is similar to its preceding. The researcher observed gender differences and their impact on learning, more particularly the learners' frequency and quality of contributions during in-class group work. In this task, learners were asked to tell short stories; one student in each group started telling a story from his own creation, and the others had to listen, imagine and predict the coming events. The four group members took part in narrating the story till the first period (3 minutes, about 12% of the total time allocation) was up. Then, the same process was repeated with the other group members each three minutes (four periods of three minutes= 12 minutes which represent around 50%) telling different stories. After that, they were required to share their stories with the whole class. At this level, each group's members should summarise and link the four short stories' events so as to get a more complex set of events. Time devoted for this instruction was twelve minutes; and each group was given three minutes to share (50% of the task).

- First instruction: 12 minutes= 50%.
- Second instruction: 12 minutes= 50%.

Tables 31 and 32 show respectively the focus of the four periods of observation and the percentage of the learners' task achievement.

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓		✓			
	FFG1						✓		✓
	FFG2		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG1		✓				✓		
	MFG2	✓	✓				✓		✓
	MFG3		✓				✓		
	MFG4		✓		✓		✓		✓
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
	MMG2	✓	✓						
	FFG1						✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓				✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		
	MFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MMFG3		✓				✓		✓
	MFFG4		✓				✓		✓
3	MMG1	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓		✓			
	FFG1						✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓				✓		✓
	MFG2		✓				✓		
	MMFG3		✓				✓		
	MFFG4		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
4	MMG1		✓	✓					
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1							✓	✓
	FFG2						✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓				✓		✓
	MFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MFFG4		✓				✓		✓

**Table 30:** The Researcher’s Observed Gender Differences in the Second Task of the Second Two Months.

Table 30 suggests that males’ interruptions and dominance as well as female gossiping, precisely in single-gender groups, still existed in almost all periods. In these groups, some male participants were trying to dominate the amount of talk and have more frequent group contributions. This led to a disorganisation and the appearance of passive members. Girls, from the other side, did not manage their time appropriately because of gossiping. Consequently, they wasted time and did not achieve the task objective which is listening actively (see table 31).

Instructions	Percentages	MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
First instruction	Student 01 (12.5 %)	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Student 02 (12.5 %)	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved
	Student 03 (12.5 %)	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved
	Student 04 (12.5 %)	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved
Second instruction	Class sharing (50%)	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved
Achievement of the task objective	100%	40%	40%	50%	50%	70%	70%	70%	70%

**Table 31:** The Percentage of the Learners’ Achievement in the Second Task of the Second Two Months.

Tables 31 and 32, also, show that mixed-gender groups achieved the task’s objective to a great extent. Males’ interruptions existed mostly when females’ gossiping occurred. They limited ‘useless’ talk and gave more emphasis to the task instructions. In addition, females’ avoidance of FTAs largely restricted struggles and misunderstanding while males’ rational thinking and females’ emotional orientation were complementary to have emotional but more realistic stories’ endings. All in all, the second principle of the exploratory talk was more highly respected in mixed-gender than in matched-gender type of grouping. Members were more willing to listen to each other and stricter in achieving the final target.

### 2.3. The Researcher’s Observation Findings in the Third Two Months

#### 2.3.1. Task One: The Balloon Debate by Harmer.

In this task, the researcher focused on the existence of the third exploratory talk principle being influenced by the learners’ gender differences. In other words, she observed whether these differences affected the exploratory talk atmosphere as a beneficial classroom alternative in the enhancement of learning; she checked if ideas could have been challenged and if rational reasons were given while learners interacted in small groups. The task contained one instruction in which participants should choose an influential figure or a needed profession and convince others to stay in the balloon basket. Time allocated for participants was fifteen minutes. The period

of time was divided into three periods of observation and each period lasted five minutes (each period is about 33% of the total time devoted for the task).

- Instruction: 15 minutes/3periods= three periods of five minutes.

Tables 33 and 34 respectively show the focus of the three periods of observation, and the percentage of the learners’ task achievement.

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1						✓		✓
	FFG2		✓			✓	✓		✓
	MFG1		✓			✓	✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	MFG3		✓			✓	✓		
	MFG4		✓			✓	✓		✓
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1				✓		✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓				✓		✓
	MFG1	✓	✓			✓	✓		
	MFG2		✓			✓			✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
	MFFG4	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
3	MMG1	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓		✓			
	FFG1						✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓			✓			✓
	MFG2		✓			✓	✓		
	MMFG3		✓			✓			
	MFFG4	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

**Table 32:** The Researcher’s Observed Gender Differences in the First Task of the Third Two Months.

Percentages		MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
The instruction	Period one	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Period two	achieved	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Period three	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Total percentage of achieving the task purpose		100%	100%	35%	35%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 33:** The Percentage of the Learners’ Task Achievement in the First Task of the Third Two Months.

Table 34 shows that the occurrence of gender differences in the different groups through the different periods was almost the same. Interruptions and dominance

existed mostly in male-male groups. As all the preceding tables suggest, these behaviours resulted to struggles and misunderstanding, and thus, causing quarrels and unachieved purpose in male groups (see table 33). Assertiveness was more observed when males belonged to the group than in female groupings; while FTAs' avoidance and gossiping were more noticed in female groups. It is also worth mentioning that logical thinking and reasons were more remarked in mixed-gender groups and male-male groups than in female-female groups where participants were more emotionally-oriented according to the reasons they gave.

All in all, single-gender groups were unable to fulfill the task's purpose though male-male groups scored higher in reasoning and logical thinking (see table 33). Interruptions and dominant behaviours created an unbalanced opportunities of contributions among group members. Thus, the quality of contributions was logical and reasonable whereas their frequency was not equal for all participants. Additionally, members in female-female groups deviated from time to time far from achieving the task's purpose, as illustrated in table 33, because they were busy gossiping. Then, the quality of contributions was sometimes doubtful. They were also more emotional in giving arguments which caused them to be more submissive, and thus, to accept more and challenge less. However, mixed-gender groups achieved the main objective of the task which was challenging ideas and providing reasons and logical arguments, table 33. Males' struggles were much less observed mainly because of FTAs avoidance by girls. Gossiping was limited to a large extent since interruptions restricted its occurrence in group interactions. Moreover, reasons and arguments provided by male and female participants varied between males rational-orientation and females emotional-orientation; together, they provided a variety of ideas.

### **2.3.2. Task Two: Problematic situations.**

The focus of observation in this task is the same as its preceding because both tasks have been designed to check if the existence of the previously mentioned gender differences influenced the third exploratory talk principle. This task lasted 20 minutes. Each period of five minutes was devoted to debate in a specific situation.

- Instruction: Situation one: 25% (five minutes).  
 Situation two: 25% (five minutes).  
 Situation three: 25% (five minutes).  
 Situation four: 25% (five minutes).

Tables 35 and 36 show the focus of the observation during this task, and the amount of the learners' in-group achievement.

		Interruption	Assertiveness	Dominance	Arguing		Politeness	Gossiping	Emotional thinking
					Reasoning	Quarreling			
1	MMG 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	FFG1						✓		✓
	FFG2	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG1		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFG3		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG4		✓		✓		✓		✓
2	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	MMG2	✓	✓		✓	✓			
	FFG1						✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFFG4		✓		✓		✓		✓
3	MMG1	✓		✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	FFG1				✓		✓	✓	✓
	FFG2				✓		✓	✓	✓
	MFG1		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2		✓		✓		✓		✓
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
	MFFG4		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
4	MMG1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	MMG2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	FFG1				✓		✓	✓	✓
	FFG2		✓		✓		✓	✓	
	MFG1	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	MFG2		✓		✓		✓		
	MMFG3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
	MFFG4	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓

**Table 34:** The Researcher's Observed Gender Differences in the Second Task of the Third Couple of Months.

Instructions	Percentages	MMG 1	MMG 2	FFG1	FFG2	MFG1	MFG2	MMF	FFM
The instruction	Situation one (25%)	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Situation two (25%)	achieved	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Situation three (25%)	achieved	achieved	Partially achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
	Situation four (25%)	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved	achieved
Achievement of the task objective	100%	100%	100%	75%	75%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 35:** The Percentage of the Learner’s’ Achievement in the Second Task of the Third Two Months.

The same remarks during the third two months of observation were highlighted by the researcher. Table 35 shows that male single-gender groups were able to achieve the task purpose as far as the provision of reasons and logical arguments is concerned. Yet, some dominant behaviours, interruptions and the low degree of linguistic politeness led to the raise of voice and quarrel. Female single-gender groups, also, could achieve an important percentage of the task purpose (around 75%), but still gossiping hindered the quality of talk and the frequency of the contributions in the instruction. Obviously, contributions in mixed-gender groups were varied; reasons were sometimes logical and rational and some other times emotional. Members in those groups could achieve the task purpose with almost no male’s struggles or female’s gossiping.

#### 2.4. Summary of the Observation Findings

From all the considered remarks during the observation phase right from its beginning, it is important to note down that:

- Whenever dominant and interruptive behaviours exist, quarrels and struggles occur.
- Whenever gossiping exists, the deviation from the task objective and inadequate time management are inevitable.
- Assertiveness is more noticed in groups to which males belong.
- Emotional thinking is more provided by female participants.
- Logical reasoning and challenging are more provided by male participants.
- Female politeness softens the sharpness of the interaction.

We also note down that gender is an influential factor in the classroom context, particularly in group work tasks during the speaking sessions. Although students' preferences and awareness as deduced from the questionnaire's findings confirm that learners are more motivated and willing to work in single-gender groups; the collected data from the observation-based method emphasise the fact that males and females should work together. It is more beneficial and reliable to group them with mixed-gender partners since this brings up richer ideas, varied points of view, more elaborated contributions, and thus, lift up the members' achievement of the task purpose. The following table summarises the learners' total achievement of all the tasks being spotted from the beginning of the observation phase:

Groups of students	First two months		Second two months		Third two months		Total rate of achievement of all the tasks
	Task one	Task two	Task one	Task two	Task one	Task two	
MMG 1	32%	35%	25%	40%	100%	100%	55%
MMG 2	16%	35%	25%	40%	100%	100%	52%
FFG 1	46%	35%	25%	50%	35%	75%	44%
FFG 2	16%	35%	25%	50%	35%	75%	39%
MFG 1	100%	100%	75%	70%	100%	100%	90%
MFG 2	100%	100%	75%	70%	100%	100%	90%
MMFG	100%	100%	100%	70%	100%	100%	95%
MFFG	100%	75%	100%	70%	100%	100%	90%

**Table 36:** The Percentage of the Learners' Total Achievement during all Periods of the Observation Phase.

It is important to say that students are better achievers when teachers group them with mixed-gender mates. The quality of their contributions is more varied; emotional and rational ideas are provided and ideas are challenged. The frequency of contributions within groups is acceptable though it may differ from one group to another and from one task to another considering that males generally interrupt gossiping in mixed-gender groups. Despite the fact that girls avoid face threatening acts, they are able to take turn in the interactions and gain turns after being interrupted. These results refute the learners' questionnaire's findings but confirm the teachers' questionnaire and validate the hypothesis set at the beginning of this work in which the researcher assumed that mixed-gender type of grouping is better and more appropriate to boost the learners' frequency and quality of contributions.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this research, the researcher explained the research design, its procedure and the different methods conducted to answer the research questions and test the validity of the hypothesis stated at the beginning. Our main interest was to find out which group arrangement was more efficient to raise the learners' frequency and quality of the in-class group work tasks.

To do so, varied research method had been conducted. Data from two questionnaires had been reported, analysed and interpreted. The first one was administered to ninety second year students at the University of Khenchela and the other one to ten teachers at the same University. Both questionnaires' findings were convergent in the sense that the teachers' as well as the students' answers generally agree when similar questions were asked. As a conclusion, most teachers' and students at the University of Khenchela preferred single-gender group work tasks in the speaking session. Surprisingly, these results refuted the research hypothesis which urged us to further investigate through a qualitative method. Then, an observation was conducted so as to bear out the researcher's assumption or the two questionnaire findings. During a six-month period, the research tried to observe, note down and report the students' behaviours while doing the designed group work tasks.

Findings show that gender differences have a positive effect on learning during speaking sessions. Although those differences may prevent learners from having totally equal learning, still they provide great variety and wide range of contributions and possibilities to the tasks. In fact, teachers should not look for that equality since differences, whether in nature, competence or gender, as this had been demonstrated throughout this research, impacted to a large extent the process of teaching and learning to achieve the objectives set. These findings then could be implemented in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. It could, indeed, present a significant help to teachers looking for more appropriate ways and techniques to act, react and perform in group work tasks during the speaking sessions.

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# Conclusion

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If the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun. Among the activities and tasks that teachers may use to increase the learners' motivation, raise their interest, and better their learning in the speaking session is the in-class group work task. In fact, many important aspects the teacher should consider like the group composition; he should think of who is to be grouped with whom. In the present research, we focused on gender as an influential factor in group work tasks. However, we noticed that many teachers have little awareness about how they should deal with gender differences in the classroom context. Therefore, they reinforced gender bias and fossilised the learners' gender stereotypes leading to inequity in learning and widening the gap between what learners know and what they should achieve.

In this research, we attempted to investigate the effect of these disparities on the learners' in-group contributions. We checked if group members took equal opportunities to speak and if the group contributions varied in terms of quality; if rational and emotional ideas were provided. In short, the researcher investigated the impact of these differences on the frequency and the quality of contributions in group work tasks wherein the exploratory talk principles were respected. In other words, she investigated if these principles were obtained when learners worked in mixed- or single-gender groups.

To achieve this purpose, a mixed method approach was conducted. At first, the researcher administered two questionnaires to both teachers and second year students at the University of Khenchela. These questionnaires helped the researcher to gain knowledge about the teaching and the learning situations. In this respect, the data gathered gave a relatively clear view of how teachers' and students behaved and reacted, about their preferences and awareness as far as group work division was concerned. From the one hand, data collected from the learners' questionnaire confirmed that most learners were motivated to work with peers of the same gender category. They were willing to work with same-gender partners, especially with whom they share friendship, mainly because they felt shy and less comfortable. From the other hand, the teachers' questionnaire findings suggested that most teachers were

aware of the extent to which the in-class group work and gender equity are difficult in the exploratory talk classroom ambiance.

After that, we supplied the research with a more reliable and qualitative-based method of investigation in order to diversify data and findings. Thus, the researcher conducted a six-month observation which provided real-life first hand data. She focused on some gender differences exhibited in single- and mixed- gender group work tasks to see whether these differences affected the availability of three main exploratory talk principles as beneficial classroom alternatives to better learning in the speaking sessions. Findings showed that learners had more varied and frequent contributions when they were grouped with mixed-gender partners though their educational experiences differed. Therefore, mixed-gender groups proved to be more appropriate and beneficial for the enhancement of learning in the oral expression class.

These research findings, indeed, helped us to decide about either validating or refuting the hypothesis set and to give answers to the questions asked at the beginning of this investigation. After testing the hypothesis through conducting different research methods, we were able to find out that mixed-gender type of grouping was more appropriate in group work tasks and that gender differences had positive effect on the enhancement of the learners' quality and frequency of contributions. Therefore, the hypothesis was validated. This, in return, paved the way to answer the different research questions. We figured out that the existence of gender differences in group work speaking process was a reality that teachers should greatly consider and that these differences were not merely apparent in lower grades but also relatively found in higher education because of social, cultural and educational reasons. These disparities had a positive effect on the in-class interactional outcomes in group work tasks.

Aside from the present research' target population, we believe that these findings can be applicable in other teaching and learning contexts. This means that results can be generalised in other than the department of English at the University of Khenchela. In this respect, we should consider the social, cultural and regional common aspects with the neighbouring Universities since we share similar points of view related to gender differences. These differences are relatively overemphasised in internal regions

like Tebessa, Batna and Oum Bouaghi. Consequently, the results reached in this study can be generalised to second year students at the Universities of the stated regions and the implications can be implemented by their teachers.

In this regard, teachers seeking new ideas and ways to improve their teaching practices may benefit from the current research findings. These results, in fact, confirmed the usefulness of group work tasks as an effective type of activities for the enhancement of the learning outcomes in an exploratory type of talk. But beforehand, teachers should make sure that students have enough knowledge about group work skills and tactics in order to make it more worthwhile. Moreover, they should consider gender disparities in group work tasks in the sense that mixed-gender type of grouping should be prioritised when the teacher arranges the in-class group work.

### **1. Pedagogical Implications**

Teachers are always in search for new ways and ideas to improve learning and to raise the teaching efficacy through considering the results of the different research studies done in the field of education. Hence, according to the results reached throughout the study, we could demonstrate the pedagogical implications which are as follows:

- The use of group work as an effective type of activities in increasing the learners' oral performances in the exploratory type of talk.
- During the activities suggested, teachers should regard gender when they group their learners; mixed-gender type of grouping is more efficient than when learners are grouped with same sex partners.
- Evidence indicates that collaboration is strongly related to positive learning outcomes. It encourages all members to participate in different tasks and provides TL exposure, especially in the classroom context.
- In-class group work activities as a form of collaborative work imply that learners work better in small groups to reach shared goals.
- In order to achieve common goals and more elaborate working outcomes, teachers should first be sure that learners know how to work and proceed in the group work task.

- Students should be aware of the group work difficulty as well as the skills and tactics to make the task as successful as possible; they need to share common knowledge and understanding about the task.
- The role of the teacher is to teach his/her students these tactics and skills implicitly throughout the different activities given to the students.
- Group work task will not be successful unless the teacher encourages the appropriate classroom atmosphere for learners to work through the exploratory type of talk. In fact, it is an efficient way to teach speaking inside the classroom to encourage the learners' contributions, challenging and reasoning.
- Learners engage critically but constructively in discussions, listen and consider each other's points of view. Therefore, using the exploratory type of talk creates appropriate classroom atmosphere that help bringing out salient values in our students, elaborates and increases the frequency of their contributions.
- In this type of talk, teachers should also be aware of how to arrange their students in group work tasks.
- Teachers should consider gender in group division. Teachers generally forget about or ignore this influential factor though its influence is clear and may drift the task from its objective.
- Although some gender-linked differences may overwhelm group interactions, they generally bring up a variety of contributions and help in achieving the task shared objective when mixed-gender groupings are created. The use of icebreaking activities is necessary to reduce the learners' reluctance especially when they are in mixed-groups.

Although some findings were reached and a number of implications were set for EFL teachers, the research at hand was faced by some obstacles that might mark some pitfalls in the methods conducted, their analysis or interpretations.

## **2. Limitations of the Study**

A number of limitations, indeed, occurred throughout this work. They created obstacles in the achievement of the research which might have reduced the quality of

the findings. Therefore, we shall summarise the most affecting challenges confronted by the researcher.

Group work tasks should not always be used, in the sense that other classroom activities and tasks should be used and given equal opportunities. Group work is a strategy among other class alternatives to develop the students' oral performances, and it is mostly used to break the routine and in-class monotony. This variety of activities lessens the frequency of using group work tasks. Therefore, we needed a longer period of time to collect necessary data from different activities during the observation as well as the pre-observation phase.

It was, however, a challenging endeavor for the researcher during the realisation of this work was the students' recurrent strikes at the University of Khenchela. The researcher started her observation rightly after the pre-observation phase. Meanwhile, students went on different periods of strike. Each time we started the observation, a new strike was reconducted which interrupted the flow of the work. Consequently, we stopped and started again to have the observation in one period not scattered on different periods of time in order to make findings more reliable. This caused a great delay in getting the necessary data since we could not start our data interpretation without having a real organised period of observation with subsequent and sequential tasks without any external influence or interruptions.

Another limitation we should consider was the total number of males and females inside the classroom. In fact, the students' total number was not large, this helped the teachers to apply group work tasks and implement different materials and aids. However, girls generally outnumbered boys, especially in FL classes. This led us to question the validity and reliability of the investigation if it would be conducted with small number of males and larger number of females. This disequilibrium would create an imbalanced research data; i.e. we would have enough data concerning female-female groups but obviously insufficient data about male-male groups and mixed-gender groups. As a result, we worked with two groups, in the department of English, instead of one in order to have sufficient number of both genders. Then, another issue came up; the number of girls also outnumbered that of boys. After

deciding about group division eight girls remained out-grouped. So, we asked them to form groups of four and inevitably participate in the task, but the researcher did not consider or report any of the remarks observed while they were interacting.

### **3. Suggestions for Further Research**

Although there were important hindrances we faced to achieve the main objectives of our undertaking which, we strongly believe, is of paramount roles in the realm of EFL teaching and learning processes, we could thank to the results obtained and the research methodology implemented to maintain our research statement, suggest some ideas that may serve other research topics related to the present field. These ideas may also help them narrow the scope of thinking when seeking new variables or even a disagreement related to our topic of investigation.

Throughout this research, we investigated gender as an influential factor in group work tasks during speaking sessions. We have worked with four mixed-gender groups; two of them include two boys and two girls, one includes three boys and one girl and the last one includes three girls and just one boy. Actually, through this division we did not merely want to study gender differences in those groups, but also to find out if the number of a specific gender affects the group outcomes. In other words, we tried to observe the variable of number whether it had any effect on those groups. As a result, we could have been able to reach relevant findings related to the effect of gender but no significant results have been found as far as the effect of number is concerned. This was mainly because the database was not enough for this variable. In other words, we believed that the number of mixed-gender groups in which we played on the factor of number were not enough to build up conclusions related to this variable. Hence, we suggest that students and researchers may start from the findings of this research and have enough groups investigating number in order to have a larger and more global range of data and results.

Moreover, we mentioned the importance of having an exploratory talk classroom ambiance and suggested that this type of talk was an appropriate alternative for teachers of speaking to provide good working conditions for them and more importantly for their students. Since Mercer and Hodgkinson (2008) provided a

comprehensible list of the exploratory talk principles, we were not able to work on all those principles because of time constraints; investigating all these principles needed more time and energy, so we decided to choose three principles only and check whether gender differences affected their existence. Thus, we propose for students and researchers to work on the other remaining principles and have a more complete picture about the effect of gender differences on achieving or hindering the exploratory talk.

In fact, the variable of gender could also be dealt with otherwise. In this work, we had chosen some among large list of gender differences pointed out by many researchers in the field of gender studies. Other future research may consider other gender disparities and investigate their effect on learning. Consequently, they complete this work and provide a better understanding of in-class gender differences.

We also researched in the learners working in-class groups as a form of cooperative learning. In fact there were other forms of cooperative learning that educators might consider: in-class pair work activities and pair and group work tasks out of the classroom context, i.e. collaborative leaning outside the classroom setting. Thus, we suggest that future research may investigate cooperative learning in its different forms in relation to gender differences. The results will obviously help teachers to have a variety of tasks in a more appropriate and beneficial way.

In this research also, we tried to study the effect of gender differences in enhancing or hindering learning in the speaking sessions. More precisely, we observed the effect of those disparities in achieving the exploratory talk principles through observing the *frequency* and the *quality* of group' members contributions. Other research studies, then, may investigate the same gender differences, or others, in affecting other aspects of the target language speaking skill like fluency or accuracy. Additionally, other language skills can be studied, like the effect of gender differences on enhancing or hindering learning in group work activities during written expression class. Here researchers may consider some aspects of the language as far as writing is concerned. For example, they may investigate the learner's grammatical mistakes and errors, peer feedback provided by both sexes and so on.

#### **4. Validity and Reliability of the Research Questions**

Q 1: Are gender differences in group work speaking process within the class a myth or a reality?

Gender differences affect the learners' frequency and quality of learning in group work tasks. Therefore, these disparities are a reality that should be considered by EFL teachers.

Q 2: To which degree are gender differences apparent in higher education?

The current research investigates the effect of gender differences on group work learning focusing on a specific target population. This population belongs to second year students at the University of Khenchela only. Consequently, findings cannot be generalised on all second year students at all of the Algerian Universities because many regional, social and cultural aspects may interfere and control our variables.

Q 3: Do these gender disparities affect the amount and quality of contributions of speaking in group work interactions wherein the exploratory talk is respected?

Yes, gender disparities emphasised in the research at hand affect the amount and the quality of group work interactional performances in an exploratory talk classroom atmosphere.

Q 4: To which extent can the gender disparities affect the speaking skill learning outcomes? Case of second year students at the University of Khenchela.

Gender differences affect the group work interactional outcomes to a large extent. This is clearly illustrated in table 36. It summarises the learners' total achievement of all the tasks of the observation phase. It determines a substantial difference in the learning outcomes between single-gender and mixed-gender groups.

Q 5: Which type of grouping is more appropriate to match the exploratory talk principles?

Similarly, table 36 shows that mixed-gender groups' task achievement percentages are higher than single-gender groups'. Thus, mixed groups prove to be more appropriate in fulfilling the group work objectives in an exploratory class.

Q 6: As a teacher, shall we group our students with single- or mixed-gender partners?

Since mixed- gender groups attain more task objectives than when learners are grouped with same gender partners, teachers are invited to prioritise mixed-gender arrangements in group work tasks during the speaking sessions. However, same-gender arrangements are sometimes inevitable because of the students' number.

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# Appendices

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## **Appendix One: The Learners' Questionnaire**

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

University of Algiers -02- Bouzereah.

-Algeria-

This questionnaire is designed to investigate the learners' preferences and suggestions in the speaking class wherein the exploratory talk is respected. The researcher tries to check the learners' awareness, willingness and reluctance towards some classroom actions. You are kindly invited to answer the questions objectively taking into account that your answers will be treated confidentially.

### **Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Learners' Reactions.**

1. Which of the following skills is difficult for you? Please, classify them according to their level of difficulty.

---

	Very easy	Easy	Difficulty	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

---

2. What is the language skill you prefer most?
  - a. Listening.
  - b. Speaking.
  - c. Reading.
  - d. Writing.

3. Justify your choice.
4. What are the difficulties that you usually face in the speaking sessions?  
.....  
.....  
.....
5. Do you think that the speaking skill is: (put a cross by the most appropriate answer).
  - a. Extremely important in TL learning.
  - b. Important in TL learning.
  - c. Not really important in TL learning.
6. What are the suggestions that teachers may consider in order to make the speaking session as successful as possible?  
.....  
.....  
.....

**Section Two: Class Management and types of work.**

7. Classify the following activities according to your preferences: (use numbers in front of each alternative 1, 2, 3).
  - a. Individual work activities.
  - b. Pair work activities.
  - c. Group work activities.
8. Justify your choice.
9. In case of group work activities, do you like:
  - a. To be grouped by the teacher? Or
  - b. Choosing your partners?
10. Justify your answer.
11. If the teacher is the one who groups the students, what is **the aspect** that he/she should **mostly** consider while grouping? (put a cross in front of the aspect that you choose):

- a. Gender of the learners in the group (males, females).
- b. Abilities of the learners (high achievers, low achievers).
- c. Origins of the learners (social, cultural, regional).
- d. Personalities of the learners (extroverts, introverts, etc).
- e. None.

12. If you have chosen 'e', suggest others:

.....

.....

**Section Three: gender Differences and Classroom Work in the Speaking Session**

13. If gender is to be regarded, what type of arrangement do you think is more beneficial to better learning?

- a. Mixed-gender groups (groups containing males and females) or
- b. Single-gender groups (female-female and male-male groups).

14. Give possible reasons.

.....

.....

.....

15. Do you think that the type of gender grouping (single-gender/mixed-gender) affects learning? (put a tick by your choice).

- a. Yes.
- b. No.

16. Is this effect:

- a. Positive or
- b. Negative.

17. Why do you they think they affect learning?

- a. Single-gender groups:

.....

.....

.....

b. Mixed-gender groups:

.....

.....

.....

***Thank you for your contribution***

**Appendix Two: The Teachers' Questionnaire**

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

University of Algiers -02- Bouzereah.

-Algeria-

This questionnaire is designed to investigate the current teaching situation in the speaking sessions. The researcher tries to gather necessary data about the teachers' practices when they teach the speaking skill in order to reinforce the research assumptions. Additionally, it serves as a continuation to the current learning situation deduced from the learners' questionnaire findings. You are kindly invited to answer the questions objectively taking into account that your answers will be treated confidentially.

- o In multiple choice questions; please, put a cross by the right choice

**Section One: The Target Language Skills and the Teachers' reactions**

1. As a teacher, which of the following skills you find difficult to teach. Classify them according to their level of difficulty.

---

	Very easy	Easy	Difficulty	Very difficult
Listening				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				

---

2. What are the characteristics that make the speaking session successful?

.....

.....

3. What is/are the problem/s that mostly challenge/s your speaking sessions?
  - a. The learners' level of language proficiency.
  - b. The learners' inhibitions.
  - c. The mother tongue use among learners.
  - d. The lack of motivation and the low participation.
  - e. The shortage of ideas in specific topics.
  - f. Others.
4. If you are faced with other problems, please state them.  
.....  
.....
5. Teachers usually use a variety of classroom activities in the speaking session (e.g. storytelling and jigsaw); please, give some examples of speaking activities you have already provided your students with.  
.....  
.....

**Section Two: Classroom Management and Types of Grouping**

6. In the speaking sessions, do you prefer to arrange your students:
  - a. In groups?
  - b. In pairs?
  - c. Individuals?
7. Please, justify your answer.  
.....  
.....
8. If you use group work tasks, do you prefer:
  - a. Small groups (not more than five members per group)? Or
  - b. Large groups (more than five members per group)?
9. Please, justify your answer.  
.....  
.....  
.....

10. These groups are generally arranged by:

- a. The teacher himself. Or
- b. The students.

11. Justify your answer.

.....

.....

**Section Three: Gender and Classroom Work**

12. In case your students choose their partners, do they generally prefer:

- a. Single-gender partners?
- b. Mixed-gender partners? Or
- c. Friends regardless their gender?

13. Which type of group arrangement enhances the learners contributions:

- a. Single-gender groups? Or
- b. Mixed-gender groups?

14. Please, explain.

.....

.....

.....

15. If you arrange your students in single-gender groups, do you give equal opportunities to learners' participations from opposite gender groups?

- a. Yes.
- b. No.

16. Please, explain.

.....

.....

.....

*Thank you for your contribution*

### **Appendix Three: The Choice Card**

This “choice card” was given to students to provide them with different alternatives that Dani might decide to do, in the decision making process, under her friends’ pressure to eat unhealthy food.

Choice Card:

Say YES, but only eat little portions of healthy foods and nibble.

Say yes to the food and run 5 miles on the treadmill before bed.

Say ‘No thanks’, eat nothing, stay strong.

Say YES, eat whatever looks good.

Eat any food you want tonight but skip all meals the next day.

Tell friends you already ate (even if you haven’t).

It’s only one time, what damage could it do?

Eat and then take diet pills to reverse the effects of eating.

Make a big scene to let everyone know you’re on a diet.

Fill a plate full of food to make it look like you are eating, but flush it down the toilet.

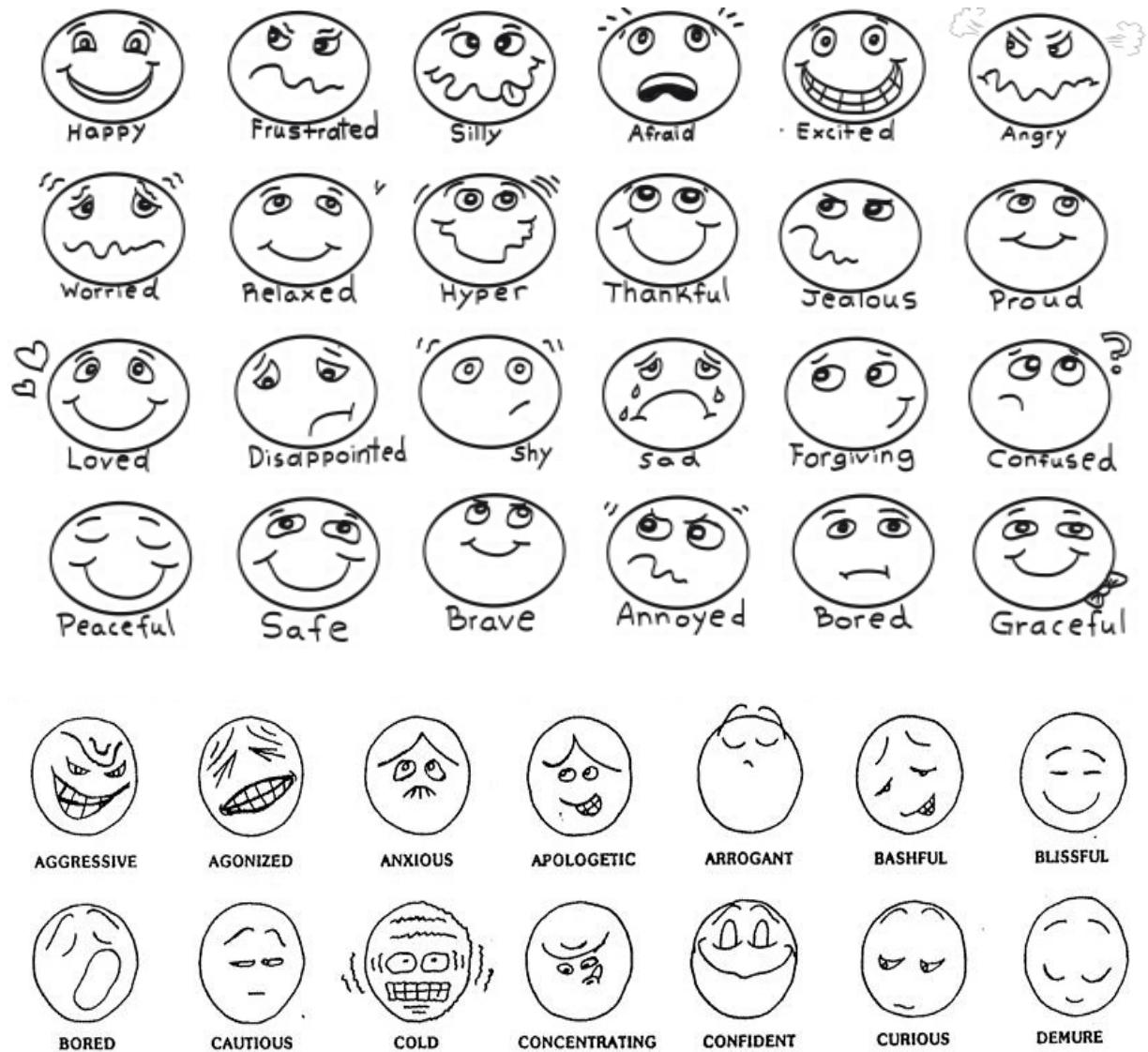
Ask your friend upfront if you can bring anything to the party (then you’ll know there will be something you can eat).

Storm out of party telling friends if they really cared they wouldn’t pressure, and they would be more understanding.

Say ‘maybe later I’ll eat...not hungry right now’.

**Appendix Four: Slips of Papers Picturing Faces.**

These slips of faces give ideas about different emotions and moods. In relation to these pictures, students were required to tell stories and anecdotes.



## ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في تأثير عامل الجندر بمفهومه الاجتماعي و الثقافي على العمل الجماعي داخل القسم أين يطبق الحديث الاستكشافي -الذي أقترح من طرف مرسر و هديسون 2008-. بعبارة أخرى، إنها تبحث في إمكانية تماشي الفروق القائمة بين الجنسين مع مبادئ الحديث الاستكشافي، و بالتالي تحاول تحديد نوع العمل الجماعي الأكثر ملائمة لتعزيز عدد و نوعية مساهمات أعضاء المجموعة خاصة و الأداء التفاعلي و مردودية المجموعة بشكل عام.

محاولة للتحقق من صحة الفرضية المقترحة سابقا، تم إجراء هذه الدراسة من خلال مرحلتين: استبيانين و ملاحظة. ففي المرحلة الأولى، لوحظ أن المتعلمين يفضلون العمل مع شركاء من الجنس نفسه و يترددون في العمل مع زملائهم من الجنس الآخر لأنهم إما يشعرون بالخجل و عدم الارتياح أو بسبب هيمنة بعض أعضاء المجموعة على البعض الآخر. إضافة إلى ذلك، تبين أن بعض الأساتذة يقومون بالعديد من الممارسات التي من شأنها التقليل من فوائد العمل الجماعي في القسم. أما في المرحلة الثانية من البحث، أجريت ملاحظات لمعرفة ما إذا كانت الفروق بين الجنسين تؤثر على تعلمهم. و لكن قبل هذا، أجريت مرحلة ما قبل الملاحظة التي ساعدت على كسر عزوف التلاميذ عن العمل في مجموعات مختلطة الجنس و كذا تزويدهم بمعلومات و معرفة مشتركة حول مهارات العمل الجماعي.

من خلال هذه الدراسة، تم التوصل إلى أن المتعلمين أكثر تحفزا و لديهم مساهمات أفضل و أكثر تنوعا عندما يتم تجميعهم مع شركاء مختلطين. بمعنى آخر، يحقق الطلبة نتائج أفضل عندما يعملون في مجموعات مختلطة و يسجلون درجات أقل عندما يعملون مع شركاء من الجنس نفسه. على الرغم من أن بعض الفروق قد يكون لها تأثير سلبي، إلا أنها لا تزال تثري و تعزز العملية التعليمية و التعلمية و كذا مهام العمل الجماعي.