Challenges in Academic Oral Presentations: The Case of EFL Master Students at Bejaia University

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Abstract

The command of Academic Oral Presentation (AOP) skills is an essential concern for college students to ensure success in their academic and professional endeavors. However, students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often face challenges when assigned to perform this task. This study seeks to identify the main difficulties EFL master students encounter when delivering AOPs at Bejaia University. Following a mixed-method design, data were obtained through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview conducted with students. The results showed that students encountered major obstacles during the preparation of AOPs due to their unfamiliarity with the requirements of this task. Additionally, the participants faced various linguistic problems such as the lack of fluency and vocabulary, as well as some psychological barriers including anxiety and fear of evaluation. Pedagogical implications are proposed regarding how instructors can help their students overcome AOP problems.

Key words: Academic Oral Presentation; AOP difficulties; EFL graduates

Résumé

Pour réussir leurs études, les étudiants ont une préoccupation majeure : la maîtrise des techniques de présentation orale (PO). Cependant, malgré leurs efforts pour forger cette compétence, de nombreux étudiants en anglais sont confrontés à de grands défis à relever. Cette étude vise à examiner les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants en master dans la préparation et la mise en œuvre de PO. Les données ont été obtenues aux traitements d'un questionnaire et d'un entretien avec des étudiants. Les résultats confirment que les étudiants rencontrent des obstacles majeurs dans la préparation des PO en raison de la non maitrise des techniques de cette tâche. De même, les étudiants sont confrontés à divers problèmes linguistiques (lenteur du débit, hésitation, indigence du vocabulaire, etc.), ainsi qu'à des obstacles psychologiques (anxiété, la peur de l'évaluation, etc.). En outre, l'étude offre plusieurs implications pédagogiques concernant la manière dont les instructeurs peuvent aider leurs étudiants à surmonter les problèmes de.

Mots-clés : présentation orale, difficultés de présentations orales, étudiants en master d'anglais.

الملخص

إن التمكن من العرض الشفهي الأكاديمي يعتبر من الاهتمامات الأساسية لطلاب الجامعات من أجل ضمان نجاحهم في مساعيهم الأكاديمية، ولكن على الرغم من الطلب الكبير لهاته المهارات من طرف طلاب اللغة الانجليزية إلا أنهم على العموم يواجهون تحديات عند قيامهم بأداء هذا النشاط. إن بحثنا هذا في هذه القضية جعلنا نقوم بدراسة حاله من أجل معرفه الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة الماستر تخصص لغة انجليزية عند تحضيرهم وتقديمهم للعروض الشفوية الأكاديمية على مستوى جامعة بجاية، حيث تم اتباع طريقه مزدوجة الشكل للحصول على البيانات والمعلومات، وهذا عن طريق وسائل تتمثل في استبانة ومقابلة شبه منظمه أجريت مع طلاب الماستر. وقد بينت النتائج أن طلبة الماستر يواجهون مشاكل كبيرة عند تحضيرهم لعروضهم الشفوية، بالإضافة إلى ذلك، مواجهتهم للعديد من التحديات اللغوية والنفسية. تم الإشارة الى بعض الاقتراحات التربوية المتعلقة بكيفية مساعدة الأساتذة لطلابهم من أجل التغلب على المشاكل التي تخص العرض الشفوي الأكاديمي.

الكلمات المفاتيح: العرض الشفهي الأكاديمي، مشاكل العرض الشفهي، طلبة الماستر تخصص لغة انجليزيه

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Introduction

Oral presentations (OP) are widely practiced in the EFL context at the tertiary level (King, 2002). They are considered as effective tools in developing the students' English speaking skills, promoting learner autonomy, identifying and addressing individual differences and assessing students' performance (Munby, 2011). Academic Oral Presentations (AOP) are broadly defined as a type of public speaking which involves the delivery of a formal talk, to a particular audience, in a structured way, for the purpose of sharing ideas and information (Cheung, 2008; Nation & Newton, 2009; Zareva, 2009). It is worth mentioning here that the term OP may differ from what we call AOP. Despite the fact that both may occur in academic settings, the former seems to be associated with teaching speaking for general purposes (Harmer 2007; Nation & Newton, 2009; Thornbury, 2005), while the latter is often perceived in conjunction with teaching English speaking for academic purposes (Horowitz & Stein, 1990; Hyland, 1991; Jordan, 1997; Levrai & Bolster, 2015). For the purpose of this study, giving OPs is regarded as an academic task rather than a classroom activity.

Delivering spoken academic monologues such as OPs is often considered a key requirement in higher education (Jordan, 1997). In this, Zavera (2009) regards the students' AOP as a genre situated in a larger network of academic genres. She further explains that AOP, as a genre, has its own characteristics and regularities that distinguish it from other academic oral genres such as lectures, conference presentations, and any other presentations given by professionals. Excluding these professional genres, the students may encounter various types of AOPs during their studies (Shephard, 2005; Levrai & Bolster, 2015). The research-based OP is one such type. This kind of presentations occurs often when students are in the final year of their graduation; hence, they have to report the findings of their research in oral presentations whether at the end of the project or during its progress (Shephard, 2005, p. 61). In the context of the present study, the participants are required to deliver an oral summary of research processes and findings during their master dissertation defense. This particular type of presentation has some specific features; it is a research-based OP, conducted in an academic and formal setting, in the presence of peers and evaluators, and for the purpose of assessing the student's skills and knowledge. The term AOP will be used in this study with reference to the master dissertation OP as described above.

Although giving OPs is a familiar activity for graduate students, the master dissertation OP, in particular, is considerably new for students who have had no previous experience with such highly structured and formal types of AOPs. Thus, the students are confronted with this demanding academic task, which seems to pose some challenges for them. However, this area is under-investigated in the Algerian context. Little is known about the difficulties Algerian EFL students encounter with regard to AOPs. The relative lack of research on academic speaking in the Algerian context coupled up with the researcher's concerns about students' academic success have motivated the current study to report on students' perceived AOP difficulties and some coping strategies, hoping to find some remedial suggestions and pedagogical solutions. To this end, the present study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties encountered by EFL master students when preparing and delivering AOPs at the University of Bejaia?

2. How do students perceive their own difficulties and manage to overcome their AOP problems?

Literature Review

Delivering OPs in academic settings is a stressful task for college students, and it is considered even more challenging for EFL students particularly (Jordan, 1997; Morita, 2002). This can be due to the fact that giving OPs, like many other forms of oral communication, is an inherently complex task, since it involves linguistic features such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, non-linguistic elements such as body language and facial expressions, as well as paralinguistic elements such as pitch, stress, and intonation; all of which should be appropriately applied in accordance with the context (Shumin, 2002, p. 204). This task also involves the ability to appropriately design visual aids and

implement effective strategies during the communication process (Hyland, 1991).

Taking into consideration these intricacies, expectedly, EFL students face several challenges in giving AOPs. Bankowski (2010) believes that AOPs require self-direction and active participation, which is highly demanding for EFL students and often leads to confusion, anxiety, and lack of understanding. King (2002) assumes that speech anxiety, failing to adopt written language to spoken language and reading from slides or notes are the reasons behind students' failure to deliver effective OPs. In a somewhat parallel view, Evans, Gruba, & Zobel (2014) consider selecting appropriate content, transforming a written work to an oral form, competent delivery, and dealing with nerves as major challenges in preparing and delivering a dissertation oral presentation in particular (p.143). Further, Duklim & Musigrungsi (2016) claim that the main factors inhibiting students when preparing and giving OPs are native language barriers, unfamiliarity with genre-related features of the target task, and the lack of oral communication skills. Another problem noticed by Weissberg (1993) is that ESL students tend to rely often on memory or written texts when they are asked to give OPs. Echoing Weissberg' (1993) view, King (2002) reports that EFL students reckon on reading or memorizing OPs, which makes their oral performance "sound canned, machine-like and dull".

These issues have been noticed by many researchers and have become the subject of considerable empirical research in the EFL/ESL context. AOPs have been examined from various perspectives. While many studies focused on identifying and listing the main difficulties EFL students encounter in giving AOPs (Abu-El-Enein, 2011; Ariff & Mugableh, 2013; Benraghda, Radzuan, & Ali, 2018; Hong & Fong, 2012; Al-Harun, Islam, & Rahman 2016; Lien, 2009), some studies narrowed their scope to investigate specific problems such as anxiety (Elliot & Chong, 2004; Woodrow, 2006). Additionally, substantial research has explored the problems that may emerge from using OPs as a form of assessment (Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem, & Taqi, 2015; Mazdayasna, 2012; Turner, Roberts, Heal, & Wright, 2012). Further, a

considerable amount of research on OPs has been conducted from the perspective of academic discourse socialization (Morita, 2000; Weissberg, 1993; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

Abu-El-Enein (2011) explored the challenges English students encountered while delivering AOPs at Al Aqsa University of Gaza. The results showed that the students suffered from serious linguistic problems including lack of vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, and incorrect pronunciation. Moreover, several deficiencies were identified with regard to the selection and organization of content, the miss-management of non-verbal behavior and the inappropriate design of visual aids. Similarly, the findings of a study carried out by Ariff and Mugableh (2013) revealed that non-native Jordanian students faced several language difficulties namely: vocabulary, pronunciation and listening comprehension. Following this line of research, Lien (2009) examined the perceptions of ESP undergraduate students towards OPs and identified some of the problems that hindered students' oral performance at Vietnam National University. It was found that students lacked presentation skills including searching for relevant materials, selecting presentation forms and memorizing presentation contents. Accordingly, a qualitative study was conducted by Al-Harun et al. (2016) to explore the challenges faced by English freshers in AOPs. The results showed that the students who had a good command of speaking skills were able to perform OPs satisfactorily; whereas, the students who had a moderate or weak level of speaking skills faced several problems including lack of self-confidence, shyness, anxiety and reciting word-by-word from memory or slides, which handicapped their oral performance. It can be noted here that these studies were conducted with undergraduates which can be an important factor in their OP difficulties. However, graduates also face challenges in AOPs (Hong & Fong, 2012; Morita, 2002; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). A qualitative study was conducted by Hong & Fong (2012) to examine closely a research proposal session at a public University. Following a single case study design, the findings indicated that even at the graduate level, AOPs can be very challenging to students. Additionally, the findings of this study

suggested that reading from slides, lack of familiarity with the task and lack of knowledge about the topic were the main areas of hindrance for the students.

Al-Nouh et al. (2015) conducted a study to investigate the perceived difficulties of EFL college students when giving AOPs as a form of assessment. The problems identified in this study were mostly related to personal traits and fear of evaluation. Additionally, some issues were due to the lack of technology-based materials and lack of time devoted to teaching oral presentation skills. In a similar vein, Alwi & Sidhu (2013) described and compared self-assessed and experts' evaluations of students' OPs. Using a needs analysis questionnaire, oral presentation tests and semi-structured interviews, the results revealed some discrepancies between both forms of assessment. The findings indicated that while the students perceived their OP skills to be higher than average, the evaluators pointed out that the students' oral performance was far from satisfactory in areas of content, organization, delivery, and language.

In an attempt to reveal the reasons why EFL students often face challenges in performing AOPs, Whai & Mei (2015) carried out a study in which they found that lack of practice, some psychological factors and the underplayed role of teachers constituted the main causes of students' OP problems. Further, a study undertaken by Derwing (2003) showed that fear of negative evaluation and fear of making errors can cause major impediments in students' oral performance. Moreover, Benraghda (2018) identified anxiety, lack of technical vocabulary, lack of training and feedback as major causes of technical OP difficulties at the Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP).

Anxiety is probably one of the most reported difficulties when giving oral presentations. Speaking in front of an audience is known to provoke fairly high levels of anxiety in students, which can be increased when the audience's response is unfavorable or negative (Woodrow, 2006). Berbar and Fodil (2017) conducted a recent study to measure levels of anxiety among undergraduates before, during, and after oral tests. It was found that students experienced anxiety in all those stages but in a moderate way. Interestingly, the findings also revealed that students' apprehension was related to their fear of making language mistakes and fear of evaluation. It is worth mentioning here that most of the studies that reported high levels of presentation anxiety (Elliot & Chong, 2004; Lien, 2009; Woodrow, 2006) have been conducted on undergraduate EFL students who may lack experience and academic skills. Graduate students are also confronted with some psychological barriers (Chen, 2009; Morita, 2002; Weissberg, 1993). Nevertheless, graduates' ability to adopt appropriate coping strategies may exceed that of undergraduates. For example, in a study that aims to investigate graduate students' presentation anxiety, Chen (2009) found that the students' anxiety was moderate and can be managed by the students. The findings also pointed out that students' presentation anxiety can be triggered by social factors including peers' response and audience familiarity, and psychological factors such as self-perceived oral proficiency, self-perceived accuracy of pronunciation, and self-perceived personality. Moreover, an exploratory study carried out by Wu (2008) revealed that AOPs are complex tasks involving various stages of preparation, delivery, and post-delivery. This put the students under stress and pressure of constant decision making especially the stage of delivery which was identified by the students as the most anxiety-provoking phase.

Morita (2000) examined the discourse socialization of native and non-native graduates through OPs. The study showed that non-native speakers experienced three types of difficulties: linguistic, sociocultural, and psychological. Despite the advanced level of non-natives, English skills were regarded as the reason for students' difficulties. The findings of the study showed that the participants were socialized into their academic community through observations, peer support, expert assistance, and practice. Similarly, Zappa-Hollman (2007) explored the discourse socialization of non-native graduates as they engage in academic presentations at a Canadian university. Zappa-Hollman found that the challenges faced by the students are associated with linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological problems.

It can be noted that the majority of the studies on AOPs have been carried out in ESP/EAP contexts.

There were several studies conducted with undergraduates and only a few that targeted graduate students, which suggest a need for further research on graduates. Moreover, the available literature focused on AOPs in the classroom context leaving many other sub-genres of AOPs uncovered. This paper strives to contribute to this bulk of literature on AOPs by investigating the difficulties English graduates encounter in preparing and delivering a particular type of AOPs, the master dissertation oral presentation.

Methodology

The present study employed a mixed-method research design to report on the difficulties that EFL master students encounter when preparing and giving their master dissertation OP. The case-specific data were obtained through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. This triangulated study is more likely to enhance the validity of data and overcome the limitations of relying on a single method as suggested by Nunan (1992).

Participants and setting

This case study involved a class of EFL master students majoring in linguistics at the Department of English, Bejaia University. The study was conducted with 15 participants, including 3 male and 12 female students who took the course of oral presentation skills in the first academic term and were expected to display these skills in their master dissertation OP. Data were obtained by the end of the second term of the academic year 2017/2018 by means of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Research Instruments

The questionnaire aimed at eliciting information about the difficulties students faced when they prepared and delivered their master dissertation OP. The questionnaire was designed after observing the students' in-class OPs and reviewing the literature about factors that inhibit EFL students' OPs. It was revised by an expert in TEFL and then piloted. After receiving constructive feedback from both processes, adjustments were made to ensure the comprehensiveness, conciseness, and accuracy of the questionnaire as recommended by Dörnyei (2007). Afterward, the questionnaire was administrated to 15

EFL master students by the end of the academic year 2017/2018 after the delivery of their master dissertation OPs.

Additionally, a semi-structured interview was utilized to triangulate the data that were obtained through the questionnaire and to gain deeper insights as to why the students face difficulties when preparing and delivering AOPs and how they manage to overcome their problems. Moreover, allowing the students to report in their own words might provide valuable insights into their understandings of and attitudes towards some of these difficulties. The semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 students after the questionnaires were retrieved.

Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 and presented in the form of descriptive statistics with percentages and means. Qualitative data collected in the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed by using content analysis. This process was assisted by the Qualitative Data Analysis miner lite (QDA) software.

Results and Discussion

To answer the research questions effectively, both quantitative and qualitative data were reported and discussed in four areas: students' preparation difficulties, nonverbal behavior problems, linguistic challenges, and psychological barriers.

Students' perceived difficulties in preparing AOPs

The results showed that the participants did not seem to face major problems when preparing their presentations as the means of almost all items were between medium and low. However, some areas of hindrance were identified. Over half of the participants reported that the examiner's expectations with regard to OPs were unclear and 47 % of the students agreed that the ambiguity of OP norms constituted a major challenge for them. About half of the participants (46 %) faced some problems when trying to select appropriate content. These findings are in line with previous literature which highlights the problems of selecting and organizing OP content

(Abu-El-Enein, 2011; Evans et al., 2014; King, 2002).

As showed in Table 1, a considerable number of respondents (40%) felt confused about the appropriate delivery style they should adopt. Some students (33%) admitted that they tend to memorize their speeches, while nearly half of the students rejected the use of this technique. This is in good agreement with Weissberg (1993) and Al-Harun et al. (2016) who found that EFL students tend to memorize their speech when asked to give OPs.

The majority of students stated that using PowerPoint and designing visual aids were not problematic for them despite the fact that they did not receive any laborious training in this area. This, however, does not correspond with Abu El-Enein's (2011) study in which he found that participants lacked the necessary skills to design effective visual aids.

Apparently, many of the difficulties that confronted students when preparing their OPs did not stem from a lack of presentation skills. Rather, they seemed to be associated with the students' lack of knowledge and experience about the norms of master dissertation oral presentations. Since the participants were advanced learners, presumably, they have acquired OP skills. However, these skills seemed to be insufficient to prepare them for this academic task. This confirms Musigrungsi and Duklim's (2016) claim that unfamiliarity with genre-related features of the target task constitutes a major impediment for students. The overall results in this section lend support to the findings of previous research (Abu-El-Enein, 2011; Al-Harun et al., 2016; Hong and Fong, 2012; Lien, 2009).

Table N° 1: *Students' difficulties in preparing AOPs*

Items	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	M
1.I feel confused what type of presentation is suitable for the topic	26,7	20	0	53,3	0	2,8
2. The norms of academic oral presentations are ambiguous to me	0	13,3	40	46,7	0	3,3
3. The examiners expectations regarding oral presentations are not clear	0	13,3	33,3	53,3	0	3,4
4. I find it difficult to select the appropriate content	0	40	13,3	46,7	0	3,06
5. I feel confused about how to structure the content of OP	20	46,7	0	33,3	0	2,46
6. I find difficulty in using PowerPoint	20	53,3	6,7	20	0	2,26
7. I do not have sufficient knowledge about designing supporting materials	33,3	33,3	0	33,3	0	2,33
8. I feel confused about whether to read directly from the slides or prepare a talk	13,3	40	6,7	40	0	2,73
9. I do not rehearse my talk well	13,3	46,7	13,3	26,7	0	2,53
10. I tend to memorize my speech fully	6,7	40	20	33,3	0	2,80
11. I find it boring to prepare a presentation	26,7	66,7	0	6,7	0	1,86

1 = Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= No opinion, 4 = Agree, 5= Strongly agree

The data obtained from the semi-structured interview provided in-depth explanations for the students' preparation problems. The results suggested that there was some confusion on the part of respondents as to what constitutes an effective AOP and how to prepare for it, which supports the results of the questionnaire. A student reported that "at the beginning, we didn't know how to do it, or what are the elements of a presentation, or what to select as content, the only thing that we know is the time; we

are given 15 minutes to speak" (S1). Another participant stated that "in the beginning, I didn't know how to make my presentation, because we don't do presentation like this. In the class, we talk about regular topics and we don't use PowerPoint, so this presentation was different for me" (S4). In addition to the alleged lack of knowledge about this type of AOPs, the students also felt confused about the requirements of this task. A student in this context noted that "it was also not clear how the jury evaluates

the presentations; there should be a model or some clear criteria so we can be compared to that model" (S2). Another problem reported by the majority of participants was the selection and organization of OP content. For example, a student mentioned, "it was difficult to choose the content and summarize the whole thesis" (S1). Similarly, another student added, "it was hard to summarize the important points, then to organize them"(S6). The students claimed that the main causes behind these problems were the lack of instructions on how to do a master dissertation OP, lack of materials and the short time allotted to the course of OPs, which deprived them of acquiring sufficient knowledge and preparation skills. This concurs well with Al-Nouh et al. (2015) who found that some aspects of the course such as lack of technology-based materials and insufficient time affected negatively the students' acquisition of OP skill.

In line with the questionnaire results, the interview analysis showed that the students had the necessary skills to design effective visual aids. Moreover, some students admitted that they relied solely on memorizing the whole speech. This was explained by a student as follows: "I just feel afraid that if I didn't memorize, I'll not be able to express my ideas well and I'll do more mistakes" (S9). A student added, "I personally do not like memorization but I was afraid to forget my ideas" (S8).

Surprisingly, the students seemed to encounter several preparation problems despite the fact that the department of English at Bejaia University offers a specific course for presentation skills. It can be assumed here that the course did not emphasize preparation skills, which might have happened because teachers tend to take for granted that graduate students know how to prepare OPs (Zavera, 2009).

To compensate for their lack of knowledge and experience with regard to the genre of AOP, the participants applied a number of strategies. When the participants were asked about these coping strategies, many replied as follow:

S1: "Actually we followed some videos, we saw samples on YouTube how to make thesis

presentations, we even Googled some problems and we found solutions".

S12: "I saw the presentation of my classmates, this gave me some ideas".

S6: "I didn't really know how to do it at first, but later we asked our supervisor".

S7: "we prepared at home just like it was viva and we present it in front of our supervisor, and she told us it's perfect so we were comfortable and confident that the presentation is good".

Apparently, the students applied various coping strategies such as searching on the internet, observing their colleagues' presentations, asking teachers about AOP and performing OPs in pre-viva voce sessions with supervisors. The students seemed to favor the last two strategies. Unlike the internet, they provided a valid source of information and clear instructions relevant to their academic context. These findings correlate favorably with Morita (2000) and Zappa-Hollman (2007) and further support the importance of exploring the process through which the students are socialized in their academic communities when using oral activities.

The students' nonverbal behavior problems

As displayed in table 2, the low level of means in most of the items indicated that the students have fewer problems related to their nonverbal behavior when delivering OPs. Another plausible explanation is that the students may not be aware of these problems, giving that much of nonverbal behavior occurs unconsciously. However, some difficulties were reported by the students. Over half of respondents agreed on their overuse of fillers during the OP, which could be due to stress or lack of fluency. 53% of students mentioned that they look at the PowerPoint slides too often. This was reported in another context as a strategy employed by students who were shy or anxious to avoid eye contact with the jury or the audience.

Table N° 2: *Students' non-verbal behavior problems in AOPs*

Items	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	M
1.I do not pay attention to the audience	26,7	53	13,3	6,7	0	2,00
2. I keep my eyes on power-point slides most of time	6,7	33,3	6,7	53,3	0	3,06
3. I need to read from my notes during oral presentations	13,3	53,3	6,7	26,7	0	2,46
4. I stand rigid	6,7	46,7	33,3	13,3	0	2,53
5. I keep my arms at sides	6,7	53,3	40	0	0	2,33
6.I do nervous movements	6,7	40	13,3	26,7	13,3	3,00
7.I move a lot and shift around	0,0	66,7	13,3	20	0	2,53
8. I tend to rock my body	0,0	66,7	13,3	20	0	2,53
9. I do not use gestures to refer to visual aids or explain ideas	6,7	53,3	6,7	33,3	0	2,66
10. I use too many fillers (ah... hum)	0	26,7	6,7	53,3	13,3	3,53
11. I speak in a quiet voice	0	46,7	33,3	20	0	2,73
12. I do not apply appropriate pace	0	40	26,7	33,3	0	2,93

1 = Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= No opinion, 4 = Agree, 5= Strongly agree

In accordance with the results of the questionnaire, the qualitative data revealed that the overwhelming majority of students did not consider nonverbal behavior to be an issue when giving OPs. However, some students reported some minor problems. These obstacles were explained in a student's words: "I've noticed that I use a lot of gestures and movements as I present" (S5). Another student added, "I memorized my speech well, and I didn't forget it really, but I was unable to look at the jury or audience because I was so shy, so I kept my eyes on slides" (S12). Evidently, these problems resulted from some psychological factors. For example, avoiding eye contact by looking at and reading from the slides was correlated with shyness and stress respectively. Some students seemed to overuse gestures while others seemed to complain about standing still and rigid throughout the delivery, which suggests that the students respond differently to stress and anxiety.

The students' linguistic challenges

Table 3 depicted the linguistic difficulties that encountered EFL students when giving AOPs. The high mean level of item 11 (mean = 3,86) indicates that students faced serious problems in using English to answer questions addressed to them after their oral delivery, followed by a medium mean level of several other items. This suggests that students encountered moderately some other linguistic problems.

As displayed in Table 3, approximately two-thirds of the participants reported that miss pronouncing words and committing grammatical mistakes were two major problems for them. This correlates fairly with Abu El-Enein's (2011) study in which he found that EFL students suffered from serious linguistic problems including lack of vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, and incorrect pronunciation. 60% of respondents stated that they found difficulties in using English to refer to visual aids. While many students reported that the language used in the introduction and conclusion sections was not problematic, the language used in the main body of OP seemed to pose some challenges for over half of the respondents. In addition, some students (33%) had problems with the effective use of transitional language. Despite the fact that many students (60%) admitted that their vocabulary is limited, the majority (73%) asserted their adherence to the academic and formal style when giving OPs.

Table N° 3: *The students' linguistic challenges in AOPs*

Items	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5%	M
1. I often miss pronounce words	6,7	20,0	0,0	66,7	6,7	3,4
2. I tend to make grammatical mistakes	6,7	26,7	6,7	60	0	3,2
3. I focus on accuracy more than fluency	0	20,0	26,7	53,3	0	3,3
4. I do not use academic /formal English vocabulary	0	73,3	13,3	13,3	0	2,4
5. I use limited vocabulary	6,7	26,7	0,0	60,0	6,7	3,3
6. I am not sure about what the language I should use in the introduction	14,3	50	7,1	28,6	0	2,5
7. I can't use the English language well to explain the key points of the main body	6,7	33,3	6,7	53,3	0	3
8. I do not use transitional Language or signposting effectively	6,7	46,7	13,3	33,3	0	2,7
9. I am not sure about how to conclude my presentation	6,7	53,3	6,7	33,3	0	2,6
10. I find it difficult to handle and refer to visual aids in English	13,3	26,7	0	60,0	0	3
11. Using English appropriately to answer questions addressed to me is difficult	0	20,0	0	53,3	26	3,8

1 = Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= No opinion, 4 = Agree, 5= Strongly agree

The results suggested that many students lacked the linguistic skills to perform effectively an AOP, which can be attributed to different reasons such as unfamiliarity with speaking in highly formal and academic settings, anxiety and other issues related to the course of OPs. The findings from this section are consistent with previous studies (Abu-El-Enein, 2011; Alwi & Sidhu, 2013; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007) which reported that the EFL undergraduates and graduates often encounter several linguistic challenges regarding AOPs.

The findings from interviews support the quantitative data concerning linguistic challenges faced by students. The main theme that was identified across the qualitative data was related to the accuracy of language. Many students felt frustrated when presenting because they committed grammatical mistakes and miss pronounced words as reported by a student, "I did not present well; I made mistakes in language, grammatical and pronunciation mistakes" (S9). Similarly, a student commented, "I didn't do my presentation as I wished, even I prepared well but I know I did many mistakes" (S10). Some students tried to overcome this problem by ignoring those mistakes and putting emphasis on the message they wanted to convey.

In addition to language inaccuracy, lack of fluency was also reported as an issue by some respondents. A student mentioned, "I used a lot of fillers, I was kinda stressed and forgot what to say" (S12). Further, a student stated, "Honestly my problem is not in standing in front of audience or anxiety, my problem is how to express myself in English fluently" (S4).

Seemingly, the students' linguistic problems were mainly related to grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary; components of the English language. When the participants were asked about the obstacles they faced with the language of presentations, a student responded as follows: "It was difficult to choose appropriate language for the presentation and the speech, because it needs to be very formal" (S1). Another student said: "I didn't know how to do it at the beginning, how to start my oral presentation, what I should say in every stage, what language I should use" (S4). Clearly, some students were not familiar with the language of oral presentations and the appropriate transitional language as reported by a student, "My presentation didn't go easy or smooth…I felt stuck when I move from one point to another" (S9).

The students claimed that the linguistic problems they faced during their oral performance were related to some psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes, inadequate preparation and some deficiencies in speaking skills. The students assumed that a part of what makes OPs challenging is its formal setting and the demands and

complexity of this task. This is consistent with Zappa-Hollman (2007) who found that oral presentations were perceived by students to be a daunting task because they require the mastery of various skills to manage the stages of preparation, delivery, and post-delivery.

The student's psychological barriers

As illustrated in table 4, the mean level of all items indicates that the students struggled, though

moderately, with some psychological barriers. When the participants were asked to comment on their anxiety level through the whole process of preparing and delivering their OPs, the majority of students agreed that the stage of delivery was the most anxiety-provoking followed by post-presentation stage and preparation phase respectively which is in good agreement with Wu's (2008) findings.

Table N° 4: The students' psychological barriers

Items	1	2	3	4	5	M
1.While preparing for an oral presentation , I feel tense and nervous	6,7	60	13,3	20,0	0	2,4
2.I feel stressed and nervous when I am giving a presentation	0	20	6,7	46,7	26	3,8
3.I feel anxious during the post-presentation stage	0	40,0	6,7	40	13	3,2
4.I do poorer on presentations because I am anxious	0	46,7	6,7	40	6,7	3
5.I feel tense when I am rehearsing for an exam presentation	0	40,0	0	53,3	6,7	3,2
6.I feel fear and uneasiness when taking an oral exam or being evaluated	0	50	0	42,9	7,1	3,0
7.I am bothered and tense when I am being evaluated	0	35,7	14,3	42,9	7	3,2
8.I feel flustered and confused when I start an oral exam	0	26,7	13,3	53,3	6,7	3,4
9. I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings	0	40	13,3	40	6,7	3,1
10. I am afraid others will not approve of me.	6,7	40	0	46,7	6,7	3,0
11. I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make	0	40	6,7	46,7	6,7	3.2
12. I often fear to make language mistakes during my presentation	0	35.7	7,1	50	7,1	3,2
13. I feel shy during the oral presentation	0	60	0	20	20	3
14. I do not feel confident that I could effectively deliver oral presentations	0	40,	6,7	46,7	6,7	3.2
15. I do not feel confident about my public speaking abilities	6,7	33,3	6,7	46,7	6,7	3,1
16. I believe I cannot manage to solve problems if they occurred during OP	0	46,7	0	46,7	6,7	3,1

1 = Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= No opinion, 4 = Agree, 5= Strongly agree

The results showed that almost half of the students (47%) believed that anxiety was the main reason behind their poor oral performance. In response to items 5, 6, 7, and 8, which tackled exam apprehension, a large number of students (60%) reported that they feel confused and nervous when starting and preparing for an oral exam. Over half of the students stated that they fear oral exams and feel tense when being evaluated through oral tests. Fear of making mistakes was also reported by a large number of students (60%). This is consistent with the findings of Berbar & Fodil (2017). Additionally, the results indicated that while approximately half of the participants feared negative evaluation, the remaining students did not seem to be concerned with this issue.

Feeling shy when giving OPs was reported by a considerable number of students (40%). Over half of the participants agreed that their low self-confidence hindered their oral performance. The results of this section are in line with the findings of previous studies (Al-Harun et al., 2016; Elliot & Chong, 2004; Chen, 2009; Lien, 2009; Woodrow, 2006).

The findings of the qualitative data support the results of the questionnaire and further our understanding of the psychological factors that hindered students' oral delivery. Anxiety was considered by several students as the main problem they faced when giving OPs. These problems were explained in the respondent's words: "Well, even I practiced a lot at home when the time came to present

I was very anxious and stressed and I didn't feel well…I missed some important points and I forgot some ideas" (S6). Not only anxiety was a major problem for the participants, but also it was the cause of many other problems. Due to anxiety and stress, the students missed important ideas and committed mistakes as mentioned by a student, "I was very afraid and anxious; I forgot my words and I did many mistakes" (S10). Some students felt perplexed and even altered their delivery style to reading from slides. For example, a student stated, "At the beginning, I started to do it spontaneously as I planned but I felt so stressed when looking at the jury, so I started reading from the slides" (S9). Trying to avoid eye-contact by reading notes or looking at slides was also reported in Zappa-Hollman (2007). Further, some students mentioned that they were highly anxious during the full OP while others felt more relaxed a few minutes after they began.

When the participants were asked about the causes of their anxiety, a student replied: "I think it was because it's the viva, the jury was there and my family too" (S6). Accordingly, a student stated: "I was so anxious the previous days but not because I was afraid to fail but because I feel pressure to do the best, so I always feel pressure when I'm about to do something new" (S5). Evidently, the students' anxiety and fear were related to the specific context of presentation rather than the OP itself. This was also found to be true by Al-Nouh et al. (2014).

Additionally, uncertainty about AOPs and lack of confidence about one's competence was also identified as a cause for stress and anxiety as demonstrated by a student, "I feel stressed and afraid because I'm not sure that my presentation is good or I did the right things" (S9). This is in line with Chen's findings (2009). Another possible cause of students' anxiety was English language. Some students mentioned that their fear of anxiety was not related to confronting the audience as much as it was related to the use of English language as revealed by a student, "For me, I can speak in French better, even in front of teachers or many people, but English is harder, I feel anxious and afraid to make mistakes" (S6).

Moreover, the students reported other psychological barriers, though in many cases the line between those psychological factors is thin. The

students expressed a mixture of feelings such as stress, shyness, and fear. Many students seemed to be very concerned with the accuracy of language. Indeed, the results from the questionnaire indicated that the students focused on accuracy more than fluency. A respondent expressed her solicitude saying, "I was afraid to do mistakes because we are now master students and we should not do grammatical mistakes, so I was so stressed about this" (S8). Correspondingly, a participant commented, "I feel anxious about grammar mistakes, I don't like when I make mistakes in grammar, because it's a shame, we are master 2 students, at least we should speak accurate language" (S11). Apparently, the participants' distress and worry were caused by the fear of making language mistakes in the presence of evaluators which aligns well with the findings of Berbar & Fodil (2017).

In addition to fear of making mistakes, many students suffered from other types of fear such as fear of exams as reported by a student "Mostly, I was scared of being evaluated" (S10). Another respondent said, "I felt stressed about it because the jury members will evaluate my ability to present and defend my topic" (S3). Fear of negative evaluation was also a problem for participants as expressed by a student "I felt afraid about their opinions about me and my presentation" (S11). Accordingly, another participant said, "It's always challenging to do a presentation, for me there is a high risk of losing face (S2).

Moreover, the results showed that personality traits such as shyness and lack of self-confidence affected negatively the students' performance. This is illustrated in a student' words, "I memorized my speech well, and I didn't forget it really, but I was unable to look at the jury or audience, I just feel so shy, so I kept my eyes on slides" (S12). In a similar vein, a student mentioned, "I don't feel confident when I present in English, not like native language or French" (S10). These issues, however, were reported by a minority.

Finally, in addition to the identified problems encountered by EFL master students in AOPs, the qualitative data revealed other impediments such as the shutdown of electricity during the presentations, which was reported by many students. However, the students were prepared for

such technical problems; they printed their presentation slides in various sizes, so they were able to continue their OPs.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest an urgent need to address the difficulties that students encountered when preparing AOPs by offering clear instructions and guidelines regarding the preparation and delivery of the master dissertation oral presentation in particular. The taken-for-granted claim that students know how to prepare OPs should be disregarded. The findings imply that students, even at an advanced level, need explicit teaching on how to select and organize content, design visual aids, manage one's nonverbal behavior and choose the appropriate language (Cheung, 2006; King, 2002). More importantly, emphasis should be given to teaching the students how to use the language in the different stages of OP (Sharif, 2016).

Another suggestion that can wipe off to the students' confusion about the norms and characteristics of AOPs is adopting a genre-based approach to the instruction of OP skills or the use of modeling. As a course of action, teachers can provide audio-visual models for this genre. Afterward, the prospective presenters can discuss and analyze the linguistic and non-linguistic features of this task and work gradually towards the joint then independent construction of OP (Webster, 2002). The students also need to be aware of the requirements and the expectations of evaluators regarding this task. Informing the students about the criteria by which their presentations will be evaluated might help them prepare accordingly (King, 2002; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008).

The students' psychological barriers can be alleviated by the application of some strategies and guidelines. Evidence from this study suggests that conducting a pre-viva voce session in which the students deliver their OPs in front of their instructors was regarded as an effective tool to boost students' confidence and lower their anxiety. Using note cards as a reminder of the key points of OPs is likely to be helpful in solving the problem of forgetting words and ideas, which is often caused by anxiety and over-reliance on memorization (King, 2002). Further,

maintaining a friendly and stimulating classroom environment may help the learners construct and reinforce positive experiences related to giving OPs, which can help in managing their psychological state during their dissertation defense (Al-Harun, Islam, & Rahman, 2016).

Moreover, the students may benefit greatly from the process of continuous evaluation including overall impression and criteria-based evaluation (Levrai & Bolster, 2015). In addition to teacher's feedback, self-assessment and peer feedback may assist the students to gain a firm understanding of what makes an effective presentation (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008) and can help in reducing their fear of evaluation and fear of making errors (King, 2002). Another possible strategy that teachers can use to help students overcome anxiety and shyness is by assigning group and pair presentations to students and avoiding podium presentation format (Munby, 2011). As the students gain more confidence and experience they can conduct individual OPs (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010).

Conclusion

This study was carried out to identify the main difficulties that EFL graduates face when preparing and delivering one type of AOPs, the master dissertation OP. Further, the study attempted to yield a better understanding of students' experiences and how they managed to cope with some of these challenges. The findings revealed that the EFL master students of Bejaia University faced some linguistic and psychological obstacles as well as preparation problems. The results showed that when the students arrived at the stage of preparation, they felt confused about the selection and organization of content and appropriate delivery style, which can be attributed to students' lack of familiarity with the features and requirements of this oral genre in addition to the insufficient training in this area. It was also found that the students encountered many linguistic challenges including the use of inaccurate grammar, incorrect pronunciation and limited vocabulary. Most of these academic difficulties were related to the low speaking proficiency of students, the high demands of the task, and some psychological factors such as anxiety, shyness, fear of making

mistakes and fear of evaluation, which were identified as major problems themselves. To cope with some of these challenges, the students employed several strategies such as intensive practice, observing their peers' OPs, seeking information on the internet, asking their instructors and supervisors and performing OPs in a pre-viva voce session.

This paper provides further evidence that preparing and giving an AOP is a challenging task for EFL graduate students. Moreover, the findings of this study add substantially to our understanding of students' OP difficulties in the Algerian context. However, the present study was limited in some ways. The data presented in this research paper were obtained from self-reported instruments, which did not allow for strong claims about some issues that could be identified by means of linguistic analysis. Additionally, this small-scale case study reported on an instance of academic language use, which aimed to deepen our understanding of the challenges related to this task. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the wider population. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will provide encouragement and assistance to teachers and students as they attempt to address the problems associated with AOPs.

Research into the AOP problems of EFL students is already in progress. Further work is undertaken by the researcher, which involves the use of other instruments and accounts to provide a better picture of students' needs and difficulties. Drawing on the limitations of this study, further research may consider surveying larger sample sizes in investigating the difficulties of English graduates regarding AOP to provide generalizable findings. Future studies on the current topic are recommended to examine the effect of gender, age and other variables on students' AOP. Moreover, exploring the process by which EFL students acquire AOP skills is also an important area that requires further research. The findings of this study have laid the foundation for future work to investigate AOP problems of Algerian EFL students through more rigorous and robust methods such as experiments.

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