

## Differences in Communication Between Native English Speakers and EFL Saudi Female Speakers

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### Abstract

The main aim of this study was to explore EFL and native speakers' differences in communicating with one another. A total of 5 advanced EFL speakers and 3 native English speakers enrolled in two sets of semi-structured interviews. Two rubrics were used to compare the changes in communication among the two groups. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that there were significant differences in the intercultural communication between EFL and native speakers. Speaker's style of delivery, self-correction, and the avoidance of long answers were the least influencing factors in determining levels of communication hindrances, while the deficiency of fluency and accuracy, intergroup anxiety, and lack of understanding were significant factors in influencing the communication. These findings had several significant implications for both developing and constructing cross-cultural communication skills training, particularly for multinational organizations, and business studies.

**Keywords:** communication, native English speakers, EFL Saudi female speakers

### INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that mainly focuses on comparing communication between members of different cultures. Effective communication is essential in the workplace, in relationships, and in everyday life (Schneider, 2007). People with different linguistic origins can face communication barriers even when everyone is speaking the same language. In fact, it is not those people' will to create such barriers, but rather their cultural background varieties are what lead them to interpret verbal and non-verbal signs differently. An association between how we perceive others based on their language proficiency (e.g. native speakers), language attitudes, and other factors that determine how we, in turn, interact with them had reinforced the main goal of this research.

Although effective communication in interpersonal and organizational relationships is important, it can be difficult to achieve (Schneider, 2007). One of the major barriers that Saudi female EFL students face while interacting with people from different cultures,

especially native English speakers, is the ignorance of developing the interpersonal skills and language which could lead to suffering from misunderstandings and sensitive relationships. In many intercultural communication's setups, social and psychological factors like nervousness, self-monitoring, fluency and accuracy, and speaker's style and delivery can play an effective role in the process of communication. The researcher, therefore, attempted to incorporate these factors as the basic scale to examine the intercultural communication between EFL and native speakers, and by raising questions on which are the most and least influencing factors that affect communication in Saudi Arabia.

### **The Study**

The purpose of this study was to compare and examine the intercultural communication between Saudi female EFL speakers and native English speakers from social and psychological perspectives.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the social and psychological factors that affect the cross-cultural communication of Saudi female EFL speakers with native English speakers?
2. What are the most and least influencing factors that affect the cross-cultural communication between natives and EFL speakers in Saudi Arabia?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Edward T. Hall (1959, p. 30), "Intercultural communication competence presents one's skill in facilitating successful intercultural communication outcomes in terms of satisfaction and other positive assessments of the interaction and the interaction partner. Intercultural communication is a skill of transformation from a monocultural person to a multicultural person that respects cultures and has tolerance for differences".

As mentioned by Falk & Lieberman (n.d.), in their research about the neural basis of attitudes "Attitudes encompass long-standing evaluations of people, places, and ideas, and influence a range of behaviours, including those that directly impact political behaviour, intergroup relations, and health behaviours among other consequences. Gardon Allport (1935, p. 798) called attitudes "the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology", and suggested that understanding attitudes would allow us to understand not only the preferences and behaviours of individuals but would also provide broader insight into the actions of groups and cultures. With this in mind, Allport (1935) defined an attitude as a mental and neural state of readiness organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon an individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related (p. 810)".

### **Previous Studies**

Tomoko Yashima, Lori Zenuk-Nishide & Kazuaki Shimizu (March 2004) conducted a study on the reasons that affect the willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language for Japanese learners of English at Kansai University, Japan. Two investigations

with different groups of Japanese teenage were conducted. The participants of the first investigation were 166 students aged between 15-16. They are native Japanese speakers studying at a high school in Kyoto as EFL beginners' learners. To examine the participants' attitudinal/motivational measures in WTC, questionnaires were distributed by native English teachers. In the second investigation, 57 Japanese high school students were selected for a scholarship program in the United States in 1999 and 2000. To collect data about the participants' WTC, two sets of questionnaires were administered. The analysis of the collected data shows that 1) the two investigations indicate that willingness to communicate (WTC) highlighted the areas of frequency in communication 2) how one perceives another's linguistic competence is the most influencing factor upon how willing one is to communicate in a foreign language 3) lastly, how willing a person to communicate in L2 is determined by how much self-confidence in communication a person has.

Another study was conducted by Fahad Alfallaj (2016) to examine the barriers of a new register in sociolinguistic called "Foreigner talk" in communication with Arabs in KSA. The researcher observed the interactions of native and foreign populations of Saudi Arabia. Empirical data on their performance was used to compare and evaluate their communication. The results of the study suggested that foreigners in KSA needed more training on how to communicate with native Arabic speakers because the current situation documents a severe miscommunication.

The previous studies and the current study are different in terms of the context chosen to be investigated. The previous studies were conducted to examine either a specific aspect that affects the interpersonal interaction or communication barriers in a controlled classroom context. Building on that strength, the main goal of this study is to document those language attitudes that are often interrelated with authentic language in everyday interactions.

## **METHOD**

This section sheds light on the type of the research, tools, participants and data collection procedure. It was qualitative research. The qualitative data came from the use of semi-structured interviews as a research tool.

The researcher used the following tool in collecting data:

- **Semi-structured interviews.** Giving that the main aim of this study was to explore EFL and native speakers' differences in communicating with one another, the researcher chose 2 samples of participants and 2 sets of semi-structured interviews. According to Oakley (2007), " A qualitative interview is a type of framework in which the practices and standards be not only recorded but also achieved, challenged and as well as reinforced. Moreover, Mason (1994) states "As no research interview lacks structure most of the qualitative research interviews are either semi-structured, lightly structured or in-depth". Therefore, the expectations of the study to document the participants' cultural parameters and social interactions can best be fulfilled via the use of semi-structured interviews, that is, it was the key tool for collecting data in this study. The participants were a

total of 5 Saudi female EFL speakers and 3 native English Speakers. They performed in a context of semi-everyday conversations, and the circle of the 5 EFL participants had performed in both sets of interviews. In the first set of semi-structured interviews, the researcher investigated EFL and native speakers' communication using online calls via (Wakie application) as a platform for communicating, whereas in the other set, the researcher investigated EFL speakers' communication face-to-face in YUC collage. The purpose of having 2 sets of interviews was to make a comparison between the outcome of the 2 sets. The atmosphere of the interviews sessions was characterized by the control of the researcher in which she led the conversations between the participants. They were asked to talk about specific themes that evoked discussable answers or open-ended questions (see Appendix A). During the sessions, the researcher used 2 rubrics consisting of 6 and 7 statements that measure the changes in communication, and 4 possible answers (see Appendix B and C). The process of the sessions matched the pre-designed plan but, taking notes and asking for feedback were unexpected variables. Finally, all sessions were approved for audio-recording to be analyzed afterward.

### **Participants of the Research**

To achieve the goal of comparing the intercultural communication between EFL and native speakers in Saudi Arabia, conducting 2 sets of interviews was a need. In the first set, where Saudi EFL and native speakers were supposed to contact, 5 EFL students from Sophomore year at Yanbu University College (YUC) were selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The reason for choosing advanced students was to ensure adequate communication with native speakers. For the native speakers, 3 online callers were selected randomly using Wakie application with no specific linguistic attribute to mention, yet the main criteria for selecting them was to be native English speakers. All participants aged between 21-25 years old. In the second set, the same 5 EFL participants agreed to participate in the additional interviews for comparing how the social and psychological aspects of communication can differ among the 2 groups of speakers of the 2 sets of interviews.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

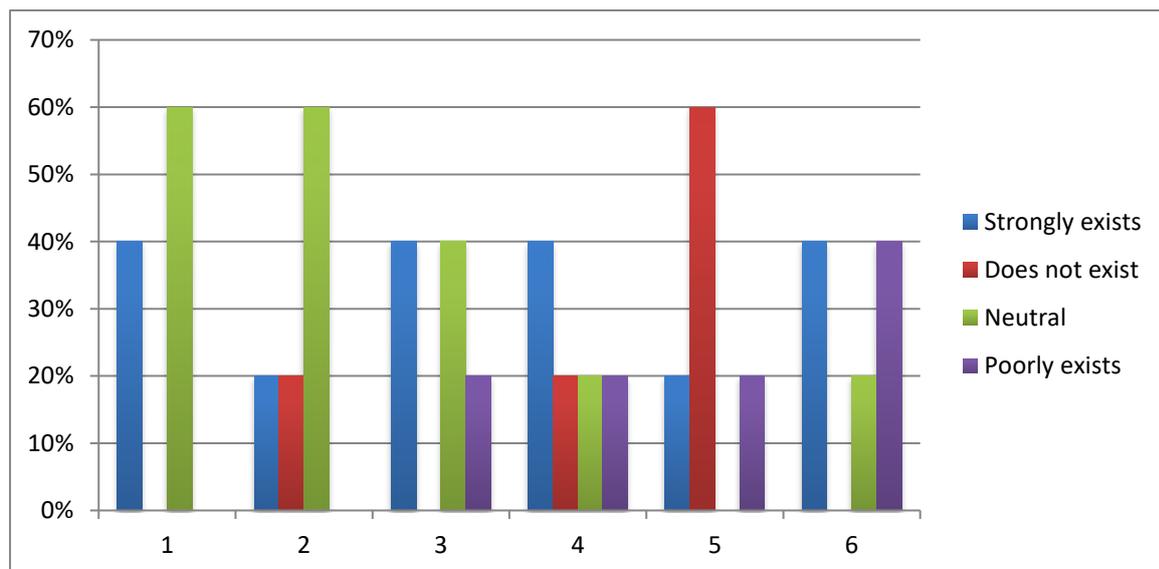
In order to provide answers to the proposed research questions of this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative approach. The type of communication that the researcher intended to observe was a normal everyday conversation, therefore, a semi-structured interview was a more convenient data collection tool for an experimental lens. The participants were 2 groups of EFL and native speakers. Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted where fixed topics and open-ended questions were given to the participants to discuss. A rubric was administrated by the researcher with the first group (EFL and native speakers) to evaluate their questions' responses. Afterward, another rubric was used for the second set of interviews with the other participants (EFL speakers only) to compare how their responses varied from the first set of interviews. The semi-structured interviews lasted no more than 10 minutes. Finally, the qualitative semi-structured interview data and notes were analysed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current section mainly presents the results of the semi-structured interviews, and discusses how the results have contributed to answer the two questions of the research.

### Semi-structured interviews

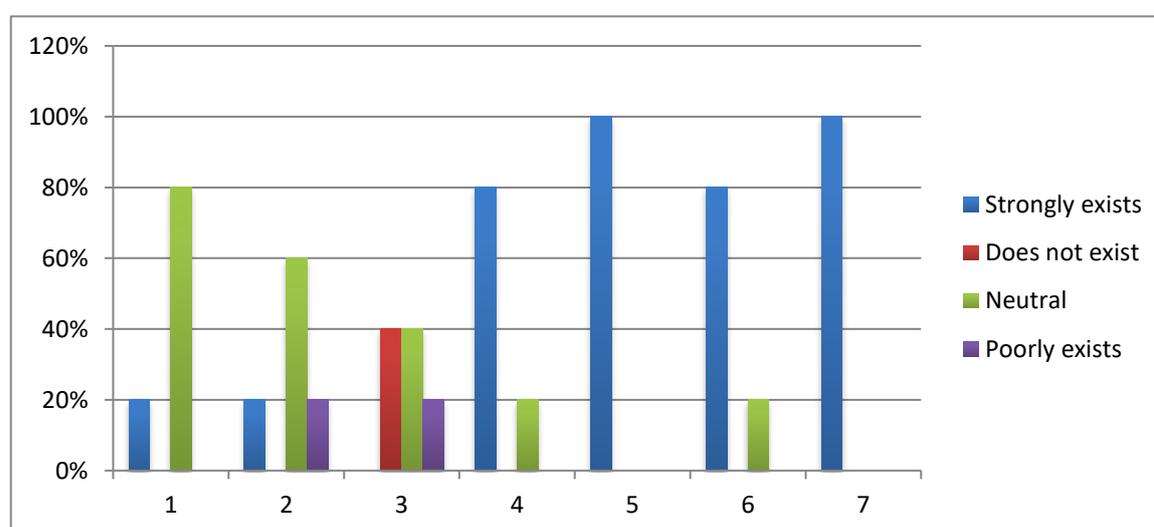
The type of framework used to investigate the intercultural communication of EFL speakers versus native English speakers was semi-structured interviews. The participants were a total of 8 speakers, including 5 advanced Saudi Female EFL students and 3 native speakers. Two sets of interviews were conducted to compare the first set's findings to the other set. The inclusion of the latter set had been on the understanding that a fair comparison of the intercultural communication of EFL and native speakers must take in consideration the interaction of EFL with both conversers (EFL and native speakers). The group of sets was structured in which the topics of discussion were selected to facilitate the interpersonal interaction (see Appendix A). To evaluate the social and psychological aspects of communication, 2 rubrics were used. The first rubric included 6 statements, and 4 possible answers (see Appendix B), whereas, the second rubric included 7 statements and 4 possible answers (see Appendix C).



**Figure 1.** Communication aspects between EFL and native speakers

As shown in figure 1, to address the first research question, a rubric was used to compare the intercultural communication for the first group under investigation (EFL and native English speakers) based on the results of the semi-structured interviews. According to the results shown in figure 1, statement number 1 (the EFL speaker faced difficulty in the fluency of speech during the conversation) indicated that almost half of the EFL participants faced difficulty in being communicatively fluent, while the other half faced an average amount of difficulty. As the researcher observed the interaction, she concluded that the lack of fluency in speech, which means that the process of interaction was more mechanical, not natural, has affected the way natives perceived the EFL speakers in which they seemed frustrated and less interested in interaction. The researcher asked for feedback from the 3 native participants regarding this claim, and the

responses confirmed their negative attitudes. In response to statement number 2 (the EFL speaker faced difficulty in using the proper grammar during the conversation), the results showed that among the 5 EFL participants, 3 students faced neutral difficulty in using the proper grammar forms. It was observed that those participants were the ones who tried to be as much grammatically accurate as possible through the use of self-correction mechanism discussed in statement number 6. In response to statement number 3 (the EFL speaker felt nervous during the conversation), it was determined that this psychological factor had a strong influence on the cross-cultural communication, indeed, it affected the participants' contribution as a whole with varying intensity. According to Rahmani (2017), "Intergroup anxiety is a form of restlessness and negative feeling caused by communicating with someone with a different social and cultural identity. One form of intergroup anxiety is intercultural communication apprehension, which is the apprehension individuals feel due to real or imagined intercultural communication. Intercultural communication apprehension is positively correlated with uncertainty and ethnocentrism and negatively correlated with intercultural willingness to communicate". Based on what Rahmani suggested, the researcher noted that nervousness was the root cause for affecting the other evaluated aspects. In response to statement number 4 (the EFL speaker tended to avoid long answers), the results suggested that the EFL participants mainly ignored their actual ability to communicate and even limited their responses in interaction to the use of short phrases. As it is reported in the table, they were either extremely avoiding long answers or their attempts of avoidance were at an average degree. In response to statement number 5 (the EFL speaker's non-verbal communication showed understanding during the conversation), the researcher tried to evaluate the nonverbal elements in speech including voice quality, rate, loudness, and speaking style, however, it was clear that to a large extent the participants have not shown signs of understanding. In response to the last statement (the EFL speaker corrected herself many times during the conversation), the results showed that some participants were constantly correcting their language mistakes, where the other participants had less amount of self-correction tendency.



**Figure 2.** Communication Aspects between EFL Speakers

As shown in figure 2, to address the second research question, a rubric was used to determine on which are the most and least influencing factors that affected the intercultural communication for the second group under investigation (EFL speakers) based on the results of the second set of semi-structured interviews. In response to statement number 1, EFL speakers had neutral hesitation in their production of speech. As it was observed, the participants had less difficulty in expressing ideas and more flow in the speech in comparison to how fluent they were with natives. In response to statement number 2, again the participants did not really have a problem with using the right grammar rules and forms. In fact, the correctness of their language seemed much better. In response to statement number 3, nervousness was not a factor that affected the EFL speakers' interaction. Moreover, the researcher believed that because of the absence of intergroup anxiety, the interaction went more seamlessly. In response to statement number 4, the avoidance of long answers was a common aspect found among both groups of participants. In response to statement number 5, the significant results showed that non-verbal signs of understanding existed among the second group, as opposed to the interaction of the first group where the process of communication was hindered due to this reason. In response to statement number 6, it was shown that EFL speakers had a tendency to monitor their language whether they were speaking with natives or other EFL speakers. In response to statement number 7, the researcher documented the participants' behaviour toward changing the style of delivery between the 2 sets of conversations. Develop a speaking persona by manifesting your own honest and sincere personality without imitating the style of others when communicating (boundless.com), (n.d). This kind of accommodation, when people change their behaviour to attune their communication to their partner, have been noticed when the EFL speakers communicated together, whereas, when EFL and native speakers were communicating, a distinct persona was present in the conversation.

According to what was mentioned earlier by Rahmani (2017), "Intercultural communication apprehension is positively correlated with uncertainty and ethnocentrism, and negatively correlated with intercultural willingness to communicate", it was found that the findings of the present study go in line with a previous study from the literature. The study of willingness to communicate in a second language (WTC) conducted by Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu (2004), suggested that " how one perceives another's linguistic competence is the most influencing factor upon how willing one is to communicate in a foreign language ". As hypothesized by Rahmani and Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, it was concluded that the intercultural communication is hindered by the low linguistic competence, namely oral production, which affects the willingness to communicate for EFL speakers. The results shown in figure 1 and 2 have brought the needed answers to the research questions. Speaker's style of delivery, self-correction mechanism and the avoidance of complex structures in communication were the answers to the question about what is the nature of the intercultural communication between EFL and native speakers. However, the absence of proper grammar, nervousness, and lack of non-verbal signs of understanding were the answers to the question about which are the most significant factors that affect intercultural communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the intercultural communication between Saudi female advanced EFL speakers and native English speakers. The findings have contributed efficiently to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the social and psychological factors that affect the cross-cultural communication of Saudi female EFL speakers with native English speakers? 2) What are the most and the least influencing factors that affect the cross-cultural communication between EFL and native speakers in Saudi Arabia? Results showed that there were significant differences in the intercultural communication between EFL and native speakers. Speaker's style of delivery, self-correction, and the avoidance of long answers were the least influencing factors in determining levels of communication hindrances, while the deficiency of fluency and accuracy, intergroup anxiety, and lack of understanding were significant factors in influencing the communication. One possibility for finding more difficulty in communication among non-native speakers may be that those who have less tension in communication are better communicators. Indeed, a great deal of anxiety among the first group was observed, and that could be the cause for the inadequate communication of EFL speakers. These findings had several significant implications for both developing and constructing cross-cultural communication skills training, particularly for multinational organizations, and business studies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study was limited to an analysis of EFL speakers' conversation with native speakers. Future research could triangulate the findings of this study by examining native perceptions and conversation between the two groups. Another limitation of this study concerns the number of participants. In order to generalize these findings, future research could investigate a larger number of participants.

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**Appendix A – topics for the semi-structured interviews**

Discuss: What hobbies that can be developed to benefit your skills?

Discuss: The impact of woman driving in Saudi Arabia

Discuss: Can a robot be the next employer in the workforce?

Discuss: The advantages and disadvantages of using smartphones

Discuss: The pros and cons of being a Vegetarian

Discuss: How to consider a friend as a good friend?

Discuss: What would you do if you failed in achieving a goal?

**Appendix B- rubric number 1 for semi-structured interviews**

Name of the EFL speaker: .....

Name of Native speaker: .....

Aspect evaluated	Strongly exists	Poorly exists	Neutral	Does not exist
The EFL speaker faced difficulty in the fluency of speech during the conversation				
The EFL speaker faced difficulty in using the proper grammar during the conversation				
The EFL speaker felt nervous during the conversation				
The EFL speaker tended to avoid long answers during the conversation				
The EFL speaker non-verbal communication showed understanding during the speech				
The EFL speaker corrected herself a lot during the conversation				

**Appendix C – rubric number 2 for the semi-structured interviews**

Name of the EFL speaker: .....

Name of EFL speaker: .....

Aspect evaluated	Strongly exists	Poorly exists	Neutral	Does not exist
The EFL speaker faced difficulty in the fluency of speech during the conversation				
The EFL speaker faced difficulty in using the proper grammar during the conversation				
The EFL speaker felt nervous during the conversation				
The EFL speaker tended to avoid long answers during the conversation				
The EFL speaker non-verbal communication showed understanding during the speech				
The EFL speaker corrected herself a lot during the conversation				
The EFL speaker's style of delivery shifted between the 2 conversations				