

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS THAT LEAD TO  
SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG EFL LEARNERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that cause speaking anxiety in English language learners. The participants of this case study were randomly selected 50 Turkish university students who are at the pre-intermediate language proficiency level of English at the Preparatory School of Istanbul Aydın University. Two main data collection instruments were used in this study. The first data collection instrument was a Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, which was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The second data collection instrument was the focus group interviews. Using the item categorization of the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, the data of the study were analysed in four sections: self-perceived proficiency, self-comparison to others and competitiveness, fear of performance in test situation and learners' beliefs about making mistakes in English class. The findings on self-perceived proficiency showed that although the majority of the students have self-confidence and feel relaxed about speaking English in the class, there are a few students who have self-perceived low-level ability in learning a foreign language. We may conclude that being confident and feelings of comfort during speaking in foreign language are significant factors in speaking. With regard to the self-comparison to others and competitiveness category, we realized that more than half of the students don't think of others' competence during the language learning process, while the rest of them compare themselves with the other students in the class. Those students stated that they don't get anxious about the English language examinations because they always prepare themselves for the examinations in advance on daily-basis. In addition, they mentioned that studying hard at home and also listening to the teacher in the class help them to become aware of the topics they are not good at. Moreover, they pointed out that their teacher is very good and that is why there is no need to get nervous about the examination time. But we cannot deny those learners who do have problems in test situation even though they represent the minority of the participants. Regarding the learners' beliefs about making mistakes in English class, we concluded that all of the students don't feel anxious about making mistakes in the English class.

*Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety*

## **İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN ÖĞRENCİLERDE KONUŞMA KAYGISI YARATAN FAKTÖRLER ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA**

### **ÖZ**

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce öğrenmekte olan öğrencilerde konuşma kaygısına neden olan faktörleri araştırmaktır. Bu çalışmanın katılımcıları İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi hazırlık okulunda okumakta olan ve orta düzey İngilizce bilen rastgele seçilmiş 50 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın verileri iki veri toplama ölçeği ile toplanmıştır. Birinci ölçek Horwitz, Horwitz ve Cope (1986) tarafından geliştirilen yabancı dil kaygı ölçeği (FLCAS), ikincisi ise hedef grup mülakatlarıdır. Çalışmanın verileri yabancı dil kaygı ölçeği öge sınıflandırması baz alınarak dört bölümde analiz edilmiştir: dil yeterlilik algısı, kendini diğerleriyle kıyaslama ve diğerleriyle rekabet etme, sınav kaygısı ve İngilizce derslerinde hata yapma kaygısı. Kişisel dil yeterlilik algısı ile ilgili bulgular katılımcıların çoğunun İngilizce konuşma konusunda özgüvenli ve rahat

olduğunu gösterse de az sayıda kişisel dil yeterlilik algısı düşük öğrenci olduğunu göstermiştir. Öğrencinin kendini diğerleriyle kıyaslama ve rekabet etme konusundaki bulgular katılımcıların yarısından çoğunun dil öğrenme sürecinde kendilerini diğerleriyle kıyaslamadıklarını göstermiştir. Bulgular bu öğrencilerin yabancı dil öğrenme sürecinde hata yapmanın doğal olduğunu düşündüklerini ve kendilerinin diğerlerinden daha iyi olduğunu inandıklarını göstermiştir. Bu öğrenciler İngilizce sınav kaygısı çekmediklerini belirtmişler ve bunun sebebinin günlük olarak sistemli bir şekilde sınavlara hazırlanmak ve İngilizce öğretmenlerinin de çok iyi olması şeklinde açıklamışlardır. Bu öğrencilerin yanı sıra azınlık bir grup öğrenci sınav kaygısı çektiklerini belirtmişler İngilizce derslerinde hata yapma kaygısı konusunda öğrencilerin sınıfta konuşurken hata yapma kaygısı yaşamadığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Yabancı dil kaygısı, konuşma kaygısı.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

EFL learners believe that speaking a foreign language is the greatest dilemma they could ever face that is conducive for induced anxiety during language teaching (Young, 1990). In addition, it is one of the biggest obstacles that may affect the anxious foreign language learners when they are required to speak in front of the class (Horwitz et al. 1986). Language learning process has a psychological effect on the learner. In this process, several factors affect learning such as the student's personality, his/her feelings, and the language learning practices. For this reason, many endeavors have been done regarding language anxiety to show the sources that cause anxiety and perceive its significance. Language learners' achievements might be affected because of their mental barriers toward language learning as these barriers could prevent them from understanding new items or even make them avoid engaging in communicative activities and express themselves spontaneously. It has become clear that language anxiety emerges when learners start to learn a foreign language and not before that, which means only when learners become more exposed to the target language their perspectives and feeling are constructed. Therefore, it is argued that language anxiety is not based on the language itself (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). Aydın (2001) argued that, the level of anxiety may increase for the learners when they experience negative practices during the process of learning a new language. The current research aimed to investigate the factors that cause speaking anxiety in an EFL classroom. Accordingly, the research question of the present study is as follows:

What factors cause speaking anxiety in an EFL classroom?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyze the data. This study was conducted at Preparatory School of Istanbul Aydın University, Turkey in 2018-2019 academic year. The participants of the study were 50 Turkish university students. The students' subject area of study ranged from English Translation and Interpreting Business Management, International Relations, English Language and Literature to Electronic Engineering, but they were all English preparatory school students at the time of the study. The students' language proficiency level of English was pre-intermediate. The data of this study was collected through two main instruments. These were Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Focus Group Interviews. The first data collection instrument was the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). There are two parts in the FLCAS. In the first part, there are two questions, which require demographic information about the students' age and gender. The second part involves 33 items based on a 5-point Likert type-rating scale ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire items are divided into four subcategories: Self-perceived proficiency,

Self-comparison to others and competitiveness, Fear of performance in test situation, and Learners' beliefs about making mistakes in English class. The second data collection instrument of the study was the focus group interviews. The questions used in the focus group interviews were developed by Batiha, Mohd and Mustaffa (2014). The number of the learners who participated in the focus group interviews was 10 out of 50 participants. The learners already articulated their notions in FLCAS but through the focus group interviews they had the opportunity to discuss and express their ideas verbally which made them feel more comfortable. The data collected through Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was subjected to Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 19. The qualitative data collected through the focus group interviews was transcribed and then analyzed through descriptive analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The research question of the study aimed to define the factors that cause speaking anxiety in an English foreign language classroom. By using the design of the FLCAS as a basis, we attempted to present the conclusions of the study in four sections: self-perceived proficiency, self-comparison to others and competitiveness, fear of performance in test situation and learners' beliefs about making mistakes in English. The findings related to self-perceived proficiency showed that the majority of the students have self-confidence and feel relaxed about speaking English in the class. However, the rest of the students that represent the minority have self-perceived low-level ability in learning a foreign language cannot be ignored in educational settings. On analyzing the reasons why those students have self-perceived low-level ability, we found out that those students are not sure of themselves during speaking English in the class. The focus group interview analysis helped us to conclude that those students with low ability level self-perception learn to overcome the feelings of speaking anxiety as they get accustomed to using English in communication. For this reason, we might conclude the importance of involvement in speaking practice activities in language classrooms. All in all, we may conclude that being confident and feelings of comfort during speaking in foreign language are significant factors in speaking. This conclusion is similar to those pointed out by Young (1991) and Toth (2007). Toth (2007) argued that the learners may feel anxious about using the target language if they believe that they lack enough competence in language skills. For this reason, Toth (2007) believes that there are negative correlations between self-perceived competence in language learning and anxiety level and if students have low expectations of their foreign language learning ability, they perceive their success as poor in foreign language learning.

With regard to the self-comparison to others and competitiveness category we realized that more than half of the students don't think of others' competence during the language learning process, while the rest of them compare themselves with the other students in the class. In the light of our analysis as to why those students don't think of others' competence, we found out that those students think that it is natural to make mistakes in learning a foreign language. They also believe that they are better than their peers in the English class and this is why they feel very confident when they talk in front of the class. As for those students who compare their language proficiency levels to others, we observed that those students are less proficient in the target language than the others and in time their level of confidence in the use of the target language increases. This conclusion is similar to those pointed out by Price (1991). Price (1991) articulated that most of the participants in the survey believe that their language skills were behind the others in class and they were worried about what the others would think about them when they made mistakes. Therefore, it was found out that self-comparison to others played an anxiety-arousal factor causing students feel less competent than the others.

The findings that are related to fear of performance in test situation revealed that most of the students have no problems when it comes to taking English examinations. Those students stated that they don't get anxious about the English language examinations because they

always prepare themselves for the examinations in advance on daily-basis. In addition, they mentioned that studying hard at home and also listening to the teacher in the class help them to become aware of the topics that they are not good at. Moreover, they pointed out that their teacher is very good and that is why there is no need to get nervous about the examination time. But we cannot deny those learners who do have problems in test situation even though they represent the minority of the students. It was clear that those students who have problems in this issue feel worried about the idea of failing in the English language examination for different reasons. For example, while one student says he does not spare much time for out-of-class work, the other one complains about his carelessness.

Regarding the learners' beliefs about making mistakes in English class, we concluded that all of the students don't feel anxious about making mistakes in the English class. These students view the process of foreign language learning similar to learning a mother tongue. Accordingly, they believe it is natural to make mistakes in the language classroom. Additionally, they expect the teachers to correct their mistakes so that they learn the target language appropriately. Hashemi & Abbasi (2013) conducted a study on this topic and they concluded that making mistakes in English class might have a negative impact on those students' self- image who are anxious of making mistakes in front of their peers. And in turn this will increase their anxiety during speaking. Also, as concluded by Keramida & Tsiplakides (2009) students who practice bad assessment whether from the teacher or their peers do not view language mistakes as an ordinary fragment of learning process but as a threat to their appearance.

The finding that are related to the classroom procedures showed that half of the students feel confident and relaxed when they speak in the English class and they also don't consider English as a difficult course at all. While the other half of the students have problem in self-confidence during speaking in the English class and according to those students, English lessons are neither difficult nor easy. Therefore, we cannot ignore the students who do have problem with self-confidence. Additionally, we can conclude that the reason why they don't feel confidence during speaking the English class ascribe to their personal features. In addition, as concluded by Daubney (2002) classroom procedures play a vital role in academic success and a supportive and friendly environment should be set up in classrooms in which students behave comfortably without being constantly evaluated. Similarly, Aida (1994) articulated that for some students the classroom setting presents itself as an anxiety-provoking situation because it includes perpetual evaluations from others except that the student him/herself.

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