

# *An Exploration of Students' Perceived Sources of Speaking Anxiety*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study was to find out sources of anxiety felt by intermediate English language learners when speaking English, and to obtain instructors' suggestions so as to decrease the learners' foreign language speaking anxiety. It was conducted with 60 students and ten English language instructors at the Preparatory School of Istanbul Aydın University, Turkey; in the 2019-2020 academic year. The research was designed as a mixed method approach. Quantitative data was accumulated by means of a questionnaire dispersed to the students; qualitative data was accumulated by means of follow-up interviews dispersed to the teachers. The results uncovered that the students had a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety. The most anxiety inducing items were identified as the harsh attitudes of classmates, having to volunteer answers in the classroom, a comparison of language classes with other classes, getting left behind and being corrected for every mistake. Suggestions from the instructors were creating a comfort zone and a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, doing group-work and pair-work activities, encouraging and praising students for their participation and avoiding immediate error correction.

**Keywords:** *Communication apprehension, language anxiety, speaking anxiety*

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## **İngilizce Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Konuşma Kaygısı Kaynakları Üzerine Bir Araştırma**

### **ÖZ**

Bu çalışmada, Türk üniversitelerinde yabancı dil öğrenen orta düzey İngilizce seviyesindeki öğrencilerin hissettiği konuşma kaygısının kaynaklarını belirlemek ve yabancı dil konuşma kaygısını azaltmak için öğretmenlerin önerilerini almak amaçlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, 60 öğrenci ve 10 İngilizce öğretmeni ile 2019-2020 akademik yılında İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi Hazırlık okulunda yürütülmüştür. Bu araştırmada karma yöntem çalışması uygulanmıştır. Öğrencilere kullanılan anket nicel veri toplarken, öğretmenlerle yapılan takip görüşmeleri nitel veri toplamıştır. Sonuçlar, öğrencilerin orta düzeyde yabancı dil konuşma kaygısına sahip olduğunu açığa çıkarmıştır. En çok kaygı uyandıran öğeler sınıf arkadaşlarının sert tutumları, sınıfta gönüllü verilen cevaplar, dil sınıflarının diğer sınıflarla karşılaştırılması, dil sınıflarında geride kalma ve yapılan her hatada düzeltilme olarak belirlenmiştir. Öğrencilerin kaygı düzeylerini azaltmak için öğretmenlerden gelen öneriler sınıfta bir konfor bölgesi ve samimi bir ortam oluşturma, grup çalışması ve ikili çalışma yaptırma, katılımları için öğrenciyi teşvik etme ve övme ve anlık hata düzeltilmesinden kaçınmadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** İletişim kaygısı, dil kaygısı, konuşma kaygısı*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of anxiety in foreign language learning has been a thought-provoking topic among researchers for the past few decades. It arouses interest because it has been perceived as an effective source of students' level of achievement in foreign language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

The first study that introduced anxiety in the context of foreign language learning was conducted by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). They claim that this phenomenon is especially liable for students' adverse emotional

responses to language learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) interpret it as having tension, worry and negative emotional attitude towards second language learning, particularly linked to second language contexts such as listening, speaking and learning in general. Similarly, Zhang (2001) agrees that this phenomenon is a psychological strain which the language learner experiences when partaking in a learning task.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), this particular anxiety type ought to be taken into consideration as situation-specific anxiety which derives from the unlikeliness of the language learning itself. They believe that it is a solitary kind of anxiety, explicit to foreign language learning, and suggest that it is different from general classroom anxiety. So, it is profoundly plausible that students with anxiety in general may struggle with foreign language anxiety. However, it may also be a familiar feeling among students who do well in other subjects but still experience anxiety when learning a foreign language (Trang, 2012).

Foreign language learning anxiety reveals itself in various ways. A student may get anxious when writing, listening, reading and/or speaking in the target language. However, there is no doubt that speaking anxiety emerges as one of the most frequently experienced feelings that students encounter. Horwitz et al. (1986) state that adults, in this case, university students, see themselves as fairly smart, socially skilled and sensitive individuals, and when speaking in their native language, expressing themselves is rarely difficult. However, it is probably challenging when communicating in the foreign language as it also requires complicated structures with ambiguous or unknown linguistics and socio-cultural standards. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) indicate that perfectionist learners tend to utter correctly pronounced, contextually appropriate and grammatically correct sentences. It can be said that making perfect sentences while speaking in the target language puts great pressure on these students. Thus, communicating in the second language involves risk-taking and can be tricky for the speaker.

The speaker might feel distressed when speaking in the foreign language not only because it is hard to express oneself, but also because it requires more productivity in a shorter period of time. Ay (2010) reports that students get more uptight when teachers expect them to speak in English without any preparation beforehand and, in particular, if students are required to talk about subjects which are unfamiliar to them. The idea of getting negative reactions from teachers may also create anxiety while speaking the target language. According to Cao (2011), when students do not get enough support, encouragement or personal attention from their teachers, they tend to be quiet in speaking classes. Tuan and Mai (2015) argue that when students have inadequate background knowledge about the topic, they get anxious and tend to speak very little or none because they cannot come up with ideas in the first place. As reported by Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013), a remarkable number of participants admit that having insufficient vocabulary discourages them from speaking the target language fluently, thus creating anxiety. They also found out that grammar and pronunciation play a significant role in building up anxiety. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) claim that anxious students have the tendency to remain seated indifferently in the classroom and refrain from the activities which might improve their language skills, they might indeed skip that class entirely. As a result, anxious students may be reluctant to take part in activities and there is little chance that they will voluntarily give answers in spoken classes (Bekleyen, 2009).

Many researchers are of the opinion that the effects of anxiety in foreign language speaking are mostly to the students' disadvantage, as it may lower the quality of oral language performance (Horwitz, 1991). Yet, there are numerous reasons why students get anxious when speaking English as a foreign language. Thus, this research aimed to find answers to the questions below:

1. What are the perceived sources that cause speaking anxiety among EFL learners in Turkish universities?

2. What are the instructors' suggestions to decrease EFL learners' level of speaking anxiety?

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-method research design was used in this study. Thus, quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed to find out the answers to the research questions. This study took place at the English preparatory school of Istanbul Aydin University at the beginning of the second term of the 2019-2020 academic year in the Turkish educational context. The first group of participants was 60 Turkish and international intermediate level EFL students who were selected through convenience sampling. The students' age range was 18-23. The second group of participants was ten English language instructors with at least ten years of teaching experience.

The quantitative data was collected from the student participants by means of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). FLCAS has 33 items and is an individual self-report Likert scale. The scale ranges from 5 "Strongly Agree" to 1 "Strongly Disagree". The FLCAS questionnaire is a valid and reliable tool that measures three significant aspects of anxiety, which are communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The qualitative data was collected from the instructors through follow-up interviews and written reflection papers. The interview questions provided to the instructor participants included the five highest anxiety inducing situations as provided by student participants which were in line with the FLCAS questionnaire (Horwitz et al., 1986). The quantitative data gathered from the FLCAS questionnaire was subjected to the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) – Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) Statistics 18.00. The qualitative data collected through the interviews was subjected to descriptive analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

After examining the three sub-sections of the FLCAS questionnaire, we found out that the students who participated in this research were moderately anxious in all three aspects of anxiety. The findings of this study showed parallels with other studies such as Balemir (2009), Çağatay (2015) and Saltan (2003) as these studies' participants experienced moderate level of speaking anxiety, too.

According to the results of the FLCAS questionnaire, the participants revealed that being laughed at by their classmates (24 strongly agreed, 15 agreed), volunteering answers in the classroom (22 strongly agreed, 16 agreed), comparison of language classes with other classes (20 strongly agreed, 27 agreed), being worried about getting left behind in language classes (18 strongly agreed, 21 agreed) and being corrected by their teachers for every mistake they make (17 strongly agreed, 22 agreed) are the items which increase their anxiety levels most. The highest rated anxiety inducing items determined by students along with instructors' suggestions to these items are discussed below.

The most anxiety inducing item was identified as the harsh attitudes of classmates. We see that majority of the students care about what others think and how other students react to their utterances in English. They find it stressful and unpleasant to encounter the possibility of their classmates making fun or laughing at them when they speak in English. In their studies, Balemir (2009) and Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) also found that negative thoughts, judgment and evaluation by peers increase anxiety levels of students. In the current study, all teachers agreed on the fact that it is a common problem that they encounter in their classrooms. To take this pressure away, the instructors indicate that it is a must to create a comfort zone in the classroom. To achieve this goal, language teachers are to take responsibility and let all the students in the classroom know that mistakes are natural and are a part of the learning process. Some teachers reported

giving examples of their own language learning experiences to decrease students' stress caused by their peers. Another important point put forward by almost all the instructors is the efficiency of group-work and pair-work to lower the anxiety levels of students.

Voluntarily speaking in English among others was the second main source of anxiety. We understand that students find it stressful to speak out what they have on their minds when other students are around. The studies of Koch and Terrel (1991) and Young (1990) also showed similar results. Like the first item's suggestion, the instructors primarily proposed group-work for a less anxious classroom atmosphere. They pointed out that when students talk to one another in smaller groups, they tend to get less anxious. They also indicated that they start with relatively easy questions, to make anxious students more comfortable volunteering answers, and that they offer single prompts to help volunteer students remember the words to express their thoughts better. Another solution suggested by instructors is to praise the volunteer students even if there are flaws when they are speaking in English. It should be noted that the first and the second most anxiety inducing items are relevant since they both promote the fear of harsh peer pressure.

Thirdly, it can be said that students feel more confident when they use their mother-tongue in schools. However, unlike other classes, students are expected to speak in English when learning the target language. It should also be noted that if students are not used to the communicative approach when they were taught English before, they get anxious as most teachers in English preparatory schools apply this method to teach the target language. The instructors drew attention to two important aspects. Firstly, they suggested evaluating the students' language learning process by giving less exams and/or giving exams in different forms. Secondly, they emphasized the importance of doing more productive activities and group-work. The instructors stated that practicing language skills to develop speaking skills and using various communication strategies help students decrease their

anxiety levels. The latter suggestions are also made by Cohen (2010) and Çağatay (2015).

Next, we see that students get anxious about not keeping up with what is taught in the classroom as this situation may lead them feel incompetent in terms of language learning. If they miss a lesson or struggle with a subject, they might get confused, panicked or they might even feel they will lose control and become unsuccessful at learning English. Horwitz et al. (1986) report that the main source of language learners' anxiety is the incompetency in the target language. The instructors stated that when students are presented with the syllabus of the course and the objectives of the lesson at the very beginning of the lesson period, they feel more confident. Showing students everything is planned and under control may put less pressure on students who get anxious about getting left behind. The instructors also suggested that students having this kind of fear should spend more time on self-studying. Finally, the issue of correcting errors in language classrooms is important because the flow of communication may be disturbed and accordingly, the motivation and willingness of students to speak may decrease in the target language. All the interviewed instructors stated that they avoid immediate error correction if an anxious student makes a mistake while speaking. They suggested that it is better to wait until the end of the lesson to point out the main mistakes in general without mentioning the names of the students. Some indicated that they prefer not to correct every single mistake, thinking that they can gain that ability on their own. They all pointed out that it is teachers' duty to create a student-friendly and safe atmosphere in the classroom so that students can feel motivated and encouraged to speak more regardless of mistakes they make. These suggestions are also similar to the findings of Cohen (2010) and MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément and Noels (1998) as they emphasize how a teacher's approach towards students and students' anxiety levels are linked to one another.

As a result, it is a fact that preparatory students in universities suffer from

foreign language speaking anxiety due to various specific situations. Diagnosing the negative sources of students' speaking anxiety gives teachers an opportunity to administer treatment for this unpleasant feeling in many constructive ways. It was found that students feel more relaxed and confident about speaking English when their classmates are mature and do not laugh at their mistakes; when they speak English in smaller groups instead of having to volunteer answers all by themselves; when they feel the same way in their language classes and other classes they have had; when they catch up everything explained in the classroom; and when they keep speaking without error correction interference. Doing this study showed that having a classroom with minimum levels of anxiety is possible.

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